Mho N)ants to be A Sex Goddess? When women go wild...

> GEMMA BRUCE

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Chapter 1

You want me to what?" Ariadne McAllister paced in front of the sofa where her mother, Galena McAllister, her younger sister, Liz, short for Lysandra, her brother, Lucian, and their housekeeper, Betty, sat shoulder to shoulder, looking like four evil genies.

"It's the only way to find out what happened to her," insisted Galena. "She went to this Terra Bliss place and disappeared."

"You don't know that she's disappeared."

"Then why hasn't she come back?" Galena rolled the section of newspaper she was holding into a tube and began tapping it on the bentwood coffee table in front of her.

Liz looked up from the couch. Dark curls spilled Medusalike over her forehead, a perfect curtain for the penetrating look she fixed on her sister. "I'd go, but I start filming in three days."

"And I can't go," said Lucian. "I'm damn good, but not the goddess type."

Andy stopped pacing and looked down at the people she loved most in the world. "And I am? Look at me."

They all dutifully looked at her. Scuffed desert boots, severely distressed jeans, out at both knees and one pocket, and a spaghetti-strapped T-shirt that was still encrusted with fake

blood. Both elbows were scraped, and she was bruised in places no one outside the business even knew about.

"If you took a bath and brushed your hair, you would be," said her mother.

Andy sighed. "You said emergency. I left straight from the set as soon as we wrapped and drove two hundred miles to get here. I didn't have time to primp. But if I leave in the next ten minutes, I can get home, pack, bathe"—she emphasized the last word—"and still make my flight to Acapulco."

"But, Andy."

"I've been on location—in the desert—in the summer—for the last six weeks. I've nearly drowned in a flash flood, fell off a cliff, crawled until sand is permanently embedded in my knees, and wrestled a sidewinder—for seven takes. I deserve a vacation."

"So does the snake," said Lucian.

"He only worked one hour. He belongs to a better union."

"You can go on vacation later," said her mother.

No, I can't, thought Andy. Banshee, the Sequel began filming at the end of the month. She really needed two weeks of pampering herself. Basking in sunlight that didn't give you skin poisoning. Floating on waves that weren't made by a machine. And indulging in several days of hot sex with one of the film's costars, Jason Hill—before Jason's eye and dick roved to someone who would be more beneficial to his career.

Andy sighed and picked up the Terra Bliss brochure from the coffee table. She knew it was useless to argue with her family once they got "the look." And they all had it. It had been perfected over three generations of Hollywood stunt people and brooked no argument. And when you threw Betty into the mix . . . She might as well start driving to Lake Tahoe.

She began to read the brochure, unconsciously pulling out the elastic band that held her hair in a long, thick braid. *Un*locking Your Inner Goddess. Three-week sensual-training workshops in the glorious Lake Tahoe mountains. She opened the trifold to the course list: Focusing Your Eternal Feminine; Getting What You Deserve; Retraining the Man in Your Life; Sexual Secrets for Lasting Relationships; and a special workshop, The Eternal Orgasm.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Got to the Eternal Orgasm part, didn't you?" asked Lucian. Andy tossed the brochure back onto the table. "Good old Aunt Mac. She's probably locked in an eternal orgasm and can't get out."

Lucian snorted. "But what a way to go."

"This is not a joking matter," said Galena. She whacked the newspaper against her palm for dramatic effect.

"Oh, Mom," said Andy, sneaking a peek at her watch. She could still make the flight if she gave up the bath. "Maybe she decided to stay for the second session. Sometimes, hang gliding, car chases, and bull riding just aren't enough. We'll probably find her staggering down the highway—"

"With a smile on her face," added Lucian.

Sister and brother grinned at each other.

"How can you two be so awful," snapped Liz. "We called the retreat and they said she'd left. Aunt Miranda's life may be in danger. Show her the article, Mom."

Galena stopped whacking the newspaper and began to unroll it. She spread it out on the coffee table. "There," she said, pointing to the center of the page.

Andy leaned over to get a better look at the crumpled article. "Heiress Leaves Fortune to Sex Group." Imogene Southwaite, widow of—Andy scanned through the family particulars—fell to her death Tuesday night. It is said that the Chicago heiress left her considerable fortune to Goddess International, an organization that professes a system of turning women's inner sensuality to outward power.

Owner of the company and television sex guru, Dr. Fiona Bliss, was unavailable for comment.

"Coincidence," said Andy.

"There's no such thing," said Galena. "Miranda has probably been murdered in her sleep."

4 Gemma Bruce

"Mac isn't an heiress," said Andy, her vacation panning to a long shot in her mind.

"She's not poor," said Betty. "But if your vacation and some hit-and-run pretty-boy actor are more important than your aunt's life..." She heaved herself off the couch and dragged herself away.

Andy winced. Even Betty knew about her serially disastrous love life. "Come back and sit down," said Andy.

Betty lurched around, scowled at Andy, but made her way back to the couch. She'd come to live with them ten years ago after an aerial accident had left her partially paralyzed. She was slow, but she was still lethal.

Andy's vacation faded to black. "What do you want me to do?"

"There's another workshop starting Saturday," said Galena. "I've reserved you a place."

Dillon Cross unpacked the duffel bag the human resources department of Goddess International had issued him on his arrival at Terra Bliss. Three pairs of powder blue silk gym shorts with matching T-shirts. Two pairs of sweats in the same color, and a shear white, pleated—skirt.

Great. Grayson Talbot was going to pay for giving him this assignment. He didn't do skirts. And this one was ridiculously short. Some kind of Greek slave wear, he supposed.

He shucked off his jeans and wrapped the skirt around his waist. Then he looked in the mirror attached to the back of his dorm room door. The skirt barely covered his crotch, and it left the jagged scar from his latest knee surgery exposed. He pulled it down, until it hung low on his hips. That was a little better. He turned around and looked over his shoulder at his reflection. Now the scar on his back was showing. Shit.

He thought he'd blown his "audition" when he had to strip down to his underwear. But to his surprise, he passed with flying colors. Evidently, some women thought scars were a turnon. Some women—but not the ones he knew. Those women could turn from randy she-devil to Mother Teresa at the first touch of rough skin. It brought out their nurturing instincts. He hated nurturing types. Which explained his lack of a sex life. At least, partially explained it.

He was jarred from that train of thought by a knock on the door. It opened, and Rusty Slayton's curly head appeared in the opening. This was Rusty's second summer at Terra Bliss, and he'd offered to show Dillon the ropes.

"Shorts and tees for afternoon. The kilt is for dinner." His gaze fell on Dillon's thigh. "Jesus."

Dillon stepped behind the bed and gritted his teeth. The look of horror he could take; it was the following sympathy that made him see red. It was his own fault for pulling this dickhead assignment. But hell, it was the only kind of assignment he was good for.

"Better shake it," said Rusty, regrouping and giving himself a quick once-over in the mirror. "The bus will be here in ten minutes, and all the slaves—attendants, I mean—have to be lined up for the welcoming address. Wear your tightest jockstrap. Some of these 'ladies' think a sensuality workshop is one long sex orgy."

Slaves? Dillon shuddered. He owed Grayson a lot. The man had saved Dillon's carcass on their last assignment and had convinced the agency to keep him on, even though he was no longer of use in a war zone—or anyplace else for all Dillon knew.

He looked down at his powder blue outfit. Before the accident, he'd been a damn good covert operator. Now he was nothing more than a covert boy toy.

Andy stared out the window at the blur of scenery as the bus climbed up the mountain road to Terra Bliss. She should never have let her family talk her into this, especially after they insisted on the disguise. But here she was, her hair pulled back in a tight bun. Her feet stuffed into "sensible" shoes. And after a five-hour car ride and another two hours on the chartered

bus, her conservative, gray linen suit looked as if she'd slept in it.

She'd balked at the idea of bleaching away her tan. She'd earned every UV ray-induced inch of it. And she'd absolutely refused to wear the prosthetic buck teeth. But when she'd tried to nix the glasses, there was a general outcry.

"Come on, Andy," Lucian had pleaded, the devil in his eyes. "You'll never pass as a plain Jane if anybody gets a good look at your face."

She'd put them on and swayed. "I can't see a thing."

"Sure you can," said Lucian. "They're just props. You'll get used to them after a minute. It'll add to your credibility."

Except they were Coke-bottle thick, and hours later, the scenery was still a blur. She knew they had driven through the town of South Lake Tahoe and circled the lake to climb higher into the mountains. But the woman sitting next to her was a blob of green and navy blue. Probably just as well she couldn't see, thought Andy. She had a sneaky suspicion that the woman was wearing a golf outfit.

The bus slowed down, and the driver announced that they were entering the Terra Bliss grounds and would have no further cell phone or Internet service. Andy heard the scurry of last minute calls starting up around her. She didn't bother. Everyone who mattered knew where she was, and the others would be too busy partying to care.

The bus passed through what appeared to be a stone arch. The deep forest gave way to a wash of lighter green. Andy slid her glasses down to the tip of her nose and looked over the tortoiseshell frames—an extensive, perfectly manicured lawn that stretched for acres and was surrounded by a high stone wall.

To the far left was a large, Greek-styled building with entrance columns and an ornamental frieze that ran between two stories of rectangular windows. To the far right sat a swimming pool and two buildings that looked like a gym and a dormitory. In between, the lawn was sprinkled with copses of

trees, white marble fountains, and smaller structures that suggested ancient shrines and made Andy think of vestal virgins dancing in the moonlight.

Taking this goddess theme a bit far, she thought. Then wondered hopefully if there would be any Greek gods in attendance.

All around her, chatter rose in excited trills. The woman next to her began talking in a thick Texas accent.

"Isn't it just like a real paradise?"

"Um," said Andy. It was about all she could manage, except, Are you nuts? It looks like a sound stage from the last "Xena" season.

The bus stopped and the doors whooshed open. The driver instructed them to step down and form a line to the right, where they would be greeted by the retreat's director, Katherine Dane. The forty women filed down the aisle. Andy stayed close on the heels of the wavering blue-green mass in front of her. Until it stopped suddenly and Andy plowed into it.

"Sorry," she mumbled. She was going to have to find a way to ditch the glasses.

"That's all right, hon. There's nothing to be nervous about. This is my third summer here and I love it to death. You'll see. You won't even recognize yourself when the session is over."

Not to worry, thought Andy. She was never wearing these clothes or glasses again.

"I'm Jeannie Jenkins."

"Ariadne McAllister."

"Nice to meet you. Now hurry up and let's see how yummy the slaves are this session."

Slaves? Andy followed Jeannie down the steps.

They formed a line along the side of the bus. Katherine Dane began her speech. Andy missed most of it. She was trying to see across the drive where a line of blue wavered in the sunlight. More people, she guessed. The slaves? Intrigued, she dipped her head and looked over the top of her glasses; she could see only halfway across the driveway. She pushed the glasses up

and peered through the slit at the bottom. It gave her a crick in the neck.

Next to her, Jeannie wriggled her fingers at someone across the way. "I just love it here. Even the security guards are hunky." She pointed across the drive. "Yum, I think that's my slave. The tall one with black hair. He's a knockout. Yessiree bobtail. Sleek and trim, like a panther. Ooo-eee. Do you like yours?"

Andy crammed the glasses back up her nose so quickly that it made her queasy. "Uh."

"He's cute, too. Shorter and hunkier. I remember him from last session. Demetri. Definitely a keeper. You just keep him guessing and you'll drive him crazy."

The line started to move. Andy took a deep breath and stepped forward. She was about to flirt her way through a missing person investigation. Gloria Steinem would be appalled.

Dillon stood in line waiting to meet his goddess and schlep her luggage to her cabin. All the participants were assigned an attendant and a private cabin set back in the woods—for reflection and study—and, Dillon would lay odds, for clandestine meetings with the retreat's cadre of studs.

He was in the middle of a line of men all wearing the skimpy shorts and shirts.

Behind them stood a row of security guards, dressed in navy blue jumpsuits, all buff, good-looking, and trained to kill. Dillon had already run into two of them when he was jogging near the wall that enclosed the compound.

The wall was twelve feet tall and reminded Dillon of a prison camp. When he'd asked about it, Rusty said, "The wall? Keeps out grizzlies and the local Evangelists."

But once Dillon had seen the guards marching the perimeter, he knew they were doing more than bear patrol. Definitely serious stuff going on here.

Money? The whole setup was ludicrous. He was sure he'd

seen something comparable to this on a late night *Star Trek* rerun. The togas, the fake Greek architecture, the orgies. And yet, the sex doctor was making a fortune. Maybe she did need armed guards. Because the security guards were definitely carrying.

The line moved forward, and he realized a woman across the way was waving at him. She was tall and skinny, with big red hair, and wearing green knit pants and a blue halter top. She had to be sixty if she was a day. She pointed to him and then to herself, and Dillon got a sudden sinking feeling. He quickly looked to the head of the line. She was his and she looked like she was ready for fun. He didn't have time for fun. He was on assignment, such as it was. He glanced back at her, but his eyes snagged on the woman in front of her. Tall and stoop-shouldered, in a god-awful gray suit that made her look like a scared mouse on stilts.

He bet that *she* wouldn't be making demands on her slave. She kept looking at the sky, then down to the ground, as though she were expecting rain.

Only on his parade, thought Dillon humorlessly. Then he got a flash of genius. He leaned over the shoulder of the serf in front of him, a stocky weight lifter, named Demetri.

"You want to trade?"

"Huh?" Demetri looked over his shoulder and gave Dillon an incredulous look. "You putting me on? You want the beanpole in the wrinkled suit?"

"Yeah. I do." The line advanced another spot. "You better decide before it's too late. Do you want the tall redhead behind her?"

"Like shit, yeah. We're gonna be stuck with them for three weeks. The redhead was here for the first session. Richer than God and ready to rock 'n' roll. Thanks, man. I owe you." He dropped behind Dillon, and Dillon stepped forward just as he reached the head of the line.

Katherine Dane, the business manager, motioned him forward. She was a slim brunette with a smile that could freeze

your balls. She lifted an inquiring eyebrow at Dillon, but said, "Ariadne, I'd like you to meet Dillon Cross, your attendant for this session. He'll see to your luggage and get you settled in the Muses group—cabin twenty-two. Dillon, say hello to Ariadne McAllister."

Ariadne? If Ms. Mouse's mother could have seen into the future, she would have chosen a better name. The woman was the least likely candidate for goddess that he had ever seen.

Dillon cleared his throat. "Which suitcases are yours, Ms. McAllister?" He shot her a smile that was as fake as it was brief. He couldn't bring himself to call her Ariadne.

"I only have one. It has wheels. I can manage."

"It's my job. Uh, my pleasure." Hell, he should have practiced the script he'd been given. "And anyway, the wheels won't help. Your cabin is uphill through the woods."

She sighed and pointed to a frayed brown suitcase. He picked it up; a cloud of dust rose around it. God. It must have been in the attic for years. Pitiful.

She was clutching a black backpack to her chest. He reached for it, but she wrenched it away and took a reflexive step back. Good. She was afraid of men. That was even better. He'd be able to devote his time to collecting evidence, without having to worry about her getting in his way.

"If you'll follow me, your cottage is this way." He turned and began walking across the grass to the path that led into the trees.

Andy clutched her backpack closer, tucked her chin to her chest so she could see where she was going, and shuffled after him. After a few minutes of panavision green, she ventured a quick glance at her attendant—and stumbled when she got an eyeful of the silk shorts shifting over his glutes. Yowser. She checked out the torso and, yeah, it was just as good. Broad shoulders, muscular arms flexing as he carried her heavy suitcase. She mentally stripped him down to a swimsuit and

stretched him out on the hot sands of Acapulco Beach. And tripped again.

He turned around and frowned at her. She ducked her head. They started moving again, and Andy peered out cautiously from above her glasses. No wonder she'd tripped. It wasn't just the body. They were beginning a steep ascent. Ahead of them she could see a stand of trees that rose steadily upward.

And dead ahead, a tiny opening that marked the beginning of a narrow, graveled path.

Andy gritted her teeth. What happened to *elevator to the fourth floor*? She didn't need exercise. She needed a drink with an umbrella in it. She ducked her chin and plowed ahead.

Dillon stopped at the entrance to the woods and turned around to wait for his goddess-in-training. She was struggling along, her head drooped so low that he could see the part that ran down the center of her hair. It was nice hair, thick and deep auburn with red highlights that caught the afternoon sun. But he hadn't seen a bun like that since his first grade teacher. And that suit and those glasses. Christ. If ever a woman needed a makeover, it was this one.

He shifted his hold on the unwieldy suitcase. It banged against his leg, and he sucked in his breath as pain shot up his thigh. Probably filled with books. He hefted it to his good side and started up the path.

They were barely into the trees when he heard a loud "umph." He turned just in time to see her pitch forward and hurtle toward him, head down and feet war dancing as she tried to regain her balance. Dillon's mouth opened in surprise. Before he could react, the top of her head butted into his solar plexus. His breath went out in a whoosh, the suitcase fell to the ground, and for a moment he saw stars.

She squawked and rebounded off him, while Dillon struggled to stay on his feet. The backpack dropped to the ground between them. He was almost positive he heard her say, "Shit." But he must be mistaken. She didn't look like the type of woman who said shit, even in private.

She took a step, her foot got hung up in the backpack strap, and she pitched forward again. This time, she fell against him, and his arms automatically closed around her. Her face was mashed against his shoulder, her glasses twisted on her nose, her breasts pressed to his chest. He could tell they were full and ripe, even separated by his shirt and her stupid suit.

And he was hit by a jolt of a totally inappropriate response that went straight to his groin. Christ. He was in sad shape if this poor woman could turn him on. Though she did smell wonderful: jasmine or honeysuckle or—

He pushed her away and settled her onto her feet. She shoved her glasses back up her nose, then dropped to her knees. He leaned over to help her up, then realized she was looking for her backpack. She must be nearly blind. It was right next to her foot. He could have picked it up and handed it to her, but he was mesmerized by the way she moved. A sort of graceful hysteria. And the way her rear end wiggled beneath the suit. She found the backpack and stood up.

He shook his head to clear it. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," she said breathlessly. "How much farther?"

"A quarter of a mile." This time he was sure she said, "Shit." He picked up her suitcase and started out ahead of her. She stumbled and tripped her way behind him, past two groups of cabins, until they finally arrived at The Muses.

"Number twenty-two," he said, stopping in the clearing in front of her cabin. "Watch the steps," he said over his shoulder and climbed up to the porch to open the door.

She managed the steps, shuffled past him, and tripped over the threshold. Dillon shook his head and followed her inside.

While he rattled off the list of amenities, Ms. Mouse stood in the center of the room, clutching her backpack and staring at the floor. When he took her suitcase into the bedroom, she followed him to the doorway. He dropped the suitcase on the luggage rack at the end of the bed and started to open it.

"Don't," she cried.

Dillon jerked his hand back. Her undies must be near the top. He walked around the bed to the window, pulled back the gauzy curtains and pushed up the sash. Fresh mountain air filled the room. "Well, that about does it."

She was still standing in the doorway. Dillon squeezed past her and felt a definite zing again. He forced himself not to breathe in her scent as he inched his way toward the front door.

"The air-conditioning, heat controls, and light switches are on this wall. The orientation meeting is at five. Do you need an escort? I'd be happy to come back . . . " Shit, he was babbling. There was no way he was coming back.

She shook her head, reached into her jacket pocket, pulled out a crumpled bill, and held it out in his direction.

Dillon rolled his eyes. "We're not allowed to accept tips, but thanks for the thought. Gotta go." And he went.

As soon as Andy heard the screen door bang shut, she threw off her glasses and ran to the window. Dillon Cross was loping off down the path, in a slightly irregular gait that she recognized all too well. Every time she fell off a horse, or jumped out of a moving car, she ran like that for the next several days. God, she hadn't hurt him, had she?

Damn, Lucian and his credibility nonsense. She'd almost neutered the guy when he tried to keep her from falling. And that would have been a shame. He was definitely hot.

What was wrong with her? A woman's first response to a sexy man's touch should be to kiss him, not deck him. Too many R-rated action films, she guessed. She needed a life... one where she played herself and lived happily ever after without ever having to leap from another burning building or karate chop her way through another gang of bad-guy ninjas.

14 Gemma Bruce

She sank down on the windowsill as Dillon and his little blue outfit rounded a turn and disappeared into the woods. Tall, dark, and handsome—and pure temptation in those little shorts.

She was dressed like Miss Marple and had no choice but to act the part.

Chapter 2

Andy knew that sitting on a windowsill, mooning over a stranger in a gym suit, was not going to find her aunt. If Mac even needed finding.

It occurred to her, though only for an unguarded second, that the whole thing had been a ploy by her family to keep her from going to Acapulco and acting out another chapter in her love-'em-and-get-left lifestyle. They were always trying to lure her away from relationships with actors. They thought she should hook up with a steady "stuntman"—like she needed more broken bones in her life.

Andy pushed to her feet and looked around. The décor of her cottage was disappointingly banal after the Greco hype of the larger Terra Bliss buildings. The walls were painted off-white. Instead of a gilt-edged chaise, an apartment-sized couch covered in a nubby tweed fabric rested against one wall. A light wood coffee table stood in front of it, and two matching end tables flanked each side.

An alcove to the right held a small kitchen just large enough for a counter with a toaster, blender, and coffeemaker lined up across the top, and an apartment-sized fridge underneath. A look inside the fridge revealed a bowl of grapes and a carton of skim milk, presumably for the coffee. But who was going to peel the grapes? The man in the blue gym shorts? Andy sighed. Not likely. He couldn't get away fast enough.

She wandered into the bedroom and kicked off her shoes. The bed was covered with a white chenille bedspread and was large enough for two. Too bad she was solo. At least, she could catch up on some sleep while she was searching for Mac. She stopped at the luggage rack and flipped open her suitcase. She pushed aside the layer of underwear and the string bikini she'd brought on a whim.

Next came several pair of khaki slacks and oversized shirts. And beneath them, a coil of rope, a grapple hook, a flashlight, and a digital camera—all compliments of her demented family. And a bag of "necessities" from Betty. Not bath oil, nail polish, and eau de cologne, but two flares, a waterproof bottle of matches, and a compass. What were they expecting? A midnight escape from Goddess Land?

It was obvious that Andy wasn't the only one in the family who had been in the stunt business too long.

She took the last item out of her suitcase. A box of condoms that she'd hidden on the bottom, just in case she could still make Acapulco. But hell, you never knew. She pulled out the drawer of the bedside table and dropped them in.

She sank down on the bed, and a cloud of white chiffon rose up on each side of her. She stood up and lifted it off the bed. A flowing length of sheer material. She held it up in front of her and turned to the full-length mirror.

A toga. Not a toga but a . . . chiton. That's what wardrobe called the ankle-length garment she'd worn while filming *Return of the Barbarians*. One flimsy square of fabric, pinned at the shoulders with gold clips and gathered at the waist with a golden cord. It wouldn't hide a birthmark, much less a bronzed, muscular stuntwoman's body. Hell. She knew what she looked like in a chiton. She'd trashed fifteen of them in *Barbarians*, when she'd had to save the hero by leaping from her horse into his runaway chariot. She'd wrestled the rolling-eyed team to a stop with one hand while fighting off the hordes with a scimitar. All the while, the hero's stunt double had lain at her feet with an arrow in his shoulder.

She'd dragged him to safety, past thundering hooves and revolving wheels, dust and flying pebbles. As soon as they were out of frame, the director called "Cut," and the actors who had whiled away those fifteen takes in their air-conditioned trailers appeared—artistically torn and dirty—for the love scene. While they lay artfully arranged in a nest of PVC rubble, Ariadne had limped off to the first aid tent.

The stars had actually told a morning talk show host that they did their own stunts.

Ha. If twisting the top off a bottle of spring water was a stunt.

She wasn't complaining. The money was good and the thrills were addictive. But something told her that wearing a toga while playing a plain Jane was going to push the parameters of her acting abilities.

She went back into the living room and picked up the Welcome folder from the coffee table. On top was the day's schedule. Five o'clock orientation in the Pantheon Auditorium. Followed by dinner and a dessert party. Togas mandatory.

"So help me, Mac, if you're sitting at home with a double bourbon and water, while I'm flitting around in a nightgown . . ."

She glanced at her watch. Four-twenty. That gave her forty minutes to transform herself into a Greek wallflower and stumble her myopic way downhill to the Pantheon. She headed for the shower, unbuttoning and unzipping and leaving pieces of her suit on the floor behind her.

Dillon stood in the employee's lounge along with forty other men. He, like the others, was wearing his kilt. He was one of six new guys, who stood uncomfortably to one side of the veterans, who laughed and joked as if wearing a skirt and being a slave was a normal line of work. JoJo Carmichael waved from the other side of the room and came toward them, weaving through the other groups of men. He was on the short side, well-proportioned, with large blue eyes and a sweep of blond hair that fell over one eye. Definitely a ladies' man, thought

Dillon. He was also the veteran attendant in charge of training and making sure things didn't get out of hand.

He reached the newbies and cast an exasperated look at the man standing next to Dillon. Then he lifted the hem of the man's kilt to reveal a pair of light blue boxers.

"Tsk tsk," he said, shaking his head. "No boxers. It's for your own good. As you will soon see. Now, go take them off and contain the jewels."

The slave blushed and slumped away. Jo Jo turned to Dillon. "Jockstrap," he mumbled before JoJo got any closer.

JoJo gave him an approving smile. "Hey. You shouldn't have let Demetri talk vou out of your original goddess. He plays fast and loose, and he'll take advantage of you if you let him. I put him with the plain Jane on purpose so he wouldn't cause any trouble. He's already on probation."

Dillon shrugged. He didn't think he should volunteer that he'd been the one to suggest the switch. But now he was glad that he'd done it. For Ms. Mouse's sake as well as his own.

"Don't worry. She doesn't look like the demanding type. It'll give you time to get into the swing of things, and my guess is you'll get snatched up by one of the other women before long. Just don't let it take away from your appointed goddess. We're paid to work; any perks are on your own time, unless it's with your own trainee." He turned to the rest of the newbies. "And I don't need to remind you gentlemen that there will be no stepping out of line unless asked."

They all nodded.

"And for you new guys. Don't be surprised if some of the ladies refer to you as slaves. It's just a little in-joke. You will at all times refer to yourselves as attendants."

More nods.

This is sick, thought Dillon. Probably broke a slew of state and federal trafficking laws. But that wasn't his problem. His problem was uncovering a murder conspiracy.

Andy heard the knock on the door and looked at her watch. Ten to five. She groaned. Please don't let it be Body Beautiful. He was just too tempting. And if he kept escorting her everywhere, she would have a hard time keeping a blank look on her face and her hands off his butt.

Three women stood on the other side of the screen door: the tall, skinny redhead, Jeannie, who'd sat next to her on the bus, a round, shorter woman with pink cheeks and a blue perm, and a distinguished seventy-something with aquiline features and a swept-up French twist. They were dressed in long chitons and smelled of afternoon cocktails. *They* probably carried Gilbey's in their suitcases, not rappelling rope.

Andy opened the door and got a brief look at their smiles, before their faces went blank and their mouths dropped open.

Okay. So she'd put on a long-sleeved white shirt under her toga. Muscular biceps and visible nipples were not exactly the look she was going for, so she'd resorted to camouflage. Her hair was pulled back even tighter than before, and an extra layer of pale makeup covered her face and lips.

Andy slipped her glasses on and stepped onto the porch.

"Dear," the distinguished-looking woman said in a New England accent. "I'm Evelyn Monroe; this is Loubelle Smothers." She gestured to the plump lady. "And I believe you've met Jeannie Jenkins. We thought you might like to walk with us to the orientation."

"Sure, thanks," said Andy, flattered that they had thought of her.

Evelyn tucked Andy's arm in hers, and they all started down the hill. "You're going to love the program. And you'll feel more comfortable once you meet everybody."

"They're all just as sweet as they can be," seconded Loubelle in a soft southern accent.

"Especially the slaves." Jeannie laughed. "I tell ya, honey, not even Texas grows 'em like this. My Demetri is good enough to eat."

Andy tripped over the hem of her toga. "Slaves?"

Evelyn grasped her elbow. "It's what everybody calls the attendants," she said. "But not in front of the staff."

The path became steeper, and their talk turned to silence, then to huffing, as they maneuvered their way down through the woods. They crossed the expanse of grass to the main building and joined other groups of chiffon-clad women climbing the entrance steps.

It looked like a cattle call for a *Ben Hur* remake. Every age, shape, and size, all swathed in flowing white.

The lobby buzzed with conversation. A woman with a clip-board and a purple sash stretched diagonally across her toga, à la Miss America, was directing women to different lines.

"What does the purple sash stand for?" asked Andy.

"Priestess," said Evelyn. "She's passed all the levels of goddess training and is qualified to lead her own workshops. Loubelle and I go to the Initiates, since we're second-year returnees. We're aqua. And Jeannie—"

"Gets to wear royal blue. A Handmaiden at last," said Jeannie, giving a little shiver of pleasure. "That's your line over there. The Novices." She pointed to the longest line where women were receiving light blue sashes. "But before you go, just let me give you a little get-go. A pretty girl like you doesn't need to hide her assets. After you get your sash, you just go on into the *ladies*' and change out of that shirt. Like my mamma always said, 'A big smile and a little flesh will get you everywhere.' "She winked what had to be false eyelashes at Andy. "We'll save you a place at dinner."

Andy took her place at the back of the line of Novices and slowly made her way to the front. The name of Dr. Bliss rose from every conversation and floated around the room like an effervescence. Everyone seemed fascinated by the TV guru. She hadn't been at the Welcoming Ceremony, and Andy was curious to see her.

When she reached the head of the line, another purple-

sashed priestess gave her a stick-on name tag and a light blue satin sash.

She followed the others into the auditorium and saw Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie sitting near the stage with the other higher ranking goddesses. She found a seat in one of the rows of folding chairs at the back of the room, reserved for the Novices. Peeking over the top of her glasses, she began a systematic search of each row, looking for a tall, auburn-haired, middleaged stuntwoman—just in case—and came up blank.

She did find Dillon Cross, standing in the line of men on risers at the back of the stage behind a long table that presumably would seat the staff of the retreat. The men were bare-chested and dressed in short white kilts. They were all handsome and fit, though some looked self-conscious and some looked ridiculous.

Unfortunately, Dillon looked good enough to make her forget her reason for being here. He was also perusing the rows of seats, a slight frown on his face, and she took the opportunity to get a good look.

He was tanned and buff, sleek more than built—like a panther, Jeannie had said. There *was* something predatory about him. A natural grace that was only slightly disturbed by the hitch in his walk. He had long legs and a developed chest that tapered to a narrow waist. A gold braided belt was fixed several inches below his navel.

Andy gave herself a buzz, just imagining what was under that little pleated skirt.

Suddenly he looked right at her. Something zinged in the air between them. He smiled, then shook his head and grinned. Andy shoved on her glasses, chastising herself for being caught ogling her attendant. The world became a blur again.

Conversation abruptly ceased as several priestesses, all dressed in flowing white robes and purple sashes, entered from a side door and took their places at the table on the stage.

Katherine Dane came next and stopped at the podium at the

center of the long table. She was wearing an off-white silk pantsuit and no sash, just a purple jeweled pin fastened to her lapel. Two men followed her onto the stage.

The first man, a giant blond with powerful muscles swathed in undulating white pajamas, walked to the far end of the table and sat down. The second man was much shorter, slight, with dark shiny hair that receded from a high forehead. He was dressed incongruously in a pinstriped suit. The overhead lights picked out a sheen of perspiration on his forehead as he sat down.

Ms. Dane signaled for quiet. The rustle of conversation gradually subsided, and the house lights dimmed until only the stage was left in light. She nodded to the audience, welcomed them again, read off a few announcements, and reminded everyone to apprise themselves of the rules of the retreat.

"And now, it is my great pleasure to introduce the founder and guiding spirit of Goddess International, Dr. Fiona Bliss."

At last, Andy thought and removed her glasses to get a better look.

All eyes turned expectantly to the closed door. After a few seconds, the door opened, and Dr. Bliss entered, followed closely by two serious-looking young women in white robes crossed by gold and purple sashes.

The room, as one, sprang to its feet, and deafening applause reverberated through the air. Dr. Bliss walked to the podium, and Katherine Dane stepped into the background. The supreme goddess lifted her hands, palms upward, and though to Andy it looked like a gesture to continue their accolades, the hall immediately became quiet and everyone returned to their seats.

Except for her two acolytes. They stood at chairs on either side of the doctor. There was a brief standoff as the two women eyed each other, and not at all worshipfully. A slight gesture by Dr. Bliss and they sat simultaneously.

Dr. Bliss was close to six feet tall, strikingly poised with classical features and silver hair that was swept back in an

elaborate coiffure. She wore a sleek, floor-length caftan decorated in gold braid. She looked magnificent with the row of slaves creating an exotic tableau behind her.

Silence fell over the room, and Dr. Bliss thanked her "dear Katherine" for the lovely introduction. Andy's gaze drifted back to Dillon. He was staring down at the floor, completely motionless.

She turned her attention back to Dr. Bliss, who began talking about finding your inner goddess and how the classes at the retreat would help your self-fulfillment. How women could empower themselves and find satisfaction by discovering their essential woman-ness. The audience hung on her every word.

"Our detractors dismiss the precepts of the goddess program as mere sex therapy." She smiled across the rows of listeners. "But it isn't just about sex . . . It's about power."

Andy could swear she heard eighty slave gonads shrivel up and play dead.

Dr. Bliss began to introduce the staff, starting with the priestesses at the far end of the table. Each stood and smiled and nodded to the audience when her name was called, then sat down as the next one was named.

The pajama-wearing hulk was Hans somebody, the retreat's masseur, and more, if the sighs around Andy meant anything more than wishful thinking.

Then the doctor turned and smiled down at the smaller man. "And this is my husband and help mate, Bernard Bliss, who will be conducting the Eternal Orgasm sessions."

Bernard Bliss stood up and with a deprecating smile, nodded to his high priestess wife. She began the applause that was quickly taken up enthusiastically throughout the room.

Andy stared. There was the sex guru, surrounded by forty half-naked studs, and the nerd with the sweaty forehead was giving her eternal orgasms. Hell. Life was sometimes stranger than the movies.

When the applause finally died down and Mr. Bliss had taken

his seat, Dr. Bliss smiled between the two remaining women. "And these are my assistants, Jane Parsons and Carmen Gutierrez."

The two women stood. Jane was a tall, svelte blonde; Carmen was dark and compact. They smiled at their mentor and glared at each other. Dr. Bliss sang their praises, carefully alternating their names as she spoke, meticulously showing no favoritism. Still, the icy looks they reserved for each other boded no good. No doubt about it, thought Andy. There was trouble in Goddess Land.

The dining hall was set with round tables covered in white linen tableclothes. Andy sighed with relief that she wouldn't have to eat while lounging on pillows, though she'd been looking forward to peeking up Dillon Cross's kilt when he leaned over to pour her wine. He definitely had the kind of body that rang bells in her libido.

She stood just inside the door and pushed her glasses down to the tip of her nose. The glasses were a real nuisance. She couldn't find her dinner mates. How could she find evidence of her missing aunt? They'd have to meet with an untimely demise. And soon.

After a minute, she spotted Jeannie's red hair at a table at the back of the room. She was draped over the stocky attendant named Demetri.

Dillon was standing with his back to Andy. She just caught a glimpse of his broad shoulders before he was blocked from view by a passing group of goddesses. The last woman trailed a finger along the edge of his kilt.

Dillon jumped as if he'd been goosed, and Andy felt a rush of possessiveness. He was her attendant. She shoved her glasses up and hurried toward her place.

By the time she reached him, he was a mere blur, but she could swear she'd recognize him by his scent, which was soap and all man. He stepped back and she sprawled across a chair, that she hadn't seen. He must have just pulled it out for her. As

she struggled to get up, a hand grasped each of her arms, and she was lifted into the seat. Then he shoved the chair closer to the table, while Andy blushed hot with embarrassment and frustration.

It killed her to not be able to tell him what she was really like, that she could out-goddess Athena without breaking a sweat.

"Better?" he asked, leaning close to her. His breath was warm and tickled her ear. Her nipples tightened beneath her toga and shirt.

I'd be a lot better if you'd just take me under this table, she thought, but she said, "Yes. Thank you." And stared down at her plate—at least she thought it was a plate—until he moved away.

Dillon was feeling more kindly toward Ms. Mouse. And grateful. She was the only woman who hadn't tried to grope him since he'd donned his damn kilt. He began to fill glasses from a heavy silver water pitcher and felt a twinge in his elbow. Christ, he couldn't even pour water without pain.

At least he didn't have to carry the heavy tray of covered dishes that Demetri was wielding like a Frisbee. He braced his arm with his other hand and leaned over to fill his goddess's glass.

He felt something crawl up his inside thigh.

What the hell? He was thinking bug, when a hand slipped between his legs and cupped his jockstrap. He jerked up; water sloshed out of the pitcher, splashing the table.

He'd spoken too soon. The bitch had just goosed him. He turned on her, frowning. She was glaring back at him. And with good cause. She was drenched. Water ran off her hair and fell in drops off her nose. Her toga and that prim white shirt she wore underneath it were soaked through.

His anger quickly took a backseat to lust as his gaze stuck on the full, rounded breasts that were outlined by the wet fabric. His mouth opened involuntarily. And he was hit with an image of Ms. Mouse with her thick hair flowing down her back, her toga without the tailored shirt wet and clinging to luscious curves.

The hand settled back on his crotch and squeezed.

He glowered down at Ariadne. She was using both hands to wipe water out of her eyes. He whirled around and caught the wrist of the woman on his other side, just as she pulled her hand out of his kilt. It was the redhead he'd traded away that morning.

"Oops," she said, grinning, and picked up her knife and fork.

He turned back to Ariadne, dimly aware that everyone was gaping at her. Great. He'd probably be fired. Wouldn't that just seal his future for him. He couldn't even handle an assignment this simple. But one look at the dripping woman and he forgot his own problems. She looked mortified. He was such an ass.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Really, I am. Are you okay?" Not waiting for an answer, he handed her a linen napkin.

She snatched it from him and wiped her face. When she took it away, a smudge of pasty beige had transferred from her face to the napkin. Across her cheek was a patch of darker skin. Ms. Mouse had a tan...that she was covering up. Had someone told her a tan wasn't sexy? Didn't she ever watch television? Go to the movies? Maybe the tan stopped at her neck. That would explain the buttoned-up shirt.

She stood up and tossed the napkin on the table. She mumbled something and stumbled away, leaving her glasses next to her plate.

He grabbed them and went after her.

By the time he reached the hallway, it was empty, which was strange since he'd been right behind her. He hurried down the hall, knocked on the door of the ladies' room, and hearing nothing, poked his head inside.

"Ms. McAllister? Ariadne? Are you in there?" No answer.

"I brought your glasses."

Nothing.

He eased inside and knelt down to look under the doors to the stalls. No feet. No flowing white fabric. He sighed and went back the way he had come. The auditorium was completely dark. Surely she wasn't hiding in the dark. "Ariadne," he whispered. "Please come out, I have your glasses."

Still nothing. He ran his fingers along the wall until he came to the bank of light switches. He flicked them on. The room was empty except for rows and rows of folding chairs.

The only place left was outside. In the dark. She was a disaster in the making.

Dillon pushed through the double doors and took the front steps at a run. There was no one on the lawn, and a shiver of unease lifted the hairs on his forearms. Where was she?

He headed toward the woods, where the lights from the cottages winked through the trees. It was really dark beneath the trees. He imagined her running blindly through the woods, humiliated and cold. She'd probably fall or run into a tree or something before she made it back to her cabin.

He mentally kicked himself for reacting to that lascivious touch like an amateur. He just hadn't expected it. It wasn't every day that a total stranger slid her hand between his legs. At least, it hadn't happened recently. And instead of playing it cool, he'd humiliated the most pitiful wallflower in Terra Bliss.

He felt like a heel. And worse, he was worried.

He began to run up the path. "Ariadne," he called. "Wait. You forgot your glasses." He stopped and listened. Heard nothing, not even the crunch of gravel beneath sandaled feet.

He imagined her hurt and lying on the ground, too shy to call for help. He called again, fear making his voice warble in the night air.

He was in a near panic by the time he reached her cabin. Not that she would be there. There was no way she could have beaten him. She'd have to be an Olympic sprinter.

Her lights were on, but everybody's lights were on. He was

wondering if he should bother knocking when he heard a low sound. He froze, listened. Humming. A woman was humming.

Cautiously, he followed the sound. It led him around the side of her cabin. He stopped suddenly as his attention fixed on the light coming through the bedroom window.

A thin, lithesome figure was silhouetted by the gauzy curtains. She lifted her arms and his breath caught.

The clinging robe rose along her body. The light caught the sensuous curve of her hip, the narrow waist as she wiggled free of the garment and tossed it aside. She paused, and he knew she was unbuttoning the shirt beneath. And he knew it had to be his mousy goddess, and yet. . . .

The shirt slipped from her shoulders, and the edge of a near perfect breast came into view.

He shouldn't be watching, but he couldn't look away. He was vaguely aware of his dick hardening beneath his kilt, straining at the confines of the jockstrap. His mouth grew dry, and he seemed to be having trouble taking a simple breath.

Could this possibly be the skinny, stooped, shy woman who just this afternoon had stumbled blindly after him to this very same cabin and then tried to tip him a dollar? Maybe he had the wrong cabin. But he knew he didn't, even before he dragged himself away from the view long enough to check out the sign on the porch post.

He should return her glasses and get the hell out. But instead, he crept back to the side of the cabin and peered through the window. Her elbows were lifted now, showing a body that was curved in all the right places. She turned profile. Her hands slid beneath her breasts, and she tilted her head as if looking in a mirror.

Dillon licked dry lips. Tried to swallow. She arched back, lifted one plump breast, and ran her fingers over the tip.

Desire swept through him, hitting him so hard that his knees buckled.

Her hands moved again, this time to her hair. She was

pulling out the pins that confined it in that unflattering bun. His mouth opened in anticipation. He tried to adjust his erection, but her hair fell loose and spilled over her shoulders, and the touch of his fingers almost caused his climax. He yanked his hand away.

He could see her almost as if she weren't hidden behind the curtain. Could imagine the feel of her hair, thick, and slightly wavy.

Christ, what was going on with him? An out-of-body experience? A hallucination? He'd had a few in the hospital, but not since. And none as enjoyable as this. If only his jockstrap wasn't cutting off the circulation to his balls. His dick was throbbing, searching for escape like a caged animal.

He ordered himself to back up, leave the glasses on the porch, and get away. But he stood riveted to the spot as she picked up a brush and began to pull it through her hair. His hand drifted to the bulge in his kilt. His eyes closed as he pushed himself into his palm. It was a hell of a time to get the first real rush of desire he'd had in ten months.

It was sick to be standing here like a voyeur at a peep show. It was disgusting. Perverse. Then she turned to the window and walked straight toward him as if she could see him. He ducked behind a tree, but couldn't help peeking out again. She pushed the curtain aside. Raised the window. And he got a moment of full frontal.

Jesus. This couldn't be happening. He squeezed his eyes shut, opened them again as the curtain fell back and she walked out of sight.

Dillon leaned against the tree. His heart racing. Okay, she was safe. Inside. The vision he was having of her must be the product of a not fully healed mind. And the fact that he hadn't had sex in a really long time, hadn't even wanted to have sex. The curtains were distorting her image. . . .

The rational part of his mind was trying to tell him something. It had tried earlier at dinner, but he'd been too con-

cerned about Ariadne to listen properly. And now he was too blitzed. He stood there, the tree holding him up until his pulse returned to normal and he could breathe again.

Okay. It was over. There was solid ground beneath his feet, and he was going to make sure it stayed that way. He was still holding her glasses and was relieved to see that he hadn't broken them in his fever of lust or whatever it had been. He should knock on the door and return them to her, but even now, he didn't trust himself to leave it at that. And to be honest, he didn't want the spell to be broken.

On second thought, he'd keep them. Bring them back first thing in the morning, before she left for breakfast. Yeah. That was a better plan.

He'd get a good look at her in the daylight. She'd be wearing something god-awful. He'd be brought back to his senses and his sense of duty. See tonight for what it was. Some bizarre, waking wet dream.

She would go her way and he would go his. And while she was learning to flirt, he would find a murderer.

His fingers closed around the glasses and he backed away from the cottage.

And, finally, away from her allure, rational thought kicked into place, and it occurred to him that maybe Ariadne Mc-Allister wasn't as plain as she wanted everyone else to believe.

Because if what he'd seen through the window was even half as good as it appeared, Ariadne McAllister was a knockout.

So what was she up to?

Chapter 3

Andy jumped out of bed in the predawn light and was half dressed before she realized she wasn't on location and she didn't have to be in makeup or wardrobe. It always took a few days after a wrap to retrain herself to sleep late.

And here she was in a mountain retreat with no warm body to induce her back into bed. She was starving. She'd made it only halfway through dinner before the water-dousing fiasco, and the grapes and skim milk had done little to assuage her hunger or her restlessness.

She made a cup of coffee and stepped out onto the porch. Night was slowly turning to day, but the sun wouldn't appear for hours. She was anxious to begin questioning people about Aunt Mac's disappearance, but breakfast wasn't served until seven, and she couldn't just stand here staring into the woods until then. She'd be stark-raving mad by the time the others woke up.

She needed exercise. The retreat had a gym and several pools, but she didn't think her persona would survive being discovered in spandex gym shorts or a bikini.

She could do sit-ups and push-ups in her living room, but the air was crisp and smelled of pine needles, and she hated the thought of going inside again. The day was growing lighter, even though the surrounding trees kept her cabin in shadows. But higher up . . . An energetic climb would work. And she was sure no one would see her. Everyone else was still sleeping. Andy had heard them carousing late into the night, but had no inclination to join them. She'd finally had to stuff her pillow over her head to get to sleep and overcome the desire to see if Dillon was among the partiers.

She drank off the last of her coffee and went inside. A few minutes later, she was dressed in running shoes and sweats. She jumped off the porch, bypassing the two steps, and started up the path toward the mountains.

She'd just passed the last few cabins, when the path narrowed and underbrush began to encroach on the gravel. A hundred feet later, she came to the stone wall she'd seen from the bus.

So much for her hike; she wasn't even breathing hard.

A metal gate, as high and as solid as the wall, blocked her way. A lichen-covered sign warned, NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT.

She rattled the padlock and chain, but the gate didn't budge. Why lock it? Why was there a wall at all? To keep wildlife out? Or to keep the trainees in.

Andy couldn't shake the memory of the newspaper article about Imogene Southwaite falling to her death. She supposed people did stranger things than accidentally walking off a third-story balcony. But she had also appeared in too many thrillers not to think the obvious. Had Imogene Southwaite been killed for her legacy?

That would mean that someone in the Goddess organization was a murderer. It couldn't be. They were all too busy running around in nightgowns, trying to flirt their way to success. Murder didn't seem like a viable flirtation technique.

Nonetheless, Andy had a sudden urge to see what was on the other side of the wall. Not that she thought she would find the abandoned body of her favorite aunt, but she had to look. Just in case. Even though it was ridiculous. She hoped. She began looking for a place to scale the wall. There were several trees growing nearby, but their branches had been pruned so that she couldn't reach even the lowest one. She began searching along the wall and found something better. A fallen oak tree had wedged itself at an angle between the wall and a solid spruce. She'd be able to walk right to the top.

She placed one foot on the trunk. Several slivers of wood crumbled beneath her feet. She kicked them away until she found a solid core.

Hands out to her sides for balance, she tightroped her way up the tree and was soon standing on the top of the wall.

On the other side was a steep incline of trees. No problem getting down, but first, she needed to find a way to get back up. Always plan your escape before your entrance: a motto that had saved many stunt actors from serious injury or worse. And besides, she didn't want to find herself locked out of the retreat. It could take days for her to trek her way back to the front gate. And living on mushrooms and wood grubs was not her idea of a vacation.

She found a tree with several sturdy branches within reach of the wall. Its lowest branch came within six feet of the ground. She could jump high enough to get a handhold.

Gauging the distance to the nearest branch, she sprang from the wall. She caught the branch with both hands. It swayed as it took her weight, and she hung there until it came to rest, and she could steady her feet on the limb below. Shifting her weight from her arms to her legs, she let go and dropped straight down. She grabbed the limb on either side of her feet, then slid her feet from the branch. She dropped to the ground and landed in a deep-knee bend.

The earth between the trees was spongy, covered in moldy leaves and pine straw. Tangled bushes erupted like witches' brooms from the ground. She wiped bark and sticky resin off her hands and looked around. A few yards away, a smaller path continued up the mountain.

34 Gemma Bruce

Andy began to climb, winding in and out of patches of early morning light, finding footholds in rocky outgrowths and slipping over patches of moss. She heard rumbling in the distance and thought it must be the highway. But as she climbed steadily higher and it became louder, she realized it was the sound of rushing water.

She scrambled over detritus and fallen logs and came to a swollen stream. Its banks churned with foam as water coursed downhill toward a section of agitated rapids.

She followed it upward to where the steam disappeared into a crevice between two jagged boulders. She had no equipment to climb the face of the rock, so she skirted around it, back into the deep woods, until she finally glimpsed water again. Breathing heavily, as much from the altitude as exertion, she stepped out of the forest and into sunlight.

She was standing on a flat boulder. A crystal-clear lake stretched before her, forming an hourglass of blue in the surrounding woods. Across the lake, a waterfall rushed over a palisade of rock and tumbled into a cloud of mist. But here, the water was calm and serene. Trees grew right to the water's edge and reflected on its surface. Clumps of yellow flowers dipped into the water, and in the patches of grass, tiny slips of wildflowers were waiting for their petals to be opened by the sun.

She sat down so that the sun beamed down on her face and shoulders. It was peaceful here. A perfect place for swimming and sunbathing, for solitude or romance. If she were going to run a goddess retreat, she'd have made this a part of it.

Two days of inactivity had been too much. And the lake was tempting. She pulled the sweatshirt over her head, kicked off her shoes and socks, and inched over to the edge of the boulder. She stuck her toes in the water, let out a gasp, and snatched her foot back.

It was freezing. But exhilarating. A polar bear's dream pool. She stripped off her clothes. The water was deep, but so

clear she could see the bottom. She bent her knees and dove in. She surfaced with the air wrenched from her lungs. She let out a "brrr" that echoed across the water and began to swim.

She could feel her muscles come to life as her arms sliced through the water and her legs kicked beneath the surface. Within minutes, she was back in form, her body sleek and powerful. She dove in and resurfaced, arched her back, and lifted her face toward the sky. She kicked once and curved backward into a somersault, then rose again and floated on her back. Her nipples grew hard from the cold. The water caressed her sides, her arms as she waved them back and forth to stay afloat. She turned and swam, first on her stomach and then on her back, rolling in the glassy lake like a dolphin.

And her mind conjured a playmate, muscular and sleek, as handsome as—Hell, he looked just like Dillon Cross.

Well, why not, she thought. When in Rome, only perhaps she should think, When in Greece. It didn't matter. Her fantasy was in full swing as she imagined their bodies coming together, slick to the touch as they passed within inches of each other—darting in and out of reach. Then they would float, side by side, while desire rose, and their dolphin flirtation would begin again. This time, more intimate. Her breasts skimming his chest as their legs entwined in the water, his fingers gliding between her legs, his dick sliding between her closed fingers. Finally their lips would touch and their tongues would lock in a kiss.

Andy sighed as her own hands slid down her thighs to touch herself, before once again paddling the water to stay afloat.

It would be lovely. And when they tired of swimming, they'd climb out of the lake, holding hands like two primeval beings, born of the water like Aphrodite and—

Ick. Been there, done that, got the paycheck. Andy scissor-kicked, dipped beneath the surface, and came up to spout water into the air. Reran the scene. They would climb out of the pool, holding hands like Adam and Eve...no, like Tarzan

and Jane. Yeah, that was better. She'd never gotten to play Jane.

So-o-o... Without speaking, they stretch out on the hard rock. The warmth of it seeps into her back. Dillon rolls over and presses his body into hers, at first cold and wet, rubbing along her stomach and breasts, until the motion sends a tingle of warmth through her skin and his erection grows heated and hard with the motion.

She'd throw her head back and arch up as he slid that heat inside her. Warming her completely. The warmth would turn to fire in her belly as he filled her and filled her with his thrusts.

They'd mate like wild beasts, crying out and writhing as they pushed themselves to the brink of annihilation. And when they came together, fireworks would explode above them.

Not fireworks, too clichéd. The heavens would sing. No. That didn't work, either.

They would come together in a conflagration, the forest bursting into flames around them. Dillon would collapse onto her, his heart beating wildly. Then they would begin again.

But later. Right now, her teeth had begun to chatter, and her lips were probably turning blue. They were so stiff with cold she couldn't have puckered up if Apollo, himself, appeared naked on a golden cloud.

Andy uprighted herself and began to tread water. Besides, what was she thinking? As soon as they climbed out of the water, the director would yell "Cut," and the actors, spritzed with warm water, would replace them for the hot and heavy love scene, while Andy and Dillon shivered their way back to their trailers and hot showers—solo.

Disgusted, she swam back to where she'd left her clothes and climbed out of the water. She wrung water from her hair and sat down to let the sun dry her skin. The granite was abrasive, and she had to roll to one cheek to brush a pebble off her butt.

So much for love on the rocks.

She pushed damp legs and arms into her sweat suit, laced up her running shoes, and climbed back down the mountain.

The retreat was just showing signs of life as she let herself over the wall. She stole unseen past the other cabins and was feeling smug, when she saw a flash of light blue in the clearing in front of her cabin.

She quickly withdrew into the shelter of the trees.

Damn. It was her attendant. Too late for her fantasy, but too early for breakfast. Now what was she going to do? She eased around to the back of her cabin. The bedroom window was still ajar. She pushed it open and swung herself over the sill.

Dillon leaned against a tree, a Styrofoam cup in one hand and Ariadne's glasses stuck in the waistband of his gym shorts. He'd been waiting for nearly an hour so he wouldn't miss her. His coffee had grown cold and so had he. It was almost seven o'clock and still no sign of her.

His eyes felt gritty from lack of sleep. Not from spending the night casing the retreat's business office, like he should have done, but from thinking about the enigmatic Ms. McAllister. Every time he started to drift off, his pre-REM state morphed into fantasies about her naked and in his bed, and he woke up again.

He had to get over this infatuation. He wasn't given to flights of fancy. Those kinds of things were sure to get you killed, as he knew all too well. He'd nearly died because of his desire for a unearthly siren, who also happened to be a double agent. But Ariadne was no siren. And she was certainly no agent. She was a long, tall, gawky, near-sighted librarian.

Still, he couldn't get his body's response to jibe with his visual take on her. Something posttraumatic, he guessed. He'd been through a lot, physically and mentally, and wasn't sure he could completely trust his reactions.

That was why he was standing outside her cabin, waiting to

accompany her to breakfast. If she came out of her cottage this morning a complete fright, he'd know he was loosing his grip. And if she came out like the advanced goddess he'd been imagining . . . He'd know he'd already lost it.

But one way or the other, he needed to get a closer look. And besides, he still had her glasses.

At last, he heard the shower running and looked at his watch. Twenty minutes until breakfast. It probably took her twice as long to wrap all that hair into a knot. He started to pace.

She came out twenty minutes later, dressed in baggy khakis and an oversized shirt, buttoned at her wrists and neck. Her hair was pulled so tight that he was surprised her eyes weren't slanted. And the pale makeup was back.

He had a nearly overwhelming urge to pull the shirttail out of her khakis and wipe the makeup off her face. He had an even more overwhelming urge to lick it off, himself. Or better still, tear off her shirt and—He blew out air and stepped back while he tried to force his brain back up to his head.

Ariadne strode across the porch, her backpack slung over one shoulder. She jogged down the steps, and Dillon automatically rushed to help her. Then he stopped as he realized that she had navigated the steps perfectly fine without her glasses. Contacts?

He stepped in front of her. "I have your glasses." He reached under his shirt and pulled them out of his waistband.

Her eyes widened for a millisecond; then she squinted in his direction.

She's faking this whole eyeglasses thing, he thought. But why? What was she up to? He could think of several possibilities, but most of them were results of a paranoid mind.

Not paranoid. You're just being careful. The way you were trained to be.

Ariadne reached for the glasses. Her fingers brushed his as

she plucked them from his hand. A tingle went up his arm. No doubt about it, he was in bad shape.

He peered at her face, trying to understand why she caused this reaction in him. It couldn't be her, could it? She gave off nothing but insecurity. Not the kind of woman he liked—used to like. Maybe that was it. She was completely nonthreatening. He growled inwardly. You'd think he was the novice and not her.

"Look, about last night. I'm sorry." he said.

She quickly looked up at him, her eyes magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses. Not brown, not blue, something in between.

She turned away and started down the path. He had to hurry to catch up with her.

Andy stumbled along, cursing Dillon Cross for finding those damn glasses and then for keeping them in his shorts. They were still warm from his skin, and she imagined she could smell his scent on them.

He caught up to her and she lowered her head even more.

"Why do you wear those glasses?"

"So I can see where I'm going," she mumbled.

"They don't seem to be helping much."

No shit. They made her seasick every time she put them on. But she wasn't about to confess that to him of all people. She wished he would go away and let her get on with her work. Because it was really hard to concentrate on anything but the feel of him striding along beside her, the heat radiating off him like sunshine on water. Or to imagine another night going by without just coming out and propositioning him.

Too bad she hadn't been assigned the muscle man in front of him, that Demetri character. Him, she could resist. She'd never really cared for pumped-up men. Hollywood was full of them. But this one was sleek and predatory in design.

He must know it.

Except he didn't put out those vibes. At least not with her. Maybe her disguise was working too well.

Stupid, she thought. *It's supposed to work*. So she could find out what happened to Mac, not have unbridled sex with a stranger.

Her toe caught on something and she stumbled against him. He pushed her back to her feet.

His breath tickled her skin and she knew he was laughing at her—At her. This was the last, absolute last, time she'd let her family talk her into one of their madcap schemes. She could be having raunchy sex with a movie star on a tropical beach. She tried to picture herself and Jason lying on the white sands of Acapulco, but the face and body that appeared belonged to the man escorting her down the path to breakfast.

When she tripped for the third time, Dillon overcame his resolution to keep several feet between them and took her elbow.

Her arm grew rigid beneath his touch. Well, tough. He didn't want to show up at breakfast with a scraped and bloodied remedial goddess in tow. He'd already taken a shitload of ribbing for dumping water over her the night before. Had been forced to listen to a few jokes about *her* idea of toga wear, and *his* taste in women.

They tromped down the path together, way too close for Dillon's comfort, Ariadne taking in quick, short breaths beside him. As soon as they reached the lawn, she attempted to move away, but Dillon held on, and halfway to the main building, she seemed to resign herself to his help and relaxed against him.

So she wasn't entirely a cold fish. Maybe she was just out of shape. Whatever it was, it made his pulse jump and sent warmth shooting through his arms and legs to settle low in his belly. He gritted his teeth, concentrated his thoughts on his mission, and managed to get her into the dining hall without throwing her on the grass and tearing off her clothes to see what was really underneath. This really had to stop.

Fortunately, breakfast was buffet style, and as soon as they were inside the door, he steered her toward the line in front of the warming trays and pushed a plate into her hands.

"Be right back." He hurried off to his wait station to pick up a coffeepot and get back before she made it through the line. He didn't trust her to carry an egg-laden plate across the room to her seat. The possibilities were unnerving.

He'd just reached the table, when Demetri came up and slapped him on the back. "Saw you come in with the frump. Don't tell me she put out on the first night." He reached past Dillon for a white thermal carafe.

"Show some respect, will you?"

Demetri grinned. "Anything worth looking at under all those clothes?"

Dillon put down the coffee carafe he'd just picked up. "Shut the hell up."

Demetri glanced down at Dillon's leg. "Ooh. Scary. Think you could take me with that gimpy knee?"

"If I have to." He could still hold his own, even with his "gimpy" knee, the ravaged muscles in his thigh, his trick elbow, and the metal plate in his head.

"Hey, you guys are blocking the way." Rusty was carrying a tray with juice pitchers.

Dillon stepped aside, glad of the interruption. Demetri didn't move.

"I said you're in my way," said Rusty.

Demetri moved an inch to the side. "Is this better?"

"You're pathetic." Rusty tried to ease past him.

"My goddess doesn't think so." Demetri held his hand in front of Rusty's face. A sapphire ring glinted from his little finger.

Rusty quickly looked around. "I wouldn't be so smug if I were you. You know the rules, no seducing, no bragging—"

"Not me, man. I just did what she told me to do." His thick eyebrows lifted in mock astonishment. "And, man, can that woman talk."

"And no accepting gifts," Rusty continued. "It's in our contract, and you could get the rest of us in trouble."

Demetri shrugged. "Relax. It's just a trinket. No big deal." "You'd better not let IoIo see it."

"Oooh, think he'll spank me?" Demetri smiled. "I'm telling you, there's nothing like a wealthy widow to set my blood on fi—er." He did a little shimmy; his chest moved in one solid piece. "She's old and saggy, I don't care how many lifts she's had. But hey, you gotta pay to play. I mean to play." He wiggled his pinkie at them and walked away.

"I hate that guy," said Rusty. "This is a great job and he's going to ruin it for everybody."

Dillon nodded and followed him to their table. He'd never been the chivalrous type, but there was something about Demetri's attitude toward the women here that made Dillon see red.

Ariadne was already seated, and he realized he'd forgotten about her. Someone else must have helped her. Thank God for small favors.

Rusty put down his tray and stopped to talk to his goddess, a lady with a blue perm. Dillon moved to the far side of the table and began pouring coffee, concentrating on not spilling it on the goddesses or on the daily schedules they had spread across the table.

"I'm thinking about starting with Elements of Flirtation."

Dillon carefully filled the cup and moved to Ariadne's place.

"Not me," said the redhead. "I'm going straight to Pussy Empowerment."

Dillon fumbled his carafe. There was an intake of breath from the goddesses. He held on until the carafe settled back into his hand. Christ. It was hard enough pouring coffee while getting goosed, stroked, and fondled without having to listen to their plans for flirtation and God knew what else.

The redhead grinned at him. "Did I embarrass you, sugah?" She turned to Ariadne. "What about you, honey? What workshop are you goin' to?"

"Uh," said his goddess.

Well, that was a relief. He couldn't imagine Ariadne empowering her—he couldn't even say the word. Maybe he should take a look at the course list and give her some advice. She wasn't really cut out for this kind of thing.

Actually, neither was he.

"What do you suggest?" asked Ariadne, lowering her glasses to watch Dillon walk away. God, he was gorgeous. She wondered what he usually did for a living. Surely he didn't work the circuit of sex therapy workshops. It gave her the creeps to think of him waiting on woman after woman. Servicing woman after woman.

He didn't even seem that comfortable around women. Maybe he was a cowboy; that scar on his back could have been caused by a bull. But his knee. She shuddered just thinking about it.

"Honey, are you all right?" asked Loubelle. "You're not still upset about that little accident with the water pitcher last night, are you?"

"Well, you shouldn't be," said Jeannie.

"No, you shouldn't," agreed Evelyn, giving Jeannie a pointed look.

Jeannie looked innocent. "He was probably nervous. It's obvious the poor man isn't comfortable being around so many desirable women. Though with his looks, I don't know why not. I could eat him with a spoon."

Desirable wasn't exactly the word she would have chosen to describe her fellow goddesses. There was something desperate about their need to control.

Okay, so maybe she was just jealous. She'd never had control of anything, except her stunt work. And half the time that went to hell, too. She had the scars to prove it.

44 Gemma Bruce

Maybe she did need a little goddess training.

She picked up her schedule and began to peruse it. In the end, she opted for a workshop called Knowing What You Want. Which seemed like a good place to start, since she didn't have a clue.

Chapter 4

Three hours later, Andy still didn't know what she wanted or how to get it. Not that Carmen, the spitfire acolyte, didn't do her best. She was a dynamo, all four-foot-eleven of her. Her hair was a riot of tight curls. Stretch capris molded themselves to muscular legs, and a knit top draped off her shoulders—a twenty-first century happening kind of goddess. Her tight little body thrummed with energy as she quickly settled everyone onto couches and chairs and began to pass out questionnaires.

She collected them before Andy had answered half the questions. Then she paced through the group, gesticulating, confronting and cajoling her "sisters" to spill their guts about their failures in life and love—which everyone except Andy was more than willing to do. It was amazing the things women were willing to share . . . and share . . . and share.

As soon as someone admitted their failure, Carmen turned it around and badgered them into "changing the scenario" to one of success.

Andy kept her mouth shut during the first half and avoided Carmen's intent eyes whenever she passed by her chair. And then with only minutes to go, Carmen stopped in front of her.

"And you, Ariadne," she said in her spicy Latino-accented voice. "Do you know what you want?"

Andy shrunk back in her chair. She didn't have to pretend to

be the shy Ms. McAllister. She was horrified to see everyone turn toward her, their expressions expectant and encouraging. She couldn't give details about her life. What would she say? That she was a stuntwoman, here under false pretenses? That she wasn't really shy and inexperienced? And she certainly wasn't going to confess to her active, but going nowhere, love life.

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Cleared her throat and finally just shrugged and stared at her hands.

Carmen gave her a disappointed look and said, "We are all here to succeed, but in order to do that, we must first share." Then she turned her attention to someone who was more than happy to oblige.

As soon as the class was over and Carmen was surrounded by enthusiastic women, Andy grabbed her backpack and slinked out of the room.

She had wasted the entire morning without asking one question about Mac's disappearance. Which she needed to do soon. She couldn't take much more of this touchy-feely "we are all sisters and we deserve the job and the man of our dreams" bit. She had the job she wanted. She was successful, had a loving family. And if she was a little behind in finding the man of her dreams, it wasn't through lack of trying.

Making films was a grueling, time-devouring profession. And exhausting. Which didn't leave much time or energy for building a relationship. Men came on to her all the time, but they didn't stay. And she never really wanted them to. They assumed that a stuntwoman would be fun for a night of gymnastic sex, but they invariably ended up feeling threatened by a woman who was stronger, more athletic, and able to take care of herself as well as him. Then it was, "That was great. I'll call you." Of course, they rarely did, and if they did manage to leave a message, she was usually working.

Well, a girl couldn't have everything.

She stalked across the grass toward the pool where she'd agreed to meet Evelyn, Jeannie, and Loubelle for lunch. There

were plenty of young, good-looking women at the retreat. Too bad her family hadn't done their research. Then she wouldn't be stuck in this annoying old-maid costume.

What she needed was a makeover, like Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* or Anne Hathaway in *The Princess Diaries*. Then Dillon could see her as she really was.

Wait a minute. Forget Dillon. She was on a mission. And as soon as she found out what happened to Mac, she was out of here. No wonder Mac left. Andy couldn't figure out why she'd come in the first place. Mac was successful, gorgeous, independent, and still had plenty of men around . . . but never kept any of them.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Mac was looking for "the one." Andy shuddered. She really didn't need to go there.

She heard her name being warbled. "Over here." Jeannie waved at her from where she and Loubelle and Evelyn were lying on white plastic chaise lounges by the pool.

Andy waved back, shoved her glasses on, and began shuffling past blurs of chairs and people toward the three women. She felt along the empty chaise between Evelyn and Jeannie, dumped her backpack alongside it, and sat down.

"We ordered iced tea," Jeannie drawled. "Here's the lunch menu." A rectangle of cardboard appeared before Andy.

"What's everyone having?" she asked, hoping to get a clue without actually having to read it.

"I'm having the crab salad," said Evelyn. "It's always delicious here. They have it flown in from the coast."

"Sounds good to me." Andy dropped the menu and stretched her legs along the chaise. The sun was glaring through her Coke-bottle lenses. She felt as though her irises might burst into flame any minute. She tried closing her eyes, but it didn't help. She picked up her backpack, rummaged inside, and took out her Ray-Bans. She pulled off her prop glasses and replaced them with the sunglasses. The world snapped into focus, a little dark, but clear. Why hadn't she thought of this sooner.

Her gaze fell immediately on a huge kidney-shaped pool

with three stone dolphins spewing water from its center. Across the pool was a food cabana and a colonnaded stone amphitheater. Goddesses of all sizes and shapes, wearing a variety of swimwear from string bikinis to knee-length coverups, swam, sat at tables playing cards or eating, or lay in chaises while their attendants straddled their recumbent bodies and applied sunscreen in long, easy strokes.

Andy wondered where her attendant was. Too bad her string bikini was hidden away in her suitcase. She wouldn't mind having Dillon's hands slathering oil all over her.

"You know, hon, you should try to relax. Have some fun. Like me." Jeannie was wearing a two-piece suit, which accentuated her too-thin, too-tanned body. Her skin wrinkled each time she changed positions.

On the other side of Jeannie, Loubelle stood up and began to slather sunblock over the parts of her not covered by her Bermuda shorts and peasant blouse.

"Loubelle, sugah, pull up your sleeves or you're gonna get a farmer's tan," said Jeannie, turning lazily toward her. "And where's that Rusty? He should be doing that."

Loubelle shook her head. "I'm a great-grandmother," she said in her soft accent. "Some things are better left to the imagination."

"But not many," Jeannie said and winked at the others.

Andy began to search for Dillon among the men carrying trays to and from the food cabana. She finally spotted him on the other side of the pool, talking with several of the younger, hotter women.

Andy crossed her arms. Back off, bitches, she thought. He's mine.

Just when she was considering a triple flip across the pool and several well-aimed karate chops, Dillon moved away from them. Andy watched them watch him, until she realized how stupid that was and began watching him, too.

He moved unhurriedly, efficiently, walking with a slight hitch that she'd noticed yesterday. Surely she wasn't responsible for that limp. She hadn't fallen on him *that* hard. The silk of his nylon shirt rippled over his muscles as he headed toward the cabana.

"Which workshop did you attend this morning, Ariadne?"

"This morning?" Andy forced her gaze away from Dillon and looked at Evelyn.

"Oh. Knowing What You Want and How To Get It."

"That was a good choice," said Loubelle. "I took it two sessions ago and it really works."

"Always good to know what you want before you get it," said Jeannie, then shook her head. "Somebody oughta light a fire under your slave, hon. He's moving slow. Uh-huh. But lookin' good."

He sure was, thought Andy. Dillon was walking toward them, the drinks' tray balanced on his palm. The frontal view was even better than the side view. And for the first time, Andy could look to her heart's content. Really, the sunglasses were a brilliant move. A breeze kicked up, plastering his T-shirt to his chest, while the sun glared down on Andy's shirt and khakis. She seemed to get hotter with every step Dillon took.

"Do you ever let your hair down?" asked Jeannie, sitting up on the edge of her chaise and looking at Andy.

Evelyn shook her head. "Jeannie. You are too much."

"I didn't mean it like that, but your real hair. It's so nice and thick and such a lovely color." She scooted her chaise closer to Andy's. "Let's see. Sit up. Evey, hand me that brush out of my purse."

Oh, *shit*, thought Andy. The makeover. It was so tempting. Wouldn't she just love to see Dillon's face when the real her appeared. But that would be a disaster. She couldn't change until she'd found Aunt Mac.

Jeannie was already pulling out the pins from her bun. Andy grabbed her hand. "Maybe later."

Jeannie pursed her lips. "I don't know what you're waiting for. Here's your chance to be a new you. Life is short. I know you're too young to think about that. But I'm telling ya. There aren't that many good men out there, and you better make sure you get yourself one."

"I don't . . ." But she did want to have a meaningful relationship. It wouldn't have to last forever, but long enough to get to know each other, not jump into bed the minute they met. They could read, talk, play dominos. . . .

"Mr. Jenkins was a real sweetie," Jeannie continued. "He had his head screwed on right and he took care of me. But I never had any eternal orgasms. I was lucky if I got one at all. Then one day, he up and died, just like that, and I was richer than I had any right to be. I'd been watching Dr. Bliss's show on the TV every day, read all her books.

"I thought, what the heck, I'm young . . . enough. So I signed up for Terra Bliss. Liked it so much, I came back for a second round. Now I'm on my third. I'm still waiting for that eternal orgasm, but I aim to get it before I die. Do you have a bathing suit?"

"What?" said Andy. "Me?" Dillon had almost reached them, and Andy was having a hard time thinking. Only my string bikini. "No. I..."

"No matter, you can borrow one of mine. I brought a few extras."

Dillon set the tray on the table and handed the others tall, frosty glasses of tea. Then he leaned over Andy and placed a glass of iced tea on the table by her chaise.

She turned her head to watch him, which put her eyes right at crotch level. She took a second to enjoy the way the silk clung and shimmered over a landscape she'd like to explore. She leaned on the arm of her chaise; her elbow slipped off.

The top of her head brushed against his thigh. She got a jolt of pure "take me now." She lifted her head. Dillon was still leaning over the table. He seemed oblivious, but Andy was sure that something was happening inside those little shorts. Was it possible that he was getting aroused?

Yeah. He was definitely growing. You rock, girl. Even with old-lady clothes and bad hair and makeup, she still had it, and

she was more than ready to use it. She was tempted to reach for her iced tea and accidentally brush the front of his shorts to see if he was as hard as she thought. After all, she was halfblind. He'd never guess she'd done it on purpose.

Then he moved away and she felt oddly deserted.

Jeannie sipped her iced tea and watched Dillon as he carried the empty tray away. Then she leaned over the space between the chairs. "He's definitely got the hots for you."

Andy shook her head, biting her lip not to laugh out loud. Yes. Thank you, God.

"No, really. He does. His Mr. Peter was practically dancin' in his pants."

Andy buried her face in her hands to hide her grin.

"Jeannie," admonished Loubelle, pursing her lips and flushing pink. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Jeannie rolled her eyes. "And it's a mighty fine one, too. I know, 'cause my hand did a little introducing itself to him last night at dinner. Sorry 'bout the water. Who knew he was so ticklish."

"Honestly, Jeannie," said Evelyn. "I knew something had surprised him. But I never."

"Well, I never did either. But I figured, what was I waiting for?"

"You . . . you . . . goosed him?" asked Andy, nearly choking to hold back her laughter.

"Yeah, but don't mind me. I'm perfectly happy with my Demetri. But you better go on and act before one of these other women starts poaching."

Andy shook her head and reached for her iced tea. She pulled at the straw and sucked in a burning breath. Her eyes teared up. No one had said it was Long Island iced tea.

"No need to be embarrassed. You're a diamond in the rough. He's smart enough to see it. Now, if you'd just let me do something about your hair."

A few minutes later, they moved to the luncheon table. Demetri and another attendant, whom Evelyn introduced as Louis, wandered over. Louis was a clean-cut, well-scrubbed, all-American kind of guy. He nodded politely and began chatting with Evelyn.

Demetri stopped at Jeannie's chair, did some rubby, purry things, then left again. A minute later, Louis followed him.

"Was that your sapphire ring Demetri was wearing on his pinkie?" asked Loubelle, smoothing her linen napkin across her lap.

"Uh-huh. Doesn't he look sweet wearing it?"

Evelyn shook her head. "You should be a little careful with your gifts."

"Oh, pooh. I've got more little trinkets than I'll ever be able to wear."

"Well, I wouldn't advertise it if I were you. Oh, there you are, Rusty." Loubelle smiled past Andy. Andy turned around to see a freckle-faced redhead bouncing toward them.

"Just came by to say a quick hello. Everybody having a good time?"

They all nodded.

Rusty gave Loubelle a friendly smile. "See you tonight, unless you need anything?"

"No, no, I'll see you this evening," said Loubelle, beaming.

Andy began to feel a little sick. Were these women, whom she was beginning to really like, all being gouged by their appointed slaves? Would Dillon soon start hitting her up for presents? And what about sex? Better not to even imagine that.

"Were those your attendants?" asked Andy.

Evelyn and Loubelle nodded.

"Rusty's a sweet boy," said Loubelle. "And much nicer than the one I had last time. He was a bit of a pill. I suppose I should be glad that Miranda didn't come back for the second session. She might have wanted him back."

Andy swallowed the wrong way and burst out coughing.

"Jeannie, do something, she's choking."

Andy shook her head.

"She just swallowed the wrong way. Are you all right, sugah?"

Andy nodded and kept spluttering.

"Well, look who's here," Jeannie said and smacked her on the back.

Andy pitched forward, and when she sat up again, Dillon was standing beside her, a salad plate in each hand.

Hmmm. Both hands occupied. It was tempting. Of course, if last night was any indication, she'd be wearing two crab salads before she was finished copping a feel.

He set one plate down in front of her.

"Thanks," she said stiffly.

"My pleasure," he said and placed the other plate in front of Jeannie.

"Why didn't she come back?" asked Andy.

"Who?" Jeannie asked around a bite of crab.

"Mi—the woman who had Rusty last session." God, this was too easy. She didn't even have to make up a story to get them to talk.

"Oh . . . Miranda . . . Nobody knows. Evelyn, you're hogging the bread basket."

Evelyn handed Jeannie the basket.

Jeannie selected a roll and began slathering it with butter. "It was the strangest thing. One night we were having drinks, and she says she's tired and going to bed. Next day, she was gone. Just like that, in the middle of the night. Didn't even leave us a note."

Andy's fingers gripped her fork. Good God. It was true. Mac had really disappeared.

"We thought she must have gotten bad news from home," said Loubelle, frowning. "She seemed preoccupied the last day she was here."

"Preoccupied?" said Andy, her pulse starting to race. "About what?"

"She didn't say."

"No one saw her leave?" Dread made it hard for Andy to even form the words. She had scoffed at the idea that the goddess doctor was offing her clients to get at their money. Maybe her family wasn't as hysterical as she thought.

Mac had a substantial portfolio. Years in the business as a stuntwoman and then as a stunt agent had left her comfortably well off. But not in the millions or billions like Imogene Southwaite. Not enough to kill for.

It was too absurd. Besides, Mac could take care of herself.

"We stopped by her cabin to get her for breakfast the next morning, but she was gone. The place was cleaned out. Lock, stock, and barrel." Jeannie chuckled. "Even took the toilet paper. I mean, the little bottles of shampoo and conditioner are one thing, but toilet paper?"

Andy felt a ray of hope. If Mac had taken all that stuff, surely she'd left under her own steam, But why? Where was she? Why hadn't she come home?

"Hmm," said Andy. "You'd think she'd call to let you know she was okay. I mean, it's been several weeks, right?"

"Three," said Loubelle. "But we hadn't gotten around to exchanging phone numbers, and our cells are useless here."

"But there are land lines."

"Oh, sure. But only for emergencies."

"What constitutes an emergency?" Maybe Mac had gotten home by now. Andy had to find out.

"Death in the family. Illness." Evelyn pointed past the amphitheater to a sloping hill of perfectly manicured grass. "Behind that rise is a helipad. They keep two helicopters there, but we didn't hear one take off in the night, did we, girls?"

Jeannie and Loubelle shook their heads.

"And I would have heard," said Loubelle. "Those darn diuretics keep me up all night."

"Well, I hope she's okay," said Jeannie. "I thought sure she'd come back for the second session. We were on the waiting list for the Eternal Orgasm class." Andy heard the rattle of china and looked up to see Dillon juggling a tray of coffee cups.

Jeannie sputtered and said under her breath, "He's getting an earful today."

He set the tray down.

"You know," said Andy, reaching up to take a cup from him. "I read in the newspaper about a woman who died recently. A Ms. Southwaite." She took the cup and waited for Dillon to let go, which he did, but reluctantly.

And Andy realized that she probably shouldn't be talking in front of the staff. If there was something sinister going on at the retreat, any of them could be part of it. She glanced over at Dillon. His expression was so bland that she knew he had been listening.

She waited until he'd passed around the other cups, dawdled over the tray, and finally moved away.

"Sugah, if you don't do something about that man . . . Ooheee. Drop the poor soul a morsel, how 'bout it?" Jeannie raised her thinly tweezed eyebrows and nodded sagely. "Or I promise you, someone else will."

Dillon walked slowly away from the group, his ears tuned to catch whatever snatches of the conversation he could. First Imogene Southwaite and now this Miranda person, who disappeared during the last session. Why hadn't he been briefed about her?

It could be coincidental, but Dillon didn't believe in coincidence. Not anymore. Even his goddess had been pretty quick to make the connection to Imogene Southwaite. Not bad for an amateur.

The thought stopped him midstep.

Why would a shy, retiring spinster come here if she knew about Imogene Southwaite. Even if her death was an accident, wouldn't she be afraid to come? And it was becoming increasingly clear to Dillon that it had been no accident.

And to think, the agency hadn't even wanted to put anyone on the investigation. The authorities had dismissed it as a tragic accident.

The Southwaite family had pulled some upper echelon strings. And since Dillon had just come off sick leave, his superiors gave the assignment to him. It was about all he was good for.

So far, he hadn't discovered much. He planned to break into the business office and take some digital pictures of their files. But he hadn't had a spare minute since the goddess bus had arrived. Between wait duties and debriefing meetings, and trying to keep his goddess from falling down and knocking herself out, he hadn't had time to get inside.

He looked across the pool. The four women were getting up. The afternoon session would be starting in a few minutes, and there was a general migration toward the main building. Ariadne had kept the sunglasses on. They were expensive and must be the correct prescription, because for the first time since arriving she wasn't walking into the furniture.

The back of his neck prickled as his intuition overrode his logic. Something about his mousy goddess was not adding up. Was she actually what she appeared to be? Or something else entirely. And if something else . . . What? Why the makeup, the glasses, the baggy clothes? What was she hiding? And why?

Chapter 5

Andy stood in the hallway, her course booklet open, as women scurried past her into classrooms. It seemed as though she was the only one who didn't have a plan. Not one that included learning to be a goddess. Though with everyone in class, it wasn't likely that she'd glean any more information about Mac's sudden departure. And she'd learned all she could from the girls at the pool.

She walked past the auditorium and dining room and paused at the next door, where the second session of Knowing What You Want was being held. She had no desire to deal with Carmen and her pointed questions this afternoon.

She stopped outside the next door to read the scrolled sign there: Getting Rid Of Your Inhibitions. Not exactly her problem. The next was Training Your Man.

Andy grimaced. She didn't have one, and she certainly wouldn't want to train him if she did. What if she trained him wrong and was stuck with the results, 'til death did them part? She'd just keep to the Hollywood shuffle. Less work, more fun—no messy endings, just a "it's been swell."

Who was she kidding? Most of the time, it was just empty lust gratification. And it was the only fulfillment that she and half the women in HW were getting. She wanted more.

She stomped down on the thought. She didn't have time for more. She was too busy to put someone else first, didn't have the attention span to develop a relationship. Nor the allure to keep a man once he was in her bed. Stuntwomen were in demand, but they were nameless, faceless stand-ins. How many times did someone leave a theater saying, "Andy McAllister was great, wasn't she? I've seen all her movies."

Never.

No, better she should find Mac and leave goddess-ness to the others. Though she wouldn't mind getting to know Dillon better, a lot better.

If she just knew that Mac was okay, she might stay. Let Jeannie fix her hair and slowly transform back to herself. At least then, the money her family had forked out for her tuition wouldn't be totally wasted.

She turned away from the sign. First things first. She needed to call home—now. There must be a phone in the business of-fice. Even with the retreat's philosophy of no distractions, they must make allowances for the real world. There were food orders and advertising to coordinate. And the attendees were businesswomen, mothers, movers and shakers. Nobody could go three weeks without contact with the outside world. She'd just walk in and ask.

She took the stairs to the second floor. She passed several classrooms reserved for advanced training and came to another hallway. An AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY sign was posted on the wall. She peered around the corner. Heard the whir of fax machines and printers.

She'd reached Goddess Central.

She started down the hallway, but had gone only a few feet, when a door opened and Dr. Bliss stepped out. She saw Andy and smiled.

It was Andy's first close-up of the sex guru, and she was pleasantly surprised. She was dressed in an off-white pantsuit of soft satiny material. Her hair was caught up into a soft top-knot of silver curls.

Her tall, willowy body seemed to glide effortlessly down the hall as she came forward, smiling, her hands held out, palms up as if half in question and half in an offering of help. The doctor's penetrating gaze locked on Andy's, seeming to look into her soul. Andy shoved her glasses up her nose. The doctor became a blur.

Even so, Andy felt the power of the sex guru's charisma. She didn't strike Andy as someone who would commit murder. Even for billions of dollars. And certainly not for whatever Aunt Mac had.

But Andy hadn't grown up with actors, those perfected liars-for-hire, without learning that a good actor could tap into any emotion, any persona, and make his audience believe it.

Dr. Bliss stopped in front of her. "Are you lost?" "I was . . ."

But before she could say "looking for a phone," the doctor said, "You've wandered into the business section. There are a few classrooms on this floor, but they are the advanced workshops for Initiates, Handmaidens, and Priestesses."

Andy wondered how she could spout those ridiculous titles with a straight face. But the doctor was serious about her goddess training.

"Let's see. You're Ariadne McAllister, correct?"
"Uh, ves."

"We had another McAllister at the last session. Miranda, I believe her name was, yes, Miranda McAllister Houston. A relation of yours, perhaps?"

Damn. Of course, the application had a blank for middle names. She should have used an alias. Did they know why she was here? She swallowed. "I don't believe so."

"And how are you enjoying your participation so far?" "It's interesting."

"Good. Carmen was telling us at our lunchtime staff meeting that you attended her Knowing What You Want workshop." She tilted her head and looked into the Coke-bottle lenses as if she could read Andy's thoughts.

Andy had to fight the urge to apologize for being such a re-

calcitrant Novice. She knew she was falling under the doctor's spell, just like everyone else did. And she knew the doctor expected her to tell all. It was part of the program.

After several uncomfortable seconds, the doctor's eyes released Andy's. She took Andy's elbow and gently, but firmly, began steering her back toward the stairs.

"It's sometimes a little overwhelming at first," said Dr. Bliss, sympathetically. "But we all have each other's success at heart. I know Carmen's enthusiasm can sometimes be a little intimidating. It's just that she wants everyone to find the joy she has found."

Andy forced herself to smile. If Carmen was an example of the joy ozone found at Terra Bliss, she was welcome to it. As far as Andy could tell, Carmen and Jane were locked in one of those Olympian catfights that the Greeks were so well known for.

Somehow, they had reached the stairs.

"I need to call my mother," Andy blurted out.

Dr. Bliss looked surprised.

No wonder. Andy sounded like a querulous child. And she felt querulous, not to mention just damned pissed off. She'd like to wring Galena's neck for getting her into this.

"She's not well." Sorry, Galena, but you are just a tad on the sicko side. "I want to make sure she's okay, uh, so I can really concentrate on my goddess training." Not bad. She saw the flicker of interest in the doctor's eyes before it faded and the knowing smile returned.

She started them down the stairs. "It's wonderful that you care for your mother. But you do understand that we have a reason for our no-calls policy.

"Terra Bliss is a haven for us to discover our true natures. To turn our lives around and seek what we really want. It's difficult to do if we let the ties that bind us to the outside world pull us from our purpose. Here we want to stay totally concentrated on uncovering the goddess within us. To retrain ourselves to listen to our inner eternal feminine, to do what's good

for *us*. Without pressure from our everyday responsibilities. To learn to demand pleasure from those with whom we have intercourse." She smiled. "All kinds of intercourse. Isn't that why you're here, Ariadne?"

Wariness skittered up Andy's spine. Had she imagined that sinister undertone? She looked hard at the doctor. The woman appeared completely peaceful, seemingly at one with her goddess love, almost otherworldly—a little too perfect to be real.

Andy had to stifle a shudder. If that's what eternal orgasms did to you, she'd take the thirty-second kind and be happy to get them. This whole setup was beginning to give her the willies.

"Now, let's see if . . . Ah, I have just the workshop for you." Dr. Bliss steered Andy down the hall and stopped outside a door. "Achieving the Specs That Make You Special. It's led by Jane Parsons."

Great, thought Andy. Carmen's evil twin. She didn't think she was up for both of the acid acolytes on her first day. But before she could say she'd rather pass, Dr. Bliss opened the door.

A dozen women, sitting on the standard couches and armchairs, turned to stare at them.

Jane's face lit up.

"Ah, Jane," said Dr. Bliss. "Sorry to interrupt, but Ariadne would like to join your discussion." She turned to the rest of the women. "Please, welcome Ariadne." There were smiles and murmurs around the room.

Jane was so happy, Andy was afraid she might fall to her knees and start kowtowing. "Of course, Dr. Bliss. Won't you come in?" She motioned to Andy, but her eyes were fixed on the doctor, who was obviously the sun of her existence.

Dr. Bliss beamed around at everyone and quietly stepped out of the room, closing the door behind her. Andy found herself standing alone in the middle of the floor. A young woman about Andy's age motioned her over to the free place on the couch next to her.

"Well," said Jane, as soon as Andy sat down. "We've heard from Carol. So-o-o. Tell us, Ariadne. What makes you special?"

When lunch was over, Dillon went to look for Rusty. He wanted to find out more about this Miranda who'd left in the middle of the last session. And who would know better than the woman's attendant?

They'd already investigated the whereabouts of each of the Goddess International executives on the night of Imogene Southwaite's fall to her death. Each had a solid alibi.

Which meant if they were involved, they had hired someone to do their dirty work. Possibly someone working at Terra Bliss. Which made everybody suspect, so he would have to be careful with his questioning. With the disappearance of Miranda Houston, Dillon might have more than one possible murder on his hands. And if there were two, they might be planning more.

But Rusty was nowhere to be found. Dillon went back to the dorms to wait. He was still waiting when it was time to dress for dinner.

He splashed aftershave on his face and opened his closet. There was a clean kilt inside. He kept his room locked, which meant the laundry staff, and probably others, had a master key.

Fortunately, he had nothing for them to discover. He was working solo with nothing but a cell phone that didn't work. He knew that his superiors were only marginally interested in this case, and they had assigned it to Dillon so that he could prove himself once again. The outcome would determine his future.

If he blew it, his life as an agent would be over. He wouldn't even get a purple heart for getting mangled in the line of duty. Because units that didn't exist didn't get medals. Well, he'd think of something. Become a private investigator or go into his brother's sporting goods business.

He pulled the towel from his waist and flung it across the room. No, damn it, they'd have to drag him kicking and screaming out of the department. He stopped, the kilt held up to his waist but not buttoned. Did he really want to keep working for them? Or was it just that he couldn't stand the thought of being drummed out because he wasn't up to standard anymore.

It was something he'd better figure out and soon.

He finished buttoning the kilt, slipped his feet into the sandals, and running fingers through his shower-wet hair, he crossed the hall to knock on Rusty's door. While he was standing there, the outside door opened and Rusty ran inside.

"What's up?" he asked, panting for breath. He unlocked the door to his room and pushed it open. "Come on in. I'm late as hell and I've got salad duty."

"Where have you been?" asked Dillon, following him inside.

"Review meeting with the Great Dane. Brrr." Rusty paused in the middle of pulling off his gym shorts. "Just routine."

"Sure," agreed Dillon. "Do you have time to answer a couple of questions?"

Rusty stopped completely. His eyebrows snapped together. "About what?"

Interesting reaction, thought Dillon, choosing his next words carefully. "It's about your goddess from the last session."

"Miranda?" Rusty dropped to his hands and knees and began searching under the bed. One sandal flew out, then another. "Nice lady. But one day she just leaves without a word."

"Do you know why?"

Rusty stopped and looked up at Dillon. "No. Why are you asking?"

"Just something I overheard today. That she sort of . . . disappeared."

"Yeah, well. You could call it that. Left during the night without a word of warning. At least not to me." He stood up and slipped into his sandals. "I got my ass chewed out by the high mother honcho for mistreating her. Which I didn't. Now I'm on probation. If it hadn't been for Ms. Dane, I'd probably have been fired." He shrugged and yanked his kilt out of the closet. "It wasn't anything I did."

"You and Demetri are both on probation?"

"Several of us are. They run a mucho tight ship here. No stepping out of line. Which is hard to do when you're never really sure where the lines are. I mean, if they want to fuck, you can fuck them. But if they don't, you don't. Sometimes it's hard to tell. Just play it safe and you should be okay."

"Did this Miranda want you to . . . make love to her?"

"Never came up. She was a very cool lady. Very desirable, though she was a good fifty or so. I think she must have been here for a refresher course, 'cause she had the moves." He headed for the door.

"And no one's ever heard from her?"

Rusty stopped and turned on Dillon. "No. What's it to you, man?"

"Just curious. I don't want my goddess disappearing on me."

"You sure as hell don't. So be careful, because she looks about as skittish as they come."

Yeah, thought Dillon as he followed Rusty outside. There probably wouldn't be any requests for any serious lovemaking from that quarter. Too bad. Because he thought that Ariadne McAllister might have a few moves of her own.

"Just one more thing."

"What are you, the FBI?"

Not on a cold day in hell, thought Dillon. "Nah, just curious. What did the honchos say about why she left?"

"Just that she'd gone. And they didn't hear from her again. At least not while the session lasted, because me and several others kept asking. Everybody really liked her."

"These wealthy types, they never think about shit like that. Once she was away, she probably forgot all about you." They'd reached the steps of the main building, and Rusty paused. "Not Miranda. She had bread, but she didn't flaunt it or even seem to give too much of a shit about it. You coming in?"

Dillon shook his head. "No. I'm not scheduled for another fifteen minutes."

"Then see ya later." Rusty ran up the steps, leaving Dillon outside in the growing dusk.

Andy stood on the steps of the Pantheon, feeling rather pleased with herself. She was one of the few that had managed not to tell their life story or burst into tears during Jane's class. Jane wasn't the most patient group leader in the world and a few "um"s and "ah"s went a long way.

She saw Loubelle's slave, Rusty, hurrying across the lawn. Good. He'd been Mac's slave the last session. He might know something about her disappearance.

She put on her Ray-Bans and hurried down to intercept him. Then she saw who was with him. Mr. tall, dark, and wearing a kilt.

She couldn't question Rusty with Dillon looking on. She wasn't sure she trusted him. All that loitering around during lunch. She'd been flattered, but the more she thought about it, the more he seemed like one of those James Bond villains. All finesse on the outside, lethal monster on the inside.

She quickly ducked inside the closest copse of trees and watched them walk toward the Pantheon. They parted at the steps. Rusty went inside, but Dillon turned around and gazed out over the lawn. Andy slunk farther into the trees. Was he looking for someone?

He began walking toward the edge of the woods, so nonchalantly that he looked suspicious. She crept to the other side of the copse in time to see him saunter around to the back of the Pantheon. She suddenly had an urge to see what was back there. Throwing caution to the wind, she stepped out of the shelter of the trees and sprinted across the lawn. Once she reached the path, she doubled back through the woods and got a good look at Dillon, staring fixedly at the second-floor windows.

What was he doing? Contemplating Windex and a squeegee? Or planning a little breaking and entering? There was more to her slave than a pretty face and a dynamite body. He was up to no good. But what the hell, she'd dated bigger crooks than a two-bit second-story man. And besides, he'd just given her a brilliant idea.

She slipped back to her cabin, showered, and changed into her white shirt and goddess robe. On a whim, she braided her hair and let it fall down her back. It felt wonderful after two days of bobby pin torture. She still looked prim. And with the new hairdo, everyone would think she was really getting something out of this goddess business.

She was only slightly disappointed when Dillon didn't come to escort her to dinner. Probably too busy casing the joint or practicing carrying a water pitcher without dropping it. They should probably put him on napkin duty. You couldn't hurt anybody with a napkin.

Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie showed up at her door instead, and the four of them walked down to the dining room.

"Where's Dillon tonight?" Jeannie asked Demetri as he filled her water glass.

"He's setting up the orientation room for the film tonight."

Good, thought Ariadne. At least he wouldn't be carrying those heavy dinner trays. She shuddered. The possibilities were daunting.

Rusty set down a tray of salad plates. Demetri scowled at him. The man sure seemed to scowl a lot. Except at Jeannie. For her, he had wide, knowing smiles. He was forever brushing her arm when he served her. Lingered at the back of her chair. Whispered in her ear.

He gave Andy the creeps, but Jeannie seemed to revel in his

attentions. Rusty and Louis, on the other hand, were perfect gentlemen, which also seemed to agree with Loubelle and Evelyn.

Which was good, because Andy really didn't want to have to readjust her first impressions to include sweet Loubelle and the sophisticated Evelyn having torrid sex with men young enough to be their grandsons.

"What kind of film?" asked Andy, imagining *Bad Girls of Carthage*.

They're showing *Roman Holiday* tonight. Followed by more dessert and coffee," said Evelyn.

"They feed us so much, you'd think we were training for chubby cherubim instead of goddess." Andy clapped a hand over her mouth. That was stupid. Never try to join in the fun; it will catch you out every time.

The other three stared at her for a second, then smiled simultaneously.

"I just love Gregory Peck," said Loubelle. "Such a gentleman."

"Yes," said Evelyn. "Even when playing a scamp. They don't make them like that anymore."

Loubelle sighed. "They sure don't. The way he looks at Audrey Hepburn just makes you know he loves her."

Yoo-hoo. He's an actor, thought Andy. Not real. A big phony. And was shocked by her reaction. She always dated actors. And they were all big phonies. She really did need to get a life. Not with an actor and not with a stuntman like her family wanted. Stuntmen were macho, unreliable, easily threatened by stuntwomen, and there was always the possibility they'd get a head injury and end up a vegetable. Not a rosy future.

And even worse, she was lusting after a man who made a living dressed as a Greek slave and catering to lonely women. Where were the good, stable, bread-earning men, who did dishes and gave eternal orgasms?

"Well, you can have your gentlemen. I'll take the scamps." Jeannie leaned down by her chair and brought up two bottles of wine from her carryall. "Do you indulge? We do. Every night."

"Yes," Andy said, then remembered her pitiful self. "A little."

"Good." Jeannie lifted her chin and Demetri sauntered over. He uncorked the wine and made a big to-do over handing the cork to Jeannie. She smelled it, then tasted the wine and nod-ded. He filled the other glasses and left the bottle on the table.

"Well," said Jeannie, when he'd gone away. "I don't know what you're supposed to tell from smelling a cork, but since I bought it, I figure it's gotta be good." And she held up her glass for a toast.

Dinner got a lot better with a 1964 Greysac Medoc. Andy regretfully limited herself to one glass.

"Do the slaves and staff watch the movies, too?"

"Not usually—they really do work like slaves. They can either join us or have free time," said Evelyn. "The staff always has a debriefing session at night."

Hmmm, thought Andy. The stairs would save a lot of wear and tear on her toga. She'd give it another shot. "I think I will have some more," she said and pushed her wineglass toward Jeannie.

The movie began shortly after dinner. As soon as the lights went down and the theme music began, Andy leaned over to Loubelle, who was sitting next to her.

"Bathroom. Back in a bit."

Loubelle nodded, her eyes on the screen. She was already lost in celluloid idol land. Andy crawled over the two goddesses at the end of the aisle and slipped out the door—right into Carmen and Jane.

They were arguing so heatedly that they didn't even see her. "... stealing my trainee," Carmen snarled

Jane rolled her eyes. "Dr. Bliss brought her." She smiled and

Carmen turned redder. Andy froze in the doorway until they had climbed the stairs and their hissed conversation died away.

Then she followed them. She stopped at the top of the stairs in time to see the two acolytes go into a classroom. The door closed behind them. The staff meeting. Andy looked quickly around, saw no one else. Listened. Nothing but the din of clearing away from the dining room below.

She scuttled past the door of the staff meeting and started down the hall. When she reached the AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL sign, she hesitated, then looked around the corner. The corridor was dark except for a lone auxiliary light at the far end which illuminated a second staircase. The business section had closed for the night.

She walked slowly toward the light, trying to keep her footsteps from sounding. Paused to read the sign on the first door. ETERNAL ORGASM, APPOINTMENTS ONLY. She had to stifle a laugh. Next came the Staff Room, and on the left Dr. Bliss's personal office. At last she came to the Business Office. She tried the knob. It didn't budge.

Andy sighed. It looked as if she'd be using that grappling hook after all.

A sudden noise made her snatch her hand away. She cocked her head, listening. Someone was coming up the back stairs, more than one person. She could hear them laughing.

She whirled around, but there was no place to hide. She began running back down the hallway, though she knew she'd never make it before they saw her.

She was two-thirds of the way down when she ran into something hard. She registered skin and chest hair. She grimaced and pushed away.

Of course. Her life was under a cloud. Dillon Cross folded his arms over his scrumptious chest and looked down at her. Then he grabbed her and pushed her against the wall.

She only had time to think, *trapped*, before his body crushed hers and his arms pinned her to the wall. She tried to release

70 Gemma Bruce

her knee, though a kick to the groin wouldn't get her very far; she didn't have the leverage. She could hear footsteps echoing down the linoleum, approaching rapidly.

"Relax," he ordered.

Andy blinked. "The hell I will."

She saw the flash of his grin before his lips came down on hers.

Chapter 6

She groaned, not exactly pleasure, not exactly pain. More blike surprise. But it must have been good enough, because Dillon said, "Good," into her mouth and kept kissing her. And the man could kiss. Why else would her knees feel like Jell–O and her heart be pounding with fight or flight adrenaline.

Her next groan sounded more like a purr. Her hands slipped to his sides, and when she touched his firm, warm skin, the sensation shot right to where she liked it best. There were definitely perks to this investigation business.

His hand was just finding its way to her breast, when someone cleared his throat.

Dillon jerked away, looking shocked and embarrassed. Not the best actor in the world, but she'd seen worse. Hell, she'd dated worse.

He stepped partially in front of Andy. Trying to protect her reputation? Would he throw his kilt over a mud puddle for her to walk over? Now, that had some interesting possibilities.

"You know this is an unauthorized area," said a man's voice.

Andy peered over Dillon's shoulder and saw Bernard Bliss frowning slightly. And standing behind him—Andy sighed with relief—was not his wife, but Katherine Dane. She looked from Dillon to Andy, one eyebrow lifted speculatively.

72 Gemma Bruce

Great. Caught on the second floor twice in one day. She had no doubt that the high priestess would hear about this. These people seemed to share everything. Andy just hoped the doctor wouldn't leap to any correct conclusions.

"Sorry, sir," said Dillon. "We, uh, were just looking for some, uh, privacy." Dillon was looking pale, kind of poleaxed. Either his acting had made a rapid improvement or he was going to faint.

"Yes, well," said Bliss. He took Dillon's elbow and turned him around. He was considerably shorter than Dillon, and he looked rather ridiculous, but Dillon moved meekly down the hall, dragging Andy with him.

When they reached the stairs, Bliss released Dillon's elbow. "I suggest one of the reflection temples. Perhaps the Temple of Venus."

"Yes, sir. Good night."

Andy couldn't believe the subservience in his manner. He was probably afraid they were going to fire him. "It isn't Dillon's fault. It's mine," she said, casting a desperate look to Katherine Dane—a bit over the top—and she felt Dillon's head snap toward her.

Katherine said nothing for the longest moment, then, "It's quite all right." The briefest smile passed over her lips. "And good for you, Ariadne. Just the kind of progress we like to see at Terra Bliss. But Bernard is right, the Temple of Venus would be much more appropriate for exploration and experimentation."

Exploration and experimentation? Did they think she was conducting a scientific investigation? Andy had to force herself not to shudder with disgust.

Andy barely managed a quick thank-you, before Dillon lifted her off her feet and practically carried her down the stairs.

He didn't stop until they were outside.

"I'm sorry if I got you in trouble. I'll explain to Dr. Bliss tomorrow."

Dillon just frowned at her.

"I'm sorry. What more can I say?"

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

"What?"

"Put on your glasses."

Oh, the damn glasses. No wonder she was so aware of Katherine's expression. Her glasses were still stuck in the gold cord at her waist, where she'd put them when she decided to search the second floor. She fumbled at her belt. Crammed the glasses onto her nose. Dillon went out of focus.

"Come on." He propelled her across the lawn and toward the path to the cabins.

Not toward the Temple of Venus, thought Andy, disappointed.

Dillon was aware that Ariadne was stumbling along behind him. He knew he was gripping her wrist too tightly. At the moment, he didn't care. He was too busy castigating himself for his ineptness. He'd just jeopardized his mission because curiosity had overridden his good sense.

He'd seen Ariadne slip out of the movie and go upstairs. He couldn't figure out what she wanted up there. There were only classrooms and the business wing. So, like an idiot, he'd followed.

And been caught.

And to make matters worse, he'd had to pull that old kiss trick.

So far his time here had been fraught with disaster. And to think he'd chosen her because she wouldn't be a problem. She was proving to be more of a distraction than he could have imagined—or wanted. And he wanted her.

He drove the thought out of his mind.

She hadn't said a word since they left the Pantheon. She was probably mortified at being caught kissing him. But what a kiss. The woman was a miracle waiting to happen. And to him, hopefully.

He drove *that* thought out of his mind. She'd probably hated his kiss. Just responded out of surprise. But where the hell had she learned to do that with her tongue?

He didn't stop until they were on the porch of Ariadne's cabin. Then he settled her in front of him and said, "Look, I'm sorry. About what happened... back there... in the corridor." God, he sounded like an adolescent. And all he wanted to do was apologize. No, he didn't. He wanted to kiss her again.

"It's okay."

Okay? Just okay? He'd thought it had been pretty damn good. "Okay? How okay?"

"What?"

Maybe she thought he was crazy. He must be, to be attracted to someone like her. Even with her hair falling out of her braid. The wisps that furled around her face. She looked softer. More kissable.

"Okay okay."

"Okay enough to ...?"

She nodded. Stepped toward him.

This was a mistake. But she looked so damn desirable. He'd worry about the ramifications later. He slipped his arms around her waist, slowly, gently. Not too aggressive. He pulled her closer and let his hand drift up her back, even though he really wanted to cup her ass, pull her gown up, and find out what was under all that drapery. You'll scare her, you fool. So he cupped the back of her neck instead.

Her eyes closed, her lips parted.

He bent his head, brushed his lips lightly across hers. A kiss, just a thank-you for telling Dane it had been her fault and not his. It had been a sweet, but needless, reaction.

"Um, Dillon?"

"Yes?"

"Kiss me."

Like a Pavlovian dog, he obeyed. His mouth latched onto hers. His fingers slid into her hair, and he pressed her into the kiss. Her lips moved with his. They were soft, open—an invitation. His tongue pushed past her teeth.

She sighed. Like a breeze. He licked the roof of her mouth. The breeze became a wind. Her tongue flicked his, and the wind became a sirocco of heat. And it was too late to stop.

Her fingers pressed against his chest, and Dillon's world caught fire. She moved her hands up to his shoulders, her palms creating friction as skin rubbed against skin.

Down, he thought. Move them down.

As if she'd heard, her palms slid down, slowing as they covered his nipples.

Heat flared in his groin. Down, he thought, down, girl, down.

And down they went, pressing into his abdomen, his stomach. His hands moved on her back, mimicking the downward motion of her hands, his fingers spread, following the contours of a thin and muscular body.

Something was not computing in his brain, but his brain was barely functioning, except where it had taken up residency for the last half hour. There, it was working overtime.

Her finger slipped into his navel and he groaned into her mouth.

A shudder passed over her and he felt her smile beneath his lips.

Her fingertips dipped into the waistband of his kilt. He sucked in his stomach and her fingers slipped another inch.

He pulled one hand from her ass and dragged it to her breast, lightly brushing the curve of it through the layers of her shirt and gown. Then she touched the tip of his erection through his jockstrap. His fingers closed over the lush roundness of her. She arched back, pushing her breast into his hand. Now, if he could just lose the shirt and the jockstrap without breaking the mood, everything would be perfect.

And if neither of them thought about what they were doing, they might actually—

Through the fog of his lust, he heard voices. Distant but coming closer. The movie must be over. Damn.

He crowded Ariadne until she took a step backward. Then another while he kept assaulting her mouth with his tongue. He fumbled behind her and found the door handle. Pulled it open. It hit her in the back, and she fell into him with an expulsion of breath. Not of surprise, he realized, but laughter.

Ms. Mouse was full of surprises. He pushed her inside, letting the screen door slam. Then released her long enough to shut the wooden door. When he turned back to her, she was standing where he'd left her. Her hair had fallen from the braid. Her cheeks were flushed pink against her pale skin. Her eyes were heavy and she looked good enough to ravish.

She reached past him and turned off the lights. And in the sudden darkness, the fragrance of jasmine surrounded them.

"Are you sure about this?" He wasn't sure she knew what she was getting into. But she couldn't be a virgin. It was the twenty-first century. There were no virgins.

"Yes." Her voice was husky, not at all like the prim Ms. Mouse he'd escorted to this room barely twenty-four hours ago.

She came willingly. Really willingly. She rubbed against him and he was instantly on fire again. She was snuggled into him and he was having a hard time thinking. He just knew that he wanted her.

He pulled the straps of her gown over her shoulders. Started on the buttons of her tailored shirt. Smiling as he thought how ridiculous she was to try to conceal what was obviously a dynamite body.

The voices were closer now, but he was barely paying atten-

tion to them. Thank God Ariadne had turned out the light. Her attempt at modesty might just save them from being interrupted.

He undid another button, felt warm flesh against his fingers, and couldn't resist sliding his hand through the opening to feel her breast without the layers of clothes.

The voices stopped. Then he heard footsteps coming across the porch.

He froze.

"What?"

He pulled Ariadne into him and held her immobile, while he tugged up the front of the gown, fumbling with the straps until they were back over her shoulders. He brushed her hair out of her eyes, no easy feat in the dark. Just in case. With any luck, whoever it was would go away, and he and Ariadne could take up where they'd left off.

There was a knock on the door.

Ariadne jumped. "What was that?" She twisted around, but Dillon held on.

"Shh. Someone's knocking on your door."

She moved closer to him.

"Ariadne?"

"Maybe she's not in."

"Of course she's here. We just saw the lights go out." A louder knock. "Ariadne, hon. We just saw your lights go out, so we know you aren't asleep. Come out and party."

"Maybe she's tired. Come on, Jeannie. Don't be a nuisance."

"Me? It's time that girl had some fun, and she's not gonna have it sitting by herself in her cabin all night. And just where is her slave, I'd like to know?"

The screen door squeaked. The doorknob rattled.

Ariadne pushed away from Dillon and got to the door, just as it opened.

Dillon couldn't see who it was, but he recognized the voice and cast his eyes upward.

"Lordy. You scared the bejeezus outta me. Get dressed. We're having a party and we won't take no for an answer." A hand reached out and flipped on the light. And Dillon was staring into the shocked face of Jeannie Jenkins.

Slowly, she looked from him to Ariadne and back again. "Oops." She flicked off the light and backed out the door.

Andy closed the door behind her, just as Dillon heard, "Let's go, girls. Ariadne is busy. Ooo-ee, is she ever."

Andy tried hard not to laugh when she turned back to Dillon and saw him frozen in place like a Greek statue. A stunned Greek statue. She sighed and leaned against the door. Just in case he decided to bolt and run. She wasn't finished with him yet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know you probably think this is the worst thing that could happen."

No, thought Andy. The worst thing would be that you leave now instead of getting on with it.

"Really. I should never have put you in the position . . ." *Just show me a few more and you're absolved*.

"I can't apologize enough . . . I'm really, really sorry. For everything."

He was sorry. She got the point. Sorry. The last word any woman wanted to hear when she was aroused.

What was wrong with the man? One minute they'd been going at it hot and heavy, and the next minute he's making excuses. Okay, so maybe things had gotten a little out of hand, but not nearly far enough for Andy.

"I'll go explain." He moved her aside and opened the door. He was really leaving. When was she going to get a break here? "Explain what?" she asked as he ran down the steps.

"That I was just fixing your glasses."

He took off at a run. Andy watched him go. Her slave

needed finessing, no doubt about it. Too bad they didn't have a parallel Getting In Touch With Your Inner Slave retreat nearby. He could use it.

She watched him lope up the darkened path. Then she closed the door, wondering when it would occur to him that you couldn't fix glasses in the dark.

Chapter 7

The sun was just appearing over the mountaintops when Dillon paused in his morning run to take a drink from his water bottle. He'd made an ass of himself last night, first with Ariadne and then with her friends. He still felt like an ass seven hours and four miles later.

He wiped sweat away, tucked the water bottle back into its case. He'd started running the first day he arrived at Terra Bliss for training. At first he could barely limp around the drive of the compound. After three days, he'd left the cleared area and stuck close to the perimeter wall, forcing himself up and down the wooded paths, testing his physical limits while he committed the details of the compound to memory. Now he knew where each surveillance camera was located. Each padlocked gate. Even knew where the security guards took their breaks on their morning rounds.

He'd selected several possible escape routes in case this mission went sour. Not that he expected it to. It should be a simple case of staying put, acting the part while he looked for evidence that they hadn't been able to access from the outside.

And then along came Ariadne McAllister.

He bent his knees, stretched out his calves, and started running again. Slower now because he was going uphill. He pushed along the path, past quiet cabins. Everyone was still sleeping. He could take the uneven ground at a pace he could control.

And if he fell on his face, there wouldn't be anyone to see. He ran faster, leaning forward as his thighs screamed against the incline. He gritted his teeth. Let his nostrils flare as he forced himself to breathe evenly. He had to get in shape, and he had to stop thinking about Ariadne, whatever it took.

There was something not right about her. Nothing he could name, not yet anyway.

He spent the next twenty minutes forcing his body down one path and up another.

He had just made it up one of the nastier climbs, when a flash of color caught his eye. He slowed down, then stopped and stared as he realized what it was.

Someone was walking across the top of the perimeter wall. He slipped behind a tree and peered at them. The figure stopped, looked down, then with arms stretched out to the side, began walking down a trunk of a fallen tree that was wedged against the stones.

Dillon stared in disbelief. Tall, slim, dressed in a girly running suit. It couldn't be. But it was. His mouth fell open as she took off at a fast jog, arms and legs pumping like a pro. She passed him so close that he could have reached out and grabbed her, if he'd been able to move.

His eyes narrowed. Pro. Of course. Nobody could be as mousy as she was pretending to be. Not in this day of television, movies, and makeovers. And no one as naïve as she pretended to be could kiss the way the woman had kissed him. And hers had definitely been experienced fingers. Now he knew he wasn't hallucinating as he watched that tight little ass rippling beneath her tight spandex pants.

His plain Jane was a fraud.

He stepped out behind her. Watched when she slowed down as she neared her cabin. She didn't go inside, but scanned the trees. In just the place he'd been waiting for her yesterday morning. She'd done this before and had seen him watching for her.

And sure enough, she slipped around to the side of the cabin and climbed in through the window.

So Ms. Mouse wasn't a mouse after all. But what was she? Besides an incredibly built woman. Another agent? Had they sent someone to back him up, because they didn't trust him to handle this simple job? Or had a different agency sent her? Just like them, so territorial and uncommunicative that they both had agents working on the same case.

Well, he wasn't going to be caught out again. It was time to find out just what Ms. McAllister was up to.

Andy turned on the shower. She was going to be late for breakfast if she didn't hurry. Instead of swimming, she'd looked for signs of Aunt Mac: footprints, broken twigs, discarded toilet paper. And found nothing but a narrow, dirt road curving along a ridge near the falls.

She stepped into the tub and let the hot water sluice over her. She was doing a lot of speculation, getting hung up in fantasies of Mac escaping across the mountains, of being kidnapped, of being held hostage.

Not the movies, she reminded herself as she lathered up. What she needed was real information, and she bet she'd find some in the records that they kept on all the participants.

She rinsed off and got out of the tub. But the business office was kept locked, and besides, she didn't dare risk being caught again. She quickly dried off and braided her hair, dressed in baggy capris and another big shirt. She applied only a light layer of makeup. She'd had lunch in the sun yesterday. It stood to reason that she would be getting a tan.

It was time for her transformation to begin. She hated deceiving Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie after they'd been so nice to her. And she admitted, she wanted Dillon to see her as she really was before she had to leave.

For once in her life she wished things had been different. That she and Dillon could have gotten to know each other. In

all ways. That one little taste last night had made her crave the whole pie.

Dillon stood outside the cottage, fuming while he waited for Ariadne. He heard the shower running. He had to force himself not to just break in and catch her en flagrante. Which made him wonder what she would look like naked and rosy from a hot shower.

He closed and opened his fists. He needed to get his damn mind on the job and on finding out about the enigmatic Ms. McAllister. She could be his undoing, in more ways than one. A hell of a time to finally want to have sex.

When he heard the shower being turned off, he crept up to the porch, pressed himself against the wall next to the door, and prayed none of the women in the other cabins would come by and catch him skulking outside his goddess's door.

When the door finally opened, Ariadne didn't jump out like she had the morning before. She eased the door open and stepped cautiously onto the porch, her glasses in place. Dillon stepped in front of her and grabbed her arm.

Her reaction nearly knocked him off his feet—literally.

She spun around. The glasses went flying. Her arm flew up and a fist barely missed his nose. She saw him and she froze, her face a mixture of shock and consternation. Then slowly, she glanced down at the glasses lying on the porch floor.

He bent down to retrieve them just as her foot came down on top of them.

She let out a little squeal and jumped back, her hands pressed to her cheeks.

He picked up what was left of them—a twisted frame and two crushed lenses. Dangling them from one finger, he presented them to her.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, never mind. Clumsy me." She rummaged in her backpack. Seconds later she came out with her sunglasses and slipped them on. He took her arm. "We need to talk."

"Yoo-hoo, Ariadne."

Dillon groaned and dropped her arm. He turned to see Jeannie waving fingers at them. The other two friends came up beside her, warbled, "Good morning," and hurried her away.

Ariadne started after them, but he stopped her by grabbing hold of her braid. "Lucky you had those sunglasses handy," he said, gritting his teeth.

"It sure was," she said innocently.

He could slap her silly. Well, let her think she was playing him for a fool. Did she know who he was? What he was doing here? She might not be an agent but part of the whole sordid conspiracy. No. She wasn't a killer. He was making too much of this, surely. If he weren't careful, he'd be seeing conspiracy everywhere.

Andy walked down the hill, Dillon taciturn beside her. She didn't know what he was so pissed about. And what was with him, sneaking up on her like that? She could have broken his nose, or worse. Of course, he didn't know that.

She shot a sideways glance at him. They could be strangers at a bus station the way he was acting. She'd expected a little tenderness. After all, they had almost had sex the night before. *Almost* being the operative word. Maybe he'd gotten cold feet. Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe he'd just changed his mind and didn't know what to say. Hell. It could be just about anything. The man was deep. Still waters and all that—and she wouldn't mind creating some waves.

At least one good thing had come about this morning. A good stuntwoman could think on her feet, and destroying the glasses had been a stroke of genius. Now, at least she could see where she was going. Physically, anyway.

Dillon dropped her off at the buffet table with a surly "Later" and began his breakfast duties.

A lot later, thought Andy. He sounded like a man who was

85

about to break up with her. And they hadn't even gotten together yet. Well, he'd just have to wait.

She considered grabbing an apple and eating it outside, but before she could leave, Jeannie saw her and waved her over.

Reluctantly, Andy joined them for breakfast.

"Now sit right down and tell us everything," said Jeannie.

"Jeannie, let the poor girl eat her breakfast," said Evelyn with a sympathetic smile.

"Oh, don't be a spoilsport. Is he as good as he looks?"

"Jeannie, hush." Loubelle tipped her chin and gave her a warning look, just as Dillon reached over to put the coffee carafe on the table.

Jeannie giggled into her napkin until he was gone. Then she gave Andy an arch look. "You're not tellin' me that you didn't get him to dance the bedsheet tango?"

"Jeannie, really," said Evelyn. "It's none of our business."

"Don't be such a stick in the mud. Half the fun is sharing." Jeannie leaned on her elbows and waited.

"Nothing happened," Andy said finally.

"Oh." The look on Jeannie's face would have been comical if Andy didn't feel so terrible.

"Well, never you mind, dear," said Loubelle and patted her hand. "That just means he's a gentleman."

"Well, I'll just have to have a little talk with him about that, uh-huh."

"No," said Andy.

"Absolutely not," said Loubelle.

"You should be ashamed," said Evelyn. "Don't pay any attention to her. Regardless of what some people think, the goddess program is not just about sex."

Jeannie made a face. "But it's the best part."

"I wouldn't know," said Loubelle. "And I'm having a delightful time."

Jeannie sighed. "You sure you don't want me to light a fire under that delicious tush of his?"

"I'm sure," said Andy. "But thanks."

Evelyn deftly changed the subject and it didn't come up again. They left the dining room together.

"Well now, that's my idea of a goddess class," said Jeannie.

"Knowing What You Want—?" Andy swallowed the rest of her sentence. The KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT sign had been replaced by FELLATIO 101. Intriguing, she thought, then immediately changed her mind when a slave carrying a tray of unripe bananas knocked on the door and was let inside.

"Well, I know what I'm studying this morning," said Jeannie. She toodled her fingers at them and followed him inside.

Loubelle pursed her lips. "I'm taking the morning off to get my hair done. See you at lunch."

Andy was about to follow her out. Dillon would be finished with cleanup any minute, and she wanted to prolong the inevitable. "Well, I guess I'd better—"

Evelyn stopped her. "Don't let the things Jeannie says put you off. She's a kind soul. A heart of gold really. She does like her fun and can be a little too nosy. But you shouldn't feel obligated to say anything you don't want to. Relations between a man and a woman are meant to be private. I'm glad you respect that."

Andy smiled, touched that Evelyn was actually concerned about her. And she felt a stab of remorse for her deception. "There's really nothing to tell." At least that was true. "Jeannie makes the whole situation sound more interesting than it was. Dillon was just fixing my glasses."

"Ah," said Evelyn, a twinkle in her eye. "Well, I better run or I'll be late. See you at lunch?"

"Sure," said Andy, though she had no intention of having lunch at the pool while Jeannie grilled her about Dillon, while Dillon served lunch and Andy tried to ignore them both. She'd never pull it off. Then he was bound to snag her and they'd have to have *the* talk. She'd had it before. She knew it by heart. Her throat tightened.

She would never be a goddess, just a hell-bent-for-leather stuntwoman good for a weekend fling.

She watched Evelyn walk down the hall, her posture erect, poised, every bit a lady even in capri pants and canvas tennis shoes. And she wondered what it would be like to be raised in a family where manners and good breeding were taken for granted. Where caviar was served under candelabras instead of frozen dinners in front of the television. Where the forks and knives were silver, not plastic. Charity balls and card parties . . .

Nah, it wasn't for her. Her family swung from trees, crashed cars, jumped from burning buildings with only a thin layer of fire-repellant sheeting between them and a horrible death. Their idea of a good time was takeout Chinese while watching *Xena* reruns. Their motto in life, "Knock 'em dead." And on the rare occasions they all had a few days off at the same time, they spent them jumping from makeshift training towers in someone's backyard.

She sighed. It was a great life, but sometimes she wondered what it would be like to . . . Well, that was stupid. Besides. She hated caviar.

Andy passed by the Fellatio room and walked into the first door she came to.

After two hours of Flirting With Success, Andy was glad that she didn't really aspire to a more normal life. She'd never been so bored in her life.

She waited until she was sure that Evelyn, Jeannie, and Loubelle had left for the pool, then went into the dining room. She sat at a table of women who didn't eat much—probably owing to the number of bananas they had inadvertently eaten during the morning session.

After lunch she went out to the lawn to study the diagram of the Pantheon she'd torn out of her welcome packet. She walked around to the back of the building and came face-to-face with the yard crew. There were six of them, all men,

dressed in olive drab jumpsuits, mowing, pruning, and raking to the low tunes of a boom box.

One turned and grinned at her. She nodded and went back to the lawn, where she sat in one of the little temples waiting for them to leave. Finally she heard their grounds cart start up, and when she walked behind the building a few minutes later, they were gone.

There were eight windows along the second floor, separated by an ornamental ledge from eight identical windows on the first floor. Gotta love those Greeks, she thought. She was pretty sure the farthest four of them belonged to the business section. They were simple casements that swung outward and were probably locked with a simple latch. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure which window belonged to which room.

She was perusing the façade when a window opened and one of the priestesses leaned out. Andy backed into the trees. The priestess took a couple of long drags on a cigarette before letting it drop to the ground. She fanned the air, then pulled the casements shut.

The staff room. Which made the window to its left the business office. Satisfied, she headed back to her cabin for a nap.

Andy was pulled from sleep by a knock at the door. So much for catching up on sleep while she was here. She rolled over and looked at the clock. It was almost six o'clock. Jeez. She'd slept for four hours.

When the knock came again, she reluctantly rolled off the bed. The girls had come to pick her up for dinner. She'd make her apologies. Plead a headache. The kind of ache she really had, she didn't plan to share with anyone other than Dillon.

She yawned and opened the door. No one was there. Annoyed, she started to close the door, then saw Dillon, looking hotter than ever in his little skirt, waiting in the clearing.

Her mind immediately started tripping down fantasy lane at the same time her hand flew to her hair. God. She'd been so dead to the world, she hadn't even checked her face before opening the door. What if she looked awful? Worse, what if she looked like her? She opened her mouth to tell him to wait, but he stepped forward and said, "You've been avoiding me."

"No, I haven't," she said without thinking. "I had a headache."

"Are you better?"

Good enough to go you a few rounds.

"You're not dressed for dinner."

She shook her head. "But you are."

"As you can see." He was frowning, but one corner of his mouth twitched. Well, hell, it was probably hard to keep any kind of serious attitude when you were wearing a skirt.

"Do you want me to wait for you?"

Every single time, bud. She almost laughed at herself. Her libido had taken over her thought process, and it was small wonder, with her hot feline slave half-nude in front of her. All around them, people were getting it on. She'd almost walked in on a couple using the temple for a lunchtime quickie. Hell, there was even a place called the Bower of Bliss, officially designated by Goddess International for fulfilling your every wish. Not that she'd be seeing the inside at the rate things were going.

"Yes. I'll just be a minute." And resisting the impulse to drag him inside and have dinner on the couch instead of in the dining hall, she hurried to dress. She didn't want to walk to dinner with him, because she was afraid of what he might say. Then again, if he dumped her, she wouldn't have to worry about how to get rid of him in time to break into the records office.

Chapter 8

It was two o'clock when Andy, dressed in a black turtleneck and black spandex tights, finally slipped out the cottage door. A black ski cap hid her hair. Her backpack was slung over one shoulder. Inside was everything she thought she might need: grappling hook and rope, penlight, metal card for lifting the window latch, and a digital camera.

She silently stole through the woods. She was nervous as hell, but she kept telling herself she had done this thousands of times. Of course, there had always been a director to block the action, another take if something went wrong, and a team of EMTs in case of accident.

So pretend this is just another take, she told herself.

She reached the woods behind the Pantheon and stopped. Security lights shone from both corners of the building. She hadn't taken them into account. Nor the full moon that cast a silver sheen over everything. Well, hell. Everyone was asleep. The staff lived in a guest house off to the far side. She couldn't see it from where she was standing. Which meant, if anyone was awake, they wouldn't be able to see her either.

She crouched down and opened her backpack. She stuck the camera inside her tights, the penlight between her teeth, and draped the rope and grappling hook over one shoulder. Taking a deep breath, she crept across the shadowed lawn until she stood below the window of the business office.

She looked up, gauged the distance to the concrete sill, and slid the rope off her shoulder. She took the hook in one hand and the end of the rope in the other, letting the rest of the rope fall to the ground. Once she was sure there were no tangles, she swung the hook to test its weight, then swung it toward the window. It arced through the air and hit the sill with a clunk that seemed to echo through the night. It bounced off, fell to the ornamental ledge, then slid down the side of the wall. It landed on the lawn with a dull thud. She reeled it in.

The night air was chill, but her hands were sweating. Her heart pounded in her throat. She took a deep breath, focused on the windowsill, and tried again. This time, when the hook made contact, Andy yanked down. The hook caught—and stayed. Keeping the rope taut, she walked to the building face. She shifted her hands on the rope until they were above her head, then pressed one foot against the stone facade. Her rubbersoled aquatic shoes found traction, and she began to scale the building.

She reached the second floor easily, clasped the sill with one hand, while her toes searched for the ornamental ledge beneath her. For a moment she hung there, half held up by the rope, the other half held up by the ledge.

She began to sweat. She had to hold the rope taut while pushing to a standing position. Any release of pressure would loosen the hook and she'd plummet to earth. Well, into the bushes. She sucked in air, pulled on the rope, and pushed against the ledge in one movement. Her other hand found the windowsill. She leaned forward on her elbow, braced there while she carefully let go of the rope. The grapple held, and she was perched on the side of the building, held by her feet and one elbow while she extricated the metal card from the neck of her turtleneck.

The latch was tight, and she was sweating by the time she had manipulated the card past the window ridge. At last, one side of the window swung outward. She thrust her arm inside. Holding on with all her might, she shifted her weight off her toes. She shimmied over the frame and balanced on her waist while she unlatched the second side. Then she threw her legs over the sill and dropped to the floor.

The office was dark as pitch. She reached back to pull the window shut, but not locked, in case she needed to beat a hasty retreat. Then, taking the penlight from her mouth, she clicked it on and directed it at the floor. It cast a circle of light barely five inches in diameter, but it was enough. She quickly scanned the walls. A desk, a water cooler, and a row of file cabinets. She started with the first one and found what she was looking for. Folders on each of the retreat's participants.

With the penlight back in her mouth, she quickly flipped through the files until she found Miranda Houston. She pulled out the folder and opened it. The first page contained basic information, age, height, weight. The second, a list of hobbies and a paragraph on why she had chosen Terra Bliss for her retreat. Andy scanned the statements her aunt had made about her love life and her desire for a like-minded companion, and she quickly turned to the next page.

Here she found a list of the courses Mac had attended with comments from her workshop leaders. Andy took a second to read through these. Flirtation. Mac didn't need lessons in that. Retraining Your Man. She didn't have one. Meditation. Meditation? Mac never sat still in her life.

The last page was a financial report. The numbers of the credit card she had used to pay for the retreat and a series of others that looked like bank accounts. It was the first thing that sent up any red flags in Andy's mind. Did they really need to know all her bank accounts?

At the bottom of the page were the dates of her visit, with the note, *Left after one week*. But no reason for her early departure.

Disappointed, Andy returned the folder, and then just out of curiosity reached to the back of the drawer for the one for Ariadne McAllister. She quickly leafed through it until she came to the leader reports. Low self-esteem. Painfully shy.

93

Unadventurous. *Unwilling to share*. Andy swallowed. Well, gee, the disguise really worked.

She returned the file and shut the drawer, then opened the next and looked for Imogene Southwaite. The same forms and financial report were in her folder, except there were more bank accounts and a complete listing of the workshops she'd taken. There had been quite a few as well as numerous Spa Days, Yoga, and Meditation. The comments and progress reports told of a lonely woman, whose money, she thought, had prevented her from finding a lasting relationship.

Andy was so engrossed in Imogene Southwaite's story that she almost missed the click of the door opening. She flicked off the penlight and slid it into her turtleneck. Shoved the Southwaite file into the drawer and eased it closed.

Hopefully, it was just a security guard and he would go away. As long as he didn't turn on the light, she'd be okay. If he did... She was gauging the distance to the window just as the door opened a crack and a dark figure slipped inside. He didn't turn on the light, but he didn't go away. Instead he stepped farther into the room and quietly closed the door.

Andy froze, her mouth suddenly dry and her heart pounding against her ribs. She squatted by the file cabinets, not daring to move. Shit. She was screwed. But why was he just standing inside the door, not moving.

And it occurred to her in a flash of sudden intuition that maybe he wasn't security. She wrestled between two urges. See who he was? Or get the hell out. Though it was unlikely that she would get as far as the window without being caught.

She didn't know whether to cry or laugh at the absurdity of two people breaking into the same place at the same time. It would make a great comic scene.

A giggle bubbled up inside her. She pushed it back down. This was no time for hysteria or flights of imagination. This was time for someone to yell, "Cut."

She shifted toward the window, ready to attempt an escape. Her knee bumped against a metal wastebasket. It rattled on the floor. She felt the figure in black turn and begin to move toward her.

Andy's body quivered with adrenaline. Time for diversion and run. She carefully picked up the wastebasket and lifted it over her head. Just as he rounded the corner of the desk, she threw the basket at him and bolted for the window.

She heard his muttered oath as the trash can made contact, the rustle of papers as they spilled across the floor.

She thrust the window open and vaulted onto the sill. Heard another crash, another oath. He must have tripped over the trash basket.

Still, there was no time to use the rope and get to the cover of the trees. She released the grapple and tossed it to the ground. Then pirouetted on the balls of her feet until she faced the window. She sprang upward and just managed to catch the eaves of the flat roof. She scrambled up the façade, threw herself over the edge, and lay there trying not to breathe.

She waited for a sound. Something to tell her if he was following. But she heard nothing. Had he given up? Was he inside burgling the place? That took some nerve.

Cautiously, she inched her way to the edge of the roof. He was looking out the window, down toward the ground. She drew back, heard the window close.

And it hit her. She had no way down. Why, oh, why hadn't she looked for an alternative exit before playing *It Takes a Thief*? She needed a script, damn it.

She leaned back over the side. Only two floors to the ground. The bushes would break her fall. She might get a few scratches, a sprained ankle even. She'd done worse without a harness. Of course, there had been a foam pit waiting for her at the bottom.

Her mind flashed on Betty and the sight of her mangled body that first day in the hospital. Her life of dragging a paralyzed body from room to room, day after dull day. Never to work again.

Okay. Don't panic. She could use the window to lower her-

self down. Then it would only be a one-story jump. Piece of cake.

But what if he was waiting for her at the window. *Stupid*. *Use another window*.

She scooted along the roof, leaned over the side. She looked left. No sign of the other intruder. She took a calming breath and let herself over the side.

She stretched the full length of her arms until her feet found the windowsill. Pressing her knees against the window well, she carefully released one hand from the roof, then the other—and hovered there, willing herself to stay. Then she slid one foot off the sill and lowered herself until her foot almost reached the ledge. But it was a no go. There was no place to hold on to while she lowered her other foot. She'd have to jump from here.

She looked over her shoulder, gauged the distance to the ground, then pushed away from the wall. There was a moment of free fall; then she felt the scrape of the bushes as she fell past them. She landed on both feet, automatically curled into a ball and rolled onto the grass. And rolled—and rolled until she came to a stop against a pair of running shoes.

She turned her head just enough to peer up two long, blackclad legs.

"Busted," said the voice above her.

Andy blinked. She knew that voice. It was her slave. "Dillon. Thank G—"

He yanked her to her feet. Held her with one arm, while he pulled the ski cap off her head. Her hair spilled over her shoulders.

They stared at each other for a heart-stopping moment. Then Dillon said, "Well, Miss Ariadne McAllister. This is a surprise."

"I can explain," she began automatically.

"I bet." He broke off, cocked his head like a hunting dog on the scent. "But later." He dragged her into the woods.

"Hey," she protested.

His large hand clamped over her mouth and he pressed her into his body.

Then she heard low murmurs, getting louder as a pair of security guards passed by. When they had rounded the corner of the building, Dillon removed his hand from her mouth. Keeping her arm in a firm grip, he reached down for her backpack.

"But my—"

"Rope and grapple? They're in your backpack."

He slipped it over her shoulder and gave her a push up the hill.

Neither of them spoke as they moved through the woods. Andy was thinking furiously, trying to come up with some excuse she could use to brazen her way through this. Tell the truth? What if he was in cahoots with the Goddess directors? Not that she had any proof that they were up to anything but extortionate prices. There hadn't been anything suspicious except those bank account numbers.

She risked a glance at Dillon. Not that she could see much. The trees hid what was left of the moonlight. But she could see the outline of his jaw. And it looked tense. Very tense.

He didn't slow down when they reached her cabin, but hauled her up the steps, across the porch, and into the living room. Even then, he didn't speak, just dragged her across the room and tossed her onto the couch.

She let him do it, though she was tempted to fight back. But she didn't want to maim or disfigure him. Because if they saw their way clear of this, she planned to have her way with him, and she wanted him in good shape.

She grimaced. How could she be thinking about sex with a man who might be a thief, or worse.

He switched on the lamp and light fell across her face. He, of course, was in shadow. She gave him an ironic look. "Interrogation 101?"

No response, not even a quirk of those beckoning lips. *Jeez. Stop thinking about his lips.* She went on the offensive. "Just

what were you doing skulking around in the dark outside the Pantheon in the middle of the night?"

He cocked his head. She could see the speculation, the suspicion in his eyes. Could feel his anger pulsing in the space between them. Okay, so the man had no sense of humor.

"What were you doing inside the business office?"

"How did—" And then it hit her. Dillon looking up at the windows. Dillon following her upstairs. He hadn't just been waiting outside for her. He'd been inside with her. "What were you doing there?"

She knew she'd hit the mark.

"Cleanup detail." He said it without missing a beat.

Dressed like Batman? She didn't think so.

"I'm waiting."

He could wait all night. Suddenly she didn't like him very much. And didn't trust him. Time for a change of tactics. "Look. It isn't what you think."

Silence, then, "How do you know what I think?"

Not friendly. He wasn't going to give anything away. Fine. Neither was she. She tried to get up from the couch. He pushed her back down. Not roughly, just a flick of his wrist. And it sent her sprawling. She stared up at him. Her slave had some advanced self-defense training.

She was impressed. And turned on. And sure that she was in deep shit.

She fought the urge to squirm beneath his gaze. The man didn't even blink. Like *Night of the Living Dead*, only with a butt that made her fingers tingle. She crossed her arms and stared back at him. She knew how to give the silent treatment. And boy, was he going to get it.

"Would you prefer to tell the police?"

She had to consciously stop her eyes from widening.

"Or maybe I should just turn you over to Hans."

Hans? The masseur? He was a giant, with arms like anacondas, hands like sides of beef. The blood rushed from Andy's head, and she had a hard time staying upright.

"Hans?" she squeaked.

"In addition to masseur, he's head of security."

Okay, the silent approach wasn't working. Time for evasive tactics. She cowered back. "Don't take me to Hans," she whimpered. "Don't hurt me."

Dillon drew back as if she'd slapped him.

"I can't help it. It's a disease. Dr. Abramovitch says it's because I'm repressed. That I feel the need to express myself, but I can't open up to people. So I take things for the attention. He sent me here." Her bottom lip trembled. "He thought it would help me with my problem."

Dillon was staring at her as if she'd suddenly grown two heads. "Bullshit."

She could see his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides. *He really does want to hit me*, she thought, suddenly truly uneasy.

Dillon glared down at her. "I know this is an act. I'm not planning to resort to torture."

Yeah, the implication being that he could if he wanted to, thought Andy. Who was this guy? She knew nothing about him. Jeannie knew the entire history of Demetri's life; even Loubelle and Evelyn knew things about Rusty and Louis. But Dillon hadn't volunteered one personal fact in the three days she'd been here. Maybe she wasn't the only one in Terra Bliss with something to hide.

"Leave or I'll scream."

He lifted an eyebrow.

She opened her mouth and filled her lungs. He lunged at her, his hand reaching for her mouth. At the last moment, she rolled away. It threw him off balance and he fell with her. Her arms automatically went around his waist. She couldn't help herself. She was a woman after all.

"Don't," he growled and pushed her away. He staggered back, looked down at her with loathing.

This time she really did cower. She'd never seen anyone look so evil.

He backed up, staring at her like she was sewer scum, then spun around and strode to the door. He stopped with his hand on the knob. "I'll be back in the morning for the truth. Don't think about going over the wall. You wouldn't last two days in that terrain, I don't care who you are." He opened the door and left.

Andy stared at the door, wondering what had just happened. One minute he's threatening her, the next he's running as though the hounds of hell were after him. She didn't get it. He must be up to something. He hadn't believed a word she said, and yet the way he'd recoiled from her touch had been real. And that bothered her. Bothered? It had been insulting, more than insulting. It had been humiliating.

She pushed off the couch, got a bottle of water out of the fridge, and went into the bedroom. He'd been repulsed by her. She couldn't remember anyone reacting to her like that—ever. She pulled off her turtleneck. Took a sip of water. She had disgusted him. She pushed down her tights and kicked them off her feet. Took another, longer swig of water. And what did he know about the wall?

She unhooked her bra and turned to the mirror. Gave her body a good appraisal. She looked damned good. She had everything she needed—that Dillon needed—and more. She pulled her terry cloth robe out of the closet, cinched it about her waist.

She'd make him sorry. And then she'd make him tell her just who he was and what he was doing here. Then maybe, just maybe, she'd tell him the truth.

Dillon took the path at a run. His brain had begun to short circuit halfway through that confrontation. The woman was playing him. That was obvious. But who the hell was she? A crook? A pathological liar? A fed?

He should have stayed until he got the truth out of her, but when her arms had gone around him, it hadn't been Ariadne McAllister drawing him down, but Isabelle Foubert. And he'd panicked. He still had the scars to remind him of the treachery of women. He wouldn't forget again.

He ran until he reached the men's dormitory. Stole down the hall to his room. Closed the door and leaned against it, his lungs burning, his heart pounding, and his mind tormented by the past.

Andy sprinted down the path and stopped at the edge of the lawn. She scanned the silvered landscape. Not a soul in sight. Not that she'd really expected to see Dillon. He'd probably run all the way to the men's dormitory and locked himself in. The man had been seriously freaked. That much of his act had been real, and now that she was more coolheaded, she thought it had more to do with him than with her.

She struck off across the grass, the dew wetting her feet. Past the pool and the gym, across another expanse of lawn. And still no sign of man or beast. Ahead of her, the dormitory was dark—except one window.

The dormitory was off-limits. But, hell, who needed limits.

She moved stealthily toward the door. Carefully tried the knob and when it turned, poked her head inside. A hallway. Good. She'd been afraid she might walk into forty hunky men, sleeping in rows in the buff. Something she'd ordinarily enjoy, but not tonight. Tonight she was interested in only one man.

She tiptoed down the hall, looking from side to side. How convenient that someone had placed nameplates outside each door. These Goddess people were certainly efficient. Halfway down the hall she came to Dillon's name. Saw the light coming from beneath the door. Considered knocking. Decided against it. Strength in surprise. Taking a breath, she opened the door. The room was empty. She stepped in, looked around, opened a smaller door, and found a closet. Not hiding there.

The bathroom. It must be down the hall. She'd be waiting for him when he came out. She leaned against the wall outside the bathroom, then heard the sound of running water several doors away. She followed the sound to another closed door.

Should she? Shouldn't she? There was no guarantee that it would be Dillon behind that door. But what was life without danger?

She opened the door and was hit by a heated wave of steam as it rushed toward the open doorway. It was a communal shower. Dillon was standing dead center, sleek and lean and covered in soap. He was facing the wall, his head raised so that the water slicked his dark hair to his skull. It pelted his shoulders—his broad, soapy shoulders. His back was shiny with water and heat. And his ass was . . . perfect.

An involuntary sigh of appreciation escaped her lips. He turned around, his face frozen in surprise, his hands pressed to the soap bubbles that formed a nest around his rather impressive erection.

"I'm a reporter." She slipped the robe off her shoulders and closed the door.

Chapter 9

Gesus Christ." Dillon lunged for the towel that hung from a peg on the wall. One foot slid out from under him. He winced and shifted his weight to the other foot. In that split second, Andy grabbed the towel and threw it between her and the door.

He wasn't going to get away without hearing her explanation. It wasn't the truth, but it was nearly as good. It had taken her entire trip across the compound to come up with it. Well, actually she had lifted the idea from Kathleen Turner in *Romancing the Stone*.

"What are you doing here?" His eyes seemed to be caught on her breasts.

She rolled her eyes.

"Get out. You can't be in here."

Her better self was telling her to just tell him the truth, but the savvy self, the one that had survived as a Hollywood stuntwoman since the age of four, said, *Are you nuts? He could be* one of their goons. If that were true, she'd definitely be in hot water.

"Why?" She cocked her head, focused on his slick, soapy chest, slowly panned down to his crotch, and his very ready erection. She sucked in air. Okay, maybe he didn't want to want her, but he did.

Dillon jerked his head and pulled his gaze from her. He focused it on the floor. "You're naked."

"So are you."

He lifted his eyes, then dropped them again. "You really need to get out of here."

"Come on. It's a communal shower. Let's get communal."

He shook his head once.

Andy sighed. What was it with this guy? "Come on. Live dangerously. Enjoy the thrill."

Dillon stepped back. "Who are you?"

She began to feel just a little insecure. Why did he have to be so suspicious? "Like I said, I'm a reporter." She stepped toward him.

He stepped back. Water pelted his head, sluiced down his chest.

"Freelance. I wanted to do an article on Terra Bliss, but the only interviews I could get were testimonials on how wonderful it was. I wanted dirt. So I decided to come see for myself."

Dillon's fists were clenched at his sides.

Jeez. What was wrong with him? He wasn't trying to cover his crotch, so it couldn't be shyness. He was supposed to be her slave. It was part of the job description. And he was getting bigger by the second. She'd better do something fast before they both exploded.

The room was steaming up again. She could feel the sheen of moisture on her face, feel the rivulets of condensation roll down the valley between her breasts. She reached down and wiped it away.

"What-" He cleared his throat. "What kind of dirt?"

"Nothing specific, just what goes on inside Terra Bliss. Look, I really need this story. And if you turn me in . . . "

"You're going to seduce me to keep me quiet?"

"I'm going to seduce you because you're hot and I want you." She looked pointedly at his erection. "And you want me, too."

He jerked his head. Was that a no, he wouldn't tell, or no, he wasn't buying it, or—God forbid—no, he didn't want to.

She could cry with frustration. Most men would have been on their knees by now, and Dillon was just standing there, getting soaked.

The steam was so thick that he kept disappearing behind white clouds of it. Her body was covered with mist. His was covered with soap. It was a perfect combination.

She smiled—slowly. Stepped closer. Close enough to touch him. So she did. Just two fingers. Trailing across his collarbone and down his chest.

Dillon shuddered, but he kept his arms at his sides.

Down past his navel. He shifted to the right, but she stepped with him. They were only inches apart now. Down that line of dark hair. Feather-touched the tip of his erection.

Dillon sighed. Swayed on his feet. But his hands stayed by his sides.

Jeez. What did he want? Double backflips? She could do that. Or maybe this. She drew a line down the ridge of his penis until she reached his balls. They were soapy and hard.

"Don't you want this?" she asked, rephrasing his question from the night before.

"Yes." He lunged into her. His arms wrapped around her waist, and he pulled her against him, capturing her hands between his legs.

She gave in to him, pressing her body against his, her curves matching his valleys perfectly. God, this was better than she'd imagined. She lifted her face, and he lowered his to nuzzle her cheek, her neck, finally found her mouth. His lips were tentative. As though he still wanted to talk himself out of it. She sucked his lower lip into her mouth. He groaned and pushed his tongue in after his lip. Her tongue touched his and heat flared in her belly. Her hands tightened around his balls; he growled and deepened the kiss.

The water beat down on them until they slid against each other. His hands moved over her back, down her butt, kneaded the muscles there. Her hands slid up his cock and away. Around his back. He thrust against her stomach, his soapy penis sliding up and down her, tantalizing and seducing.

She circled her hips against him. His mouth slid off hers. His teeth nipped at her neck, her collarbone. Their bodies parted and he licked between her breasts. Her hands ran up his arms to his shoulders. The muscles flexed beneath her touch and a thrill shot through her.

He took a breast in each hand, lifted them, and rubbed his cheek against them. His tongue flicked at one nipple. It was already so incredibly sensitive that she jerked, knocking him away. A smile curved his lips. He flicked again, then covered the nipple with his mouth and sucked. Electricity shot straight to her crotch. Her arms pushed down the muscles of his back. He smelled of soap and heat.

He moved to her other breast, sucked at the tip, his tongue washing around the aureole. His hands ran down her sides, outlining her curves. His mouth followed them down, nipping at her skin, flirting with her navel until he was curved into her like the discus thrower, a Greek god incarnate, a dangerous man, who was probably up to something illegal but she didn't care.

This was primal and she was fully engaged.

His hands encircled her waist and turned them so that her back was to the wall. He reached past her and came back holding the bar of soap. He ran it over her chest, under her breasts, then down her center to her abdomen.

Andy leaned into the cold tiles, her knees too weak to support her. But his hands shifted to her back, rubbing the soap over her butt, into the crack that separated the cheeks. His mouth found hers for a brief kiss; then he moved away, looked at the suds streaming down her body, and slipped the soap between her legs.

"Open," he said.

She opened her thighs. He smiled and looked down between them. It drew her eyes downward, too. She watched his soapy hands ease back and forth between her legs. Jerked spasmodically beneath his fingers. She didn't think she could stand the pleasure that he wrung from her.

His hands moved to his cock and began lathering it with circular strokes. She moved his hands away and took over, sliding her fingers over the pulsing strength of him. Circled the tip, caressed the shaft with her fingers, and down again to coat his balls with suds.

He braced his hands on either side of her head, using the wall for support. He seemed to tower over her, and she felt small and vulnerable. And it was exhilarating. He assaulted her mouth with his, angling his head from one side to the other as he claimed her. His hands slid down the wall, his lips brushed hers, then he pulled away. "Shit. No condom."

"Right pocket of my robe."

"You did mean to seduce me."

"Yep. And I'm going to." Since he didn't appear to be moving, she slid out from under him, picked up the now-soggy robe and pulled a foil packet from the pocket.

Dillon was still standing where she'd left him, his hands braced on the wall as if he'd turned to stone. Worked for her. She ripped the packet with her teeth and slipped back between him and the wall.

"Mission accomplished," she said and guided the condom down the length of his cock.

Dillon's breath caught. She linked her hands behind his neck and swung her legs to his waist.

She wrapped arms and legs around him so that he could adjust his cock to drive into her. Her thighs gripped his waist as he withdrew and thrust again. And all the time, he kept kissing her. She was vibrating with tension and expectation. He shifted her weight to one arm, pressed her into the wall so his free hand could slip between them. He slid his finger through her slick folds. And timing the rhythm of his finger to the thrusts of his hips, he drove her relentlessly to the edge.

She fractured without warning. Startling her into a scream, which he quickly covered with his mouth. Her thighs tightened convulsively around him. Her mind started meltdown; she was liquid fire and desire and still he drove her. And when she thought she couldn't bear it, he pushed her into another wave of release.

And still he didn't let up. Thrusting faster and deeper, until with an erratic thrust, his body tightened and stilled. Andy could feel him rushing into her once, twice, and again. And still he kept pulsing into her, as if to drain himself completely. Then wordlessly, soundlessly, he collapsed against her. They slid down the wall to the floor, and huddled there, clinging to each other while the water showered them with tiny darts of heat.

It seemed that time had stopped, when Dillon finally shifted away from her. "We can't stay here." He reached overhead and turned off the water. "Everyone will be waking up soon."

Andy merely sighed, even though with the warmth of Dillon and the water gone, gooseflesh had broken out all over her.

He used the wall to steady himself as he pushed to his feet. Then he pulled her up after him. He picked up her robe and tossed it to her. She felt stiff and drained and barely had the energy to lift her hand in time to catch it.

She didn't want to get dressed. She wanted to tap her heels together and end up in Dillon's bed. But she put the robe on and tied the sash. It was soaked, and she shivered convulsively as the damp fabric clung to her skin.

Dillon wrapped the towel around his waist and peeked out the door. He motioned for her to come, and she just had time to grab her sandals from the floor before he trundled her down the hall and into his room. He closed the door and pulled her to him, his mouth finding hers with an urgency that made her light-headed.

When he finally pulled away, Andy could only stand there, stunned. She'd meant only to engage in a little seduction, a few

minutes of hot and heavy sex, but this had been something else. Something she hadn't experienced before, and was afraid she might never experience again.

She let out a yelp when a sweatshirt and pants sailed across the room and hit her in the chest.

Shivering, she quickly exchanged her wet robe for the sweats.

"Have a seat."

She looked up.

Dillon was pointing to his bed. He'd already changed back into the black pants and long-sleeved T-shirt he'd been wearing earlier.

Her intense lover was gone. He was all business. His eyes cold again, his mouth a mere line across his face. Maybe once was enough for him, but Andy was already craving more. The man was good. They were good. Hell. They were more than good. Not a good sign. Except Dillon was acting as if nothing had happened. And that wasn't good at all.

He took her by both shoulders. Andy moved toward him, lifted her face. He walked her backward to the bed and sat her down.

He stepped back, leaving Andy's shoulders tingling where he'd touched her, and feeling drained everywhere else. Shaken over what had happened between them. Confused. And wishing she'd never set eyes on the man who was regarding her now with cold contempt.

Maybe it's what she deserved for setting out to seduce him. But something more had happened between them. She didn't know what it was, was afraid to even consider what it might be.

She shook herself. Whoa, girl. It was sex in a shower. Cool down. You're about to be interrogated. She realized she was twisting the hem of the sweatshirt between her fingers. She let go, smoothed out the fabric, and straightened up.

He'd used her. Well, duh. She'd used him, too.

He was leaning against the chest of drawers, his hands gripping the wood on each side of his hips.

Hips she'd caressed just a few minutes ago and were now untouchable.

She'd been a fool to come here in the first place. To Dillon. To Terra Bliss. What could she possibly do to find her aunt? They should have called the police. She would be in Acapulco right now, breaking it off with Jason instead of with Dillon.

"Let's start over, shall we?" His voice was hard, a tinge of irony making it hurtful. "Who are you?"

"Ariadne McAllister. Who are you?"

He lifted an eyebrow. Andy bit the inside of her lip.

"Why are you here?"

I came to find out why my aunt disappeared. "I told you. I'm a reporter. I'm here doing a story."

"A story that involves breaking into the records office and rifling their files."

"You know, your postcoital pillow talk leaves a little something to be desired." It was a cheap shot, and she was only a little gratified to see him flinch. Well, she didn't care. She just wanted to go to bed—her own bed—and forget tonight ever happened. The room was growing lighter, and she'd have to get out of here soon if she had any chance of getting back to her cabin without being seen.

"All right. Fine. I was looking for news."

"In the clientele files?"

"I had to start somewhere." *Tell him*. "Why are you asking me all these questions? Are you the resident goddess snitch?"

No response.

"It's a human interest piece. You know that heiress that died a few weeks ago?"

Still no response. She might as well be talking to herself. "Well, I thought it would be a really good story. You know, lonely rich woman meets tragic end just when she finds the key to happiness."

"And how does Miranda Houston fit into this human interest piece?"

Andy flinched. Tell him. "Who?"

He just looked at her.

She was getting panicky now. People would be getting up soon. "Oh. The woman that was here last session?"

He nodded.

"No connection." She glanced up at him. "Were you here last session?"

"No."

"Can I go now?"

"No. Where do you go in the mornings?"

That one had come out of left field. "Well, I did the Knowing What You Want class and—"

"Before class. Before breakfast. Over the wall. I saw you."

"Oh." She pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Just getting some exercise. There's a nice lake there. I like to swim. Now can I go? It's getting light."

Dillon looked past her to the window. Gave a short nod.

Relief shot through her. She jumped off the bed. Started for the door.

Like a panther, Dillon was there before her, blocking her way.

"Why don't you put your talent to use?"

She frowned, not understanding.

"Use the window."

He dragged her across the room, opened the square window with his free hand, and stuck his head out, "It's clear. Get going and don't get caught."

He stood back while she climbed onto the sill. Suddenly her throat was burning, and tears were pricking her eyes, but she glanced back over her shoulder.

"Hey," she said, her voice only a little shaky. "What happened to 'I had a great time. I'll call you.' "

His eyes narrowed into searing pinpoints that cut right

through her. "I had a great time. I'll call you." He gave her a shove and shut the window.

Dillon stepped away from the window, but he watched Ariadne running gazelle-like over the lawn. He was already castigating himself for succumbing to her studied seduction, and yet he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Christ. It was déjà vu all over again. How stupid could one man be?

If he screwed up this assignment, he'd be out on his ear. And yet, seeing her look so forlorn, even knowing she was lying to him, he was barely able to keep himself from pushing her down on the bed and making love to her until it was night again.

Tonight he hadn't cared if she were a spinster, a reporter, or a double, triple, quadruple agent. She'd walked into the shower room, dropped that robe, and he was lost. At first he was afraid the hallucinations were back, but he still had her scent on his hands.

She might be a reporter, but she was lying about something. And that hurt. For some reason beyond his need to know, he wanted her to tell him the truth.

Well, he would just have to find out by himself. Because regardless of what or who she was, he couldn't have her meddling in his investigation. She might blow the whole operation, and worse, she might get hurt.

Andy forced back tears as she ran across the dewy lawn. They had gone up in flames together, and he'd pushed her out a window without a kiss or a caress. That was a first.

She didn't stop running until she reached her cabin. She burst through the door and flung herself on the couch. But she didn't cry like any normal girl who'd just been jilted. Maybe she'd been expecting it. After all, she should be used to this scenario by now. She'd played it often enough.

She sat up and tucked her knees under the sweatshirt. It

112 Gemma Bruce

smelled like him, something she couldn't quite define, something that smelled so good that it made her heart ache. Made her wish that he had been different. That she had been different.

Stupid. Her next film started in three weeks. She didn't have time for love anyway. She caught herself twisting the bottom of the sweatshirt and pulled her fingers away. So why did she feel so bad?

Chapter 10

Andy waited until breakfast was almost over before making an appearance. She'd made coffee in her cabin, but caffeine and worry made her stomach roil, so she stopped by the dining hall, hoping to snare a roll without having to stay.

Of course, Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie were just coming out as she stepped up to the buffet line.

"There you are," said Jeannie. "We thought maybe your slave had done you in."

Andy bobbled the roll she'd just picked up.

"Never saw a man so surly in the morning. Except my first husband. He could be a bear. What did you do to the poor man?"

"Nothing."

"Well, he's not fit for a goddess this morning. Why don't you come with us? We're going to the Spa. And you look like you could use some pampering." Jeannie took her shoulders and marched her toward the door.

"Didn't you sleep well?" asked Loubelle, her mouth puckered in concern.

Andy shook her head. Actually, she hadn't slept at all. And her night had gone from stellar to dismal.

"Then you need some TLC," said Jeannie. "There's yoga and meditation and a Jacuzzi." She grinned. "And if those don't fix

you, there's always Hans." She did a little shimmy. "He's got the Midas touch. Ooo-eee."

"I don't think—"

"I've got an extra suit in my bag. Now, no excuses. It'll do you good. Uh-oh here comes Mr. Grumpy."

Andy looked up in time to see Dillon and JoJo leaving the dining room. JoJo gave them a bright "Good morning," but Dillon just walked past, frowning.

He's going to tell them about the break-in, thought Andy, her stomach clenching.

She caught Evelyn's eye. The older woman smiled sympathetically. "Why don't you join us? You'll feel better."

"All right," said Andy. She couldn't believe that he could be so conniving. He'd made love to her, and now he was going to rat her out. Well, to hell with him. She'd acted like a fool and she got what she deserved.

Dillon and JoJo went up the stairs, just as Carmen and Jane came down. As usual, they were arguing. They stopped when they saw the four women but took up again as soon as they passed by.

"I didn't leave that mess," groused Jane. "But somebody said I did."

"It wasn't me, so just shut up." Carmen flounced ahead of her.

"Ooo-ee," said Jeannie. "Seems like everybody's in a bad mood today."

"Thanks to you, we're stuck with Hans the ham-fisted all day."

"It wasn't--"

The door closed, cutting off Carmen's final words.

"Well," said Evelyn. "Shall we go?"

The Spa was another Greco-style building on the far side of the pool. As they approached it, Andy heard a rumbling sound and looked up in time to see a helicopter hover, then descend behind the hill. "Fresh crab for lunch," said Evelyn.

Or the police to drag me away to jail, thought Andy with a visible shudder.

"I'll meet you in the dressing room," Jeannie said and hurried away.

She returned a few minutes later and thrust a pair of hot pink leotards and exercise tights at Andy. "Got these at the Spa store. Hurry up and get dressed. Class starts in five minutes."

Andy looked at the skimpy spandex in her hands. Well, what the hell. She was tired of losing herself in loose-fitting clothes. She would just tell them she'd been working out in preparation for the retreat.

When she came out, having thrown her oversized shirt over her new exercise clothes, ten women were already sitting on blue rectangular mats, stretching and chatting quietly. Jeannie motioned her over and pointed to a mat next to hers.

Andy sat down. The instructor took her place in front of the room. Andy hadn't seen her before, but she was trim and muscular. She led them through breathing exercises, then a series of positions, starting with Greet the Sun. Andy knew the drill. She'd done yoga for a few months when she was recovering from a stagecoach chase gone bad. She concentrated on twisting herself into a pretzel while remembering to breathe, and trying not to think about Dillon or wondering what he was saying to Dr. Bliss and company.

After class, they took a five-minute break. Everyone headed for the side of the room and their water bottles.

"We're supposed to talk quietly," said Jeannie in a whisper that carried across the room. "Meditation's next."

Andy nodded. She didn't really want to meditate. She had a hard time sitting still at the best of times. But they might be outside waiting to take her away. Maybe she'd think of a way out while chanting *Ohm*.

She took her place on her mat, crossed her legs, and folded

her hands in her lap—and did a double take as the instructor walked to the front of the room.

She leaned over to Jeannie. "Katherine Dane is the meditation instructor?"

Jeannie nodded. "MBA, and certified in Hatha Yoga. Guess that's why she's so bland all the time." She made a face and slapped a hand over her mouth. But her eyes were twinkling.

Katherine Dane faced the group. She was wearing loose gauze harem pants and a leotard top. She looked as unruffled as usual and just as unapproachable. Still, Andy was having trouble reconciling the businesswoman with the New Age one. Was she a product of goddess training? Was she just as efficient with the cosmos as she was behind a computer?

"Good morning, all," she said, stretching out her arms and smiling down on the seated women.

"Good morning, Katherine," they replied together.

Katherine sat down, crossed her legs, and folded her hands in her lap. Soft New Age music floated through the room from unseen speakers. Andy felt her mind begin to relax. Maybe, this was just what she needed. According to Mac's file, she'd attended the meditation class, and Mac hated sitting still even more than Andy did. So there must be something to it.

She closed her eyes, hoping to release the anxiety and hurt she was feeling. She jumped when Katherine said, "Clear your thoughts, go to a place where sunshine welcomes you, warm, inviting, soothing." Her voice was soothing, almost monotonal, but it brought Andy right back to the fix she was in.

"Tune your chi into the universe, let the energy pour over you, through you, around you. Take a cleansing breath."

All around her, Andy heard intakes of air. She breathed in, let it out, tried to relax. She should have stopped after yoga. She'd felt okay then.

"And breathe in." Katherine's arms stretched out as she took in an audible breath. "And exhale."

Everyone did.

"Let your chi flow."

I would if you'd shut up, thought Andy. Weren't you supposed to be quiet when you meditated?

She tried to listen to the music, drown out Katherine's talking. She drifted, but instead of going to a sunny place, she thought of Dillon and the two of them in the shower. The heat that passed between them. How they'd stood before each other, naked and not touching, until he finally gave in. His hands on her. His mouth.

"Let all thoughts drift away. Think them and let them go into the universe, until all thoughts are gone. And sublime emptiness is all that is left.

"There is no worry, only light. It carries your hopes, your fears, your thoughts into the cosmos."

Andy was getting annoyed. She didn't want her thoughts carried off into the cosmos. She had a hard enough time keeping them together. But she breathed in and out. And saw Aunt Mac's face. Where was she? Wouldn't Andy know if she had been hurt? Would she know if Dillon was hurt? She pushed the thought away. Remembered that she wasn't supposed to push them away, but let them drift. This wasn't going to work.

Katherine's voice droned on and on and on, until, at last, Andy ceased to hear it.

Dillon sat across the coffee table from Fiona Bliss, regarding her with a mixture of relief and wariness. When JoJo told him she wanted to see him, he'd been sure Ariadne and he must have been spotted by the security guards during their little B and E fiasco. But Dr. Bliss had greeted him with a smile, had offered herbal tea—which he declined—and asked him to sit down. It seemed that she only wanted to know how he and Ariadne McAllister were getting along.

"Fine," he told her.

"She's led a very sheltered life."

He nodded, noncommittally, waiting for her to get to the point.

She picked up a gold pen off the coffee table and rolled it

between long, graceful fingers. "I don't want her taken advantage of."

"I—"

"I know you haven't. At least I don't believe you have. We screen our attendants very carefully. Sometimes an unsuitable choice passes under the radar, but not often. And when it does happen, Katherine deals with it quickly and efficiently."

So that was it. She'd decided he was unsuitable and was about to fire him. His ass was grass.

She paused and looked at him thoughtfully; put the pen down and leaned forward.

"Goddess International began as a program to help women fulfill their needs. Most of the first attendees were businesswomen who needed an extra edge to compete with men. But what I really wanted to do was help all women to fully realize themselves."

Dillon watched her speculatively. She seemed sincere, but then it was easy to have good intentions when those intentions were bringing in millions of dollars.

"Women who come to the retreat are in all stages of development. We don't often have someone as shy and well, as homely, as Ariadne. It takes courage for a woman of Ariadne's nature to take that first step toward self-realization."

And which of the several Ariadnes are you talking about? The mouse, the second-story sneak thief, or the demon lover.

"They must be nurtured, handled with great delicacy. I usually suggest taking several smaller sessions before signing up for the full summer course. It can be very stressful, being away from home, not being able to communicate with the outside world. But her family was very concerned about her and very persuasive. She doesn't make friends easily."

"She spends time with several women here."

"Yes. So I've been told. But they are old enough to be her grandmothers. Which brings me to the point."

Dillon waited.

"Jojo is in charge of matching serfs with trainees. He tries to

match experienced attendants with new arrivals. Sometimes there's a mix-up. Perhaps being new to Terra Bliss, you would be more comfortable with someone a little more outgoing?"

He shook his head. There was no way in hell he was giving up Ariadne. She was perfect. For his cover. He meant. If she really was a reporter, he could keep an eye on her. Prevent her from botching his investigation. If she was lying, he'd deal with her when the time came.

"No," he said, trying not to sound impulsive. "It would be a bad idea to change her now."

"Why is that?"

"She's getting used to me. She might think it was something she did, that she was a failure. It might worsen her self-image." And mine, he thought... If Ariadne had really been the person they were talking about instead of the voluptuous she-cat who'd seduced him the night before, it would be the truth. And he ached for that woman who didn't exist. Because he knew just how she would feel. It was the way he felt when he woke up in the hospital to the knowledge that he'd fallen for the oldest con in the book, that he'd jeopardized other agents, had nearly died and blown the operation because of his bad judgment.

He became aware of Bliss regarding him intently, the blue of her eyes clear and penetrating. As if she could see into his soul.

"Just my uneducated opinion, of course."

The doctor's mouth curved in a gentle smile. "You surprise me, Dillon Cross."

He lifted his eyebrows, inviting her to explain.

"In your audition, you came across as a very arrogant man. Katherine and Bernard had reservations about hiring you. Actually, so did I, but, I think, for reasons different than theirs."

"No self-respecting man likes to be paraded around in his underwear."

Her mouth quirked up. It was so fleeting he was unsure how to read it.

"I'm glad I decided to accept you. I think you'll be an asset

to the organization. And you might even derive some benefit as well."

"Me?" It came out before he could stop it. The only benefit he could possibly get from this was keeping himself employed. If he botched this job, he could kiss his livelihood goodbye.

The doctor broke into a full smile. It was captivating, and Dillon caught a glimpse of why people flocked to her workshops, sought her out everywhere she went. Which didn't mean, he reminded himself, that she wouldn't use that charisma to gain a person's loyalty and then murder them for their money.

"Which brings us to why I asked you to come in today."

This should be interesting. He settled back to listen.

"Katherine told me that she and Bernard interrupted the two of you, shall we say, getting to know each other more intimately."

Dillon shifted in his chair, feeling a little guilty, but not too much.

"I hope you can assure me that the display of affection was mutual. That Ariadne wasn't pushed into anything that she wasn't ready for."

Dillon cleared his throat. "It was, uh, unexpected, but mutual." And if that little kiss in the hall was all they knew about, he could relax.

"I have great hopes for Ariadne McAllister. She's just the kind of woman that can benefit most from my program. I mean to bring her out of her shell. Transform her. Give her the ability to empower herself. But first she needs to learn how to give and receive pleasure."

Any more empowerment and Ariadne could blow them all into the next state. And as for pleasure . . .

"I'm depending on you, Dillon, to be a part of that empowerment process."

He nodded slightly. What else could he do? The doctor actually believed her own dogma.

"But . . . You must use great sensitivity. Can you do that?" He nodded. Did he have a choice? He started to stand up.

"Good. I was sure I could count on you. I'll schedule the two of you for the Bower of Bliss."

Dillon sat back down. The Bower of Bliss? She had to be kidding. He'd heard plenty from the other men about the nightlong sex sessions that went on there. He didn't have time for this. And he sure as hell wasn't going to subject himself to Ariadne McAllister and a whole night of mind-bending sex. If last night had been any indication of how things would be between them if they ever tried that again, he'd be a blithering idiot by the time morning rolled around.

"I really don't think . . . she's ready for that."

Dr. Bliss raised one finely shaped eyebrow. Then she smiled. "I believe you may have been misled about what goes on there."

Not likely, he thought. He'd have to talk her out of this somehow.

"The Bower is not just for orgiastic behavior, though I'm sure that goes on also. Its purpose is to give two people extended private time. A chance to get to know each other without the distractions of others. It also gives the goddess an opportunity to practice some of the techniques that she's learned here."

"She's only been here a few days," he argued.

"But she has blossomed in that short time. I hope that she will become a Terra Bliss success story."

Ariadne, a poster girl for Goddess International, he thought wryly. God, lady, if you only knew. Though he thanked the stars that she didn't and hoped she never found out.

"You can use the time together however you like. But it must be mutual." She smiled slightly. "That is to say, she must be not only willing, but proactive. And you must be responsive."

Dillon began to feel cold sweat beneath his T-shirt. This was a really bad idea. "What if she isn't ready? What will that do to her self-esteem?"

"She talks to you, doesn't she? That's all that needs to happen, if that's what she wants."

Dillon had to physically prevent a tremor from coursing through his body. He doubted if Ariadne would stop at talking. He had to talk the doctor out of this. "She might be frightened, pushed more into her shell."

"I'm glad to see you so concerned about her feelings. That's a special quality that you seldom find in an untrained man."

Dillon's balls began sneaking up his scrotum. He was trained, but not to be some woman's lap dog. Oh, yeah, said an inner voice. And just what were you to the lovely Isabelle Foubert? Her patsy, thought Dillon. But Isabelle was a pro. One of the best. Now she was dead. Which was fine by him.

"I don't think she'll be afraid, Dillon. You have a certain something that is very appealing." She gave him a look that was blatantly sensual. "And you will, of course, receive a bonus."

He wanted to ask what kind of bonus. Because it looked like she might be offering herself.

"I'm sure the two of you will get along splendidly." She stood up and walked him to the door. "I have every confidence in you." And with a smile, she shut the door.

Well, he thought philosophically. It looked as though he and Ariadne McAllister were headed for a night of—he shuddered—eternal bliss.

Andy almost jumped out of her skin when the chanting started.

Then as the sound gradually died down, Katherine said, "Now, go out into the world and know that you can achieve your dreams. There is no power to stop you but your own unwillingness."

Andy stifled a yawn. It was over? She must have fallen asleep.

Women began to put their mats away; soft conversation drifted through the room.

Andy fought the urge to lie down. It must be the lack of sleep or her emotional turmoil. Her body was more lethargic, her mind more sluggish, than when she'd started the session. She didn't feel ready to face the world, just cranky.

Jeannie poked her with her toe. "Get a move on," she said in a whisper that made several people turn around.

Andy dragged herself off her mat, piled it on top of the others, and followed Jeannie back to the dressing room.

"Now what?" asked Andy, finally allowing herself a yawn.

"Put this on," said Jeannie. She held up a blue, pink, and red Hawaiian print swimsuit with a plunging neckline and high French-cut legs. "Bought it on a whim. Never wore it. I bet it'll look great on you."

Too enervated to argue, Andy took it into one of the changing cubicles. There was no mirror, but she knew immediately that there would no longer be a question about what was under those oversized clothes. She knew she shouldn't wear it. But she was sick of subterfuge and deluding these three women who had taken her under their collective wings. They seemed to actually care about the poor woman Andy was impersonating.

She put on the suit and stepped out of the cubicle.

Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie were standing in a row, eager expressions on their faces.

Jeannie threw up her hands. "Ten!" she exclaimed.

Evelyn and Loubelle just stared.

"Sugah, you're a knockout. I can't believe you've been hiding that body under those baggy clothes. We need to go shoppin'."

Andy hung her head. "Do you think so?"

"You just listen to Jeannie. I'm not the best-dressed lady in west Texas by accident. We'll have to see what they have at the Goddess Boutique."

"But first the Jacuzzi," said Evelyn, and smiling indulgently, she ushered them out.

Andy practiced saying, "I'm a fake and I don't deserve your

kindness," all the way to the solarium where the Jacuzzi, sauna, and indoor pool were located.

"Don't look so worried," said Loubelle. "You have a real cute little figure."

Andy smiled halfheartedly. Why had she let her family talk her into this.

Jeannie grabbed four huge white, fluffy towels off a pile near the door, and then she and Loubelle helped Evelyn climb down the steps into the bubbling water.

Andy sat down on the side, slid her legs into the heated froth, and sighed. Then realized the three women were looking up at her.

"Ah, to be young again," said Loubelle wistfully.

"We are young," Jeannie said and raised her hand.

A waiter appeared by her head.

"Four mimosas, Paolo."

"Sure thing, Jeannie."

Andy slid into the water. "You know everybody."

"Been here often enough." Jeannie leaned forward and said over the bubbles, "But I only remember the names of the cute ones."

"Well, I think they're all just as handsome as they can be," said Loubelle.

Evelyn nodded and closed her eyes.

Paolo came back with four tall glasses, all garnished with a sprig of mint. He placed one on the floor beside each of them.

They all grew silent, and Andy succumbed to the churning massage of the water. No one asked embarrassing questions. No one challenged her on her reasons for covering herself up. It was nice to be accepted without having to prove yourself. And if she didn't have so many things to worry about, she would feel great.

One by one, they left the Jacuzzi for their scheduled massages. Andy demurred. There was no way she was going to let Hans see her naked. She might be able to snow these ladies. They were trusting, loving souls. But Hans would know how

fit she was at the first touch, and by the evening's debriefing session, the whole staff would know she was a fraud. If they didn't already.

Andy dressed and went back to her cabin. She was too zonked to do anything else. She didn't even feel surprised that there was no one waiting outside the Spa to arrest her. She dragged herself wearily up the hill, walked straight into her bedroom, stripped out of her clothes, and flopped down on the bed. In two minutes she was asleep.

Chapter 11

Andy was dragged from a dreamless sleep by a pounding on the door. She sat up disoriented; the pounding continued. She yawned and padded out to the front door.

The door stood wide open and she yawned again. The Jacuzzi must have really taken it out of her, because she wasn't one of those trusting souls that never locked themselves in. There didn't seem to be anyone on the other side of the screen door, so she opened it and looked outside.

Dillon was standing on the small porch, holding a thermal bag and blanket. He heard the door open and turned around. "You missed lunch, so I—" His words were cut off in a strangle. His eyes widened, and Andy realized she was standing in the door frame in only her bra and bikini underwear.

"Uh," she said. That was brilliant. She had to remember to stay away from the Jacuzzi from now on.

Dillon ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

Andy began to wake up. "What do you-"

Dillon held out the bag and blanket. "I thought we might go on a picnic."

Picnic? Picnic. Was this an apology? He didn't look contrite. But he did look hot. And since she was still here and not in the local jail, she wouldn't mind a little lunch. "Okay. Just let me

get dressed." Or you could just lie down, and I could eat lunch right off those washboard abs.

"Sure. I'll wait here."

Vaguely disappointed, she went inside. So he really did want to go on a picnic. No wonder she was the one who parachuted out of smoking twin engines and wrestled poisonous snakes, while some beautiful airhead got to kiss the hero. *Always a bridesmaid*. She shook herself. What had made her think about bridesmaids? She'd never even been one. Never thought about being one. Certainly never thought about being a bride. Not often anyway.

She reached for her khakis and the oversized shirt. To hell with it. She dumped them on the floor and rummaged in the bureau drawer. Found the aqua bikini rolled up in the back corner. She put it on and covered it with a pair of light sweatpants that she rolled below her navel.

They could go someplace private, someplace where no one would see them. Then they'd see if he could resist her goddess charms. She pulled on a stretchy camisole that had been missed by Galena and Betty. She smoothed it over her rib cage. It stopped just above her waist. There was a nice strip of tanned skin between tops and bottoms.

Take that, Dillon Cross.

She carried her sandals out to the porch.

Dillon nearly fell off the porch rail. He had to grab for the lunch bag as it fell from his shoulder.

"Shall we go?"

Dillon stood up. "I thought—I thought, maybe you'd take me to this lake you were talking about."

"The lake?" A zing of anticipation skittered through her. This could be good. This could be her fantasy. She glanced at his leg where the long scar reached up his thigh; another, newer scar slashed across his knee. Some serious surgery had gone on in that knee. And within the last few months.

"Maybe—"

"I can make it, if that's what you're thinking."

A little bitter, are we? She could hardly blame him. She knew how she'd feel if she were in his place.

"Good for you, macho man, let me get my sneaks."

Dillon closed his eyes as soon as Ariadne was out of sight. She didn't think he could handle hiking to the lake. And maybe he couldn't. Why didn't he just tell her that he'd had surgery and wasn't up to his usual activity level. Hell. He might never be back to his usual activity level. He was lucky to be walking, much less jogging five miles a day.

At least she hadn't given him that look of sympathy that he hated. Skeptical, but not pitying.

She came back wearing green and pink Nikes, grabbed the thermal lunch bag, and took off up the path. Dillon stared after her. She was going to drive him nuts—and blow her cover—wearing those clinging, low-riding sweats.

He grabbed the blanket and hurried after her.

Ariadne took the path at a brisk walk, not even slowing down when she heard Dillon following behind her. What the hell was she trying to prove? That she was tougher than him? No wonder she didn't have a man in her life.

But she knew better than to compensate for him. She knew about injuries, and she knew the last thing you needed when you were on the long road to recovery was pity, or molly-coddling. Look at Betty. She never gave in to her disability, at least not that anyone saw. Everyone in the family loved her to pieces. They wouldn't belittle her by cutting her a break because she was slow and there were things she'd never be able to do again.

She guessed that Dillon was the same way. Jogging every morning. Making himself walk, slow and even, masking the weakness in his leg. Maybe that's why he was so skittish about having sex with her. Any halfway testosterone-driven man who saw her standing touching-distance in her underwear would have pushed her inside, and they would be having hot, get-down, toe-curling sex right now instead of hiking through the woods for a picnic.

It hadn't stopped him last night, she thought, reliving those few minutes with a rush of pleasure. There was probably some psychological weirdness going on with him, vacillations, feelings of inadequacy. Men always got them.

Maybe he just needed some encouragement. But she'd be damned if she'd act all simpering and helpless like some ditz from a fifties movie.

She slowed down and let him catch up. Yeah. She'd been right. He wasn't even breathing hard. He took the picnic bag from her, and she let him.

But when they came to the end of the path and Andy looked at the tree leaning diagonally against the pine, she started to have second thoughts. What if the trunk didn't hold his weight and he fell? What if he just fell? What if he got to the top of the wall and couldn't get down?

And what if you just give the guy a break and let him try? "You're okay with the log? And you have to climb down a tree on the other side."

His jaw tightened. "I'm okay."

"Look. I know you've just had surgery. And I know what it's like to have an injury and how impatient you get, so don't do something stupid."

"I said I can make it." He paused and added, "I might be a little slow, but I'll get there."

"Suit yourself. At least give me the picnic bag." She reached for the strap, lifted it away from him. He held on. There was a moment of wrestling. She gave him a look. The wrestling continued in their gazes. Then finally Dillon let go.

Ariadne chuckled. "Left me holding the bag, huh?" Dillon automatically reached for it.

She swung it out of his reach. "Sorry, sorry. It was just too good to resist. Come on."

She ran lightly up the tree trunk, counterbalancing the weight of the bag by holding her free arm out to the side. When she reached the top of the wall, she looked back to give Dillon an encouraging look.

He was looking up at her with a slight frown on his face. Their eyes held. Then he broke contact and he stepped onto the fallen trunk. His foot slipped and a shower of dead bark drifted to the ground. Andy snatched back the hand that had automatically reached out to him.

He stepped again. This time the tree held, and he began a slow and deliberate ascent to the wall.

Andy held her breath, watching. This was a stupid idea, but it had been his idea, and she wasn't about to try to talk him out of it. He probably wouldn't talk to her for the rest of the session. The fragile male ego.

It seemed to take forever until he finally stepped onto the wall. There was a sheen of sweat on his forehead, but a remnant of a smile on those usually taciturn lips.

She turned away so that he wouldn't see her pleasure in his accomplishment. It wasn't something you could share with a stranger.

We're not strangers, she reminded herself. We've slept together. Well, not exactly. They'd fucked in a shower. And pretended like it hadn't happened ever since.

She shifted the lunch bag to her shoulder, then swung to the tree limb nearest the wall. She hung there for a moment making sure Dillon had seen where she landed, hoping he'd catch on without her having to say, use that branch, watch out for—

Hell, she didn't know why she was making such a big deal about it. How many mid-level executives could scale a wall and climb down a tree on the other side. Most didn't even want to. But something told her that Dillon took these kinds of activities for granted. Or had once. From the look on his face, he was determined to do them again.

She dropped to a lower branch and then to the ground. Moved aside to give Dillon space to land. He looked down. His eyes hard, determined. He tossed the blanket to her, and while she was catching it, he jumped to the branch. It groaned beneath his weight; for a sickening moment she thought it would break and he would plummet to the ground.

Okay, it was only six feet from his feet, but it still could do serious damage. His feet pedaled in the air, then found the next limb. Andy had to force herself not to go over and spot him. There wouldn't be anything she could do if he did fall. He would knock them both down.

He let go, hovered in the air, before grabbing the lower limb and releasing his feet. He hung there for a few seconds, then let go of the branch. He landed silently, crouched on all fours.

Panther, Andy thought. He does move like a panther.

He stood up, safe and sound, if a little off balance. He brushed off his hands and, not looking at her, picked up the blanket and the bag. "Which way?"

She pointed to his right.

Dillon shifted his load and struck off through the trees.

Andy, grinning, followed him.

It was all uphill. Dillon was feeling the strain from his tree acrobatics, but he gritted his teeth, wiped away the sweat, and kept climbing. Ariadne sometimes walked by his side, sometimes let him lead the way, and several times had to blaze the way when the path disappeared into a stand of fallen scree. He could hear water, occasionally glimpsed a stream, but every time he asked if it was a good place to stop, she merely said, "Not yet," and motioned him onward.

He was beginning to suspect her of trying to tire him out, when she left the path. He followed her and stopped short when he came out of the woods onto a granite boulder that curved down into a clear blue lake. At the far end, a waterfall coursed down a rock palisade.

Andy stood with her hands on her hips, gazing across the water. She looked like a goddess, dressed in sweats and camisole, her braid like a coil of rope down her back. He longed to pull off the band, loosen the plaits, and bury his face in the rich strands. He came to stand beside her.

Light reflected off the glassy surface of the water. The air was warm where the sun broke through the trees, the falls rumbled faintly in the distance, and the woman who stood beside him was making him randy as hell.

Time passed as they stood silently taking in the majesty of the place. Finally, she turned and smiled at him.

He dropped the bag and the blanket, caught her up, and wrapped her in his arms. He'd meant to play it cool, ask more questions and see if her investigative reporting was going to interfere with his own investigation. But the second he touched her, he was lost.

She was strong, firm and warm. Especially warm. And he missed that. Warmth. And more than just physical warmth. Isabelle's body had been warm, but everything else about her was cold as stone.

Don't think about Isabelle, lover, betrayer, the perpetrator of his attempted murder.

Ariadne slanted him a glance, a question in her eyes. He shook his head, driving out the memories. She reached up, ran her lips gently over his, releasing the tension he didn't know he was holding.

She pulled away, smiled, then brushed his lips again. He shivered and held her tighter, while telling himself not to lose control.

She had been in his mind ever since he'd left her early that morning. Hell, ever since he'd walked past her in the doorway of her bedroom that first day, when she was wearing her hair in a bun and those ridiculous glasses. His rational mind had kept the thoughts at bay, was fighting his desire now.

Everything about her intrigued him. Her sensuality, her

ability to scale walls. Her sexual enthusiasm. But it hadn't been just sex, at least not for him. And that scared him. Made him mistrust his instincts.

Nobody, not even Talbot, knew the depth of the spell that Isabelle had woven around him. He'd been sent in to charm her into making a mistake, and she had done the charming. And his was the mistake. It was sheer dumb luck that she was dead and he was alive.

But he had promised himself never to take that chance again. He didn't trust himself to have sex with Ariadne, because she wove her own kind of spell. Only hers was giving and loving as well as possessing.

But no matter how hard he tried to put the various things he knew about her together, he came up with an incomplete picture. That bothered him. And he wanted her more than ever.

"Time to come back now." Ariadne was regarding him with a patient smile.

"Sorry." He looked around. "You want to eat here?"

"I want to swim first." She sat down, took off her shoes.

"Do you have any idea how cold that water is?"

"Freezing." She pulled off her socks and stuffed them in her shoes. Her feet were high arched, the toes long. Suckable.

He dragged his eyes away.

"Know how to swim?"

"Of course." Dillon sat down and started untying his shoes.

She pulled the camisole over her head, revealing an aqua bra. His pulse jumped. She stood up and pushed the sweatpants down her legs. A tiny matching bikini bottom barely covered her butt. His dick responded instantly. And she knew it.

Her smile changed. His heart hammered against his breastbone.

She turned away and dove into the water. He jumped awkwardly to his feet and pulled off his T-shirt. He looked out into the water and could see her swimming just below the surface.

Then she came up for air, tendrils of hair clinging to her cheeks. She looked back at him, and Dillon dove in after her.

He came up ten seconds later gasping for air, his lungs paralyzed from the cold. His muscles were frozen; his teeth were chattering. He would probably sink right to the bottom.

Ariadne tread water, grinning at him. She scissor-kicked; her body rose out of the water, then curved into a shallow dive, before it disappeared beneath the surface.

The woman was a maniac. Dillon paddled himself in a full circle, looking for her. He didn't see her. This kind of temperature could cause a cramp. She might be in trouble.

Something brushed his leg. He nearly jumped out of the water, then felt two hands on his thighs. She surfaced behind him. He turned in time to have a spray of water hit him in the face.

"Hey," he said and grabbed for her. She ducked away and was gone. He watched the ripple of water as she skimmed just below the surface. She was fast. He swam after her. Just when he thought he might catch her, she somersaulted in the water and swam beneath him in the opposite direction. She hadn't once come up for air.

Nearly fifty feet away, she shot out of the water like a dolphin.

Dillon swam toward her, keeping his head above water, his eyes on her as his arms and legs propelled him forward. And again she slipped beneath the surface. But this time he was ready for her. As she skimmed past, he grabbed her waist, tucked his legs under her knees, and flipped her into his lap. She laughed as she rolled out of the water. The sound was throaty and delicious. She didn't try to get away, just stretched her legs out in front of them, wiggled her toes, and proceeded to drive him wild.

He pulled her tighter until she was pressed into the bend of his thighs. Wrapped his arms around her waist while his teeth pulled at the bow at her nape.

The bikini top was sleek as skin, and it fell away to float on

the water. His palms replaced the pieces, covering each breast with an urgency that even the cold couldn't quell. He stopped kicking just to enjoy the sensation, and they started to sink.

"Blanket," he said.

She turned in his arms, and their knees touched as they both tread water to stay afloat. "Chicken." She released the back of her top and hoisted it into the air like a flag. He reached for it. She laughed and pushed his head under the water. When he came up sputtering, she was swimming away.

"You'll pay for that," he called and swam after her. But long before he caught her, she hoisted herself onto the flat boulder and sat, naked from her bikini bottoms up, her feet arched like a ballerina's, her head thrown back to the sun. He reached up and grabbed her ankle. She squealed and he laughed out loud. It completely surprised him. How long had it been since he'd laughed?

She pulled her knees up, hiding those luscious breasts, and held out her hand. He looked at it, took it, braced one foot on the rock, and let her help him out of the water.

They sat side by side, water pooling beneath them. Ariadne shivered and he put his arm around her. She melted into him. her head settled on his shoulder, and they just sat, not needing to speak. Until he realized that his hand had somehow found her breast and was playing with its pebbled nipple.

"Blanket," said Ariadne. She stood up and flapped it open. Two foil packets fell onto the boulder. She grinned at him, tossed the packets to him and spread the blanket across the rock. "Lunch is served."

Dillon pulled her down to the blanket, pushed her onto her back, and began to explore.

His hand cupped her hip bone. His fingers trailed up her ribs, setting off a crop of goose bumps. She pulled him up along her body. He brushed his lips over hers, pushed back on his elbows to look at her. Her hand wrapped around the back of his neck and pulled him back. Her mouth parted, inviting him in, and he went.

Her tongue met his, then invaded his mouth. He had a hundred questions he'd meant to, needed to, ask. They flew out of his head. There was an ulterior reason for bringing her here. He forgot what it was. And nothing existed but Ariadne's cool skin and lips under his. Cool skin that was rapidly heating.

Her hands left his neck, ran over his shoulders and down his back. Hesitated when her fingers touched his scar. Dillon froze. But her fingers kept going, tracing a line down his spine.

He rolled to the side so his weight was off her, but their sides were touching. His fingers skimmed over her shoulder, down the soft skin of her breast, over the nipple and beneath the gentle curve of her breast until he could cup the fullness of her. Gently, he chafed warmth into her skin. Then he lifted the breast, rolled her sensitive nipple between two fingers, then leaned over and nipped it between his teeth.

She wiggled beneath him, making throaty sounds of pleasure. Speared her fingers through his wet hair, kneaded his shoulders. He moved hungrily to her other breast. She feather-brushed his sides, and he twitched.

"You're ticklish," she breathed into his hair.

He shook his head, not giving up her nipple to answer.

"You are." She poked him in the ribs.

His mouth broke away. "Stop it. I'm busy here."

But she'd achieved her goal. Her hands plunged into the back of his gym shorts, her fingers splayed across his butt. His gluts tightened in response. She pulled him close until his erection was hard against her thigh.

"Polar bear," she said.

"What?"

"The cold doesn't affect their ability to get it up."

He laughed. "Is that true or did you make it up?"

She rubbed against him. "I have no idea. Let's see." She pushed him onto his back and straddled him in one motion. Before he recovered from his surprise, she rubbed up the length of him.

Her braid slid over her shoulder and brushed his chest. He arched against her, fumbled at the elastic of her bikini bottoms, pushed his hand inside, and cupped her. She sighed, squeezed her thighs against his hand, pressing his knuckles into his own heated flesh.

She leaned forward, her hands resting on his shoulders. Her breasts fell enticingly close to his mouth but just out of reach. He wanted to touch her, take both of her breasts in his hands. Bury his face between them, but one hand was trapped by their bodies.

He eased one finger into the slickness of her. Felt the jolt of her moan in his balls.

"Touch your breasts," he said between jagged breaths.

She lifted her hands, circled the buds of her nipples with her palms. Closed her fingers around the firm flesh and squeezed them until they pointed right to his mouth.

Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes glazed with desire.

He grasped her hip with one hand as he worked his finger up and down the cleft between her thighs.

The sunlight glinted off her hair. He thrust against her through their clothes, past his own hand. The movement urgent. Her hands moved down her abdomen, clasped his wrist, and she rode his arm.

Fire ignited in his groin.

She lifted away from him, just enough for him to yank down her bikinis, giving his hand more room and exposing a triangle of dark hair. He plunged a finger into her and she shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"No. I want you out of your clothes." She eased his hand from her swimsuit, pushed back on her knees, and grabbed the waistband of his shorts.

He raised his hips. She lifted the shorts over his erection and tugged them down his thighs. Stopped long enough to close her fingers around his cock, then pulled on his shorts. The fabric was wet and it rolled up around his thighs. She laughed and started working them down his legs, until they were a tight roll at his ankles.

"I hope you won't have to get into those in a hurry." Her bikini bottoms slid effortlessly down her legs to the blanket.

He pulled her down then and rolled them over so that he was on top. He lifted her knees, pushed them apart, and dove between them, licking and circling and sucking until her body jerked frantically beneath his mouth.

He crawled up the length of her, patted the blanket until he found a condom. A second later he lowered his body onto hers. "Am I too heavy?"

She shook her head and wrapped her legs around his thighs. He shifted to one elbow, grabbed her thigh, and lifted her leg until it was around his waist. He pressed against her, until just the tip of his erection was embedded inside her. Slowly, he pushed farther in, opening her with his fingers and watching

pushed farther in, opening her with his fingers and watching her eyes. He shifted his position so he could get deeper, grazing her pelvis with each thrust.

He began to push rhythmically into her, while her nails scored his back. She screamed when she came. The sound echoed through the hills as her climax pulsed around him.

He followed a second later, pumping into her as if he was giving her his very life. Then he collapsed to the side, holding on to her hip so that they were still connected.

Andy peeked at Dillon through half-closed lids. His eyes were closed. He looked asleep, but she knew he wasn't, because he was playing with the end of her braid.

The hills were alive with the sound of her orgasm, but Dillon hadn't made any noise at all. Just cut back each breath as he pumped into her. He'd done that the night in the shower. She'd thought it was because he didn't want them to get caught. But maybe he just didn't want to give too much of himself away. Which was sad. He had so much to give.

She wouldn't think about what that might mean. It was

enough to just lie there, sandwiched between the hard rock and Dillon's hard body. It was everything that her fantasy had promised—and more.

He'd set off a desire in her that she didn't think could ever be sated. It was frightening, as well as exhilarating. Who needed an eternal orgasm when she had this.

Which was not a good way to think. It would end and she'd go on to the next movie, and he would go on to the next whatever. No sense in getting attached. Someone would be yelling, "Cut!" soon enough.

Chapter 12

They lay stretched out on the blanket, Andy curled into Dillon's side, his thigh draped over her hip. He wound a strand of her hair around his finger, unwound it, curled it up again. She ran the tips of her fingers over his skin, making him shiver.

But when her fingers traveled down his back and touched the rough texture of his scar, she felt him tense.

"Where did you get this?" she asked lazily.

He didn't answer. She played along the ridge of roughened flesh until he finally mumbled into her mouth, "Fell off my bike." He kissed her, kissed her jaw, then the soft skin beneath her chin.

You didn't get that riding a bike, she thought, though why she was thinking about bikes when his lips were doing what they were doing was beyond her. "I have one, too."

He stopped kissing her. "What?"

"A scar." She took his hand and ran it along the crease in her thigh, where a sliver of glass had slipped beneath her harness as she flew through a plate-glass window. It had barely missed an artery. "Fell out of my Barbie mobile."

She felt his breath on her chest and wondered if that was a laugh. He didn't laugh much. Well, she didn't either. Not lately.

"This was a good idea," he said, his words muffled by the breast he was teasing.

"Comparing scars?"

He looked up at her. "Coming to the lake for a picnic." He sat up. "Shit. You must be starving. I forgot about lunch. I made sandwiches."

She *was* starving. For him. For love. For walking off into the sunset and living happily ever after. "A sandwich would be nice."

He reached over her and snagged the handle of the lunch bag. Unzipped it and pulled out a sandwich wrapped in plastic wrap. He dropped it on her stomach. Reached in again and grabbed another for himself.

Next came two apples and a bunch of bananas, then two bottles of beer. He twisted off the top of one and handed it to her.

"Deluxe," she said and sat up cross-legged on the blanket.

He opened the second beer. "It's okay?"

"Good," she said around a mouthful of turkey, cheese, and lettuce. "And very thoughtful."

Dillon shrugged.

Not comfortable with compliments, she thought.

He took a bite of his own sandwich, followed it with a swig of beer. They are without speaking for a few minutes.

This would be a good time to tell him the truth, thought Andy. No bad guy could make love like that. And he certainly wouldn't make her sandwiches. She had to take the chance. She wasn't any nearer to finding Mac than she had been the day she arrived at Terra Bliss. Maybe he could help her. "Dillon."

"Ariadne," he said at the same time. "Sorry."

"You go first," Andy said quickly.

"You're really athletic."

Not that line of questioning again. Not now. She sighed. "Like I said—"

"You have to be in your business."

Preemptive strike time. "So are you."

He glanced down at the scar on his knee. "Used to be at any rate."

Andy had to stifle a sigh of relief. She'd sidetracked him.

"Find yourself having to break into many buildings?"

Jesus, the man was tenacious. Overdeveloped curiosity? Or was there another reason? The sandwich was suddenly very hard to swallow. Please don't let him be pumping me for information. Please don't let him be one of the bad guys. If there were even bad guys and this wasn't some fabrication by her overimaginative family.

"Not often, but it happens."

"Hmmm. What did you expect to find?"

"I told you. I want a story."

"The kind of story you couldn't write by just asking questions."

"Right."

"And did you find anything?"

She widened her eyes at him. "I'm a reporter. I'll never tell." She saw his eyes harden. "Well, if you must know. No, I didn't find anything."

He took another drink of beer. "What did you expect to find?"

"Jeez, Dillon. I don't know. Dirt. Gossip. Something that would help—" She shut her mouth. *Don't get exasperated*. She'd almost slipped up. She crushed the plastic wrap into a ball and tossed it into the lunch bag. He'd brought her here to pump her for information. She should have guessed.

"We'd better get back." She started to stand up.

He pulled her back down. "Would help what?"

He hadn't let go of her arm. She tried to pull away, but his fingers were like a vise, not tight, just immovable. Her adrenaline kicked in, because she was suddenly afraid.

He was strong. If she told him the truth, he might inform on her. Hell, he might inform on her anyway. If he was one of them, he might even do something terrible to her. Like make her disappear like Mac. She studied his face while he studied her. Two immovable forces. Which was the stronger? Could she take him if he tried to kill her?

Kill her? She was getting as bad as her whacky family. He was her slave. A paid boy toy.

Yeah and look what happened to O. J. when the pool boy testified. But O.J. got off. She could end up at the bottom of this beautiful lake. Maybe she should call a halt to this fling now. Before it went any farther.

Dillon watched Ariadne's face shut down. Did she know that her expressions changed with every feeling? It must be difficult being an investigative reporter if she couldn't mask what she was thinking. And he knew what she was thinking. She wanted him, but she didn't want to talk about her work.

He needed to know if she was being straight with him. If she was basing her story on the Southwaite woman, she might stumble onto the murder conspiracy—and he was pretty sure there was one—and she could be in danger.

And her questions about the Houston woman. Was she trying to make some connection between them or was she just poking around to see if anything came to light?

"Ariadne."

She jumped. "What?"

She looked so apprehensive that Dillon could almost believe she was afraid of him. How could she change so quickly from lover to this wary stranger. Did she have something to hide?

And it hit Dillon that he was sick of mistrusting people. Maybe that was why he'd succumbed to Isabelle's seduction. He wanted to believe that somebody loved him, for himself. And that had gotten him into a lot of trouble. His brother's sporting goods store was looking better and better.

But first he had to finish this assignment, even if he had to hurt Ariadne to do it.

"I guess we'd better be getting back," she said, so sadly that he looked up.

144 Gemma Bruce

The apples he'd packed were lying on the blanket in front of her. She was holding a banana in her hand, her fingers curled lightly around it.

He felt the immediate response in his groin. "We haven't finished lunch."

She smiled, but there was hurt in her eyes. Then she saw him looking at the banana, and the smile changed. "Do you know what the retreat uses these for?"

"I've heard. Don't worry. These are virgin bananas."

Her smile was genuine now, and Dillon couldn't believe the way it made him feel.

"Shall we initiate it into the ways of the world?"

He watched, mesmerized, as she slid her hand down the curving fruit. Turned it in her palm and slowly pulled back the peel. She put it to her lips, and Dillon saw a pink flash of tongue before she sucked in the tip.

There was no hiding his reaction to that deliberately seductive movement. They were both still naked, and his erection lengthened and hardened as she pulled the banana out of her mouth.

She was playing with him. Whether to distract him or because she couldn't get enough of him, he wasn't sure. And at the moment he didn't care.

He moved toward her. She tossed the banana away and they tumbled back onto the blanket. He gazed down at her. Her eyes were smoky with desire, and for the moment nothing mattered in the world but her. Long tresses of dark auburn hair spilled across the blanket, creating a flaming aureole around her face. She was a sea creature, a mermaid, a silkie, mysterious and seductive. And he wanted her.

He slid down her body leaving a wet trail with his tongue. He wanted to taste her, now, before he had to return to rational thought. She might be a reporter; she might be something else altogether. But whatever she was, he wanted her.

He lifted her knees, pushed her ankles apart, opening her

thighs. He looked his fill before he touched, before he tasted, before he satisfied them both.

He lowered his head, licked at the crease between her legs, parting the folds of her already wet body with his tongue. Her hips lifted into his exploration. She was ready, swollen and musky. He sucked her and she gasped, speared her fingers through his hair. He circled his tongue around her, sucked again, felt her whole body grow tense.

"Too soon," she rasped. She pushed his head away.

He rolled to his back. There was something hard under his shoulder. He shifted to the side and one of the apples rolled away.

She laughed. A throaty sound that drew him inexorably to her. She traced her fingers lightly down his chest. He broke out in gooseflesh.

"Cold?" she whispered, as her fingers tickled his chest, his nipples, his abdomen.

He shook his head. It was all he could manage. She leaned over and kissed his navel, followed the kiss with a thrust of her tongue.

He lifted his pelvis, needing the touch of her on his dick, but she curved away with a smile. "Not yet." Her fingers tickled his sides, his butt, his thighs. Her hair spread across his stomach, so the flick of her tongue along the slit of his cock came without warning. He nearly bucked her off.

"Hmmm," she murmured and swiped at him again.

If she kept that up, he'd come before she got her mouth fully around him. She brushed a length of hair out of her face and glanced up at him. She licked her lips, slowly like a cat. Her lips parted, and she sucked the head of his penis into her mouth. He lay mesmerized by the movements of her head as her tongue caressed him and her lips created an almost unbearable suction around him. He let his knees rotate outward, giving her more space.

She pulled off him. He barely had time to feel disappoint-

ment, before her tongue rasped over his balls. He reared up, the sensitivity there almost painful. She pushed his knees farther apart until he was spread-eagle below her. She nibbled his scrotum, then lapped up the ridge of his erection, while her fingers played with his balls.

He bit his bottom lip and let her have her way until he knew he would come if she didn't stop. He pushed her away. She sat back on her knees.

"Come here," he said hoarsely. "I need to be inside you now. I can't wait." He stretched out his hand.

She shook her head. "We need to slow down. Make it last." She cupped her hand over her crotch and squeezed her thighs together as if she could curb her excitement.

He gritted his teeth and looked out to the trees, trying to slow his own reaction.

"Okay, time's up." She crawled toward him. Lay down between his legs. The blanket was warm beneath him, heated by the sun. Ariadne lay warm on top of him, heated by their desire.

She lifted her butt, while he opened the second condom and fitted himself to her. He surged upward, and she sank down onto him. They both groaned, but neither moved, held for the moment as if in eternity. Then he began to thrust inside her.

It wasn't slow. It was fast, almost brutal. He tried to slow the pace, but she squeezed her thighs together, tightening her hold on his dick.

"Oh, God," he moaned and raced to the finish, holding on to her sweet ass as she matched his thrusts with her own. She shattered first, and he stilled inside her, reveling in the constriction of her muscles around him. When they began to subside, he thrust again and kept thrusting until she clenched again. This time when she came, he followed her over.

They lay there for a long time, Ariadne asleep, her head lying on his shoulder. His cheek resting on her hair. He thought he could stay there forever, but the sun was setting behind the mountains, and Ariadne shivered against him. He yanked at the corner of the blanket and wrapped it over her as far as it would reach. He glanced at his watch, which he still seemed to be wearing.

It was almost time to get back, and there was still something he needed to do. He gently eased Ariadne aside, covered her more completely with the blanket, and pulled on his damp shorts. Then he reached into the thermal bag, unzipped an inner compartment, and pulled out his cell phone.

They were supposed to have set up a relay by now. Hopefully he'd be able to get a message through. Keeping the phone hidden in his palm, he glanced over at Ariadne, then walked into the trees.

There was a signal. He quickly texted a message and flipped the phone shut.

Ariadne was still sleeping when he returned. He replaced the phone inside the zippered pocket and knelt beside her.

He leaned over. Kissed her lightly, quickly. "I'm sorry," he said, then gently shook her awake.

Chapter 13

Dillon dropped Ariadne off at her cabin and hurried toward the dorm. He was late, he was stunned, he was physically satisfied like he couldn't remember ever being.

And then he saw the group of men gathered just outside the dorm door. Rusty and Demetri stood apart from the others, and even from this distance, Dillon could tell they were arguing. He came back to reality with a thud.

He quickened his pace. Demetri was a typical bully. Lots of muscle and the need to prove it. He was shorter than Rusty, but outweighed him by a good fifty pounds. If there was a fight, there was no question who would win. Especially, since he was certain Demetri wouldn't fight fair.

He was fifty feet away, when Demetri shouted, "You little stool pigeon. I'll teach you not to mess with me." He punched Rusty in the stomach. Rusty doubled over, and Demetri's fist caught him in the nose. Rusty's head snapped back. Blood spurted into the air and Rusty fell to his knees.

"Hey, cut it out," yelled Dillon, breaking into a run.

Demetri grabbed Rusty by the shirt and hauled him to his feet. He managed to get another punch off before Dillon reached them. Rusty crumpled to the ground and stayed there.

Dillon grabbed Demetri by the shoulder. "I said—"

Demetri rounded on him, swinging. Dillon ducked. The mo-

mentum of the punch carried Demetri forward, and Dillon helped him along with a well-placed push.

Demetri staggered, fell to one knee, then hauled himself up. He turned to face Dillon, his fists clenched, his neck bulging with anger. He lunged.

Dillon hopped out of the way and Demetri fell to his face. A cheer rose from the group.

Demetri pushed to his hands and knees. Shook his head, then lurched to his feet.

"Don't do it," said Dillon, his voice calm.

This time Demetri was more cautious, circling him like a drunken prizefighter.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dillon saw JoJo running across the lawn. Now there'd be hell to pay. So much for keeping a low profile.

"Watch out," cried someone in the group, just as Demetri growled and threw himself at Dillon.

Dillon had no time to dodge. He brought up his forearm to block the attack. It caught Demetri under the chin. Dillon automatically followed it with a back fist to the eye. Demetri staggered back and sat down on the grass, just as JoJo arrived.

"Stop. Both of you. You know the rules about fighting."

Dillon knew them. Immediate dismissal. He was fucked.

"It's not Dillon's fault," slurred Rusty. He was being held up by two of the men. The front of his T-shirt was covered with blood. It trickled down his lip and chin and dropped on the ground at his feet.

JoJo's head snapped toward him. He winced. "Good God. Somebody take him inside and get some ice on his face." He turned back to Dillon. "What the hell's going on?"

Everyone started talking at once. JoJo threw up his hands. "I'm asking Dillon. I'll hear from the rest of you later. Go inside. Now."

Demetri got to his feet. He was looking murderous in spite

of the hand cradling his jaw where Dillon had clipped him, and the rapidly reddening area around his eye.

JoJo heaved a disgusted sigh. "It's strike three for you, Demetri. You might as well start packing."

Demetri snorted. "You can't fire me. Only Katherine Dane can. And she won't."

"We'll see about that," said JoJo. "Now, go get cleaned up for dinner."

Demetri started toward the door, deliberately knocking into Dillon's shoulder as he passed by. "You're dead, asshole."

JoJo jabbed his finger in Demetri's direction. "If I catch you hitting anybody, even a friendly pat on the ass, I'll call the Tahoe PD."

"Yeah, right." Demetri yanked the door open and went inside.

"Want to tell me what happened?" asked JoJo as soon as the door closed behind Demetri.

"I was coming across the lawn and saw Demetri throw the first punch. I just stepped in to keep Rusty from getting the shit beaten out of him."

"Know what started it?"

"No. But Demetri called him a stool pigeon."

JoJo nodded. "Someone reported him for taking presents from his goddess."

"That must have been it," said Dillon.

"Yeah, but it was inevitable. Those two have been oil and water since the first day they got here. I won't say I'm sorry to see the back of Demetri, but Rusty was a good worker, always polite, and the women love him."

"He'll be dismissed, too? Demetri started the fight. Rusty never even got a shot off. There're witnesses."

"Then he should be okay."

"And me? I did get a punch off."

"You? I just saw you trying to fend him off. I'll have to report the incident to Ms. Dane. And like Demetri said, she has the final word. But I wouldn't worry. Rusty was attacked, you

interceded. All the fighting was on one side. And I'll make sure Katherine knows it. Now, I'd better go see about Rusty."

He paused at the door. "If I were you, I'd stay away from Demetri until he's gone."

Loubelle and Evelyn were sitting by themselves when Andy sat down at the dining table that night.

"You're looking awfully pretty tonight, Ariadne," said Evelyn, putting down her wineglass. "Terra Bliss seems to sit well with you."

Andy smiled slightly. She'd left off the pale makeup and was wearing her hair in the single braid, but tonight she let more tendrils fly loose around her face. But she felt disoriented. Off balance from the lightning changes of Dillon's mood. And she was feeling guilty for not putting all her energy into finding Mac.

"It's the glasses," said Loubelle. "But, honey, can you see all right?"

"They got broken," said Andy. "I can see. It's just that everything's a little fuzzy. And I have my dark glasses if I have to read something."

"Well, if you need any help with anything, just ask," said Evelyn.

"Thanks."

Dillon appeared at her elbow and poured her a glass of wine. He didn't look at her and she didn't look at him, but she felt the heat rise to her cheeks. She just hoped it wasn't noticeable.

The other two women lifted their glasses in a toast. "Here's to us, and to Ariadne's first Spa Day at Terra Bliss," said Evelyn. They clinked glasses.

Andy noticed that Jeannie's glass was filled, but untouched. "Where's Jeannie?"

"Fussing over Demetri." Loubelle pointed across the room.

"Oh, my God," said Andy. "He has a black eye."

"Big as you please. Jeannie's administering TLC."

"And finding out every detail of how he got it, if I know our Jeannie," added Evelyn.

"How did he get it?"

"Probably walked into a door."

"Oh, Evelyn," Loubelle tittered. "He isn't the brightest. But don't tell Jeannie I said that."

"Ah, here she comes," said Evelyn and took a sip of wine.

Jeannie was coming all right, and she was in a fury. She marched up to the table, sat down, and snapped her napkin across her lap.

"I am mad as hops, and it's all your slave's fault." She took a healthy gulp of wine and scowled at Andy.

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours."

"Dillon?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"He didn't say anything about it to me."

"Well, he wouldn't, would he? He attacked my poor darling. They should throw his carcass out the front gates with only the clothes on his back."

"They were fighting? I'm sure there must be some mistake. When did this happen?"

"This afternoon, just a couple of hours ago."

"But he—" Andy couldn't very well tell them she'd been having raunchy sex with him all afternoon. She shrugged. "I can't believe he would do such a thing." Though she had no doubt that he was capable of it.

Jeannie's head jerked toward Loubelle. "And it's all because of your slave," she said. "I'm so mad I could spit."

"What does Rusty have to do with it?" asked Loubelle. "Don't tell me, he helped Dillon give Demetri that black eye."

Andy bit back a smile. It was the first time she'd seen Loubelle be anything other than sweet. There was definitely a glint of challenge in her usually mild blue eyes. "And where is Rusty? I hope he hasn't been hurt."

"I'm sure he had nothing to do with it," said Evelyn. "He probably pulled another assignment tonight."

"He did too have something to do with it," snapped Jeannie. "He started the whole thing."

"I thought you said Dillon started it."

"Well. Rusty started it, but Dillon did the hitting. And now they'll all be fired. Terra Bliss has very strict rules. Two slaves had to leave in the middle of last session just for arguing in front of the attendees." Jeannie clamped her mouth shut as Louis came up with the salad tray.

He leaned over Evelyn and set a plate before her, giving her a friendly smile.

She smiled back. "And were you a part of the fight this afternoon?"

"Not me. But I was tempted. Fortunately Dillon interceded. And it was a good thing he did. Demetri would have beaten Rusty to a pulp."

Loubelle gasped. "Is he hurt?"

"Just—" He looked over their heads and said hurriedly, "I'm not supposed to talk about it." He set down the rest of the plates and left just as JoJo reached their table.

"Good evening, ladies. I came by to remind you that there will be a special presentation tonight after dinner. Dr. Bliss will speak on Jump-starting the New You."

They murmured politely and JoJo moved on to the next table.

"Well, he nipped that quite nicely, didn't he?" said Evelyn. "Now, what do you say to Louis's version of the affair, Jeannie?"

"I think it's a conspiracy. They're all jealous of Demetri." Jeannie reached for the wine bottle. It was empty. "Damn." She put the bottle down, reached into her bag, and pulled out another. She raised her hand to summon someone to open it, then pulled it back.

"Ariadne, will you please ask your slave to open this wine?" "Now, Jeannie," said Evelyn. "Don't take it out on Ariadne.

It isn't her fault that Dillon and Demetri are on the outs." She caught Dillon's attention and nodded him over.

"The outs? *The outs*? You should see Demetri's face. It's a miracle that his nose isn't broken."

Dillon stepped up to the table and efficiently uncorked the bottle. He poured a half inch for Jeannie to taste.

"Just pour," she said through clenched teeth.

He filled each glass and walked away, just as Demetri approached with the tray of dinner plates.

He set the tray down on the dumbwaiter and glowered at the table. With Rusty absent, no one had thought to remove the salad plates. Dillon suddenly reappeared and quickly whisked them away. Neither man looked at the other, but the tension was almost visible between them.

They were all uncomfortably silent as Demetri served plates of steaming medallions of beef swimming in sauce. Except for Jeannie, who fretted and fawned over him until Andy was ready to smack her. She was pretty sure that his side of the story had left out a good deal of what actually had happened.

As soon as he left, Jeannie lapsed into brooding silence, darting evil looks at Dillon whenever she got the chance, and barely eating any of her food.

Loubelle and Evelyn tried to take up the slack by telling Andy about the lecture Dr. Bliss would be giving that evening.

"I heard it last year," said Evelyn, "but she is such a forceful speaker, I think I'll go again. The topic is so interesting. Particularly for people with very low self-esteem." She was careful not to look directly at Andy, but Andy knew what she was thinking.

"She's developed a variety of techniques for breaking down old expectations and opening your life to new experiences. She combines biofeedback, meditation, prayer, hypnotism, and several therapies that I can't remember."

"Hypnotism?"

"It's used as an aid for breaking bad habits, like smoking

and overeating, as well as psychological problems. Poor self-esteem is a bad habit."

"It may be," said Loubelle, "but I don't think hopping around like a rabbit or howling like a dog would do anything to enhance my self-esteem."

Evelyn smiled. "Really, Loubelle, those things only happen on television. You can't make a person do anything under hypnotism that they wouldn't do under ordinary circumstances, though I can't speak from experience, never having been hypnotized myself."

"Well, I'm not going to try it," said Loubelle. "I feel perfectly fine with the way I am. What about you, Ariadne?"

Andy shook her head. "Not me."

"I doubt if any of us would qualify," said Evelyn. "I believe she only recommends it to women who are blocked by their own sexuality." She smiled at Loubelle. "And it doesn't make them nymphomaniacs—"

"Perish the thought," said Loubelle, growing pink.

It was odd listening to Evelyn and Loubelle talk about sexuality and nymphomaniacs. Jeannie was the only one of the three that seemed to want more from her slave than just friendly attention.

"Do you mind if I ask?" said Andy. "Why do you come to Terra Bliss?"

"Well," said Loubelle. "The first time, I came with a friend who was too embarrassed to come by herself. I don't really know why I keep returning, except that I enjoy the company. It's sort of an extended girls' night out."

"A time to rejuvenate," added Evelyn. "I'm not looking to flirt my way anywhere, but I enjoy the camaraderie of other women who are attempting to expand their horizons. It's inspirational."

Jeannie snorted. "Camaraderie—girls' night out—We're here for one reason." She pushed her chair back and stood up. "Because we're getting old." Her voice caught on a sob. She

grabbed her bag, squeezed past Loubelle, and was at a run by the time she reached the door.

"Oh, dear," said Loubelle. "Should one of us go after her?" Evelyn shook her head. "Just give her some space. She's volatile, but it won't last. She'll come around on her own, and act like it never happened."

"I really can't believe that Dillon started a fight with Demetri," said Andy, looking around. "Maybe we should ask him."

"You can ask him later. I think the less said at this point, the better."

Andy knew Evelyn was right. She'd seen people at nearby tables sneaking peeks at Demetri and whispering.

When Dillon returned to serve dessert, Andy said quietly, "I want to talk to you."

He leaned over to place a plate of shortcake and peaches before her. "I'm really busy tonight."

Andy felt as though she'd been slapped. Was he giving her the brush-off again? What was with him? "About the fight," she said.

Dillon sighed. "All right. Meet me out front after tonight's talk." And he was gone.

She suddenly didn't feel much like dessert and was relieved when after a few minutes, Loubelle and Evelyn said they were ready to leave.

They had just walked into the hallway when Andy heard someone calling her name. Katherine Dane came down the stairway, waving her hand. She was dressed in another off-white pantsuit that complemented her slim figure and contrasted with her straight dark hair.

"Ariadne. I'm so glad I caught you. A moment, please."

Loubelle and Evelyn promised to save her a seat and went into the auditorium.

Andy waited, wondering what the business manager could possibly want with her. Unless Galena's check had bounced or Dillon had ratted her out after all. She put a smile on her lips and waited until Ms. Dane caught up with her.

"How are you enjoying the retreat so far?"

"Fine," said Andy. "Very nice."

"Good. I was surprised to see you in class this morning. I had no idea that you were interested in meditation."

"Well, sure." She couldn't very well tell her that it put her to sleep.

"The reason I stopped you is that I'm beginning my special morning meditation group tomorrow. I'd like you to participate in it."

Andy blinked. "Thank you, Ms. Dane, but I thought it was only for a select group."

"Katherine, please."

"Katherine," said Andy.

"It is. We only accept six or seven people per session, but Dr. Bliss and I were discussing it yesterday, and we both agreed that you could benefit from the experience." Katherine smiled, pleasant but not warm. "It meets at six A.M. every morning. A little early, but an exhilarating way to start the day. What do you say? Can I count you in?"

Andy couldn't really say no after that buildup. So much for her morning swim. And after the way Dillon had acted at dinner, it didn't look as if she'd be sleeping late with him.

"Well ..."

"You'll be amazed at how meditation can jump-start you on your way to self-fulfillment."

I'd rather be jump-started by my slave, thought Andy, but she couldn't very well turn the woman down. She seemed so eager to have her in the group. And besides, the information in Mac's file had said that she'd also been one of the chosen few. Maybe she could learn more from participating. At least if she tried to reenact Mac's activities, she might discover why she'd left in such a hurry.

Come to think of it, Imogene Southwaite had also taken the

class. Though during a different session. Probably a coincidence, but it was somewhere to start.

"I'd love to."

"Good. Wear something comfortable. Six o'clock in the Spa. See you first thing tomorrow morning." Katherine walked briskly down the hall, hailing one of the high priestesses who was just coming in the front entrance.

The auditorium was packed as Andy guessed it would be. Dr. Bliss, who seemed to be the only person in Terra Bliss not called by her first name, always drew the largest crowds. Andy found Evelyn and Loubelle and sat down. There was an empty seat on the other side of Evelyn.

"Still no Jeannie?"

Evelyn shook her head. The lights began to dim, and there was a last minute scurry of latecomers rushing to find a seat.

Dr. Bliss walked to the podium and enthusiastic applause broke out. As always, she was regally attired, tonight in silk hostess pants and tunic. A heavy gold necklace circled her neck. Gold bangles tinkled on her wrists as she moved to adjust the microphone.

"Jump-starting the New You."

They were very into jump-starting everything, thought Ariadne as she watched the light sparkle off the doctor's earings. She knew she should be listening. There were some serious things that she'd been meaning to change in her life. Starting with men. But from the moment the lights dimmed and Dr. Bliss walked onto the stage, she found herself watching the doctor instead of listening to her advice. And when the house lights came back on, Andy was only vaguely aware of what Dr. Bliss had said.

Evelyn and Loubelle decided to go look for Jeannie and left Andy to go in search of Dillon.

He was sitting on the steps outside the Pantheon and looking grim. Andy hoped she wasn't the cause.

He stood up, and they walked in silence until they came to a

bench and Dillon gestured for her to sit down. He sat down beside her. Andy tried not to think about how close he was and what it was doing to her—that little tingle that started low and began to build just from being near him. She scooted away so that she could see his face.

"Did you instigate a fight with Demetri?"

"What do you think?"

"No. Anyone caught fighting is dismissed. The girls told me. I can't see you losing your temper and jeopardizing everyone's job."

"I didn't lose my temper."

"So . . . "

"You're beautiful in the moonlight," he said and brushed a strand of hair out of her face.

A tingle of desire rushed through her; she tried to ignore it. "What happened?"

"There's really not much to tell. After I left you this afternoon..." He ran his finger over the curve of her cheek. "I came across Rusty and Demetri having an argument outside the dorm. Demetri sucker punched him and was about to beat him senseless, so I intervened." His finger left her cheek, traced her lips, her chin.

He was going to drive her nuts. "So you did give him that black eye?"

Dillon shifted closer to her. "I didn't hit him. He lunged at me and I reacted. He ran straight into my arm. Forget Demetri." He slipped an arm around her, lifted her onto his lap.

"You blocked his attack, then back fisted him."

He nuzzled her neck. "That's what I said." Nibbled her earlobe. He pulled back to look at her. "Is this going in your exposé?"

Andy was confused for a moment; then she remembered. Right, she was a reporter. "It might. But I won't use anyone's real name."

"I guess I'm grateful for that."

"So what was the fight about?"

"It seems someone snitched on Demetri for taking gifts from his goddess. Demetri accused Rusty. And, as they say, the rest is history."

"Is Rusty okay?"

"They took him to the infirmary. His face is messed up, but he'll do. JoJo gave him the night off."

"Are you all going to be fired?"

"I don't think so. There were plenty of witnesses. We'll just have to wait and see."

"I'd hate it if you had to leave."

He smiled at her. A brief flash of white in the darkness. "Not nearly as much fun investigating without the perks of a slave, huh?"

"Not nearly."

He angled his head to kiss her. "Unfortunately, you're going to have to hold that thought. I need to get back to the dorm. I told JoJo I'd keep an eye on things. Make sure there are no further confrontations until Demetri is history. Sorry."

"That's okay. I admire a man who takes responsibility. Besides, Katherine Dane just asked me to join her meditation group. It meets at six o'clock."

"During dinner?"

"Before breakfast."

Dillon groaned. "So much for your morning swim. Come on, I'll walk you back to your cabin."

Chapter 14

The first thing Dillon heard when he returned to the dorm was Demetri's voice coming through the open door of the canteen. Great. The asshole was holding court. From boy toy to babysitter. Life just kept getting better.

With a sigh, he strode down the hall and stepped into the canteen.

There was a sudden lull in the conversation.

Demetri was sitting with one hip on the table, holding a beer can in an arrested gesture. Louis and two other guys were sitting on the couch across from him. They glanced up at Dillon, then looked away. He didn't care. At least Rusty wasn't among them.

He walked across the room to the fridge and pulled out a beer. He popped the top and threw the tab in the trash without ever once looking in Demetri's direction.

But he felt Demetri checking him out before he turned his attention back to the others. "Yeah. Well. I won't be the one fired tomorrow. You can bet your sweet asses on that one." His voice was self-assured, filled with bravado.

"If you think it's gonna be Rusty, then you're full of shit," said Louis.

Dillon sauntered toward one of the empty chairs.

"And it won't be Dillon," said Louis. "There were witnesses. They'll tell what really happened."

"Big deal." Demetri drained his beer can and tossed it toward the recycling bin, just as Dillon walked past him. It missed his chest by inches. He didn't flinch, just continued to the chair and sat down.

"Yeah, it is a big deal," said Louis. "I've been here four summers and I've seen it all. I know who'll be here when the dust clears, and it won't be you."

Demetri smirked at him and popped the top off another beer. There were two unopened cans sitting on the table beside him. Dillon wondered how many he'd already drunk.

Demetri pointed the new can at Louis. "Listen, punk, nothing's gonna happen to me. I know things."

Dillon stretched back in his chair and yawned.

Demetri bristled.

"You're so full of shit." Louis sat forward on the couch, his knuckles white where he held his beer can.

"What things?" asked the guy sitting on Louis's right. He was one of the newbies. His eyes were round with curiosity.

"Like how they've managed to become a multibillion-dollar enterprise in such a short time." Demetri held the kid's eyes for a second.

And the kid played right into his hand. "How did they?"

Good. Dillon would love to hear what he had to say.

"They're successful because of good management and Dr. Bliss's charisma," interrupted Louis. "It's no secret. Women want validation, and she gets them to think differently about themselves, to see themselves as empowered."

Demetri snorted. "Yeah, by castrating men, the bitch. We're not called slaves for nothing."

"She doesn't call us slaves. Just the women that have been here before. We even call ourselves 'slaves.' It doesn't mean anything. It's just a joke."

"It's no joke."

Louis rolled his eyes and flopped back on the couch. "It is to anybody but a Neanderthal."

Demetri smirked and flopped his wrist at Louis. "Yeah. To pretty boys like you and Rusty."

Louis jumped to his feet. "I like women. I love women. They don't have to be a threat."

But often are, thought Dillon, real threats. He willed Louis to sit back down. He did.

"Yeah, well, while you're flitting around waiting on your old bag, the bosses are doing more than opening up her potential."

Louis jerked forward. Dillon stopped him with a look.

The two newbies were staring. Their heads had been shifting between the two men like spectators at a Ping-Pong tournament. In the momentary lull, one of them said, "Like what?"

Demetri shrugged and looked sly.

Louis made a disgusted sound and got up to get another beer.

Dillon wondered if Demetri was just a bragging Neanderthal, or a Neanderthal that actually knew something questionable about Goddess International practices. And if he did know something, was it something that would help Dillon nail a murderer?

"You don't know anything," retorted Louis, sitting back down with his beer. "You just like to hear the sound of your own voice. And if JoJo finds out about the things you're saying, you won't just be fired; he'll probably kill you."

Demetri slammed down his beer and heaved himself off the table.

Louis flinched involuntarily, and a nasty smile spread across Demetri's face.

Dillon stood up and stepped between them. "I agree with Louis. I don't think you know jack-shit." He waited, silently instructing Demetri to turn his anger on him. Even if the outcome did get him fired.

Demetri swayed back on his feet, the effects of the beer fi-

nally catching up with him. "You're the one that doesn't know jack-shit."

Oh, great, they had stooped to playground theatrics. "So tell me and then I'll know. What do they do that the rest of us don't know about?"

Demetri grabbed the beer can off the table and drained it. He tossed it toward the garbage can. It missed and rolled along the floor. "I'm not telling. But you'll see what I mean when I'm still around tomorrow, and you and Rusty are gone." He snatched the unopened beer from the table and strutted out of the room. "Bye...pretty boys."

"God, I hate him," said Louis. "I swear, if he gets Rusty—or you—kicked out, he'll be sorry."

"Just stay out of his way. People like that have a way of hanging themselves in the end."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm right."

Dillon waited in the hall until Louis went to his room, then crossed the hall to his own. He didn't feel like sleeping—unless he was sleeping with Ariadne. And that was definitely out for the night. Rusty hadn't returned from the infirmary. And Dillon wanted to make sure he went straight to bed.

So he paced the small square, laughing at himself for having gotten into such a ridiculous situation. From covert operative to dorm mother. It just kept getting more absurd. And then there was Ariadne. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, and yet he knew she was lying to him.

With any luck he'd have the preliminary report on her background by tomorrow. And her new meditation class would give him a secure time to retrieve the message. It was going to be a bitch having to crawl over the wall every time he wanted to communicate.

And even if she did check out, he'd still have to decide whether to let her continue her work and risk her stumbling on to the murder conspiracy, or to advise her to get the hell out. If she didn't check out... There were two possibilities. And both were onerous. One, she was another agent. Or two, she was a spy for Goddess International and he might have to take her down with the others.

He hated that scenario worst of all. Because it meant that Goddess International had somehow found out they were being investigated, his cover had been blown, and she was here to bring him down.

And that he couldn't allow.

Dillon heard Rusty come in around two o'clock, waited until he heard his door close, then lay down for a few hours' sleep. But even then he couldn't rest.

His waking mind was filled with questions. Why was Demetri so sure Katherine Dane wouldn't fire him? Which one of them killed Imogene Southwaite? Where was Miranda Houston?

His dreams were filled with Ariadne, and they were no more restful.

He was up at five-thirty. Took a couple of laps around the compound just to keep busy. Twice, he passed security guards making their rounds. They seemed to be upping their patrol of the grounds. Because they'd discovered the break-in? They usually were more discreet.

When he saw Ariadne walking toward the Spa for her meditation group, he veered into the trees, out of view. When the guards passed by again, he started up the fallen tree.

It was a harder climb not having Ariadne waiting at the top, silently urging him upward. Her presence had made it essential for him not to fail. This morning, he was on his own. And though he knew he could do it, he didn't have the same sense of accomplishment as the day before.

Once, his foot slipped and the tree bark left a burning scrape down his calf. His heart lurched, but he pulled himself back to both feet and carefully climbed the rest of the way up.

He hated his infirmity. Before the accident, he could have taken the tree at a run, swung down the other side without thinking. Now he was lucky not to break a few bones in the process. He felt like a lumbering ox getting down the other side and was thankful that Ariadne was not here to see him.

As soon as he hit the ground, he flipped his phone open and began walking uphill, waiting for a signal to appear.

He was nearing the lake when the power surged and a message alert appeared on the blank screen. He opened it. And saw the words he was hoping he wouldn't see. No reporter by name A. M. Still checking. More to follow.

For a moment he couldn't breathe; then nausea settled into his stomach. He read the message again, then snapped the phone shut and shoved it into his pocket.

He walked out to the boulder that overlooked the lake. The water was as smooth as a pane of glass. A window. Slowly he sank down and sat with his arms cradling his knees, looking out over the calm of the water as turmoil built within him. He closed his eyes.

God damn him for the fool that he was. He'd just been taken. Again.

Andy sat in the meditation session thinking about Dillon. Wondering if he was going to be fired. Trying not to think about how she would feel once he was gone.

Maybe she could intercede for him. Katherine seemed to like her.

A better use of her newfound friendship with Katherine would be to talk her into letting her use the phone in the business office. Surely they made exceptions, people had lives to deal with.

The image of the bus ride popped into her head. The flurry of last minute cell calls right before they entered the gates of Terra Bliss. People had been using their cell phones. She'd heard them talking. There was cell reception here. Just not within the walls of the retreat.

She fought down a wave of excitement. Why hadn't she thought to take her cell to the lake? She might already know where Mac was. If she hurried, she could make a quick trip

over the wall between meditation and breakfast. Then maybe she could relax.

A buzz of anticipation made it difficult for her to sit still, but she had to because Katherine was making the rounds of the room and was heading her way.

Andy quickly concentrated on emptying her mind. A hopeless possibility. Katherine whispered something in her ear and continued to the next person. Andy had been too busy pretending to meditate to catch what she said. Probably more stuff about her soul, or enlightenment, or whatever.

Though she should be grateful to Katherine for suggesting she join the group, because maybe in emptying her mind, she'd cleared enough space for the idea about the cell phone to come in.

This meditation stuff might be a good thing after all.

Dillon knew he was going to be late, but he couldn't seem to move. Didn't care to. But he would, because it was his job. He pushed himself to his feet, suddenly feeling incredibly old. He took a last look at the lake, no longer the Eden it had been, but just a lake.

He didn't pay much attention to where he was going. It didn't matter that brambles and branches scratched at his bare arms and legs. He didn't retrace the path that he and Ariadne had used. He didn't want to see it again.

And that turned out to be a good thing, because he would have run right into her as she jogged up the trail.

He shrank back into the underbrush.

Meditation must be over, but why was she here now? She should be sitting over a plate of eggs and toast—and he should be serving her coffee. Well, he'd take the repercussions of that later. Provided he was even here later.

And suddenly he was so angry, he could have choked the life out of her. But he forced himself to stay put. Watched her hurrying up the path, looking neither left nor right, until she was out of sight. And then he followed.

He knew where she was going. And sure enough, she stopped at the lake, climbed out onto the boulder he'd just been sitting on—the same boulder that they'd made love on the day before.

He pushed the thought away. It was obvious she wasn't thinking about it. He watched her pull something out of her sweatshirt. Caught the glint as she opened her cell phone.

He crept closer. He needed to hear that call.

Andy looked out across the lake as she shifted impatiently from foot to foot, waiting for the Sim card to engage. Praying that her phone would pick up a signal. Held her breath until bars started crawling up the side of her screen. Yes! Punched speed dial and sighed with relief when she heard the phone connect.

"Come on, come on," she pled while several rings went by. The phone picked up. "Hi, this is—"

Damn. The machine. As soon as the tape beeped, she said, "Mom, call my cell. Leave me a message if Mac is okay. I can't get to a phone often."

She ended the call. Tried Galena's cell, not that she ever answered it. Same message. Tried again.

"Hello?" said Lucian in his you-got-me-out-of-bed voice.

"Thank God."

"Is that you, Andy? Where are you? Did you find Mac?"

"No. I was hoping you'd heard from her."

"I haven't. But I'm not home. I got a two-week gig on *Lost*. Liz already left for location. I haven't heard from Mom or Betty, though I *am* in the friggin' jungle. They might have tried and not gotten through."

"Same here. No reception. And no one knows what happened to Mac, just that she went to bed one night and was gone the next morning."

"Jesus. What do we do next?"

"I don't know." She suddenly really wanted to go home. "Look. Try to get in touch with Mom or Betty and find out if they've heard from her. I'll try to keep you posted, but I can only receive and make calls outside the retreat. And I have to climb over the wall to do it."

"You make it sound like a prison."

"Something like. But loaded with hunky men."

"Leave it to you. So what are you going to do?"

Andy sighed. "Keep looking, I guess."

"Well, when I left, Mom and Betty were getting ready to come up there and tear the place apart. Just give us the word."

"No," said Andy. "Keep them there."

"Maybe they've hidden her somewhere."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Should we all come up there? Raid the joint. Torture them until they confess?"

Too many movies, thought Andy. "No raids, no torture."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Something glinted in the trees across the lake. A car mirror? A signal? "I have to go. I think I'm being watched."

"That's it. You get out of there."

"No. If I leave the compound, I won't be able to get back in."

"Well, at least be careful."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Andy, this ain't the movies."

For the first time, Andy smiled. "Coming from you."

"Yeah, well, just take care of yourself."

"Will do."

"Knock 'em dead," said Lucian.

"Roger." Andy closed her phone and pushed it into her bra.

I know what I'm doing. Like hell she did. She was dallying with an angry slave, with a shady personality, and falling in deep infatuation with him, while she should be doing something about finding Mac.

She searched the opposite hills for the reflection she'd seen. It was gone. Probably just a car traveling on the dirt road she'd discovered.

All the same, she looked around before she left. Realized where she was standing. She'd made love to Dillon here less than twenty-four hours ago. It had been special. At least it had been for her.

Dillon watched Andy scan the horizon as if she was expecting someone. Then he'd seen the signal. A rendezvous? Or the receiver of the call. And why the hell weren't Talbot's men all over them? *Because*, *stupid*, *he probably sent them*. Sent her.

But what was the shit about a raid? There had never been any plans to raid the retreat. Had something happened since he'd been inside?

Who else would be planning to raid Terra Bliss? The fed's maybe. There was bound to be some money laundering or something going on here. If the various organizations could just start working together instead of guarding their information like starving dogs with a bone . . . but that would never happen.

This was getting more complicated by the minute.

As soon as he was sure she'd returned to camp, he took out his own phone, just in case, but there were no new messages.

He snapped the phone shut and started back to camp. It was time to find out just which side Ariadne McAllister was on.

He climbed back up the tree and was about to spring to the wall, when he saw two security guards step out of the trees. They weren't looking at him, but at the figure in pink sweat clothes, jogging down the path.

Dillon froze in place, watched while one of the guards took out a notebook and jotted something down. Like time, place, identity? The bitch was going to blow this operation to shit. He squatted on the tree branch while sheer rage coursed through him.

As soon as the guards had moved on, he sprang to the wall. Ran down the tree trunk and was on the ground before he realized that he'd accomplished the reverse climb with all the agility of his former self. For all the good it did now.

She'd lied to him. Twice. He'd known pretty quickly that she wasn't the pitiful wallflower she appeared to be. He'd been willing to buy her investigative reporter story, because he liked her and he wanted it to be true. Which was stupid. He obviously had no sense of self-preservation when it came to women.

And his immediate anger at having been duped settled into his belly, smoldering all through the day until late into night, when it turned to a cold, dark stone inside him.

Chapter 15

ordy, I never saw a man so cross in the morning."

Jeannie dug out a wedge of her grapefruit and pointed the spoon at Andy. "You been keeping him up late?"

Andy shook her head. "Not me."

"Didn't think so. A man that's getting it wouldn't be walking around under his own personal storm cloud. The two of you didn't have a fight?" She eyed Andy, then shook her head. "No, I don't suppose you fight with anybody. Maybe you should put yourself out to make him feel better."

Andy frowned at her. "Why? I thought you were mad at him for getting Demetri in trouble."

Jeannie ate the wedge of grapefruit, then waved the empty spoon. "Oh, that was yesterday. I just can't seem to stay mad. Anyway, during Dr. Bliss's talk last night, I had me a little tête à tête with Katherine Dane. I think we understand each other. Nobody's gonna get fired."

"You bribed her?"

"Well, let's just say that we came to an understanding." Evelyn shook her head. "Jeannie, you're shameless." Jeannie looked up, wide-eyed. "Well, I do try."

Dillon sat in Katherine Dane's office along with Demetri, Rusty, and JoJo. She'd just told them that she and Dr. Bliss, who wasn't present, were going to give them all another chance. "But, Katherine," sputtered JoJo. "The rules are clear." Ignoring the fact that Demetri was sitting two feet away from him, JoJo recited a litany of infractions that Demetri had incurred, reminded her of his probationary status, and his poor attitude.

Katherine merely smiled and said something banal about understanding and turning new pages. They were to be given a second chance.

"But Dillon and I didn't even—"

Katherine cut Rusty off with another smile.

Demetri sat back in his chair, relaxed and expressionless. He'd known all along that he wasn't going to be fired. It hadn't been just bragging. He did have something on them.

JoJo looked as if he might bust a blood vessel and left immediately after the decision. Demetri thanked Ms. Dane, then left the room, shooting Dillon and Rusty a sardonic smile.

Dane gave them both pointed looks. "No more trouble." "We didn't—"

"There won't be," said Dillon "Come on, Rusty. We've got to get to the pool for lunch."

He ushered Rusty out of the office. As soon as they were outside, Rusty exploded. "Why does he get away with this stuff? It was almost like she was blaming us."

Dillon shook his head. "Not a clue. But there's nothing you or I, or evidently JoJo, can do about it. Just stay away from him."

"I'd like to kill the fucker."

Dillon sighed. "But you won't."

Rusty frowned at him. "Of course not. I'm just blowing off steam."

"Good. Remember that."

Demetri had already proved he was dangerous. And Dillon thought he might be capable of killing in a rage. It would be better for everyone if he'd been sent packing, but if there was a chance he knew anything about the death of Imogene Southwaite, it would be best to keep him on site. And if he could be linked directly to that death, all the better.

Dillon glanced at his watch. "Look, Rusty. I need a few minutes—to get my head together. Can you cover lunch for me?"

"Sure, but—"

"Thanks. I owe you."

Andy fretted through half of the Make Him Beg For More workshop, but since you had to have a lover before you could make him want more, she ditched the second half and went to find Dillon.

She was dismally unsuccessful. He'd left breakfast early, and he was MIA for lunch. Rusty was there, with a swollen nose and a split lip.

An ache settled in the pit of her stomach. "Do you think he and Demetri were fired after all?"

"Nope," said Jeannie. "See. There he comes now. Yoo-hoo." She fluttered her hand in the air. Andy swiveled around so quickly that she almost upset her water glass.

Relief turned to disappointment. Demetri was sauntering toward their table like he didn't have a care in the world.

He finally reached the table, leaned over, and kissed Jeannie's cheek.

Jeannie beamed. "Everything all right, honey?"

"Just peachy." He grinned back at her.

Andy groaned inwardly. If he'd gotten Dillon fired, she'd personally beat the crap out of him. She might slug him anyway just for the hell of it.

He flicked the tassel of Jeannie's earring. Jeannie practically simpered. Andy felt like throwing up.

Why couldn't Jeannie tell that he was as fake as a snowstorm on a studio lot. Or maybe she could and she just didn't care. It was a sobering thought. And not exactly what goddess training was supposed to be about.

As Dr. Bliss and all the priestesses kept reiterating, it wasn't necessarily about sex, but about empowerment. How could the relationship between Jeannie and Demetri be empowering to anyone but Demetri. He was cleaning up in the "trinkets"

department. Jeannie might even be giving him money. Someone should stop her.

Not your business. Jeannie had Evelyn and Loubelle to give her advice, if she wanted it. Andy had a different mission, and so far she was doing a terrible job. So much for empowerment.

Keeping one ear out for footsteps, Dillon opened the drawer of Demetri's bureau. It was a long shot that he'd find something. More than likely whatever had kept Demetri from being fired was something he knew, not something he had. Still, he had to check.

He searched all the places amateurs usually hid things and found nothing. Went on to the more sophisticated hiding places. But after an extensive search of the room, his trunk, and his storage locker, Dillon had to admit defeat.

It was nearly two o'clock. Lunch would be over in a matter of minutes, and the attendants would come straggling back for their few hours off.

Dillon looked around, making sure he'd left no signs of his search. Then he slipped out of the room.

He'd just about exhausted his avenues of investigation. None of the employee or participant files had yielded anything out of the ordinary. Bliss kept nothing in her office but self-help books, soft furniture, and herbal tea. Hopefully Talbot's computer geeks had hacked into the accounting program, but unless they came up with some startling discrepancies, this investigation was going to go south.

When lunch was over, Andy lingered at the pool, pretending to soak up the sun.

Demetri took one load of dessert plates into the cabana, then hurried away, leaving Rusty and Louis to clean up the rest. They both scowled as they watched him stop to talk to several women who were obviously waiting for him. They left en masse, and Rusty and Louis turned back to their chores.

"I heard what happened yesterday," Andy said. "Are you all right?"

Rusty shrugged. "Yeah. Mainly my pride and my nose just got bruised."

"Both can be really painful," agreed Andy.

The unswollen side of Rusty's mouth quirked upward. "You can say that."

"And they're letting that b—Demetri stay," added Louis. "He must have some kind of hold over them just like he said. Anybody else would be on their way back to Sacramento by now."

Demetri with a hold over Terra Bliss? Interesting. "What kind of hold?"

Louis shot a quick look at Rusty. "Oh, nothing. He just brags sometimes."

They had been told not to discuss the fight. "I've noticed," said Andy and looked expectantly at him. "But it must be more than just bragging if he's still here."

"Who knows," said Rusty. "She let us all stay. Not just Demetri."

"Dillon, too?" asked Andy.

"Sure. He's the one that broke up the fight," said Louis. "Threw a block that any karate master would be proud of. Man, it was beautiful." He shook his head in admiration, then bit his lip. "Sorry, we're not really supposed to talk about stuff like that with you ladies." Louis picked up his tray of dishes and carried it away.

Andy turned her attention to Rusty. "I won't tell." She lowered her voice and said, "I think it's so exciting. Nothing exciting ever happens to me. I mean, Jeannie, Evelyn, and Loubelle were just telling me about a woman who disappeared during the last session. Imagine. Right under everyone's nose. Do you think she was kidnapped?"

"No, of course not," said Rusty. "She just left early. Just because no one saw her leave doesn't mean anything weird hap-

pened." He reached over and awkwardly patted her shoulder. "You don't have anything to worry about."

"Oh, I'm not worried," said Ariadne, making her eyes round. "It's just that I've never been around people who fight and get kidnapped." And by the way, I have this bridge....

"Miranda didn't get kidnapped. So don't let Jeannie fill your head with all sorts of gruesome ideas."

"Oh?" Andy had to force herself not to jump up and grab him. "What did happen to her?"

"She had to leave suddenly. An emergency at home."

"Oh," said Andy. She didn't have to feign her disappointment. There was no emergency at home.

Rusty was frowning, and Andy was afraid he was suspicious of her interest in someone she didn't know.

"How—how did she leave? Did someone pick her up? I don't think I've ever seen anyone but delivery trucks and the landscaping company use the main gate. What happens if you want to—have to—leave suddenly?"

"You're thinking of leaving?" asked Rusty, his expression changing to one of concern.

"No, I just—what if someone has an emergency?"

Rusty finished loading his tray and lifted it to his shoulder. "Then Mr. Bliss drives them down to the bus station in Lake Tahoe, but that doesn't happen too often. And if there's a medical emergency, there's the MedEvac helicopter. So there's no reason to worry about not being able to get away if you really need to."

"That makes me feel better. Thanks."

Andy watched him walk away. He and Louis hadn't given her much additional information to what she already knew. Mac obviously hadn't had anyone pick her up. And no one had heard a helicopter take off during the night. So she must have climbed out over the wall. But why? And where did she go?

Andy waited a few more minutes before she got up to leave.

The pool had emptied out except for a few die-hard sun worshippers. Dillon still hadn't made an appearance. He hadn't been fired, so where the hell was he?

And why did she care. It was nothing more than major attraction and a little infatuation. At least on her side. Maybe Dillon had just been doing his job.

Dillon saw Ariadne come out of the pool area and was hit with a stab of familiarity so strong that his breath caught. Not just of recognition, or even of anger, but a sense of connection, and he was shocked to realize, completion. It wasn't just about the sex, which was damn good in itself, but something more. He knew it, and he hated feeling it. Because she was a liar and God knew what else.

He'd already jeopardized one mission because of a woman. Granted, she'd been a consummate agent, as alluring as she was deadly. His job was to seduce her, then lure her into his agency's waiting arms. He thought it had been going as planned, but she was also casting a spell over him. And by the time he figured out what was happening, he was drugged and being hoisted out of a helicopter.

He'd miraculously survived, but part of him had died. The part that trusted himself. The part that trusted other people. And in that respect, she continued to weave her vicious web around him.

He swore he'd never be entrapped again. And here was Ariadne, beautiful, generous, and lying through her teeth.

She saw him, hesitated, then began to walk toward him. His pulse kicked up. He wanted her. He wanted her to be different. He wished he'd never seen her. Now he would have to force her to confess her real reasons for being here, hope that if she had been sent to monitor him, she didn't know how he really felt about her.

She kept walking toward him, while he stood rooted to the ground. Her expression was tentative as if she wasn't sure of her welcome. Or she was pretending. She was good at pre-

tending. If he hadn't witnessed her undressing that first night, he might still be trying to figure out what her game was. And it was a game. It had to be. She slowed as she came nearer, waiting for a sign from him.

He turned and walked away as fast as he could.

Andy stopped. He'd seen her. And he'd avoided her. God, that was too much. This was not about taking care of Rusty or getting fired. This was about her. And she didn't get it. They have great wilderness sex one day—at least she thought it was great—and the next he won't even talk to her.

Was it something she'd done?

Whoa, she told herself. It isn't always your fault. Yeah, right, so why did she feel as if she'd just blown it big-time. Her bottom lip began to tremble. She bit it. Her mouth twisted, she blew out air. To hell with him. It was time for her to get a move on anyway. First thing tomorrow, she'd go up to the falls, call home, and get somebody to come get her. She was accomplishing nothing here.

She wished she could just jump into one of the helicopters and get away. Unfortunately, she couldn't fly them, only jump out of them. She'd always meant to learn. There was big money for aerial work; she'd just never gotten around to it.

And there was Katherine's meditation group. She'd planned to see if that was a connection between Mac and Ms. Southwaite and so far nada.

She sniffed. She should probably stick it out for a few more days. She'd just have to find a way to avoid Dillon while keeping her heart from breaking.

Andy missed dinner. She bought a bottle of wine and some cheese and crackers at the Terra Bliss store and pleaded a headache. The crackers did nothing for her stomach, and the wine didn't do much to lighten her spirit. But at least it put her to sleep, for a few hours. Mostly she spent the night tossing and turning and dreaming of Dillon. Wondering why things

had gone so wrong so fast. And why she'd expected anything else.

By the time the alarm woke her at five-thirty, she was sick of being depressed, hurt, and lonely.

At least meditation might get her back on the right track. She'd had her big phone revelation during it.

She arrived at the Spa to find Katherine already sitting cross-legged on her mat at the front of the room, doing some sort of premeditation meditation. Just watching her made Andy's eyelids grow heavy. Heavier than they already were from worry and lack of sleep.

Well, if she didn't find inner peace, she might at least catch a short snooze.

When they were all seated, Katherine opened her eyes and smiled that I'm-your-guru-and-I-love-you kind of smile. It looked odd on the business manager's aquiline face. Was this what made her such an efficient manager? Her inner peace? Maybe that was what her semi-aloofness was. The thing that kept everyone at a slight distance. Totally unlike the doctor, whom they flocked around like rock star groupies.

Resigned, Andy folded her legs, placed her hands in her lap, and prepared to endure.

Like the day before, Katherine talked them through their breathing, her voice low and slightly singsong, taking them deeper and deeper into their "inner calm." Andy felt some of her tension ease away. Her surroundings began to blur until she seemed to be floating.

Katherine's voice became gentler, quieter, until she stopped speaking altogether. Andy began to nod off, but was brought back when she heard a rustle nearby. She partially opened one eye. Katherine was moving among the meditators, correcting the posture of one, speaking softly to another.

Andy stifled a yawn. The air was heavy and smelled strange. *Incense*, she thought before her thought drifted away. Then she felt Katherine's hand on her shoulder. Just the briefest

touch. Heard her murmur something that Andy missed completely.

The same thing had happened yesterday. Really, she had to concentrate. What had Katherine said to her? Press something? Her stomach to her back? She knew that was a technique for something. She pressed her stomach to her back. It was too hard to sustain. Press. Press. Press. . . . Her body began to slump. . . .

The next thing Andy knew, Katherine was back on her mat bringing them to their "non-rest" state. When Andy finally forced her eyes open, Katherine was smiling benignly around the room.

Everyone began returning their mats to the side of the room.

Andy stood, almost stumbled. Her foot was asleep. She picked up her mat, waited for the pinpricks to set in, then hobbled her way over to deposit her mat with the others.

Everyone was quiet, their minds turned inward, as they crossed the lawn to breakfast. Andy considered just going back to bed, but her stomach growled. Maybe Dillon wouldn't be there. She didn't look forward to eating while trying to pretend Dillon wasn't walking around their table scowling and hating her.

She filled her plate with food and sank into the vacant chair at their usual table.

"Late night, honey?" Jeannie's drawl did a lot to bring her around.

"Early morning," said Andy. She stifled a yawn then breathed in as Louis poured her a cup of coffee. "Bless you," she said. He grinned back at her.

"Well, you should have slept in."

"Couldn't." Andy stifled another yawn. "Sorry. I went to Katherine's meditation group."

"You're kidding," said Jeannie. "That's harder to get in than the Cotton Bowl. How'd you manage it?"

"I didn't. She asked me."

"Well," Jeannie said and began buttering a piece of toast.

"That's such an honor," said Loubelle. "I'd like to do more meditation, but I just can't sit with my legs crossed like that and still be able to get up at the end. And I refuse to sit in a chair like an old granny. Even though I am an old granny, thank you ma'am."

"I take yoga and meditation twice a week in Boston," said Evelyn. "I find it centers my mind and concentrates my energy. I get twice as much done on those days as on the others. Very beneficial."

"I'm afraid it only made me sleepy," said Andy. "I just feel like going back to bed and staying there all day."

"That's because you're just beginning. You'll get used to it in no time."

The last time someone said that to her, she'd been stuck with those Coke-bottle prop glasses.

This time she couldn't keep back her yawn. "I guess."

"I swear," said Jeannie. "I never saw a man who could stay so sulky for so long. I'd like to take him over my knee and paddle him good."

Dillon walked toward them, a death grip on his water pitcher. Andy concentrated on cutting her omelet. He filled the glasses and walked away.

"I don't think I've heard him say two words in the last two days. And I know for sure that he hasn't smiled. You sure there's nothing wrong?" Jeannie craned her neck, trying to see Andy's face.

Andy pushed a bite of toast into her mouth. "Nothing's wrong," she said when she'd finished chewing.

"Then he's been getting up on the wrong side of the bed. Maybe you should take pity on him and let him get up on your side."

Andy's eyes flew up. "We're not, um"—but they had—"sleeping together."

Jeannie nodded wisely. "That explains it. He's probably depressed."

Depressed, thought Andy. Right. "Depressed," she said. Too bad for him. If anyone had reason to be depressed—She paused. She wasn't depressed. And she wouldn't give Dillon the satisfaction of seeing her moping over him.

She straightened up and put on a smile for the next time he came to the table.

But Dillon didn't return, and Evelyn had to ask Louis to bring them more coffee.

When breakfast was over, Andy found herself heading for the morning session. Which was odd since she'd meant to eat and go back to bed. She glanced at the sign on the door. LEARNING FROM OUR FAILURES AND TURNING THEM TO SUCCESS. Now, there was a class that had her name on it. She went inside.

Carmen's eyes widened for an instant when she saw Ariadne. Then she broke into a smile. "Welcome. Glad you could make it."

Andy looked around, then realized Carmen was talking to her. When had they gotten so chummy? She took a seat on the couch in the first row. Her legs were too tired to carry her any farther. Maybe she was getting the flu. Picked up a microbe swimming in the lake. Swimming in the lake with Dillon. Dillon lying naked on the rock, rock-hard and waiting for her. Andy shoved the image away, forced her attention to Carmen.

"Today we're going to discuss how we let ourselves fail, sometimes even encourage ourselves to fail. Failure is a part of a whole life. But only if we can turn it into success. "Who would like to share first?"

The woman next to Andy raised her hand. She didn't look as though she'd ever experienced failure in her life. She was immaculately dressed, perfectly made up, thin and pretty.

The woman, whose name was Mindy, told about her child-hood with a domineering mother and how, in trying hard not to be like her, she'd become a doormat for her first husband.

There was some discussion about how to find happy mediums while satisfying a person's own needs.

Andy's mind drifted to thoughts about Dillon.

"I just broke up with my live-in boyfriend," said a reedy voice from the back. There were murmurs of sympathy. "He said I was too bland. I bought new clothes and dyed my hair. I even bought a book on the Kama Sutra. Then he said he didn't know what was happening to me. He liked me the way I used to be. And now I'm totally confused."

"It can be confusing," said Carmen sympathetically.

"I've been in the same kind of situation. It's so demoralizing."

"Why should we change ourselves because of someone else?"

"Every time I try to change . . . "

It seemed everyone had a similar experience.

The discussion went on and on. Andy sat zombielike through the tales of failures. Each person had a more depressing story than the one before.

"So I think we see that it's as much our responsibility as the other person's when we don't live up to our own expectations of ourselves," said Carmen. "It's hard enough to change our own bad habits. But how do you change somebody else's habits?"

"By not reinforcing their behavior," said someone.

"By cutting off the sucker's dick," whispered another. There was an appreciative burst of laughter.

When the laughter died down, Carmen said, "Anyone else have something to share?"

"I have terrible luck with men," said Andy.

Chapter 16

She'd spilled her guts. Just like all the others. She'd said things she'd never even thought before. At least not that she admitted. She'd answered one little question just to be polite and ended up telling them her life story. Once she started talking, she couldn't stop.

As soon as Carmen dismissed the class, Andy grabbed her bag and fled for the door. She'd never be able to face any of them again.

"Ariadne, wait up." Carmen hurried after her, her curly hair bouncing as she ran.

Andy stopped, resigned.

"That was awesome. You really made a breakthrough today. I'm so proud of you."

Andy looked down at her. She was proud of her? For telling complete strangers about men she hardly even remembered. It was like some pitiful girl had gotten into her body and was using her to whine about her disastrous love life—or lack of love life. This was just too weird.

She pulled some kind of smile from someplace, said weakly, "Thanks, gotta go."

Carmen came with her. "I would never have guessed that you'd had those experiences. No wonder—" She broke off, glancing at Andy's clothes. "Just wait until Dr. Bliss hears

about this. She'll be so pleased. She really wanted you to make a breakthrough. A challenge and you've made the first step. It's so great."

Andy stood there horrified. "You're not going to tell anybody?"

Carmen blinked, dipped her eyebrows. "Of course I am. It's wonderful. I'm just so glad I was able to expedite it for you."

"Expedite," repeated Andy, a little dazed. More likely Carmen would use Andy's lapse from sanity to one-up Jane. God. They might even start fighting over her. Why, oh, why had she ever let her family talk her into pretending to be a lonely spinster? Why had she fallen under some evil spell and "shared" her experiences? At least she'd managed not to mention her profession or Dillon. That was some consolation. She guessed.

Maybe she should just pack her bags and leave before things got worse.

She stopped, her breath arrested on an intake of air. Was that what happened to Mac? Had she seen her life through the eyes of others and hated what she saw?

Andy shook her head.

"What?" asked Carmen.

"N-nothing." Mac's life was great. Successful. Well respected by her fellow stuntmen. Had lovers who adored her. Had married one of them. Of course, he had died of a heart attack years ago. And Mac had never remarried.

"Aren't you happy about this?" Carmen was looking a little crestfallen, and automatically, Andy reached out and patted her arm. "Yes, thrilled."

Carmen's face lit up again. "Well, I've got to get to my meeting, but this is just great—just great." She hit the stairs running, anxious to share her news with the rest of the staff.

Andy headed for the front door, praying that she wouldn't run into anyone who'd witnessed her debacle. Had she really used the expression "soul mate"? She'd obviously gone stark, staring ravers.

She'd almost reached the door when it opened. She recognized Dillon before he even stepped inside.

She spun around and raced up the stairs. She didn't slow down until she turned the corner to the Authorized Personnel hallway. Carmen and Dr. Bliss were standing outside the staff room door.

Andy skidded to a stop. Turned again. Heard footsteps coming up the stairs. It had to be Dillon. She was trapped between two equally humiliating positions. She grabbed the knob of the nearest door and threw herself inside, closing the door behind her.

She stood there, heart pounding, panting for breath. She was an idiot. A basket case. How had her life gotten so out of control? Maybe, he would pass right by. She pressed her ear to the door. Heard nothing. Slowly she began to relax. Saved by the—She had no idea where she was. A broom closet maybe.

It was totally dark where she was standing, but slowly she became aware of light behind her. She looked over her shoulder, turned all the way around. The center of the room was spotlighted like an operating arena. There was a bed with stirrups. And a woman on the bed. And a doctor sitting between her feet.

Not a doctor. Bernard Bliss.

Oh, no.

The woman moaned, thrashed from side to side, her dark sheen of hair flying about her face.

Bliss looked toward the door; his mouth opened. He quickly stood up and stepped between Andy and the bed, blocking her view. But not before Andy recognized his blissful patient.

"Are you here for the Eternal Orgasm—"

Andy cut him off. "No. Sorry. Don't have the time." She fumbled for the doorknob. Tore it open and ran straight into the arms of Dillon Cross.

Take two. When were they going to get this right? She pushed him away and managed to close the door before he grabbed her arms and forced them to her sides.

She tried to twist away. "Let me go."

"Not a chance. Stop struggling," he hissed. "Dr. Bliss will think we're not getting along. Here she comes now." His body softened abruptly.

"No!" whispered Andy. "Her husband is in there." She jerked her head toward the Eternal Orgasm room. "With Katherine Dane."

"Shit." Dillon let her go and she staggered backward.

"Ah. Hello, Dr. Bliss. Poor Ariadne just tripped. Ever since she broke her glasses, she can't see a thing. Lucky that I was here to catch her, wasn't it, Ariadne?"

He took her by the arm, hard enough to leave finger marks. "Are you all right, now?"

"Yes, thank you," she said through gritted teeth. He wasn't going to do anything to help. His eyes were sparkling. He was enjoying this. She turned to Dr. Bliss. Tried for a smile. Her mouth was dry, her lips stuck to her teeth.

"Don't you have an extra pair?" Dr. Bliss smiled benevolently at Andy and then at Dillon as if they were her two favorite children.

She was the essential earth mother, tall and graceful in a light blue caftan. She was lovely, intelligent, and compassionate. She looked as if she were in love with the world.

And her husband was just behind the door, giving an eternal orgasm to her business manager. Did she know? Andy eased away from the door, praying that Katherine Dane wouldn't cry out in ecstasy while they were standing there.

Dillon nudged her with his elbow.

"What? Oh, the glasses. No. Just my sunglasses. But they're not for indoors." She glared at Dillon, who just stood there with a phony smile on his face. She stepped toward the doctor.

Dr. Bliss stepped backward. "Is something wrong, Ariadne?"

"No. I'm having a wonderful time." She took another step toward the doctor. Dr. Bliss stepped back. Dillon bit his lip.

"It's all so inspirational." She took another step, slowly pushing Dr. Bliss up the hallway.

"I'm so glad."

Andy could feel Dillon vibrating next to her. He was laughing, the cold son of a bitch. And it wasn't funny. It was tragic. "Yes, it's just great." Step. "The best." Another step.

They were several feet away from the orgasm room by now. Dillon had come along, sticking to her side, but doing nothing to help.

"Well, it was lovely talking to you." She needed to be away from the doctor, away from Dillon, away from that stupid orgasm room.

"I'll walk down with you," said Dr. Bliss and linked her arm through Andy's. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

Andy tensed. "Me?" Oh, please don't let her say anything about Carmen's class in front of Dillon. He was one of her prime failures, even if she hadn't mentioned his name.

Dillon was no longer amused, but he fell in step next to Dr. Bliss.

"Yes. I've spoken with Dillon about this, and after the glowing report that Carmen just gave me, I think you're ready. So tonight—"

Dillon let out something that sounded like a squawk.

"I've scheduled the two of you for an evening in the Bower of Bliss."

"I—" Dillon blurted out.

The high priestess held up her hand. He fell silent immediately.

Impressive. Then it seeped in. "The Bower of Bliss?" She was kidding, right? Oh, please, God, don't let me laugh. She wouldn't hurt Dr. Bliss's feelings for the world, but she'd read the retreat literature about the special harem room where goddesses tested their skills on willing attendants. She thought it was a joke at first, then thought it could be a hell of a lot of fun, and until today would have looked forward to spending a night with Dillon there. But not anymore. Now her stomach knotted at the thought.

"I don't think—"

The doctor paused. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Shit, they were right in front of the orgasm room again. Finally Dillon stepped in and somehow nudged the doctor into walking again.

"You've probably heard some talk about it from the other trainees. But truly, it's just a private place to practice your essential nature." Dr. Bliss paused to smile encouragingly at Andy.

Andy refused to stop, forcing the doctor to keep going.

"Some people do like to challenge themselves, physically as well as emotionally. But that isn't required, not at all. And if things do start to go in a direction you're uncomfortable with, there's a button we jokingly call the panic button. Not that there is any reason for you to panic. But if you want to leave, just press the button and security will escort you back to your cabin. Because of it being dark," she said as an afterthought.

The inside of Andy's mouth went dry, the air sucked out of her lungs. She sneaked a sidelong glance at Dillon. He looked pleased—in a fresh-kill kind of way.

Fortunately, Dr. Bliss had a few things to discuss with him, so Andy took the opportunity to get the hell out.

Andy spent the afternoon in her cabin, watching the clock ticking inexorably toward the bewitching hour and wondering how she could thwart the plans for that night.

At six o'clock Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie dropped by to help her get ready.

"Togas mandatory," said Jeannie.

"You'll be fine," said Evelyn.

"And remember, you don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with," added Loubelle.

"And can do everything you've ever wanted to do," said Jeannie, who was looking a little enviously at the crown of fake leaves that was stuck on the top of Andy's head like a mildewed halo. "You look just like a vestal virgin."

"On the way to be sacrificed," said Andy.

Evelyn patted her hand. "I'm sure Dillon will be the perfect gentleman."

As if things weren't bad enough, thought Andy. She waited for them to leave, then tossed the fake leaves over the lamp shade and dropped onto the couch. Why was she going through with this? There was obviously no reason to get to know Dillon better. She wasn't getting a paycheck. And yet, she hadn't refused.

And neither had Dillon, she realized.

She knew her own motives. She was willing to make a public spectacle of herself, because she knew it was the only way she could corner Dillon and make him tell her what was going on. Dr. Bliss hadn't said anything about *him* getting to push the panic button. And she was going to make sure he never got near it, not until she knew why she'd been ditched without so much as a "Thanks. I'll call you."

When the knock came, she snatched up the wreath, slapped it on her head, and went outside to be escorted to the Bower. She hesitated when she saw Dr. Bliss and her two acolytes. She felt honored, and at the same time, wary. Why were they making such a to-do over her? Other couples had used the Bower this week; none of them had been given such a royal escort.

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind came a voice crying out in her mental wilderness. There's a reason for this, and it isn't because they like you.

Dillon fastened his kilt around his waist. He felt absurd. How could he interrogate Ariadne while he was dressed like a character from *The Gladiator*. He slipped his feet into his sandals and pulled his sweatshirt over his head. He looked in the mirror. No longer Greek slave wear. Now all he needed was a bagpipe. He yanked the sweatshirt off and threw it on the bed.

A minute later, he walked out of his room to a line of fellow slaves that stretched to the door, all hooting and giving him thumbs-up. Christ. Nobody did this for the last guy that went into the Bower. Of course his goddess had been a perfect specimen of come-and-get-it. It must be because of Ariadne's transformation from mouse to—well, to something he'd better learn to resist.

He gave the crowd a little bow and headed outside.

The Bower was one of the many templelike buildings scattered throughout the compound. Only this one was set back in the trees away from prying eyes, enclosed by stucco walls and, hopefully, heated. The evening had turned cool.

Of course, they might expect him and Ariadne to make their own heat. Which would have been more than possible a day ago. Right now the only heat he was planning to generate was Andy on the hot seat.

He was early. The door was locked. Maybe she'd bail. That would be the smart thing to do. She must have figured out by now that her reporter story had bombed. She couldn't be looking forward to spending several hours being debriefed.

But there she was, coming up the path, escorted by the high priestess herself and followed by Twiddle Dee and Twiddle Dum, who immediately took positions on either side of the door. Surely they weren't planning to stay and safeguard Ariadne's questionable virtue. The short one, Carmen, was smiling seraphically. Jane looked as if she'd just swallowed petroleum.

Dr. Bliss nodded to Carmen, and she unlocked the door, while Jane lifted her nose in the air and stared into the trees. Then the head goddess took Ariadne's hands in both of hers and smiled like the all-encompassing goddess that everyone thought she was.

You'd think it was a wedding ceremony, not a night of sex in a tacky fake temple. A spasm of pure panic rushed up his spine. *No sex. Don't even think it*, he warned himself. Tonight would be all business.

Carmen hugged Ariadne, Jane gave her a quick, begrudging peck on the cheek, and he and Ariadne were left alone.

They turned to face each other. Ariadne crossed her arms over her breasts.

She was definitely in a mood. Her face was a mask of bore-

193

dom, but her eyes bored little holes into his chest where they were focused.

Finally she tipped her face up to look at him. "Why are we here?"

Good. She was already on the defensive. "Because Dr. Bliss ordered it. And I have a few questions that I want the answers to." He was sure that for a split second, her eyes widened.

"I'm the one that's supposed to be acting out my whatever."

"Why stop now?" He shoved her through the door.

"That's just so fucking romantic," said Ariadne.

"It gets better." He placed his hand on her chest and, resisting the automatic tingle in his fingers, pushed her onto a pile of giant, colorful pillows.

She sank into them, bounced a couple of times, then sat up. "Good God, it's a harem."

The place looked like a high budget remake of *The Sheik*, thought Andy. Huge pillows rose in piles around the room. Plump futons rested against the walls. All were covered in red, purple, blue, and paisley prints. Silk wall hangings billowed each time a breeze came through the grilled windows. There were ornate tables holding fruit and bread and cheese, another with wine and bottled water. Dimly lit lamps hung from the ceiling, casting a warm golden light over everything.

There was a closed door that Andy assumed led to the bath-room. She crawled out of the pillows and went to take a look.

Well, shit. Not just a bathroom, but a blue and white tiled octagonal room, with a circular tub on a raised plinth. And those were definitely Jacuzzi jets that she saw. Plush towels rose out of a wicker basket. And a carved shelf held rows of what appeared to be bath oils.

She shoved that idea to the side. For some reason, Dillon had used her, then dumped her. With no excuse—not even a lame one. She wouldn't fall for that again. She turned to go and stepped on his foot.

[&]quot;Sorry."

He didn't look any happier than he had a few minutes ago. It was going to be a long night. She slipped past him into the main room and began looking around.

"What are you doing?" he asked, following her back into the harem room.

"Looking for the panic button."

He picked up the little buzzer that lay in plain view and gave the cord a yank. It came free in his hand. "Here." He held it toward her.

"Bastard. Why are you doing this?"

He walked over to the table, poured out one glass of wine. "Take this, it will relax you."

"I don't need to relax." But she took the wine. "You're not drinking?"

"Not yet."

She shrugged, took her glass to the far side of the room, and perched on the edge of the window. "Okay, ask your questions. The girls are playing Scrabble tonight, and I don't want to miss a thrilling minute."

His lip twitched. Settled back into his permanent scowl.

She took a sip. "You know, if you don't lighten up, you're going to have permanent wrinkles before you're a year older." She thought she could hear his teeth grinding. Good. Now, if she could just remember the woman who played opposite Valentino, she'd be able to keep this up until he gave up and let her go.

Of course, she could just channel Laura Croft and walk over him to the door. But it wouldn't be nearly as much fun.

He was going to lose his temper, or fuck her brains out, and either one would be a disaster. God, he loved it when she was being sarcastic almost as much as he loved her being all over him. He counted to ten. "I don't know what kind of fool you think I am."

A flicker of confusion.

"You're not a reporter."

Definitely wariness. She was on her guard. Which was good. Always easier to break a person who was self-editing as they went. He bet he'd trip her up in two, maybe three, minutes.

"Who says?"

He smiled. This was going to be child's play.

"Let's just get on with this and you can get to your Scrabble game."

He'd hurt her. He could see it in her eyes. He had his own moment of confusion. Playacting. That's what she was doing.

"Who sent you? What are you doing here?" He made his tone as bored as he could muster, which was hard because she had begun playing with the tassels on the sash that wrapped around her waist. Clearly a nervous reaction.

But his reaction was definitely not on the agenda. He was mesmerized by those fingers. Wanted them on his—He shifted on the table. "We don't have all night."

"Yeah, actually, we do."

"Ariadne...."

"Why are you being like this? What happened? Why are you angry at me?" Suddenly she was the one doing the questioning, and they were flying at him faster than he could take them in. She was going on the offensive. Fine. It would tire her out pretty quickly.

"Look, I know you're not a reporter. It's a lousy cover anyway. So just tell me who sent you and why."

She just looked at him. Either she was honestly out of the loop or her little game was going to piss him off really soon.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The disguise. The second-story work. The questions about Imogene Southwaite and Miranda Houston."

Hmm. She'd flinched at that last one. Where did the Houston woman fit into this? Please, not *another* agent. They'd be falling over each other like the Keystone Kops before this was over.

Nothing but a frown. Okay, maybe it would take more than three minutes.

"I'm on to you. I know about your last hike up the moun-

tain. The phone call." He stood up, paced the length of the room, and came to a stop in front of her. "Which side are you on?"

A blank look.

He returned to pacing. "Regardless, I gotta tell you, I really hate being used like that. You're attractive. Beautiful, even. But using sex is really a low blow. Even if we're on the same side." He stopped in front of her again. "But are we?"

Her face went through a sudden transformation he couldn't begin to read. Then her mouth quivered. Damn it, if she tried the innocent crying bit, he'd throttle her. Her lips curved up and she started to shake. Laughter. God damn it. She was laughing.

"Now I get it," she said. "God, how dense am I? I get it." She held out her empty wineglass. He took it and refilled it.

"You think I'm—You're?—The knee, the scars." She slapped her thigh and started laughing.

He didn't see what was so goddamn funny.

"You know," she said, wiping her eyes. "I really need to get a life."

Now what was she talking about? She was going to drive him crazy.

"But seriously," she said, chuckling. "Who are you? The police? Is it about Ms. Southwaite's death?" Her face changed, suddenly serious. "But if you're—that means Aunt Mac—" She sprang up. "We've got to do something."

Dillon tossed back the wine in his glass and poured another. "Why don't we start again? Why are *you* here? Certainly not to learn to be a goddess." As far as he was concerned she already was one. Even if a corrupt one.

She came toward him. He readied himself for whatever she was going to pull. She poured herself a glass of wine, and he realized he was drinking the one he'd meant for her. She stopped in front of him and gave him an appraising once-over.

"Are you the police?"

"Why would you think that?"

She sighed. "Because I really don't like to think of you making a living by servicing desperate housewives."

"I don't."

"Good. So what do you do? I mean, normally . . . for a living?"

She was very clever or she was an amateur. He went back on the offensive. "Look. I think we've established you're not some innocent bystander. Which means you're either working for Goddess International or for some other organization. Which is it?"

She shook her head at him, an ironic smile playing at her mouth. If he weren't in the middle of an interrogation, he'd kiss that smile away. Push her down in the pillows and make love to her until they were both senseless—and blow this assignment for his trouble. "I'm waiting."

She studied his face. Looking for what?

Finally, she said, "You're one of the good guys, right?"

Okay, give a little, get a little. He'd take the chance. One way or the other, he'd learn something from her response. "I like to think so."

She let out a huge sigh. "Thank God. I was afraid for a minute you might have been sent to spy on me."

She was going to drive him mad. If her words didn't, the way she was chewing on her lip would. "Are you?"

"One of the good guys? Of course."

"Then tell me who sent you."

"My mother."

He ground his teeth. Prayed for patience. "Let me put it this way, who do you work for?"

"Well I'm a member of SAG, but I'm a freelancer."

SAG? He'd never heard of it. Of course, agencies came and went so fast it was hard to keep track of them all. His eyes narrowed. "Are you a fed?"

"Only in the movies." She walked away from him, turned back.

"The movies?" Now what was she talking about.

"I thought you had it figured out."

He hesitated. He thought he had, too. Now it fell into place. SAG. Screen Actors' Guild. She was an actress. Or was this just another cover?

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"A fed." Something flickered across her face. Disappointment? "Were you using me to get information, you know, when we—"

He shook his head. "Were you?"

"Of course not."

He shouldn't feel so relieved. He should be concentrating. "Okay. Let's just say I'm willing to believe that you're an actress."

"I'm not an actress. Exactly."

"Okay. You want to be an actress."

"Not me. I'd be bored stiff if all I did was say lines thirty seconds at a time and look pretty."

Maybe she was just insane.

She pursed her lips at him. "I'm a stuntwoman."

"A stunt—?"

"Woman," she finished.

Now, there was a cover. No wonder she could climb into second-story windows and scale walls, and—better not to think of what else she was able to do. "But you're not here to become a sex goddess."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt."

Okay. She was a stuntwoman, who wanted to be a sex goddess. He really wanted to believe that.

"But I came to look for Aunt Mac. Miranda Houston. She left in the middle of the last session and no one has heard from her. And then Liz, that's my sister, saw an article in the paper about Imogene Southwaite falling to her death, and they, Liz, Betty, Lucian, and my mother, being who they are, decided that Mac was in mortal danger and they packed me off to find out what happened to her."

"So thinking there was foul play, these people sent you into a possibly dangerous situation, with only a bun and fake glasses for protection?"

"They knew I could take care of myself."

"Your mother must be frantic."

"She is. Mac is one of the best in the business. She's survived a lot worse things than a fall from a balcony. But she didn't come home."

Dillon closed his eyes and wondered if this was a test to see if he still had his wits left. "Let me guess. Your aunt is also a stuntwoman."

"Of course. We're all stunt people. Have been for three generations." She turned beseeching eyes on him. "Do you know what happened to her?"

"No."

Her shoulders sagged. "But you're here because you think someone murdered Ms. Southwaite."

"Possibly."

"Someone who works for Goddess International—and that maybe they killed Aunt Mac, too?"

She looked so stricken, he longed to put his arms around her and assure her that her aunt Mac was safe. Of course, the whole thing could be an act. A moving one, but still an act. "As far as I've been able to discover, she left by her own choice."

"I think she did." She told him about the supplies Mac took from the cabin and the road she found near the lake. "But why hasn't she called home? That's what I don't get. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Will you help me find her?"

"We'll investigate all avenues."

"Straight from a script. Will you help me?"

He hesitated. "I'll try."

She heaved a huge sigh. "Thank you. So what do we do first?"

Dillon glanced at his watch. They'd only been here for half

an hour. "We can't drop everything and start looking. We're supposed to be discovering your inner whatever. If we left now, it would look suspicious."

She nodded. "They'll expect us to stay here at least most of the night."

He nodded.

"And you disabled the panic button, so it would be useless to pretend things got out of hand."

"True."

"So we should probably go along with the scheme to jumpstart my goddess-ness—so as not to arouse suspicion."

"Probably."

She smiled. "Should we start on the pillows or in the tub?"

Chapter 17

The pillows are closer." Dillon took her wineglass, put both glasses on the table, then buried his hands in the folds of silk that draped over her butt. He hardened at the first touch. And though he knew he shouldn't be indulging in her sweet heat, that he should be keeping his mind on his job, he gave in to the desire that coursed through him. Desire set off by relief. She wasn't an agent or a spy. She was a stuntwoman.

He cupped her butt with both hands, played his fingers along the soft silk of her gown, reveling in the hard muscle beneath it. A stuntwoman. The possibilities were mind-boggling. Then she shivered and he tightened his arms around her. She was also a young woman with a missing aunt; afraid, brave, strong. And doing amazing things to his chest with her teeth.

They had the time, the need. Why not indulge in a little mutual pleasure. It would be over soon enough. He drew his hands away from her butt, captured her face with them. Tilted her head so that she was ready for his kiss. Her eyes were open, her expression giving and trusting.

And he got a wrenching twist in his chest. Something that had nothing to do with hormones or arousal, but with the need to protect, to trust her in return. It was a new feeling. One that frightened him.

He'd experienced passion plenty of times. Mind-blowing passion with several women. But he'd never, never felt this

sudden rush of tenderness, and toward this woman of all people. She could probably wrestle him under the table, could definitely outrun him, and didn't need him to take care of her. And it made him want to do just that.

He lowered his head. Brushed his lips lightly across hers, came back for a gentle kiss. Licked her upper lip, the corners of her mouth. She sighed and parted her lips. Desire pushed tenderness aside and his tongue plunged into her. Tongue flicked tongue. Lips molded to lips.

Her hands ran up and down his spine as her breasts flattened against his chest, sending waves of heat down to his groin. He was pulsing hard against her, heating the fabric that lay between them.

Still kissing her, he walked her backward until she fell into the plush mountain of pillows, pulling him down with her. They landed on a cloud of foam. Giant pillows closed around them in a nest of vibrant color.

They began to explore each other as if they'd never touched before. The rest of the world went away, and they raced to a place where there was no murdered heiress, no missing aunt, no killer at large. Only the two of them.

He unclasped the shoulder strap of her gown. It fell away, baring a smooth, firm breast. He cupped it in his palm. Took the nipple in his mouth. Ariadne sighed and he left her breast to quickly kiss the sigh away.

"Ariadne," he murmured.

"Andy. My friends call me Andy."

He smiled into her mouth. She was so an Andy, and yet an Ariadne, too. She was everything he wanted. He deepened the kiss as his heart creaked back to life. "Andy," he said.

He pulled the elastic from her hair, loosened the braid until her hair came free. She lay back with her hair fanned across the pillow, one bare breast rising from the silk, and she looked like an impressionist painting.

Exotic, but earthy; a siren, but also a beautiful, competent

woman that he could see spending his future with. He reared back.

"What?" she asked, looking worried.

"I—" Just had an out-of-body experience about you. He lowered himself back onto her. That had been a first. Never, even in the throes of drug-induced captivity by Isabelle, had he felt anything but lust. Never considered a future with one of his lovers. Never. And he'd known Ariadne, Andy, less than a week.

They must have crossed some wires when they sutured his skull back together.

But she was warm, vibrant, full of life. Everything he craved. And he believed her story. Which was a big plus.

He ran his hand up her side, touched the bare skin where he'd pulled the robe away. Tantalized himself by being so close to her tempting warmth. She shifted her body, arched up to reach his hand. He brushed his fingers lightly over the tip of her nipple. Trailed his fingers down to the gold cord that wrapped around her waist.

It was tied in a knot, and he began to work it loose, his eyes never leaving her face. When it came free, he flicked the ends away. Pressed his palm to her stomach. Spread his fingers and pushed his hand slowly down her front. Slid between her thighs, released her, and moved back up to undo the other shoulder strap.

She raised up so that he could pull the gauzy fabric down to her waist, then lay back, watching him. The slope of her shoulders, the curves of her breast, the tight stomach, all tempted him like he'd never been tempted before.

He ran his tongue over dry lips.

"Do that to me," she said, her voice hoarse.

He leaned over her, ran his tongue over her lips, and an expulsion of breath told him she was laughing.

"Keep going," she said.

His tongue moved to her ear, outlined the shape of it, delved

into the opening. Andy sighed. Her hands were everywhere, his back, his chest, his shoulders, his ass. They left heat wherever they touched.

He licked down her neck, across her collarbone, and down the center between her breasts. Only then did he take them in his hands, let the fullness of them settle into his palm. Rubbed his thumb across the peaks and felt the tips grow tighter. Then took one, then the other in his mouth.

He shoved more fabric away, sank his tongue into her navel. Her fingers speared his hair, cradled his head, until he couldn't think. He rose up to his knees, pulled the robe down her hips, her legs, her feet, until it fell in a pool on the carpet.

"Wait," she said, her breathing heavy, titillating, so seductive. "What do you have on under that kilt?"

"My gym shorts." He shrugged. "I thought I might have to make a quick getaway and didn't want to have to do it wearing a skirt."

"Take them off."

He started to unbutton the kilt.

"No. Just the shorts." She smiled.

He lifted one eyebrow, but stood up to push the shorts down his legs. He stepped out of them and stood over her. She was lying completely naked, her arms and legs where he'd left them. He didn't know what to touch first.

She pushed up to her elbows, the light caught her face for an instant, and he broke apart inside. She was so beautiful, more beautiful than he realized.

"Anything else?"

He felt his cheeks heat, and his cock swell. "Just me."

"Good." She stretched her legs and hooked her feet behind his knees. Pulled him forward as she sat up to meet him.

"I always wondered what it would be like to make love to a man in a kilt." She shivered and changed position until she was kneeling between his legs. Her hands roved up his thighs, beneath the hem of the kilt. His erection tented the front of the pleated fabric, and she watched it move as she played. Her hands slipped around to his inner thigh.

"I like this," she said. "This combination of silk and sex."

His knees began to feel weak. It took a monumental effort to stay on his feet. Her hands bypassed his cock and came to rest on each hip bone. He twisted just enough so that her thumbs brushed the heated skin of his cock. She laughed and moved her hands away.

At last, when he was vibrating with frustration and selfcontrol, her hands found him. He sucked in air, tried to breathe. He felt light-headed as all the blood in his body rushed to be near her fingertips.

She stroked him, not hard enough to drive him toward oblivion, but lightly, keeping him thrumming within her closed grasp. He wanted to touch her, wanted to get closer, to lie back where he'd been and feel the warmth of her body stretched along his, but he didn't. He couldn't.

Then her hand left him. Her fingers tickled down his thighs and withdrew from the kilt. He felt suddenly cold, until she found the hook at the waistband and snapped it open. One side of the kilt fell away, leaving it attached by only one small hook.

She brushed his erection with the back of her fingers as she reached for the last hook. The anticipation was going to drive him mad.

He wanted to be inside her. To forget everything else, let her take him in, warm and tight and safe. The kilt fell away, slithered to the floor. She took his hands and pulled him down to the pillows.

He lay beside her, half-covering her, his leg hooked over her thigh. He felt boneless except for the hard pulsing part of him pressed against her hip. They nestled cocoonlike among the giant pillows. His foot rubbed along her calf, down to her ankle, back up to her knee. Then pressed on her knee until she opened her legs.

His tongue found hers at the same moment his fingers entered her. Thrust together as she rose to meet him. He pulled out. His tongue moved to her ear as his finger moved up her moistened folds. She shivered when his finger passed over the hard button of her sex.

She squirmed, murmured his name, and the sound shot fire to his belly and then to his cock. He shifted until he was above her, braced on his elbows, peering down at her face. She looked rosy, dazed, drunk with desire.

She ran her hands over his chest, pressing into the nipples, grasped his shoulders. Her legs wrapped around his ass and she pulled him down to her.

One lift of his hips and he was inside her. They both moaned. Her legs released his ass only to wrap around his waist, changing the angle of their bodies so that she took him deeper inside. He plunged into her. She locked her ankles behind his back and pushed against his thrusts. He could feel her very depths with the tip of his cock. A double sensation, the grasp of her muscles against his shaft as he pushed forward, the touch on the tip, like a kiss.

"Oh, God, Andy."

She wrenched to the side, yanked a pillow from under her back, and they fell forward, her ass higher now than her head. And he sank farther into her. And that was the last thing he remembered as they raced toward annihilation.

She came so hard that she nearly bucked him off. It was like riding a wild animal as her body arched and twisted. Dillon held on, thrusting as deep as she could take him, until he went over the top. Emptying himself again and again, until he had nothing left.

They lay together, stunned, gasping for breath. Clinging to each other, waiting for the world to upright itself again.

"Wow," she said.

"Mmmm," answered Dillon, when he could talk again. They were buried under pillows. He began pushing them aside, then slid out of her and lay on his side, looking down at her. She was so lovely that he could stay just like this forever.

Ariadne. Beautiful and strong. Named after the goddess that showed Theseus the way out of the maze. Could she do the same for Dillon? He squeezed his eyes shut. Not a possibility.

"What?"

Dillon shook his head. "Tell me about your aunt."

"Oh." She looked mussed and dazed and completely lovable. He set his features in agent mode and listened.

Andy felt more than a little disoriented. Everything seemed to be happening at warp speed. First he's questioning her as if she were a common criminal, and next making incredible love to her. And no sooner than that's done, he's back to questioning. A perfect male specimen, she thought, resigned. Able to compartmentalize to the max.

She rolled to her elbow and propped her head on her hand. And was gratified to see his eyes flicker from her face to her breast. Then he was back, all business. She told him everything she'd learned from Galena, Liz, and Lucian.

"Does she do that ever? Go away and not contact you?"

"Sure, but we usually get a postcard. When they read the article about Imogene Southwaite, they called here and were told she'd left. But she didn't go home."

"Does your aunt have money?"

"Some. But nothing like Ms. Southwaite. She's a stuntwoman for heaven's sake. She could take care of herself."

"Hmmm."

"What does 'hmmm' mean?"

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Do they know you're her niece?"

"No. Why should they?"

"I wonder."

A cold chill spread through Andy.

"Did you know that the security team patrols the perimeter of the compound?"

Compound? An interesting term for the goddess retreat. "No," she began, getting a scary idea of where he was going.

"They do, and they've been watching your morning treks over the wall."

"How do you know?" But she thought she already knew the answer.

He sighed. "Because I've been watching you, too."

"You never believed my reporter story, did you?"

"Before that."

"You've been spying on me all along? Why?"

"Because I knew you weren't who you said you were."

"How—" She stopped. It was suddenly becoming clear. "That's your job, isn't it? You're trained to pick out counterfeits. For Goddess International? Does Dr. Bliss suspect—"

Dillon cut her off. "No."

"A government agency?"

He shook his head. He didn't belong to any agency that could be traced.

"But you're here undercover."

"Don't be ridiculous. I knew you were a fake because . . . the night I spilled water on you, you left your glasses. I went after you to return them, and I, uh, saw you through the window."

"Window?" And then it hit her. "You watched me undress?"

Dillon's eyes shifted away. "Yeah."

"Why, of all the—I can't believe it." She gave him a look. Saw something else. He was getting hard again. She didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted. But as she watched, he hit full erection. In her peripheral vision, she saw him run

fingers through his hair. She took advantage of the moment to inflict a little punishment. She scooted closer to him until she was face-to-face, front to front with him. Let her thigh brush across his erection as she settled closer to him.

"I fooled everyone else."

"Maybe."

"Do you have a plan? What do you want me to do?"

She saw Dillon's Adam's apple bobble as he swallowed. "I want you to stay out of it. Go home and leave this to the professionals."

"So you are a policeman."

"No. I'm not. But this could turn into a volatile situation, and I want you far away from it."

"You're trying to get rid of me?" She brushed his erection with her fingers.

He grabbed her wrist. "Stop that. I'm serious."

Andy sighed. If only a man said that to her about their relationship. But alas. "Well, I'm serious, too. And I'm not leaving until I know that Mac is safe."

Dillon gritted his teeth. She wouldn't be easy to dissuade. But he'd have to, somehow. He leaned over her, part intimidation, part seduction. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Her eyelids fluttered. He brushed her lips with his. "And I can't find your aunt if I'm worried about you." He kissed her lightly.

"You are police."

He kissed her again. "Something like. But the less you know, the better." He rolled into her. Skimmed her breast with his hand.

She sighed. "I know what you're doing." He licked her nipple, felt it bud beneath his touch. "Trying to distract me."

He sucked the nipple into his mouth. Released it. "Is it working?"

"For now."

210 Gemma Bruce

He moved to her other breast. "So you'll leave this to me?" "Maybe."

He nipped her breast and shifted so that he could slide his hand between her legs.

She purred, and he felt himself getting distracted.

"Promise." He slid a finger inside her. She was wet, slippery, ready. "I'll take care of it. I'll take care of you."

And for the next twenty minutes, he did.

Chapter 18

66 A ndy, wake up." "Okay. I'm on my way. Tell them to chill." Andy rolled over. Hit the floor. "What the—" She sat up, blinked. She was surrounded by giant pillows. "Oh," she said and climbed back up.

She was vanked to her feet. Her face brushed a bare chest on her way up. She nestled into it. His skin radiated heat, and he smelled musky and salty. Like he'd been making love all night. "Mmmm."

"Rise and shine, baby."

She opened one eye. "It isn't morning."

"It's almost five o'clock. Unless you want the entire camp to see you skulking back to your cabin, you'd better shake it."

She pushed away from him. "Oh, shit."

Dillon grinned.

"What?"

"I knew I heard you say shit on that first day up the hill." He gave her a quick, heated kiss, and shoved her chiton into her hands.

She slipped it over her head. It slid to the floor. "What?"

Dillon leaned over and pulled it up her body. He reclasped the shoulder straps, then dug in between the pillows and brought up the gold cord that tied at her waist. He looped it around her and pulled it tight.

"It's just like being in wardrobe," she said and cracked a huge yawn.

He turned her around and pushed her toward the door.

"Just like being in wardrobe," she groused. "Always in a hurry. We didn't even eat dinner, and we didn't come up with a plan."

He stepped away from her to open the door, leaving her cold in the places that had just been warm. "We're not making a plan."

"Suit yourself. But I always think you should have a plan."

"I have a plan, and you're not a part of it."

Cold seeped into Andy's gut. Why should that surprise her. She'd never been a part of any guy's plan. Mustering all her sangfroid, she brushed past him. "Well. Thanks for the lovely time. I'll call you."

"Andy. I didn't mean—"

"See ya." She stepped across the threshold onto the dewy grass. It sent a chill straight through her bones. And for a panicky moment she thought she might cry.

"I'll walk you back."

"Not necessary. Go make your plan. Whoever you are."

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Be reasonable."

She struck off across the grass.

He yanked her back. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're cranky in the morning?"

"It's in my résumé. Now, let go."

"They probably have us under surveillance, and you're not acting like a thoroughly fucked goddess this morning."

Just a fucked-over one, she thought.

"Listen. JoJo told me that Dr. Bliss always debriefs the couple, separately, after a night in the Bower. We should have the same story prepared."

"Gee, Dillon, that sounds like a *plan* to me." She cut him a look. "I'll just tell her you fucked me silly, then told me to get lost."

"The hell you will. We talked, for a long time, got to know each other better."

"And left the place looking and smelling like a Roman orgy."

"Yeah, well. We made love; you were shy at first, but ready to try. It was wonderful—"

"Oh, please."

He looked a little hurt. "Okay. Leave the wonderful part out. Just say it was very nice; then we fell asleep and didn't wake up until it was time to leave. I'll say the same."

They were marching along like a couple of Caesar's foot soldiers. They didn't speak again until they were standing on her front porch. There was an awkward moment while they just looked at each other. Then Dillon said, "Later," and sprinted down the steps.

He was halfway to the path, when Andy called out, "Hey, Dillon."

He stopped. Turned around.

"It was wonderful," she said and closed the door.

Dillon knew he'd made a tactical error. He'd hurt her. But hell, when he said she wasn't a part of his plan, he'd been talking about the investigation, not the future. Anyway, they didn't have a future. Why couldn't they have just met in a bar sometime when he wasn't on assignment.

Because, dummy, if you randomly met her in a bar, she'd turn out to be an agent, trying to slip in beneath the radar.

His radar had blipped off the screen ever since he'd first seen Andy. And how the hell was he going to juggle keeping her from interfering, while he kept her safe, while trying to wrap up this investigation, and find her aunt in the bargain.

Time was passing. Tonight they'd celebrate the end of the first week with a Bacchanalian Barbecue. There were only two weeks left, and he didn't feel any closer to the truth than he had a week ago.

Andy left her meditation session feeling languid and more than a little depressed. But she couldn't really blame the latter on meditation. That honor belonged to Dillon Cross. Still, she'd done her share of meditation in her training over the years, and she didn't remember ever feeling so zonked afterward. Maybe it was a combination of communing with her inner self, not enough sleep, and get-down, knock-your-socks-off sex.

Katherine Dane stopped her as she was leaving the Spa. "You seem tired today."

"A little," said Andy.

"Well, you're doing fine. Just keep listening to your inner self, and keep up the good work." Katherine gave her the smile that all the priestesses seemed to have perfected. Then she patted Andy on the shoulder and returned to the meditation room.

Andy went straight back to her cabin. She wasn't ready to face the third degree over breakfast. She had no intention of "sharing" the details of her night in the Bower of Bliss with anybody, not even Dr. Bliss during her dreaded debriefing. And she definitely wasn't going to any of the workshops and take the chance of embarrassing herself again.

No. She'd take the morning off and come up with a plan of her own, since Dillon wasn't going to "share."

She was ravenous by lunchtime. She hadn't come up with a plan. It was hard to think when you were angry and depressed. Damn Dillon. No, it was her own fault. When would she ever learn.

She passed the yard crew on her way to the pool. They stopped and smiled at her, then went back to work. At least someone was happy this morning. Well, why not, there would always be grass to cut. Talk about job security.

Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie were sitting at their usual

table. Louis was handing around iced teas. Andy sat down and ordered coffee.

"Sure thing." Louis trotted off toward the cabana.

Jeannie lowered her sunglasses to look at Andy. "Well?"

Loubelle pulled her chair closer. Evelyn leaned forward on her elbows.

"Well," said Andy.

Dillon had just left Dr. Bliss's office, feeling okay about how his debriefing had gone, when Katherine Dane stepped out of her office.

"Dillon, a word if I might."

Now what? he wondered as he followed her inside. Surely she didn't want to know about his night with Andy. Well, she'd be disappointed if she did. He'd already told Fiona Bliss all he intended to say.

"Have a seat."

Dillon sat down.

The business manager sat on the edge of her desk. "Dr. Bliss told me that you were scheduled for the Bower of Bliss last night with Ariadne."

Dillon tipped his head, waiting to see where this was going.

"Of course, whatever happened is between you and Ariadne and Dr. Bliss. However." She paused, looked thoughtful. "Did everything go smoothly?"

Not the word he would have chosen. "Fine," he said. "It went fine."

"Good. I feel so much better knowing that. I've been a little concerned about her."

Dillon quirked an eyebrow.

"Nothing specific, you understand. The goddess program is a pioneering venture. It involves new ways of approaching one's life and can be a very powerful force in a woman's sense of self. It can also be a bit frightening."

Not to mention fatal if you're a rich heiress, added Dillon to

himself. Andy had said that her aunt wasn't an heiress, but he hadn't thought to ask Andy about her own finances.

"Unfortunately, in a few extreme cases, it can be threatening. In a person like Ariadne, whose self-esteem is so skewed to reality, there's always the danger that she might be overwhelmed by the changes she's going through."

Was Dane worried about Andy in light of Imogene South-waite's apparent accident? Or had she picked up on Andy's subterfuge and was reading it as aberrant behavior. He did a quick mental shuffling of everything he knew about Katherine Dane. Not a lot, he realized. The background checks had been cursory at best. Of course, if they didn't expect him to find anything, they wouldn't have wasted the man hours, would they? "I didn't know that you were a psychologist."

"Yes, in addition to my business credentials, I also have a degree in clinical psychology. All the staff are trained in some area of psychology. Even Hans has a sociology background in addition to certificates in Swedish massage and fitness."

As well as being an ex-marine, added Dillon. And the head of your security force.

"We are here to help women, guide them, not set them adrift."

"Ariadne seems fine to me," said Dillon.

"Yes, she does—on the surface. But I've talked to her several times because of certain anomalies I recognized. I asked her to join my meditation class in the hope that it will help her to stay centered during this turbulent time. And well, to be honest. It gives me a chance to pay particular attention to her."

Dane stood up. "I just wanted to apprise you of my assessment, and ask you to be alert to any change in her behavior. Depression, thoughts of suicide—"

"She seems perfectly fine," he said. "Dr. Bliss didn't seem concerned."

Katherine gave him one of those goddess smiles. "Fiona is the conceptualist, the dreamer, the driving force behind the program. It's my responsibility to make sure it runs smoothly. And that everyone is being cared for properly."

"I see," said Dillon, repressing a shudder. She made Terra Bliss sound like an insane asylum.

"Excellent. Well, possibly no cause for alarm. But we must be vigilant."

He stood up. "I certainly will be. I wouldn't want anything to happen to Ariadne."

For a second, something kindled in her eyes, then was gone. She stood up. "I was sure you would understand. Well, I didn't mean to keep you from your duties."

Dillon left her office, wondering what had really been the purpose of that meeting. Because he had a feeling that it all tied up into a nice little conspiracy-to-commit package.

He'd be vigilant all right. He didn't plan to take his eyes off of Andy for a minute, and if any one of them tried to hurt her, he'd come down on them so fast and hard, they wouldn't know what hit them.

"This is delicious," said Andy, spearing a succulent piece of crab from her salad. "You were right, Evelyn, this is the best. And I'm starving."

"All that exercise," Jeannie said and waggled her eyebrows.

"It sounds like it was a lovely evening," said Evelyn. "I'm so glad you enjoyed yourself. We weren't quite sure—"

"Damn him," said Jeannie. "That's the second time I've seen him talking to that Gloria Hollander."

Everyone looked across the pool. A slender woman with platinum shag hair was stretched out on one of the chaises. Demetri was leaning over her.

"I'm sure he's just being polite," said Loubelle. "You know how some of these women are."

"I do," agreed Jeannie. "I'm one of them. And I don't plan on sharing my slave with anyone. I have a good mind to go give her a piece of my mind." "Now, Jeannie, don't do anything rash," said Evelyn. "See. He's leaving."

"Well, if he expects me to keep putting out—"

Loubelle tittered, then covered her mouth with her napkin.

"That's not what I meant."

Loubelle shook her head behind the napkin.

Evelyn frowned. "You haven't been giving him any more presents, have you?"

"Just a few trinkets here and there. But if he wants it to continue, me and him are gonna have to have us a little chat."

Andy was glad to finally have the subject move away from her and Dillon, but she didn't like the look in Jeannie's eye. As far as Andy could tell, Demetri was an arrogant, deceitful ass. If Jeannie was getting too wrapped up in him, she was bound to be hurt.

"Maybe you shouldn't give him anything else," said Loubelle. "It is against the rules."

"Oh, rules, smules. I make my own. Nobody's complaining as long as I keep my money pouring in."

Andy's fork stopped halfway to her mouth as a surge of apprehension rushed through her. Another rich heiress who was pouring her money into Terra Bliss. She'd paid to keep them from firing Demetri. What else had she paid for? Was she in danger? Should Andy warn her?

But how could she without giving herself away, and without possibly putting Jeannie at risk.

She would tell Dillon. And then another thought struck her. "Jeannie, were you ever in Katherine's meditation group?"

"I went once, but it just made me feel all fuzzy-brained, so I dropped out. I'm here to have fun, not get enlightened." Her face lit up and she broke into a grin. "Why, here he comes, my hunky slave, looking good enough to eat. I guess he *was* just being polite."

An hour later Andy was sitting in Dr. Bliss's office, while the high priestess beamed across the coffee table at her. "I'm so glad you enjoyed your time with Dillon in the Bower of Bliss. I had a feeling that you were ready to ascend to the next level of empowerment. And after Carmen's enthusiastic report of your breakthrough in her workshop, I decided to put it to the test. We're very proud of you, Ariadne. This is what my work is about. Seeing women take control of their life, in work and in play. Demanding pleasure as well as being expected to give it. I hope you're as pleased as we are."

Overwhelmed was more like it. The high priestess was coming on strong. She seemed genuinely sincere. And the weird thing was, Andy was beginning to feel the same way, herself. She liked the doctor. It was hard to picture her as a murderer. Now that she thought about it, everyone here was nice, with the possible exception of Carmen and Jane toward each other. And they were nice to everybody else. The only staff member that even looked as if he might be a killer was Hans, the masseur, but everyone said he was a sweetheart. So many nice people all in one place. Kind of like *The Stepford Wives* meet *Helen of Troy*.

"You are happy here, Ariadne?"

Perfect opening. "Yes. Everyone must love it here."

"Why, thank you."

"Though . . . "

A crease appeared between the doctor's eyebrows. "Yes?"

"I guess it might not be to some people's taste."

"Not everyone is ready to take charge of their destiny."

"Yes. Well. What happens to those people? Do they get to leave if it doesn't agree with them?"

Dr. Bliss took a second to answer. "If they truly aren't happy, of course they can leave. However, they are not allowed to return until the next session. I hope you're not contemplating leaving us."

"Oh, no," said Andy.

"Good." The smile was back.

"Do many people leave?" She knew she was pushing it, but

she didn't think she'd have another opportunity to talk to the doctor so intimately.

"Not many." Dr. Bliss was watching her intently. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason."

"Are you feeling a little homesick? When you leave your old life behind, it's only natural that you should feel some ambivalence, a sense of loss even. But that's exactly why we insist on a retreat environment, to support each other as we slough off our old lives, our old habits. What you're feeling is a normal reaction to growth. It will soon pass."

Dr. Bliss rose from the wing chair like Aphrodite rising from the sea. Pretty impressive. "Remember. We're all here to support each other."

"Well, thank you," Andy said and took her leave.

She considered looking for Dillon. Compare notes. But on second thought, what did she have to tell him? That Jeannie was an heiress. That was no secret. That Imogene Southwaite and Mac had also been in Katherine's meditation group. That Jeannie had joined for one day before quitting. Jeannie was still alive. And hopefully, so was Aunt Mac. The meditation group was a pretty slim thread. Not enough to make him realize that he needed her help.

"How'd it go?"

She jumped. "Jesus, Dillon. Don't creep up on me that way."

"I didn't creep. You just weren't paying attention. So how did the debriefing go?"

"All right, I guess. I told her a fun time was had by all. Then I asked her if people could leave of their own free will. And she said yes."

"You what?" The words exploded from him, and before she knew it, she was being propelled out of the building and onto the lawn.

They didn't stop until they came to the Temple of Venus. Dillon pushed her through the archway and onto the hard marble bench. Then he turned on her. "Are you crazy?"

"All I did was ask a few innocent questions."

"Christ." He pushed his fingers through his hair, a gesture she was coming to dread. "No more questions. Do you understand? Don't talk to anybody. Not even the other trainees."

"Aw shucks, Dillon, I didn't know you cared."

"Well, I do. And I don't want you to be hurt or worse."

"You do?"

"Do what?"

"Care about me?"

"Of course I do. And don't you dare say, 'Aw shucks,' or I'll brain you myself."

She smiled up at him. "You say the most romantic things."

The anger seemed to seep out of him, and he sank onto the bench beside her. "I know you're capable of taking care of yourself. But damn it, Andy, this isn't a movie; you don't get more than one take. You're being watched. So no more going to the lake. Or anywhere you don't belong. Katherine Dane called me in the hall to tell me that you're—" He hesitated, uncertain of how much to reveal.

"I'm what?"

"She's worried about your emotional state."

"Just because I keep falling asleep in her meditation group? Jeez."

"No. It may be because she suspects you of being something that you aren't. She's a psychologist, after all. But I keep thinking they're setting you up. I just can't figure out what or when or where. So don't go anywhere alone. Especially don't attempt to go over the wall again. And tonight, you stay by my side."

"Tonight?"

"The bacchanalia."

"I'd forgotten about that. Pigs on spits and wild reveling.

222 Gemma Bruce

Oh, boy." She stood up. "Gee, look at the time. I'd better go iron my toga."

Dillon gritted his teeth. "Ariadne."

"You know, Dillon. You were right. It's so much easier working alone."

She heard him growl as she jogged up the hill toward home.

Chapter 19

The first thing Andy smelled when she reached the bacchanalia was roasting pork. It took only a quick look around to find the fire, the spit and, yes, the whole pig turning above the flames. Someone had stuck a wreath on its head. Several attendants stood close by, ostensibly overseeing the cooking, but who were paying more attention to their cans of beer.

Andy pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. The weather had turned cooler, and a piece of woolen fabric with directions for wearing it had magically appeared in her cabin that afternoon.

She was glad of it, since she didn't have to do the buttonedshirt thing. She wasn't the only one feeling the cold. Everyone, including the attendants, were wearing similar shawls or cloaks thrown around their shoulders. A few women had opted for tights beneath their robes.

She wandered through the crowd, looking for her friends and trying to avoid Dillon. She was feeling a little miffed at him for that macho thing he'd hit her with before they parted earlier. "Tonight, you stay by my side." Like she couldn't take care of herself. Of course, she supposed it was nice for a man to think she needed his protection. Even if she wasn't a part of his plan.

Torches were set up around the pool area, and they cast uneven shadows over the columned amphitheater where a bar and buffet tables were set up. Bowls of flaming oil floated on the swimming pool. And at each end, large birdbath-looking things held more fire and gave off the sickly odor of incense. It was warmer in the lit area, not just from all those flames, but from giant uber space heaters, camouflaged by curtains of flowing gauze.

Attendants and goddesses mingled around the pool, standing in groups or lounging in chaises.

The whole effect created an atmosphere somewhere between a Roman orgy and a suburban cocktail party.

Evelyn and Loubelle were seated with Rusty and Louis at their usual table, making serious headway through a platter of hors d'oeuvres and a pitcher of what looked like margaritas. Jeannie was conspicuously absent.

"Gone to the ladies' room," said Loubelle, when Andy asked where she was.

A burst of laughter rose from across the pool. Andy turned to see Demetri surrounded by a group of younger women. She was glad Jeannie wasn't here to see. Didn't they have some rules about flirting with other people's slaves? And what had happened to the attentive, unctuous ape on whom Jeannie had lavished presents.

"She's not going to be happy about that," said Evelyn.

"I think I'll just go remind him of his duties," Rusty said and stood up.

Loubelle grabbed his wrist. "You most certainly will not. He's a spiteful man and I want you to stay away from him."

Rusty patted her hand, then eased his wrist free. "I'll keep my distance. But someone needs to bring him to heel."

"I'll go, too," said Louis and hurried after him.

"Fine young men," said Loubelle. "And so considerate. You don't find many boys with moral fiber like that these days." She sighed. "Still, I wish they'd stay away from him. Rusty reminds me of my grandson."

Andy was thankful for that. She somehow couldn't imagine

Loubelle and Rusty in the throes of hot sex. Though she supposed that was what this retreat was about. Breaking down those kinds of preconceptions. If Loubelle wanted to have hot sex with Rusty, far be it from her to make judgments.

"Oh, thank goodness," said Loubelle. "He's stopped to tell JoJo. He'll see that Demetri tows the line."

"What line?" asked Jeannie, who'd come up behind them. She settled herself at the table and looked at the others.

"Nothing," said Loubelle, but her voice was a dead giveaway. Jeannie searched the crowd, zeroed in on Demetri, and scowled. "That little snake in the grass. And to think I forked out a bundle to keep him employed." Her lip quivered, but Andy couldn't tell if it was from anger or from trying not to cry.

Andy felt for her. How many times had she watched someone she'd just been with move on to greener pastures. And she knew there was nothing she could say or do to make Jeannie feel better.

"Men can be shits," she said.

Jeannie's eyes widened. "Don't tell me you and the panther are on the outs. Honey, I should have insisted on keeping him myself. He, at least, doesn't make a fool of you in front of the whole camp."

No, thought Andy, just in private.

"And speak of the devil. Yoo-hoo. Dillon, over here."

Andy tried not to look, because each time he came near her, her heart did a little hop, skip, and flip that told her she was getting too involved. Which was stupid. Because before long, Dillon would be just another notch on her SAG card.

He was wearing a cloak, thrown over one shoulder and secured by a large circular pin. The other shoulder was bare—and incredibly enticing. She wiped her hand across her mouth to make sure she wasn't drooling.

He smiled at her, and her heart did that skip thing, even though she was still mad at him.

"Love the dress," she said, just to get a rise out of him. It did.

"Don't start with me," he said between gritted teeth and sat down beside her. "Ladies, please stay away from open flames. I've already had to snatch several goddesses away from near incendiary disasters."

"Thank you for the warning," said Evelyn. "I was wondering if anyone was aware of the fire hazard."

"Where's Jeannie tonight?"

They all looked at Jeannie's empty seat.

"She was right here a second ago," said Loubelle, looking around.

"Well, at least Demetri has left those fawning women," said Evelyn, peering across the pool. "So hurtful to Jeannie after all she's done for him. Unfortunately, I don't see Gloria Hollander, either. If Jeannie finds the two of them together..."

"I think we should go look for her." Andy stood up, her eyes already scanning the crowd.

Dillon snagged her by the elbow. "What's this all about?"

He looked more annoyed than worried. The light cast the planes of his face into harsh angles. She shook him off. "Jeannie saw Demetri flirting with some other women. She's not very happy with him right now. And if she discovers him en flagrante with someone else, there'll be hell to pay." Not to mention that Jeannie would be devastated.

"Excuse us, Dillon," said Evelyn, getting to her feet.

"I'll find Rusty and Louis and get them to help look," said Loubelle.

"Let's meet back here in ten minutes," said Andy.

"Do you want some help?" asked Dillon.

Andy deliberated. "No, thanks. We can handle this by ourselves."

"Fine," he said and stalked away.

* * *

When they met again, no one had seen Jeannie or Demetri.

"I couldn't even find Rusty and Louis in this light," said Loubelle.

"Maybe she decided to make an early night of it," said Evelyn. "Oh, here comes Louis. I'll ask him to run up and check her cabin."

"What are the chances she and Demetri are there together?" asked Andy.

Evelyn leaned over and said in Andy's ear, "I'm not sure that there's any of that really going on. More wishful thinking than reality. She's a lonely woman. I don't want to see her hurt."

"Neither do I," said Andy, trying to assimilate what Evelyn had just told her. Louis went off toward the cabins, and the others resumed their search.

Andy made a quick sweep of the pool area, and not finding Jeannie or Demetri—or Dillon for that matter—she began to look farther afield.

She found several couples taking advantage of the shadows cast by the amphitheater's fluted columns, but none of them were Jeannie and Demetri. Across the lawn, there were lights coming from the men's dormitory.

Would Jeannie have followed Demetri there? Andy had gone after Dillon without a thought. And had been amply rewarded for her trouble. The memory of Dillon and her making love in the shower ambushed her. She'd just have to break the rules again and take a look.

She was passing the Spa, when she noticed light coming from inside. Someone must be taking a late-night swim. Or an intimate whirlpool?

She tried the door. It was unlocked and she went inside. The hallway was empty. The women's changing room was dark. She began to feel a little spooked and wished she hadn't rejected Dillon's offer to help. But she had to start getting over

him. He'd certainly made it clear that he was going to get over her.

Now she regretted confiding in him. Well, she was here to empower her womanhood, so she would just make the search herself. She could sort through her feelings later.

The last door led to the pool and whirlpool. She could see light through the square window in the door. She opened the door a crack, stuck her head in. The lights nearest to her were on, and the underwater pool lights, but the rest of the room was in shadows.

"Jeannie?" she called. Listened. Heard nothing but the bubbling water of the whirlpool. And since the whirlpool was on a timer, she knew she'd found the miscreants. Anger flared in her gut. They'd heard her and were trying to be quiet so they wouldn't be caught. And she knew for certain that it wasn't Jeannie he had in that whirlpool, because Jeannie would have answered, made some raucous joke, and Andy could have crept away, embarrassed, but relieved.

She strode past the pool, her fists clenched, the heels of her sandals sending up echoes as they clicked over the tiled floor. She wasn't sure what she was going to say when she found them; she was more inclined to knock Demetri's teeth out.

If she found Dillon in this situation, she'd neuter him. And she was tempted to do the same to Demetri, then yank out Gloria's hair. And where was Gloria's slave while all this was going on? If he'd been doing his job, she wouldn't have the time to roam.

"I know you're there," she said as she came up to the whirlpool. It was dark at this end of the room, but she could see them—at least one of them—in the water.

"Demetri, you swine."

Someone moved in the shadows across from her.

The lights flared on, and Andy blinked against the sudden brightness. The first thing she saw was Dillon standing on the opposite side of the whirlpool. "What are you doing here?" she asked stupidly.

"You didn't really think I was going to let you wander around in the dark alone."

"But what about—" She looked down into the whirlpool.

Demetri was there all right. But he was alone. Floating face-down in the churning water.

Andy blinked again, at first not believing what she was seeing. Swallowed down bile as it began to register. She stared down at Demetri, then back to Dillon. His face was expressionless, hard. She shook her head. Surely he hadn't . . . No it wasn't possible. And why would he?

She became aware of footsteps hurrying across the room. A scream pierced the air and bounced around the walls.

"Stop her," ordered Dillon. Andy turned around just as Jeannie ran past and tried to climb into the whirlpool.

Andy grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back. "Don't, Jeannie. It's too late."

Andy looked frantically at Dillon.

He shook his head.

Demetri was dead.

"Jeannie, come away. You can't save him." She began pulling the struggling woman away from the whirlpool.

Suddenly people were crowding through the door.

Andy had done enough thrillers to know that this was likely a crime scene. Not many people drowned in a whirlpool. She began to drag Jeannie toward the group of staring goddesses and attendants, wondering how she could handle both. But Dillon had anticipated her. He was already pushing people back.

Andy saw Evelyn and Loubelle standing in the crowd, mouths open in shock. She thrust Jeannie toward them and hurried back to Dillon's side.

Bernard Bliss pushed his way through the knot of people. "What's happening here?"

"There's been an accident," said Dillon, sounding cool,

sounding as if he were used to finding dead bodies all the time. Or killing them. Andy pushed the thought away. That was an awful way to think. And after he'd promised to help her find Mac.

Bliss stretched to see around Dillon and gasped. "Good God." He turned around and searched the crowd. "JoJo. Send the nurse here at once and have the MedEvac ready to lift off immediately. Someone should be doing CPR. Where's Hans?" Hans stepped out of the crowd and motioned to two men to get Demetri out of the water.

Dillon stepped in front of them, blocking the way. "I'm afraid it's too late for CPR."

"How do—" Andy closed her mouth on the words. How did he know it was too late? Demetri might still be alive. Unless he'd checked, or unless he'd killed him. *Stop thinking like that*, she ordered herself.

"Someone should call the local authorities," Dillon told Hans.

"Hans, please remove everyone from the room." The voice was cool, authoritative. Fiona Bliss appeared at her husband's side. She was several inches taller than he was, dressed in a flowing diaphanous chiton shot with gold. Andy hadn't seen her approach. It was as if she'd stepped right down from Olympus.

She continued to issue orders in the same sure, calm voice, but her eyes were focused on the body in the whirlpool, and they were filled with an emotion Andy couldn't guess at.

As Hans herded people back to the door, Katherine Dane slipped out of the crowd and came to stand on the other side of Bernard Bliss.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I've been having second thoughts about serving liquor at these parties. It seems that I was right." She shook her head, and her sleek hair caught the light and momentarily haloed her head.

"Hans, you'll have to take the body out the back and to the

heliport. This is upsetting enough without everyone witnessing that." She flicked her chin toward the whirlpool. "Have someone get him out of the water. I'll...go make an announcement. Terrible accident. Terrible," she said and started to walk away.

Andy saw Hans frown and Dillon slowly shake his head.

Katherine gave him a disdainful look. "Hans, now."

"No, Katherine," said Dr. Bliss in that same assured voice. "I'm afraid we must wait for the police before we can move him out of the pool."

Katherine whirled around. "The police? Don't be ridiculous, Fiona. There's no reason for that. We'll take him to the hospital, and they can file an accident report."

The doctor slowly shook her head.

Katherine moved closer to the head goddess and said urgently, "Do you know what this kind of thing can do to our reputation? We can't have any suspicions of misconduct or negligence linked to Terra Bliss. Our detractors will make full use of this to denounce the success of the goddess program."

"It can't be helped."

"At least call in the state. You know how the locals feel about us."

"They might learn to respect us if we cooperate."

Katherine shot an appealing look at Bernard, but he said, "You know that Fiona is right. But please do make an announcement, Katherine."

Katherine hesitated. "Well, I think you're making a mistake." She turned on her heel and marched toward the door.

Andy stood away from the others. She was trying to concentrate on what was going on around her, instead of thinking of Demetri dead and how Jeannie must be feeling. But it all passed in a fog. And strange questions kept popping into her mind. Like if Dillon had followed her to the Spa, why hadn't she heard him. And how did he get to the whirlpool before her? And how did he know Demetri was definitely dead?

And the biggie, why did he automatically take charge of things? Even Hans looked to him for instructions.

She felt him come up beside her, give her a sideways glance. Perfectly in control. And she realized for the first time that he was always in control, except making love to her. Or was that just an act? And why was she thinking these things when there was a dead man only feet away?

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Enough." She glanced back at the whirlpool. She didn't want to look but she couldn't seem to stop. The timer must have run out because the water was now smooth, and Demetri's body bumped against the bench that ran along the inside.

She swallowed. "In my business dead people get up when the take is over and go to the canteen for coffee. This is so . . . "

"Final," he supplied.

She nodded.

"I think you should go outside with the others."

"No. I found him. The police will want to talk to me."

"They'll call you when they're ready to take your statement. Just don't talk to anyone about what you've seen. Try to keep a clear head and try to remember whatever details you can."

Like that when the lights came on, you were the one I found standing over the body?

"I'm staying."

His hand came around her bicep so fast that she let out a gasp. She tried to wrench away, but he held her trapped.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to curb my temper." His voice was low, tight. "Trust me. You don't want to get involved in this mess any more than necessary. Someone killed the poor slob, and they're going to feel a little threatened. And considering you're here under false pretenses, you might want to keep a low profile."

"I never saw the man before in my life."

"Maybe. But you've been here for a week, and believe me that's plenty of time for someone to get the urge to kill."

She stared at him. Not believing what she was hearing. "You think I killed him?"

He let out a mighty sigh. "I'm just saying you should be careful."

And what about you? Who are you? "How do you know so much about this kind of thing?"

This got her a flash of teeth. "The movies," he said and shoved her toward the door.

Chapter 20

T he movies. What a jackass, thought Andy as she sat by the pool, watching Loubelle and Evelyn trying to comfort Jeannie. It had been nearly an hour since they'd discovered Demetri's body. She had no idea what was going on inside, just that Dillon was still in there and she was out here.

"Why? Why?" sobbed Jeannie. "How could something like this happen?"

Andy had a few ideas, but kept them to herself.

"He was just there, in the whirlpool, just . . . floating." This ended in a louder sob than the rest, and Evelyn and Loubelle patted and cooed more fervently.

Drowning in a whirlpool. Falling from a balcony. Andy stopped there. She didn't want to think about what might have happened to Mac.

Dr. Bliss climbed the steps of the amphitheater and stopped in front of the buffet table. For once, she wasn't accompanied by her acolytes. Andy found them at the bottom of the steps, clinging to each other as if there had never been a hard feeling between them. She also saw shadows moving in the dark outside the lit pool area. The security guards must have been dispatched.

The doctor didn't move, just looked over the crowd until all conversation stopped and all eyes turned to where she was standing. For several moments she just looked over the crowd, her face loving and a little sad.

Then she raised her hands in that gesture of supplication that was her trademark. "Friends, fellow goddesses, I know there is much concern about the tragedy that occurred here tonight." She told them very simply that Demetri had suffered a heart attack and was dead. Andy hoped she was right, because if Demetri had been murdered—but she wouldn't even think about that.

The doctor was sympathetic, sad, calm, and reassuring by turns. But when she informed them that the police had been summoned and that everyone should remain poolside until they arrived, a tide of murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"I have been assured that this is merely standard procedure whenever there is an unexpected death," she told them. "I hope that we all will cooperate in their investigation." She paused. Looked over the crowd. "Life is short. Which makes it all the more important that we should find our inner powers without delay."

In other words, thought Andy, business as usual.

As she ended her speech, a line of police cars, lights flashing, sirens churning, drove into the compound. They were accompanied by a fire truck, an ambulance, and a black sedan, bringing up the rear.

Uniformed policemen and EMTs poured out of the vehicles. No one in the sedan made an appearance. Two uniforms were left guarding the Spa door, and Hans led the others inside. As soon as they were gone, the back door of the sedan opened, and a man stepped out.

He was wearing a suit and appeared tall from where Andy was standing. She edged closer to get a better look. He was either the undertaker, a federal agent, or a Mormon missionary. Too early for the undertaker, too late to save Demetri's soul. That left the feds.

And where did that leave her? She knew her police proce-

dure. If you worked in enough movies, you picked things up. Some of it might even be true. And she knew that if they'd sent in the feds, they suspected more than a death under unusual circumstances.

And if they arrived this quickly, they must have already been investigating the retreat. And since Dillon had immediately taken charge of the crime scene, she figured he must be one, too. He'd denied it. But no big surprise there. She'd been consorting with a government agent.

He might even be doing the questioning. Just her luck.

The door to the Spa opened. Hans and one of the policemen stepped out and strode over to the pool. Andy waited for them to spot her, and when Hans motioned her over, she went without a backward glance.

She was escorted to Hans's office where an interview room had been hastily set up. A stack of *Sports Illustrateds* had been shoved to one side and replaced by a tape recorder. The officer in charge sat behind the desk, dwarfed by the overlarge furniture.

Another policeman sat in a straight-back chair with a steno pad balanced on his knee. The man who'd gotten out of the sedan stood at the back of the room, conspicuously inconspicuous.

Dillon was absent.

It was the first time Andy had been in the masseur's office, and she looked around while she waited for them to begin. The walls were lined with sports pictures and Xeroxed health articles. There was a water cooler in one corner, and a small refrigerator within reach of the desk chair.

The officer glanced up from an open manila folder. "Ms. Ar-iee-ad-nee McAllister?"

"Yes."

Their eyes met, and she thought, *Shit*. She should have been figuring out what to say instead of looking at Hans's walls.

She sat there feeling foolish as his eyes panned down her shawl and chiton and back up again. Probably the first time he'd ever had to interview someone dressed up like an ancient Greek. He shook his head and looked back down at the folder. "You live at 1254 Sepulveda Boulevard, Los Angeles?"

"Yes."

"You found the deceased?"

"Yes." So far things were proceeding according to script. She let out air and felt her shoulders relax.

"Can you tell us what you saw?"

Andy did, faltering only when she came to the part about Dillon being there. But if he'd killed Demetri, they probably already knew about it. Maybe even ordered him to do it. She told them about Jeannie coming in and screaming.

All the while she knew the man in the suit was watching her. She could feel his gaze on the back of her neck, analyzing everything she said.

And you've been doing too many movies, girl.

The officer asked her a few more questions: Why she'd come to the Spa. What was her relationship to the deceased? What was her relationship with Jeannie Jenkins? What was Jeannie's relationship to the deceased?

Finally, Andy's curiosity got the better of her. "Why are you asking all these questions?" Andy saw his gaze flick past her to the man stationed behind her. It was an involuntary reaction; she doubted if he was even aware of it.

"Just routine," he said. "It says here, you're a librarian."

"What?" Oh, great, she'd forgotten that her nutcase family had filled out the forms. It was anybody's guess what other outlandish things they'd made up about her.

How the hell was she going to explain this without making herself look like a pathological liar—or the perfect suspect.

"Ms. McAllister?"

Andy thought furiously. "I'm...not working at the moment." That was true enough.

Once again his gaze flicked past her, a frown passed over his face. Then he said, "That's all for now, Ms. McAllister. Please stay by the pool area in case we have more questions."

She stood up and headed for the door, but she couldn't resist a quick look at the man who seemed to be controlling the investigation without ever saying a word.

He met her look, but his eyes, his expression, his body gave nothing away.

The officer who'd accompanied her to the Spa was waiting outside the door. As he ushered her down the hall, she saw another policeman bringing Jeannie in. She was clinging to him, looking small and old. Andy gave her an encouraging smile as they passed, but it only made Jeannie cry all the more.

More policemen had arrived, and they were standing in a group looking over the crowd. Ariadne received several lascivious—and a couple of disgusted—looks as she passed by. She ignored them. This must be what Katherine was talking about. It was obvious that the local force didn't think highly of Terra Bliss.

Andy looked out across the pool and thought how ridiculous they all looked, playing goddess and slave. Empowering themselves by dressing up in silly costumes.

A siren cranked up, jolting her out of her thoughts. The ambulance drove slowly around to the back of the Spa. They were going to take Demetri out through the delivery door.

For the next hour, Andy watched people go into the Spa and return. Dr. Bliss made brief appearances, then left Katherine to wander through the crowd, offering support. Andy wasn't surprised when she stopped at their table. She said a few words to Jeannie, then turned to Andy.

"Ariadne," she said in her slightly toneless voice. "How are you?"

"Fine," said Andy, though suddenly she was bone tired.

"Good. Dr. Bliss was concerned. They should be dismissing us soon. I know this can be very depressing. But you mustn't dwell on it. Try to get some sleep. And be sure to attend the meditation session in the morning. It will help free you of any underlying stress or anxiety caused by this unhappy event."

"Do they know how he died?" asked Loubelle.

"Heart attack is the initial diagnosis. Though I believe the poor man drowned."

"Oh," said Loubelle, distress making her drawl more pronounced.

"I'm sure he didn't suffer. Tomorrow, Ariadne." She melted away just as the group of policemen Andy had encountered at the Spa door appeared on the perimeter and began to spread through the crowd. They took statements while giving the goddesses a variety of unprofessional looks.

At last, they were all dismissed to return to their cabins.

Andy hadn't seen Dillon since the proceedings began, so she was surprised to find him standing off to the side, talking to the man in the suit. Well, not surprised, exactly.

The man was smiling. Dillon looked mutinous. She was confused. Were they colleagues? Or was the suit about to arrest him? Did he think Dillon killed Demetri? Did she?

She frowned. Why was she thinking it? She knew Dillon hadn't killed Demetri. Fear probably. It could really screw with your mind.

She really wanted to know where he'd been the whole time the questioning was going on, but she was too far away to catch his eye. Too tired to wait for him to finish. Too depressed to do anything but sleep.

"Go ahead, Talbot, enjoy yourself," said Dillon as he watched Andy walk toward the woods.

Grayson Talbot chuckled. "I think you look cute in a skirt."

"Thanks. I appreciate it, but don't stand with your back to any open windows." Then he realized Talbot was also watching Andy.

Talbot shook his head. "I gotta tell you, Cross. You sure know how to pick them."

"I believe you assigned me this case."

"Lighten up. I was talking about the auburn-haired beauty." Talbot drew his attention back to Dillon, but there was still a ghost of an appreciative smile on his face. "So what do you

want to know about her? I've had the info for a day and a half now. Just waiting for you to pick it up. You haven't been too prompt with your communications."

Dillon gave him a look. "It's what we thought. The airways are scrambled inside the compound. I can only send and receive outside the walls. Which means climbing over a twelve-foot wall and hiking up the mountain to chat."

Talbot whistled. "Getting your exercise, I see."

"I'm also working out and running five miles a day."

"Chill. You're too damn defensive."

"I have reason to be."

"Bullshit. You don't have to kill yourself proving that you're still useful. You are. It was never a question on our end. Just on yours."

Dillon fought the urge to clench his fists. Breathe. Be cool.

Talbot saw his reaction anyway. He always knew how to read Dillon and vice versa. It was what made them such good friends, what made them trust each other with their lives. And Dillon had almost let him down.

"Let it go, Cross."

Dillon nodded, just a quick jerk of his head. Sometimes it was awful being with someone who could read your thoughts. Like Talbot—like Andy. She could read his thoughts, too. It had been stupid to let her get so close to him. He'd learned his lesson with Isabelle. He didn't think he'd ever forget it. And here he was, not even a year later, falling for Ariadne McAllister.

"So do you want to hear the inside tract on your Ms. McAllister?"

Dillon started. "She's not mine."

Talbot raised one eyebrow and Dillon braced himself. "But I think you'd like her to be."

"You don't have to worry about me. I never make the same mistake twice."

Talbot slowly shook his head. "So you got involved with Isabelle. It's one of the hazards of deep cover. You start acting the part, the boundaries of reality get fuzzy. It happens to the best agents. That's why we have debriefings. Isabelle was a pro and a damned good one. It could have been any of us."

"But it was me."

"And you took her out when you had to."

"Yeah."

"And pulled the mission out of the toilet."

"Dumb luck."

"Maybe, but luck counts." He was silent for a moment. And the two men looked straight ahead, out over the dark lawn, not needing to see each other to feel the camaraderie and trust between them. "Don't let what happened with Isabelle sour your chance of a healthy relationship."

Dillon snorted. "Great advice. I don't see a wife hanging on your arm."

A slow grin spread over Talbot's mouth. "Wife, huh?"

"You know what I mean. What did you find out about her?"

"That she's not a librarian."

"Hardly."

"That's what it said on her application to Terra Bliss. I don't know why she thought she needed three weeks at this place. If you ask me, if she unleashed any more sexual clout, we'd all be on our knees."

Dillon cut him a look.

Talbot held up his hands. "Not me. But she's not a reporter, either. You'll never guess what she really is."

"A stuntwoman."

Talbot's face fell. "If you already knew that, why have I had four people and computers on it for two days?"

"I just found out. Yesterday. She came here—in disguise." He couldn't completely keep a reminiscent smile off his face. "Her aunt was here at the last session and has disappeared." He filled Talbot in on everything Andy had told him.

"Think her disappearance is connected to the Southwaite death?"

"It could be. It could be totally unrelated."

"But this death is number three anomaly. Too many coincidences."

"I don't think Demetri died of a heart attack. Somebody killed him to keep him silent. He broke rules right and left. He never got fired. That says to me that he was holding something over someone's head."

"Fiona Bliss?"

"Bliss, her husband, or Katherine Dane, the business manager. He'd been bragging that he knew stuff, but wouldn't elaborate. I searched his possessions, came up with zip."

Talbot rocked back on his heels, pushed his hands into his trouser pockets. "I suppose we'll have to stick with this investigation. But try to wrap this up as quickly as possible. The Southwaite family is breathing down our necks."

"I will. But do me a favor."

Talbot cocked his head.

"Take Andy—Ariadne—out of here. If they know she's here because of Miranda Houston, they might try to kill her, too."

"You think there's a danger of them finding out?"

"They already have her under surveillance."

Talbot whistled softly, but he had a gleam in his eye that Dillon didn't like. He was already shaking his head, when Talbot said, "Bait."

"No." Dillon rasped out the word. "I can't protect her and continue to investigate."

"Of course you can."

"If I fuck this up . . . "

"You won't. Give yourself a break, Dil. If you decide to leave after this is over, fine. Until then, get back on the damn horse." And with that, he sauntered away.

Dillon stood watching until he climbed back into the black car and it drove out the gates of Terra Bliss.

The night air turned frigid, and he crossed his arms under the skimpy cloak and started up the hill. There was a serpent in this pseudo-paradise. He'd be damned if he let Ariadne become the next victim. Her cabin light was still on, and as Dillon got closer, he could hear people talking. She wasn't alone. He felt inordinately disappointed. He was cold, and he wanted Andy to warm him. He wanted to ask her questions about tonight. He wanted to warn her to be careful, ask her to leave. But most of all, he wanted to make mindless, raging love to her.

To hell with girl talk. He stepped onto the porch and knocked. Andy answered. She'd changed to sweats. Her hair was loose around her shoulders. And she was frowning.

"Evelyn and Loubelle brought Jeannie over. She's really upset."

I'll bet, thought Dillon. Because if one of the Terra Bliss scions hadn't killed Demetri, his bet was on Jeannie Jenkins. "Is this girls only?"

"Well," Andy began.

"No," said Jeannie, her voice thick from a night of continuous crying. "Come tell us what they said to you."

Andy shrugged and let him in.

Evelyn and Loubelle were sitting on the couch with Jeannie between them. Louis and Rusty sat on the floor. Dillon was surprised to see them. He hadn't heard their voices. They both nodded at Dillon. Dillon nodded back.

A box of crackers and a bowl of limp grapes were placed on the coffee table. Three bottles of wine were lined up next to them. One was already empty.

Drowning our sorrows, thought Dillon as Andy wordlessly filled a plastic glass and handed it to him.

She sat in the club chair across from the couch. Dillon sat down on the arm. Just being this close to her made him feel warmer. He longed to touch her, to run his fingers through her hair, to make love to her until the image of Demetri floating in the water was banished from his mind, taking all the other deaths he'd witnessed—had caused—with it.

"Was it really a heart attack?" asked Jeannie.

"That's what they're saying," said Dillon.

"But you were in there for so long. You must know some-

thing more." Jeannie's expression was so pitiful that Dillon felt bad about having to lie—but not bad enough.

Jeannie sniffed. "They think I was responsible."

"No, no," everyone expostulated. Loubelle patted her hand. Louis shook his head. Evelyn pursed her lips at Dillon, then said, "Of course not. You can't give someone a heart attack."

Not unless you have the right drugs, thought Dillon and wondered if Jeannie had a heart condition. It wasn't clear that Demetri's death had anything to do with Southwaite's death or Houston's disappearance. But it was damn suspicious. Someone might take advantage of those incidences to do Demetri in and make it look like it was related. It could be anybody. Jeannie. Rusty? Hell. JoJo had been mad enough to commit murder when they refused to fire Demetri. They all had motives.

But Demetri's death hadn't been an act of passion. It was cold, and it was premeditated. He glanced down at Andy. At least he could rule her out. He'd been following her all night. But he could tell from her expression that she wasn't so sure about him.

He dragged his attention from Andy's face and looked sympathetically at Jeannie. "You're not thinking clearly. You should get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning."

"We all need some rest," Evelyn said and pushed to her feet. Rusty and Louis stood. Rusty helped Loubelle up, then turned to Jeannie. "Come on, Jeannie. We'll see you home."

"You can stay with me tonight," said Evelyn and led the way outside.

"Smooth," said Andy. She began to clear off the table. Dillon grabbed the empty bottles and followed her into the kitchen, where she was dropping everything into the garbage can. Dillon tossed the bottles after the grapes.

Andy leaned her back against the counter and watched him. He smiled at her. She didn't smile back.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Maybe finding a dead body in the whirlpool?"

He stepped toward her. "I know. I'm sorry. What made you look in the Spa?"

"I saw the light and—" She broke off. "And what were you doing there, standing in the dark? And who was that man in the suit you were talking to? Just what and who are you, Dillon Cross?"

So much for questioning her. He couldn't get a word in edgewise. Maybe they should forget about the investigation until later. He slipped his arms around her and pulled her away from the counter.

She gave him a look. "Dillon . . . "

"Hmmm," he said, breathing in her hair.

"I know what you're doing."

"Hmmm." He found the bottom of her sweatshirt, dipped his fingers beneath it. Pulled her close, while his hands explored her back. She wasn't wearing a bra.

"You're trying to distract me."

He rubbed against her. "Is it working?"

"Hmmm." She unfastened the pin that held his cloak together. It fell to the floor. She pressed both palms to his chest, and he felt suddenly warm. Warm. Hell. He was getting hotter by the second.

He pulled off her sweatshirt, found the elastic of her sweatpants, and pushed his hands beneath it. Spread his fingers across her firm butt. Slid lower. She wasn't wearing underwear. His dick swelled against her stomach.

"Hold that thought." He pulled his hands out of her pants, lifted his kilt, and pulled off his jockstrap, freeing his erection. He sighed and tossed the jockstrap across the room.

A tremor passed through her.

"Laugh. Go ahead." He thrust his hands back into her sweats.

She rubbed against him. "After we've had our way with each other..." Her hands moved from his chest to his ribs. He flinched as she touched the ticklish part of him. "After the torture and the tease..." Her hands slid between their bodies,

over the rough chest hair, tweaked his nipples. "After all that..." Her hands moved to his kilt. Found the buttons and undid them. She tossed his kilt across the room to join the jockstrap. And he was standing butt naked in front of the cabin window.

He tried to shift them out of the light, but she grabbed his butt and pulled him back. "After that . . ." She started to pull him to the floor.

"Wait," he said. He grasped her wrists and steered her across the floor.

"Where are we going?"

"Bedroom. Bed. Mattress. White sheets. Pillows."

"Missionary position?"

"Whatever works." He kicked the bedroom door open and tossed her onto the bed. She stretched out her arms and he fell into her.

"After that," said Andy, cupping his butt, "you're going to tell me exactly what happened tonight in the whirlpool."

Chapter 21

Well, this was novel, thought Andy as she stretched along Dillon's body between the covers, flesh to flesh, front to front.

She sighed contentedly. They'd just had missionary sex and it was incredible. Who knew that you didn't have to swing from the chandeliers to make sex everything that it should be and more.

She had to admit this was really good. No pebbles sticking in your butt. No slippery shower tiles to balance on. No fighting off smothering pillows to get to the yummy parts of each other. Beds were good.

She snuggled closer and Dillon draped a thigh over hers. She felt his cock begin to stir against her and a thrill shot through her. She knew she had important things to discuss, questions to ask. But her mouth didn't seem to work, except in a very nonverbal way that was displaying itself as she nibbled his shoulder.

You need to get a grip, echoed a distant voice in her head. I sure do, she thought and stretched her hand down to find him with her fingers. And presto. Instant erection. The man had excellent responses and a quick rebound to match her own.

You have work to do, the little voice reminded her. She knew it, and with another suspicious death . . . She sighed, pulled her hand away. "We need to—"

"I agree," Dillon said and covered her mouth with his.

Okay, maybe later, she thought as she gave in to his kiss. Gave in to him. Just reacted as he began to kiss, lick, and nip his way down her body.

The sheet inched away as he pushed up to his knees and licked between her legs.

"Hmmm," she sighed and opened her knees for him. He turned his head, kissed the inside of her thigh. A shudder ran through her, and she considered jumping for joy, except that he'd moved to her other thigh and she didn't think she could move.

Her hips tipped up, inviting him in, but he seemed fascinated by the sensitive skin on the inside of her knee. She shifted her butt, he bit her thigh, and her breath whooshed out. He was totally silent. The air was still, except for the escalating panting that she knew was coming from her. "You're... oh...you're..."

"Driving you wild?" he finished and took another nip, this time closer to home. "and to think"—nip—"we have"—nip—"all night."

"We do?"

"Yeah." Nip . . . and bingo.

She cried out as that last kiss hit the mark. She rocked against him. His lips softened as he sucked her in. He released her, blowing air over her before his tongue lapped into her. Licked through her sensitive flesh and started over again.

She reached for his shoulders to pull him up to her. He pushed her hands away, pinned her wrists to the bed. Paused in his rhythmic assault to say, "I'm your slave, remember. Let me pleasure you."

He released her wrists, stretched his arms up, and took her breasts in his hands. Rubbed his palm across the tightened nipples, so sensitive now that she could barely stand his touch. And all the time his mouth kept playing her, until she writhed against him, called out his name. She coiled tighter and tighter, until she could wait no longer, and she leapt—through the flames—hovered in space. Dillon pushed himself up her body and thrust into her, and she soared, taking Dillon with her. At last she fell, fell to earth, like so many times, so many shoots before. Only this time she fell into Dillon Cross's arms, and she knew in that instant that she'd also fallen in love.

"No," she said, every instinct fighting the knowledge.

Dillon lay heavily on top of her. He shifted his weight, pulled back to look at her.

"Andy, what is it? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Then what? No, what?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." She pulled him back to her, let his body cover her like a heavy blanket. Shutting out the world, shutting out reality, but not able to shut out that treacherous last thought. She'd fallen in love with this man. After a few short days. And she couldn't because she couldn't trust him. *He's bad.* She shook her head again, this time as if knocking away a gnat. He wasn't bad. Why had she thought that?

"Okay, you're scaring me now. What's going on?" Dillon sat up. Beat on a pillow and pushed it against the headboard. Then he pulled her up to sit, cradled in his arms. "Open your eyes and tell me what's going on."

Going on? She didn't know. Her body and heart were saying one thing, and her mind was telling her something else. She didn't know how he fit into these things, but he did, and she didn't think he was on the wrong side. Hell, she'd seen him talking to that suit. *But you can't be sure*. What was with this voice that kept invading her thought processes? It wasn't the one she was used to, and she certainly didn't intend to give it a home. It was annoying as hell.

Dillon stroked her shoulder, pulled the bedspread over them.

She snuggled into him. "Tell me about what happened. Who was that suit you were talking to? Tell me about yourself."

"Now?" he asked, surprised. "Aren't we supposed to be experiencing postcoital contentment? I know I am."

She was, too. But something wasn't letting her enjoy it. She'd been waffling like this for the last couple of days. And she didn't think it was a typical love-hate relationship. She knew what those were like. "I don't know. Something is bothering me."

"About your aunt? We'll find her."

"You're going to help me?"

"Yes. I told you."

She shouldn't believe him. But he felt so right, so true. And God knew she'd had enough experience picking out fakes; the ones just using her for fun, for excitement, for getting themselves up another rung of the ladder. She didn't feel that way about Dillon.

He's using you.

She clapped her hands over her ears. She didn't like this naysayer in her head. It was so unlike her. She must be really stressed out over Aunt Mac's disappearance and Demetri's death. Go find her. Don't trust him.

"I have to find my aunt."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I know, honey. I told you we will."

"But who is we? What do you really do? I need you to say it."

Here he was in a beautiful woman's bed, having just had great sex, and she was pumping him for information. And God forgive him, Dillon wanted to tell her. But rules were rules.

And her need to know was making him uncomfortable. Curiosity? Desperation? He'd almost ruled her out as a plant. Talbot seemed to think she was okay. Besides, they couldn't be on to him. The situation had been set up very carefully.

He was overreacting again. Because of that damned last

mission. Talbot was right. He needed to start living in the present. This was different. He felt different, and he was sure Andy did, too. She just hadn't realized it yet.

Or maybe she was playing him. He couldn't be sure. Maybe you never could be.

The two of them sat against the headboard, not talking, not looking at each other. Together, but not together at all. And it made him sad. Then he felt Andy grow heavy in his arms. She'd fallen asleep, and suddenly he felt much better. That showed a certain amount of trust, didn't it? To fall asleep? And she could trust him. Maybe he'd tell her so. Tomorrow.

But long before morning, Dillon eased out of bed. He'd slept some, but he couldn't rest. He should have gone to the dorm instead of coming to Andy's cabin. He'd probably missed out on a lot of speculation over Demetri's "heart attack," and possibly some real tips.

He looked back at Andy, a dark form in a dark room. He should let her know that he was leaving, but she'd seemed so tired when she'd fallen asleep that he hated to disturb her. So he kissed her on the forehead and tiptoed out of the room.

The cabin was cold and he stopped to turn up the heat. She'd wake up to warmth. Even if it wasn't his warmth. That could come later, once this was over. He scooped up his kilt off the kitchen floor and stopped. Who was he kidding? When this was over, she would go back to the movies, and if he were lucky, he would be given a new assignment.

He threw the cloak around his shoulders and stepped outside. His breath formed a cloud in the darkness. Banishing the thought of Andy's warm, inviting body, he stole noiselessly into the night.

Andy rolled over and recoiled. Where she'd expected to find Dillon, she touched cold sheets instead. She sat up, looked around with bleary eyes.

"Dillon?"

No answer. She flopped back on the pillows. Great. He'd said they had all night. But obviously not. At this rate, they'd never even make it to a one-night stand. Of course, she wouldn't have to figure out a way to get rid of him in the morning, either. That was always a sticky business. No. It was better for them both not to have to face each other in the harsh light of day.

She pushed the covers away before she turned into Tallulah Bankhead in a depressing thirties movie. She pulled on her robe and went out to the living room. Definitely gone.

She made coffee, and while it dripped, she let questions, theories, fears roll around in her head. She needed to be doing something. Because suddenly it felt as though time was running out. Unfortunately, it was still only five o'clock. Everyone else would still be sleeping. Except maybe Dillon.

She took her coffee into the living room, paced while she wondered what he was up to. If he'd gone back to the dorm to sleep or if he was out looking for clues. Because even though he hadn't admitted it, she was pretty sure he was working for the suit.

Should she go look for him? And do what? Act like the needy creature she was beginning to feel like? She could grill him on his identity and what he was actually doing at Terra Bliss, but she'd been trying to do that for days, with no success. Every time she even got close to pinning him down, they ended up making love instead.

Whoa, girl. Sex. Pure and simple. Don't go making it complicated. Of course, it was way too late to keep it simple. She had it bad. Like the flu. And she knew for a fact, she wasn't going to be able to shake it without real concentration. Damn, why did he have to be so amazingly desirable.

Enough of this; she'd go for a swim in the lake. Better than a cold shower for what ailed her. Then she remembered what Dillon had said about the guards watching her. Was it true? Or did he just want to keep her from going outside?

Two minutes later, she was dressed and creeping through the woods to the perimeter wall. She felt foolish, until she nearly fell over two guards who had stopped to light cigarettes. She shrunk back into the woods, waited for them to start off again. Then stepped back onto the path.

So it was true. But why? Or were they patrolling more seriously because of last night.

If they caught her, they might think that she was the murderer, trying to escape. She was convinced it was murder. She'd been to a lot of parties with some really drunk and stoned people, and no one had ever drowned in the hot tub.

She crept quietly back to her cabin, feeling totally useless. Questions were running around in her head like gerbils on treadmills. She needed answers and had no idea whom to ask.

A few minutes before six, she realized she was about to miss meditation class. Last night, Katherine had made a point of telling her to come. And even though Andy didn't know how meditation could possibly help her deflated spirits, it might at least help her to see things more clearly.

But as soon as she sat down and crossed her legs, the questions flooded back in more of a jumble than ever. She knew she wouldn't be able to empty her mind, much less embrace the damn universe. But Katherine had just entered the room and it was too late to escape.

Well, this was as good a place as any to search her mind for any details she might have missed, connections she'd failed to make. She'd just assume the position, remember to breathe, and let her mind free associate.

Katherine walked past her, looking pale but serene. She took her place in the front of the class. Andy hoped she wouldn't say anything about the "tragedy" as Demetri's death was being called.

She merely began her routine, instructing the class as she always did. "Close your eyes, let your body and mind relax." As soon as she began talking, Andy grew sleepy. But as Katherine

continued to drone on, thoughts crowded back into her mind. She was supposed to let them go, send them out into space, but they were tenacious, refusing to be ignored. She knew the police had questioned Dillon and Jeannie and probably others as well. Like maybe Rusty. He and Demetri had been fighting over something when Dillon broke it up.

It seemed to Andy that the police were treating Demetri's death much too nonchalantly, but surely they would be back today with more questions. Maybe they would have a verdict on the cause of death. Would the suit in the black sedan come, too?

Katherine's voice came closer. Andy peeked and saw her wending her way among the meditators as she always did.

Andy closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. Why was Demetri in the whirlpool last night? Was he meeting someone there? A tryst. Jeannie? But Jeannie had been dressed in the chiton she'd been wearing at the bacchanalia. Or someone else? Maybe she should tell the police to question Gloria Hollander.

Andy almost jumped when Katherine's voice sounded near her ear, and she realized the woman was leaning over her. Embarrassed to be caught daydreaming, Andy tried not to fidget. It was hard with so many ideas floating around in her head. She should have made some excuse and left while she had the chance.

Katherine didn't move away but continued to talk lowly in Andy's ear. She tried to ignore her. It was distracting her from her problem solving. But she was startled out of her thoughts when Katherine said, "Depressed, very depressed." She was so close now that Andy could feel her breath on her cheek. It took all of her training not to move away.

Why was Katherine talking about depression? She *had* been ricocheting between highs when she was with Dillon and lows when they were apart. But she'd hardly call it depression.

Except maybe she was a little depressed. Who could blame

her. Mac was still missing. Demetri was dead. And Dillon was God-knew-what. The only thing she knew for sure was that at the worst possible moment in her life, she'd fallen in love with a stranger. And that wasn't good. He'd said he would help her, but so far he'd done nothing except botch her breaking-and-entering attempt, throw her equilibrium to hell, and evade her questions.

Then Katherine leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "Don't trust him." And moved away.

Don't trust who? Andy wondered. Dillon? Had Katherine known what she was thinking? A shudder passed over her, but luckily Katherine's back was turned and she didn't see. Was she trying to warn Andy? Did she know who Dillon really was? Had the guards seen her and Dillon at the falls and told Dr. Bliss? Was that why they were patrolling there?

Andy opened one eye again, tried to look at Katherine in a new way, but all she saw was a slender woman, moving gracefully through the room. But she remembered her moaning and twitching on the table in the eternal orgasm room, with Bernard Bliss sitting between her legs. Did Dr. Bliss know about that?

Her thoughts were tumbling over each other now, and she couldn't stop them or even organize them. Why was Katherine warning her in the middle of a meditation session? Was it the only place she thought no one else would listen?

And why shouldn't she trust Dillon. She hadn't trusted him at first, but that was more because she had something to hide than because of him. And yet, it seemed the closer she got to him, the more some part of her resisted.

He'd been standing over the whirlpool when the lights came on, but so had she, and she knew she hadn't killed Demetri. She could easily imagine Dillon killing someone. He was the epitome of the good-looking bad boy—the way he moved, the way he stood, the taut muscles of his body, that hard, unreadable face. . . .

Andy jumped when the other women began getting to their

feet, and she realized that the session had ended. She unbent her legs and staggered to her feet. Her joints were stiff, and she felt as if she'd been sleeping. Maybe she had. She didn't remember Katherine sitting down on her mat or intoning the prayer she used every day: "Go out into the world reenergized and confident to be what you want."

She returned her mat and stumbled outside, where she had to close her eyes against the sun. She followed the other meditators across the lawn. No one spoke. It always took a few minutes to get back up to speed after meditating. But by the time they reached the Pantheon, they were chattering and laughing as usual. They all seemed refreshed and content.

All except Andy. She just wanted to go back to bed. She didn't feel reenergized or confident. She felt . . . depressed. Not depressed, but unsure of herself. It was so unlike her. She wandered into the dining room, picked up a piece of fruit from the buffet table, and made her way over to Evelyn, Loubelle, and Jeannie.

Jeannie's face was puffy and blotched. She must have been crying all night. She hadn't bothered to put on makeup; her hair hung lankly around her face. Andy patted her arm sympathetically and sat down beside her. A coffeepot appeared at her elbow. Dillon smiled at her as he poured.

Andy shrank back. Don't trust him.

His smile faded and he moved away.

"I just can't believe it," Jeannie said and wiped her nose with a white handkerchief she kept crumpling between restless fingers. "Demetri dead. We'd just seen him talking to"—she hiccupped—"those women. And then—It isn't possible."

"There, there," Evelyn said and rubbed Jeannie's back. She looked across Jeannie to Andy. "Have you heard anything? Do they know for certain how he died?"

Andy shook her head. "It's too early to tell. They'll probably perform an—" She lowered her voice, mouthed the next word. "Autopsy."

"No," moaned Jeannie. "They can't. Not on Demetri. I won't let them."

Andy opened her mouth, but Evelyn shook her head. There was no reason to tell Jeannie that she had no rights in the case.

Dillon leaned over to fill Jeannie's cup, said, "Jeannie, I'm so sorry," and flashed her a sympathetic and, at the same time, sexy smile.

Andy gritted her teeth.

"Thank you." Jeannie looked up at him with large doe eyes.

Perfect, thought Andy. He'd managed to take Jeannie's mind off the autopsy and flirt with her at the same time. The man was good. You had to give him that.

He filled Evelyn's and Loubelle's cups. Then with a last smile at Jeannie, whose eyes had been following him as intently as Andy's, he walked away.

"He's so sweet," said Jeannie. She tried to smile, but the smile wobbled and she broke down again.

Andy wasn't smiling. Don't trust him.

"I think the police were overwhelmed last night," said Loubelle, keeping the conversation away from the indelicate topic of autopsies, like the well-trained southern matron she was. "The way they stood around gaping at us as if we were engaged in a wild Roman orgy."

"Well, you have to admit," said Evelyn. "They come speeding in, sirens whirring, and jump out of the cars to find nearly a hundred people dressed in togas and tunics, all of us showing more skin than we'd dare show to anyone we know. Wine and food piled on the buffet tables. A roasting pig. Torches. It's amazing their eyes didn't pop out of their heads."

"Or arrest us for indecent exposure," said Loubelle, her eyes growing large at the thought.

"They were downright rude," said Jeannie. "And the way that sergeant, or whatever he was, looked at me. I had to hold my hands together not to wipe that smirk off his face."

Everyone relaxed. Jeannie in a pissy mood was much better than the sad, lost woman of a few minutes ago.

Jeannie sniffed. "And the things he said to me. Me, Jeannie Jenkins. If I'd been his mama, I would've washed his mouth out with soap." She frowned. "Not that I'm old enough to be his mama."

Almost old enough to be his grandmama, thought Andy, but she kept it to herself.

When the breakfast hour was over, they all adjourned to the auditorium where Dr. Bliss was going to address the entire retreat. Something inspiring no doubt. Though Andy wondered how she was going to manage to turn Demetri's demise into a growth experience.

As they left the room, Andy caught a glimpse of Dillon carrying empty coffeepots into the kitchen.

Don't trust him.

Shut up, she told herself. Why shouldn't she trust him? She wanted to trust him. She did trust him. She had damn good instincts, and her instincts were saying, He's all right.

Andy wasn't even sure she'd heard Katherine correctly. Maybe what she thought she heard was her own fears. The thought could be coming from her own mind. That sometimes happened in meditation. Stuff came from nowhere and blind-sided you.

Maybe he was a killer. Maybe he was using her. She might be a tad too close to him to be objective. The only way to remedy that was to keep her distance, so she could think rationally. So she'd better stay away from him.

No, called a distant voice, a voice that she knew well. Her optimistic voice, her hedonistic voice. The voice that always got her into trouble.

She wouldn't listen to it, either. She had to be careful. She needed a clear mind, free of Dillon thoughts. Depend on no one, trust no one but herself.

"Ariadne, is something wrong?" asked Evelyn. "You're frowning."

"No. Nothing's wrong." Except that her whole world had just gone haywire, and she didn't know how to make it right again.

Chapter 22

Dr. Bliss stood at the podium and looked over the goddesses seated before her. She was alone on the stage, looking larger than life, suitably serious. As always, she was perfectly controlled, open but not too open, compassionate, but not gushing. Andy wondered if she ever got a run in her panty hose, or left lipstick on a wineglass. She couldn't imagine her writhing out of control under Bernard Bliss's eternal ministrations.

Andy shoved that thought away. Not only was it inappropriate considering the moment, but it was something too icky to contemplate. High priestesses were meant to be worshipped; not in the same league with the rest of them. Fiona Bliss was the perfect high priestess. But was she happy?

Jane and Carmen hovered at the edge of the stage, like two dogs waiting for a dropped morsel. They couldn't stand each other, but they would do anything for their leader. Would that include murder? Andy tried to remember seeing them at the bacchanalia the night before, but only came up with the image of them crying in each other's arms after Demetri's body was discovered. Where had they been before that?

And why did Andy care? She didn't even like Demetri. And even though it was a sad thing to happen, she had other, more pressing problems to deal with.

Dr. Bliss began speaking, and Andy forced her attention

back to what she was saying. Something about how tragedy, as hard to accept as it was, could lead to a growth experience.

Yeah, right, thought Andy. But not for Demetri. She could hear sniffling a few chairs away. She glanced past Evelyn to where Jeannie was sitting. Jeannie was crying, but so was the woman next to her. And the woman next to her. Everywhere women had pulled out Kleenexes and were dabbing their eyes.

Andy wondered at her own lack of emotion. Normally she was the first one to start bawling. Anything could set it off. A sad movie. A Hallmark card. A Kodak commercial. A song on the radio. What was wrong with her? She didn't feel a thing. She stifled a yawn. Her head drooped; she jerked up.

Evelyn frowned at her.

Jeez. She felt as if she'd downed a couple of Valium. Now, there was a thought. What if Demetri hadn't been drunk or taking drugs? What if someone had drugged him, waited for it to take affect, and then pushed his head under? There would be toxicology reports. The drug would be traced back to the killer.

Or maybe the man just had a weak heart and really bad timing.

"And so as we go through today and the next few days, let's keep Demetri in our hearts. Be open to life in a way we might not have been open to it before. Appreciate the time we have here on earth. Be kind to one another."

Well, if goddess training ever fell off, Fiona Bliss could become a televangelist.

She left the stage and Katherine Dane took her place. She didn't try to out-compassion the doctor, just said very calmly, "I have a few announcements. Please listen carefully. The police have asked that we not use the pool area until they have finished their on-site investigation. During that time, lunch will be held solely in the dining room at one o'clock. The afternoon schedule will remain the same as posted." She glanced at her watch. "The morning session will resume in fifteen minutes. Go in strength."

Andy rolled her eyes. All they needed was to throw a little holy water over them and they would be absolved. She stood up. Loubelle and Evelyn were helping Jeannie out of her chair, and Andy felt a pang of real compassion. Without her sauciness, her makeup, and her big hair, Jeannie looked twenty years older. Andy hated seeing her this way. She was so much fun, so full of life. And Andy suspected she had been that way long before Dr. Bliss and her goddess program hit the airwayes.

She followed the three women into the hallway, where they stood while the other goddesses hurried toward their shortened workshops.

"Let's stick together," said Loubelle.

"I have to fix my face," said Jeannie through her wad of tissues.

"We'll all go," said Evelyn and led them down the hall to the ladies' room. Andy went, too. It was the least she could do for the women who had befriended her when they thought she was a lonely, unhappy spinster. They had been thrilled with her sudden transformation, chalked it up to goddess training and Dillon's attentions.

So Andy stood while Jeannie ran water over her face, then rummaged in her purse for her mascara, her lipstick. They all left the ladies' room together, just as a commotion rose from the hall. Naturally, they hurried to see what was going on.

Jane had Carmen by the hair. Carmen was scratching at Jane's arms, trying to break free.

"You're a traitor, Carmen Gutierrez."

Carmen stamped on Jane's foot and, when she recoiled, twisted away from her.

"You just keep your mouth shut," said Jane, limping toward her and backing Carmen down the hall.

"I won't. Something weird is happening here. I'm leaving."

"Go ahead, you fair-weather friend. But don't even think you can spread your venom about us." Jane lunged at her.

Carmen jumped back. "You should be happy to see the

back of me." She laughed spitefully. "But you'll probably have to get used to Penny Culpepper as Dr. B's other right hand."

Jane stopped. "Not her."

Carmen nodded. "She's just been waiting for one of us to give up or get the axe."

"Never."

"And she can have it, because it's getting too dangerous around here."

"That's bullshit. You're a gutless wonder. You don't deserve to be a priestess."

Carmen rounded on her so fast that Jane didn't have a chance to retreat. Carmen's fingers closed around her throat, Jane grabbed Carmen's hair, and they went down, locked in a very ungoddesslike embrace.

"Oh, dear," said Loubelle and jumped out of the way as they rolled past her.

Andy just watched. She hadn't enjoyed anything so much in the entire week.

But they were about to be stopped. Running footsteps could be heard coming down the hall. A minute later, Hans and JoJo pulled the women apart and held them until Dr. Bliss, who was following close behind them, arrived.

The two women stopped struggling, the fight confined to spiteful looks.

Dr. Bliss merely considered them for a moment, then said, "Jane, Carmen, I am very disappointed in your behavior. What kind of example does this set for the other goddesses?"

They both hung their heads.

"You are relieved of your classes for the rest of the day. You'll spend that time in the Bower of Bliss while you reconcile your differences."

The Bower of Bliss? Andy couldn't imagine much of anything but death to the finish, coming out of such close proximity. A shiver ran up her spine as she remembered the few hours she'd spent there with Dillon. She didn't think Carmen and Jane would get the same value out of their time there.

On a nod from Dr. Bliss, JoJo and Hans released the women, who mumbled apologies and scurried away. The last thing Andy heard before the entrance door closed behind them was Carmen saying, "This is all your fault."

Dr. Bliss turned her serene countenance on the crowd that had gathered. "As you can see, there are always little setbacks in our quest for self-fulfillment. That's to be expected and embraced as a sign of true growth. And you'll see that when Carmen and Jane have had time to confront their differences, they will be stronger, more understanding women. Better able to deal with the way the world deals with them. Now hurry, or you'll be late for this morning's workshops."

She smiled over them, then left, trailed by JoJo and Hans, two of the most mismatched handmaidens that Andy could imagine.

"Well," said Evelyn, when the crowd had dispersed. "Always something new and interesting at Terra Bliss. Shall we decide on a workshop to attend?"

They chose Turning Jealousy To Juice. Seemed appropriate, thought Andy, trying not to make any guesses about what the juice might be. She followed the others inside.

The session was led by a priestess whom Andy had seen only from a distance. She was bubbling with enthusiasm. "For any of you that might have witnessed the little altercation between Jane and Carmen just a minute ago, you'll soon understand why my workshop is so important for daily living." She smiled at them, which was the goddess way, but instead of blissful she seemed downright gleeful. Maybe she was in line for a promotion.

"Even priestesses succumb to jealousy." She had a tinkly little laugh that grated on Andy's nerves. Just watching all this smiling made her jaw ache. She stifled a yawn. "But who of us hasn't felt jealousy? We can all identify, can't we?"

Nods around the room. It wouldn't be long before everyone was jousting to get to tell about their jealousies.

"What's important is to understand our jealousy and learn

how to turn it around for our benefit. What are some of the things we envy most?"

There were a lot of them. Andy's eyes grew heavy.

"How can we change that envy into a powerful goddess force?"

Hands went up.

Andy's eyes closed.

Someone was shaking her. Andy's eyes fluttered open. Evelyn stood over her, looking concerned.

"Is it over already?"

"Already. Come on. It's time for lunch."

Numbly, Andy began gathering up her things.

"Loubelle and Jeannie went ahead to snag our table," she explained as they hurried out of the classroom. "The dining room will be packed today."

Loubelle and Jeannie had managed to get their usual table. Andy dropped heavily into a chair. "Sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Must be the fresh mountain air," said Evelyn.

"Or long nights with a certain handsome slave." Jeannie lifted her eyebrows. It wasn't as good as usual, but it was progress.

"Maybe it's all the meditation you're doing," said Loubelle. "Miranda took the same course last session, and she said it didn't do anything but make her sleepy."

Andy was suddenly wide awake. "Miranda?"

"You remember," said Evelyn. "We were talking about her the first day at the pool. She left in the middle of the last session."

"Oh, yes. I do remember," said Andy.

Evelyn laughed. "Remember the night at the movies? What were we watching? A thriller of some kind. We were all biting our nails and sitting on the edge of our seats, and suddenly we hear this strange noise, but couldn't figure out where it was coming from. When the lights came on, there was Miranda,

her head lolling back in the chair, snoring like there was no tomorrow."

Like aunt, like niece, thought Andy. Though usually, stillness just didn't run in the family.

"I miss her," said Loubelle. "Though I'm glad I got her slave. Rusty's a sweetie."

"How long had M—your friend been doing meditation before she left?"

"Let's see," said Loubelle. "Evelyn, do you remember?"

"Not I. I was studying for the Initiate test. The first week or two went by in a blur."

"A week," said Jeannie. She'd been so quiet that Andy had forgotten she was there. "She said she was going to quit. It was cutting into her playtime." She sniffed. "Now she's gone, too."

"Gone? How?" blurted Andy.

"I just mean . . . She's not here. Demetri is dead. Everything is changing. Excuse me." She pushed her chair away and hurried out of the room.

They were finishing lunch, when the police arrived in a motorcade of cars. Two stopped at the Pantheon, just below the dining room windows. Three others continued around the drive toward the Spa.

"I hope Jeannie's back in her room and doesn't have to witness this," Evelyn said and got up. She and Loubelle hurried away.

Andy finished her lunch in solitude and pushed her chair back just as the black sedan came to a stop next to the two police cruisers. But when the back door opened, the police detective got out. That was odd. Where was the—The second door opened and a tall, sandy-haired man got out. Today he was wearing a light gray suit, but he was the same man from last night. They passed through the entrance columns and disappeared from view.

Andy hurried into the hallway to see if Dillon would meet them, but there was no Dillon and no man in a suit. JoJo was ushering the detective toward the stairs. "Dr. Bliss has offered you the use of her office. This way please."

The detective nodded and followed him upstairs.

Maybe Dillon and the suit were outside. She started for the door, just as two regular policemen entered, escorting a frightened Jeannie between them. She saw Andy and cast a pleading look at her.

Andy stepped forward. "What's going on?"

"Just some routine questions, ma'am," said the shorter of the two and readjusted the clipboard that he held under his arm.

"Why me?" whimpered Jeannie.

"Like I said, ma'am. We're just asking everybody to go over their statements from last night. Nothing to be upset about."

"Ariadne?"

"Do you mind if I walk with her? She's had a very rough time."

The officer frowned. "You are?"

"Ariadne McAllister."

He pulled out the clipboard and consulted it. "Might as well. You're next."

She waited in the hallway while Jeannie was inside. There was no place to sit, so she passed the time pacing up and down and pausing at the door to eavesdrop on the interview. Unfortunately, the door was thick, and she could hear only an occasional murmur.

After twenty minutes, the door opened and Jeannie stepped out. She was followed by the detective in charge. He motioned Andy inside, but instead of following her in, he closed the door behind her.

Andy whirled around. The suit was sitting in one of the wing chairs, legs crossed at the knee, one eyebrow raised.

He motioned to the couch, and she sat down, but not before she noticed him flick a look from her face to her toes. It appeared purely disinterested, but she knew that was deceiving. She bet he could judge someone in even less time than he'd used on her. At least she wasn't wearing a toga, but she felt just as exposed.

"No cause for discomfort, Ms. McAllister."

Andy realized she was sitting debutante-style on the edge of the couch. She pushed back onto the seat and tried to look relaxed. "And you are?"

His mouth quirked. "Grayson Talbot. If you'd please tell me what you were doing and what you saw and heard leading up to the time you found the deceased."

"I—"

"Already told the police. Just humor me and tell it again."

Yeah. She'd heard those lines plenty of times on the set of one movie or another, right before they hauled the perp off to jail. She knew the drill by heart. She'd waited on the set of *Some Kind of Woman* while the actress coolly answered the detective's questions: the pursuer and the pursued confronting each other at last. She'd watched the actress glance past the detective's shoulder, then leap across the room and hurl herself at the open window. They cut. Set up the next scene. Andy took the actress's place, this time filmed from the back. She leapt across the room, sprang onto the windowsill, and jumped six feet down to an air mattress. Later, an exterior shot, with the camera below, Andy perched in a window, five floors up. Then "Action" and Andy jumped.

She glanced past the suit's shoulder at the window across the room. It was open.

His eyes flickered as if he were tempted to turn around to see what she was looking at. But he didn't; he just smiled. "I saw *Some Kind of Woman*. You were great."

Andy's mouth fell open. "You—How—?" Jeez. No wonder his words had sounded familiar. They were the exact lines said by the detective in the film. He'd set her up. "Not funny. How did you find out?"

Talbot's smile widened. "We have our ways. Nice Web site, by the way."

"Thanks."

"And we know that your aunt, Miranda "Mac" McAllister Houston, was here during the last session."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"Unfortunately, no."

Andy sank back on the couch. If they didn't know where Mac was . . . and who were they? "Are you a fed?"

He just smiled.

"You are."

"Not exactly. And I believe, I'm the one who is supposed to be doing the questioning."

Not exactly? What did that mean? "But you're here because Demetri's death wasn't an accident." She made it a statement, because she knew he wouldn't answer anyway. He didn't. "Don't even bother to explain that it's classified. I know all the lingo. But what about Imogene Southwaite?"

He didn't answer. His smile didn't waiver, but for a millisecond his eyes went opaque. Barely perceptibly, but she was looking for it. She felt oddly gratified, like she was finally getting to be the star instead of the stunt double. Which was a ludicrous way to think. People were being murdered.

"She didn't just accidentally fall off her balcony, did she?" No answer.

"Is that why Dillon is here?"

One eyebrow rose on that one.

"Don't worry. He didn't tell me." And she was shocked at the bitterness in her voice. You can't trust him. She shook the thought off. "Because he isn't some boy toy with a cushy job. Any fool could see that."

This time, Talbot laughed out loud. "And I thought he looked pretty good in a toga." He crossed his arms loosely over his knee.

"But you in a bun and Coke-bottle glasses. I'm sorry I missed that. Ms. Jenkins was telling me how they're all so proud of your transformation." He looked across the coffee table at her. "As well they should be." "So who do you think killed Demetri?"

"Now, Andy—do you mind if I call you Andy?—that, alas, is yet to be seen."

"So he was murdered."

"The investigation is still in its initial stages."

"Well, you know I didn't do it."

"Like I said—"

"And Dillon."

Talbot shrugged noncommittally.

"But he works for you, doesn't he?" *Don't trust him.* "Though he *was* standing there when the lights came on." She shut her mouth, appalled at what she'd said.

Even Talbot looked surprised.

"I didn't mean that he did it," she said hurriedly. Hell, she didn't know what she meant. Why did she even say it? "Just that, if it wasn't an accident, heart attack, drugs, whatever—then it could be anybody."

"Just about. Though most people can account for their movements and vouch for each other."

"But not me and Dillon."

A dip of his head. "And a few others."

"There was a half hour between the time Demetri left the pool and"—she swallowed—"until he was found. People were moving around."

"Relax. I just want you to go over it again. Try to remember every detail." He looked at her seriously for the first time. "And don't embellish or surmise, please."

She gave him a look.

"I know an active imagination when I see one. In real life we rarely have a eureka moment. Just dull routine. So... please." He flipped on a portable tape recorder and placed it on the coffee table between them.

She repeated what she'd told the police the night before. She added details that she hadn't thought important or hadn't thought of at all.

Like the fact that Dillon was dry, and whoever had just

drowned Demetri must be wet. But no, she didn't remember anyone in a soggy toga. But she did remember that the tiles were wet where she had been standing. That most of the room was in shadow, only one set of lights by the door and the underwater lights of the pool and whirlpool had been turned on.

She hadn't thought about it at the time, but now as she replayed the scene, she realized that the killer could have been standing in the shadows watching.

She didn't mention that. She knew Talbot was making his own surmises. He was the real professional.

Chapter 23

66 She's something else," said Grayson Talbot as he switched off Andy's recorded testimony.

"Something," agreed Dillon. "Was she trying to implicate me with that 'he was standing by the whirlpool when the lights came on' business?"

Talbot bit back a grin. "I think she was just thinking out loud. She's got a quick mind."

"Yeah. Quick enough to get her in trouble."

"You want me to arrest her? I have a feeling that's the only way we're going to get her out of here."

"Unless we find her aunt."

"I've already got somebody on it, but I don't think she'd leave even then."

"Why not?"

Talbot gave him a look. "For one thing, she's too involved. And she's jazzed. I felt like offering her a contract halfway through her interview."

"Don't even think it."

"You don't think she can take care of herself?"

"Yeah. Herself. Me and you, too. It's just that—it just isn't a good idea."

"Afraid she'll get hurt?"

Dillon narrowed his eyes at Talbot. "Don't put words in my mouth."

"Whatever." Talbot stood up. "You'd better get out of here before someone starts getting suspicious."

"What's next?"

"I've convinced the local police to stretch their investigation for a couple of days. But we need a break soon or I'm calling you off. The Southwaites will just have to cope. We have more important fish to fry."

Dillon shot him a sideways glance. "We?"

"You're in if you want to be."

Dillon nodded and left the office. He wanted in, but he needed to break this case first, because his confidence level was batting zero.

When Andy left her interview, she meant to sit in on one of the workshops, just to keep herself from thinking. She felt confused, split in two, as if there were two Andys.

One of them had fallen in love with her appointed attendant. Things like that happened all the time when you were on location. You paired up with someone and enjoyed them while you were there, knowing it would end when the shoot was over.

Only this time she didn't want it to end. Which was really stupid, because it had to.

At the same time, she kept getting these rushes of fear. That Dillon was someone bad, when she knew he wasn't. That she couldn't trust him. Maybe it was true. Maybe that was her rational self talking.

And how could she be worried about her state of mind when Mac was still missing. She hadn't come any closer to finding out what happened to her than if she'd stayed at home. And yet she couldn't leave.

She passed right by the classrooms without stopping and walked out the front door and into the sun.

Katherine Dane was coming up the steps.

"Ariadne. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Andy, dragging herself back from her morbid thoughts.

"You look so unhappy. Is it this awful business about Demetri?"

"Yes. No." Andy felt herself leaning toward Katherine, wanting a sympathetic shoulder. She pulled herself back. "I don't know."

"It's normal to feel a little depressed when something like this happens."

Depressed, that's it. She must be depressed.

"But it will pass. Just keep meditating and if you need to talk, I'm always available." Katherine smiled and continued up the steps.

Andy watched her go, but it was as though someone had gelled the lens, because she was out of focus—moving too slow. A dream sequence.

Katherine stopped at the door. "Trust me. You'll be feeling better in a few days. And all this will just seem like a bad dream." She went inside.

Andy snapped out of her stupor. She'd just been thinking about a dream and Katherine had mentioned dreams. Like she'd read her mind. It had just happened again.

Andy started walking, staying in the sun. No destination in mind. Just trying to sort things out.

Maybe she was depressed, like Katherine thought. She was a very sensitive woman. She must have picked up on something even before Andy realized she wasn't happy. And she'd been the one to warn her about Dillon. But she didn't say why. Andy just knew that she must be right.

Andy hesitated. She'd come to the pool and she didn't want to be there. She veered around it and kept going. But why should she distrust Dillon? They had come to an understanding in the Bower of Bliss, and even though he wouldn't tell her what his exact job was, she guessed it was because it was classified. She didn't distrust him.

Don't trust him.

Damn, there was that voice again. She did trust him. It was Katherine who had planted the seed of distrust. And now that Andy thought about it, she hadn't felt depressed until Katherine told her not to be. Had she planted that seed, too? But why?

She'd reached the far side of the lawn. Here, the wall rose straight up from the grass. She felt like tearing it down as if she could tear down the wall to her understanding of what was happening. She turned and retraced her steps toward the Pantheon.

Now she wished she'd paid more attention during those meditation sessions. But Katherine's constant talking became so irritating that she had tuned her out. What else had Katherine said that she'd missed?

And there in the middle of the lawn, Andy had that eureka moment that Grayson Talbot said never happened. What if Katherine was not guiding them toward nirvana, but planting posthypnotic suggestions. And not only to Andy, but to others as well. To Mac. To Imogene Southwaite.

Was it even possible? Was it really true that you couldn't be made to do something you wouldn't ordinarily do. Like murder?

If not, anybody could have murdered Demetri. *No, slow down*. It was too far-fetched. Unless . . . if Mac had figured out the same thing—Andy refused to think of the ramifications of that. No, more likely, Mac left when she realized what was happening. But where was she now?

And why would Katherine do something like that? What would she get out of it? It wasn't her program or her money. But she, like the other priestesses, might do anything for Dr. Bliss. Was the good doctor calling the shots? Hypnotism was one of the methods she used to break repression.

Andy had come to one of the temples and she went inside. She was letting her imagination run wild, when what she needed was to think. She didn't know what to do next. If she went to Dillon or Talbot with such wild possibilities, they'd think she'd lost it for sure. Wait and see? Go to the session and try to catch Katherine in the act? Could she even prove it if she did?

The police would be rounding up their investigation any minute, and the troops would be gone. Somehow, she'd have to force Katherine's hand before then.

There was a lot that she needed to do to set it up, but whatever happened, when the meditation session met the next morning, she'd be there and she'd stay alert.

Dillon watched Andy and her three friends leave the dining room for the evening talk. Andy had managed not to look at him for the entire meal, and he was concerned.

Had Talbot said something that upset her? Was she embarrassed for having practically accused him of murdering Demetri? Or had she finally figured out that he was working for Talbot and was pissed. It would be like her. Too smart for her own good. And where did that leave him?

Right where you should be, fool. With your mind on your work, and not on your dick. But it wasn't that. Desire, he could control. What he was beginning to feel for Andy was a whole lot scarier and didn't have a place in his life. It was imperative that he didn't get involved with her, but it was a little too late to attempt that now. He was afraid he'd passed beyond the no-return point. And he was afraid that Talbot knew it, too.

But Andy didn't join the others in the auditorium. Instead she went up the stairs. Now what was she up to?

As soon as dinner was over, Andy made an excuse for not going to Dr. Bliss's Fantasy Fulfillment talk and went in search of Katherine Dane. She was just coming out of her office.

"Ariadne, how are you?"

"I'm—I'm going home." Andy watched for a reaction, but saw only appropriate concern.

"You don't really want to leave us, do you?"

"I have to. First Demetri. And now all these policemen everywhere."

"I'm sure they will be gone tomorrow. And life here at Terra Bliss will get back to normal. You're just feeling a little depressed."

Andy felt the word in her bones. She fought it.

"Yes. I'm depressed. And I want to go home. I should never have come. I'm going to tell Dr. Bliss that I'll need a ride down the mountain tomorrow morning." Andy worked on a quivering lip. Was fairly pleased with the results.

But she still didn't see any reaction from Katherine but understanding and concern. Could she have been wrong?

"Well, if you truly feel that way, I'll order a car to take you down to Lake Tahoe where you can catch the bus. But wait until after breakfast. Dr. Bliss is speaking tonight, and I'm sure she will want to say goodbye. And I'd like you to meditate with the group once more before you leave us."

Bingo. "I guess I could wait until after breakfast. But then I'm really leaving."

Katherine smiled. "We'll miss you, but I understand."

Well, that went well, thought Andy as she went down the stairs. She was still shaking from the conversation. She'd just gone out on a limb, a really narrow one. If she didn't force Katherine to act, she'd be back in L.A. by this time tomorrow. Just as well.

A roar of laughter burst from the auditorium as she passed. The ladies were enjoying the Fantasy Fulfillment talk. Good for them. They could have it.

What Andy needed was less fantasy in her life, not more. She already spent her days and nights being someone she wasn't. Super heroine, daredevil, evil alien, secret agent. Where was Ariadne McAllister in all of this?

And to top it all, she'd fallen for someone who was some kind of secret agent in real life. What happened to roses on Valentine's Day, dirty socks under the bed, white picket fences?

She smacked her forehead. More fantasy, and she knew it. Life for her was what it was: work and the occasional affair. It was good enough for Aunt Mac. Galena had retired when she married Andy's father. But he'd died when she was fourteen. And Galena . . . had gone back to work.

And now Andy might be indulging in the biggest fantasy of all. That someone at Terra Bliss was a killer. She pushed out the front door, growling in frustration.

"Feel better now?"

She jumped. Dillon stood in front of her. She'd been so preoccupied that she hadn't even seen him. And he was the last person she needed to see right now. Mr. Fantasy in the flesh. Katherine's warning resounded in her head, even though she realized now that it was part of Katherine's plan, whatever that plan was.

She should tell him what she'd figured out. But if he believed her, which was unlikely, he'd insist on her leaving, and though that was just what she was planning, it was her decision and on her own time.

He certainly wouldn't countenance her plan for tricking Katherine into betraying herself. He'd think it was too dangerous. Which was sweet, but he would never understand that for once in her life, she needed to take a chance that wasn't controlled by a camera.

She had a hard time looking him in the eye, though. She didn't like this subterfuge.

He reached up and pushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. "What's wrong? You don't look happy tonight."

She shivered. He sounded just like Katherine. Don't think it. "Nothing."

He heaved a deep sigh. Annoyed. She didn't blame him. What she really wanted to do was find a dark corner and touch every body part he owned. Then let him touch hers.

His fingers wrapped around her arm, and his touch zinged right down to her toes. This was not going well. Maybe she should just tell him her suspicions. *Don't trust him*.

Now that she knew that voice for what it was, why wouldn't it go away? What was triggering it? She knew enough about hypnotism to know there had to be a trigger, a word, a place, something. Maybe the trigger was Dillon himself. He sure triggered something in her that had nothing to do with an altered state of mind.

"Is it me?" he asked. His voice was low, possibly tentative. It was hard to tell. He'd started walking by her side. The cool air made her shiver, and he slipped his arm around her.

"You don't really think I killed Demetri, do you?"

She jolted to a stop. Turned to face him. "No, of course I don't. What gave you such a stupid idea."

Dillon shrugged. "Talbot said you'd implicated me."

"Implicated? You're kidding. I only said . . ." What had she said? Had it sounded like an accusation? It had. She suddenly felt light-headed, and she had to fight not to sway on her feet. "I just . . . I told him where everyone was when the lights came on. And when did you talk to Talbot?"

Dillon's arm tightened around her. "My interview was after yours."

"Oh." She'd thought she'd caught him out, but he was fast.

"Come on. I'll walk you to your cabin."

"No. I'll be fine. I just need to go to bed."

"I'm walking you." He took her elbow and she didn't resist. She wanted to be with him. But the more she thought of him, the stronger Katherine's warning became. And she was getting a little fed up. And besides, knowing it would probably be their last night together, she might cry and make a fool of herself.

They walked in silence up the hill through the woods. When they arrived at Andy's cabin, she stopped at the bottom of the steps. "Thanks, I'll see you tomorrow."

Dillon walked past her, opened the door, and stepped inside ahead of her.

"Hey," she said, hurrying after him.

By the time she got inside, he'd turned on the light and was

waiting for her, feet spread, arms crossed over his chest. "Would you like to tell me what's going on?"

"Jeez, Dillon. Someone was murdered."

"What happened to heart attack?"

"Don't give me that crap. You and Grayson Talbot are awfully schmoozy. I know you work for him. And that you're here undercover."

Dillon shook his head and laughed. "You've been playing in too many espionage movies."

I know, thought Andy. And I also know you've had that answer prepared for a while. Just in case I caught on.

Maybe Katherine had caught on, too, and was merely warning her that Dillon wasn't who he seemed to be. That was one explanation she hadn't thought of. Maybe she was making something sinister out of simple concern.

"Well, thanks," she said, standing in the middle of the room, waiting for him to get the idea.

"I'm staying."

"Look, I need some time."

"Fine. Take it. I'll sleep on the couch."

This wasn't going to work, thought Andy as she sat slumped on the side of her bed, dressed in her oversized *Stuntwomen Can Make You Fly* T-shirt that she slept in when she was alone. Which seemed to be the case tonight. Dillon had appropriated a pillow and blanket and was probably already asleep on the couch. If she'd planned to do any thinking tonight, she was doomed. Just knowing he was in the living room set her blood racing.

But if she went out there, she would end up telling him what she was planning.

This ambivalence was so unlike her. Of course, this was the first time she'd be working solo. She was good at what she did, very good, but she worked with a team. The director, the fx people, the stunt coordinator, wardrobe.

Maybe they should come up with a plan together. That

made a lot more sense. Then Dillon and Talbot and whoever else was working on this could be her backup. But the little she knew of them said they'd yank her out of here instead.

Maybe she'd tell them in the morning. And since there was nothing any of them could do tonight, she might as well have some fun while she could. She jumped off the bed, but when she touched the knob, it came again. *Don't trust him*.

"Oh, shut up," she said and opened the door.

The light from the moon filtered through the window and cast the living room into shadows tinged with silver. Dillon's clothes lay in a pile on the floor by the couch. He was breathing deeply and evenly.

Not kept awake by unrequited lust, she thought, perturbed at herself for not having such sangfroid. She tiptoed over to the couch. He lay on his back, his shoulders and arms outside the blanket. The planes of his face were softened in the moonlight. He looked peaceful. He looked hot. And in a second, he was going to look awake.

She leaned over and skimmed a finger lightly over his collarbone. "Dillon? Are you—"

Dillon heaved out of bed. She felt fire in her wrist as he bent it into her arm. Before she could even take a breath to cry out, she was on the floor on her stomach, Dillon's body pressing her into the floor, his fingers crushing her neck.

"Dillon," she rasped as she fought to pull his fingers away. "It's me."

The fingers were gone. She gasped for breath, only dimly aware that Dillon was no longer smothering her. She blinked tears away and saw him straddling her, his face, so peaceful just a few seconds ago, a mask of horror. His chest heaved with hard, adrenaline-pumped breathing.

He ran his hands through his hair. "Jesus. You shouldn't sneak up on people." His voice shook with something. Rage? Fear? "I could have killed you."

"Well," she said, her voice shaking only a little bit. "I guess we know what your relationship to Talbot is, don't we?"

He hauled her off the floor, sat down on the couch, and pulled her into his lap. His whole body vibrated as he hugged her close, rubbed his cheek in her hair, and rocked her like a child, soothing them both.

She gave in to the rhythm of his caress, content to be held and rocked, to feel her bare crotch against his thighs—to just be.

"That was too close for comfort," he murmured.

"Hmmm, is this better?" She nestled into him and felt him stir against her butt. "Or this?" She wiggled against him. He groaned, shifted her so that his growing erection pushed against her thigh.

He pulled the bottom of her T-shirt away, and his hand slid up her thigh, rested there as he stopped rocking her. He pressed his thigh against her. She was ready for him, and all that lovely wetness was being wasted on his leg.

She took his hand and moved it between her legs. Gasped as he pushed her legs open and closed his fingers around her heat. She rubbed the outside of her thigh against his erection. His finger was teasing her. It felt great, but she really wanted him inside her, every long, thick, pulsing inch of him.

And she wanted to see. She lifted away and leaned over to turn on the end table lamp. Then came back, pushed her hair out of her face, and threw one leg over his. She straddled him with her knees, moved close enough so that she could rub her slickness against his cock.

His head fell back, and he grabbed her hips, lifting her upward as he slid down her, up again, over and over, the tip of his cock catching on her entrance with each pass. Her hands gripped his shoulders, and she watched their bodies sliding against each other. The sight threatened to send her off, but she eased back, wanting to make it last.

Dillon looked at her then, and what she saw on his face scared her almost as much as his hand around her throat a few minutes ago. Naked desire—and surrender.

A sense of power welled up inside her, along with a sweep-

ing tenderness that made her want to take care of him in every possible way.

They were both in big trouble here. Did Dillon know what he was showing her? God, please don't let her be as easily readable.

His hands wrapped around her butt, separated the cheeks so his fingers could explore her from behind, while they pushed each other to the outer edge. She used her palm to press his penis more tightly to her stomach. The rhythm increased, became disjointed, frenzied.

When she thought neither of them could last much longer, she took his penis in her hand and guided it to where it belonged. Then slowly she settled down on him, drawing out the sensation until Dillon shook beneath her. She released her weight, and he rammed into her. The base of his penis appeared and disappeared like a piston, the action making waves of liquid sound.

"I want to suck you and fuck you at the same time," he said.

"If you can figure out a way, I'll play," she answered breathlessly. She slipped her hand off his shoulder, reached between them until her finger was wet with them. Then she brought it to his mouth, and he sucked her finger in, swirled his tongue around it. His hips ground into her, circling and thrusting, while he sucked her one finger and she rubbed his cheek with the others.

The pads rasped against the late-night stubble on his chin. She wanted to watch him shave, to cook breakfast for him, to have his—Then suddenly she was flying, without a harness, without a net, only air and moon and stars and Dillon.

She gradually floated back to earth, her heart pounding. And she thought lazily that she had to give up these movie analogies. Her finger was still in Dillon's mouth. She was still on her knees, which were beginning to feel the strain.

"Honey, what do you say to finishing the rest of the night in your bed?"

284 Gemma Bruce

"I was just thinking the same thing." But she couldn't figure out how to change positions without losing Dillon. So she didn't move.

He shifted forward to the edge of the couch, then stopped. "Normally, I could do this, but I don't think my knee is up to your weight. Sorry."

She slid off him. "Come on, baby, I'll make it better."

She saw his knee give when he stood up. He recovered quickly and she pretended not to notice. She kept forgetting about his injuries. Now they came back to her. She was in top form. He wasn't. Any thoughts she'd had about letting him in on her plan evaporated.

She would have to go it alone.

Chapter 24

This time Andy heard him leave. She waited until the door shut then sat up in bed. Four A.M., like clockwork. She'd have to do something about fixing Dillon's tendency to disappear before daybreak. It was depressing. No, she warned herself, don't think that word or that other phrase, no positive reinforcement for the "d" word. Just get to meditation and try to tip Katherine's hand, while Talbot and the police are still on site.

She punched her pillow, then rolled into the warm spot left by Dillon's body. How would it be to wake up together one morning? She'd never know. This excursion into goddess-dom was about to come to a screeching halt one way or the other. She closed her eyes and slept dreamlessly until five-thirty. Then fortified with coffee, she marched down the path to the Spa and her final session with Katherine Dane.

She was one of the first ones to arrive. She pulled out her mat, did some stretching exercises and was sitting cross-legged when Katherine arrived. She didn't acknowledge Andy but went straight to the front of the class and began the session.

"Take a cleansing breath. Hold it. And exhale slowly. Let your tension, your anxiety float away until your body is relaxed and your mind is empty and receptive."

Andy heard the slow intakes of breath around her. She took

a breath, held it, and began singing "Mary Had a Little Lamb" in her head, blocking out Katherine's voice. She kept at it, until she grew bored, then replayed some of the juicier moments of her night with Dillon. There was nothing boring about that, but it was turning her on, which went a long way to drowning Katherine's constant monotone, but did nothing for her own alertness of mind.

She started on her multiplication tables as Katherine's voice continued to drone on and on. Braced herself as Katherine rose from her mat and came toward her. Closed her eyes and waited until she felt Katherine stop beside her.

"Very good," Katherine said soothingly. "You're very relaxed. Very receptive, aren't you, Ariadne?"

Jeez, this was the first time Katherine had asked her a question. Was she supposed to answer? *Please don't let me screw this up now*, she thought, then took a chance and slowly nodded her head once.

"Good."

Andy had to consciously break her attention away from that beguiling voice. It was crucial to stay alert, to prevent herself from being influenced by what she was hearing. She moved on to "Born in the U.S.A." Katherine moved away and Andy felt a stab of disappointment. That was it? What about being depres—she caught herself. *Don't even think that word*.

She held still, trying to watch Katherine out of one eye, while keeping herself poised for action, or reaction.

Then Katherine was back. This time she knelt down. "I'm so sorry," she said. And it was everything Andy could do not to jerk away from her. Her voice was a mere whisper, but horrible, like something out of *Hush*, *Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte*. Andy had to strain to catch the words, while trying not to succumb to them. "He's waiting for you at the falls."

Born in the U.S.A.

"Go to the top of the falls. Free yourself. Do not delay. The very edge. And you will find peace."

And while Andy was still reeling from her instructions, Katherine moved away.

So they knew about the lake. Knew Dillon had gone there with her. Was he in danger? Why did Katherine want to get rid of her? She had no money to speak of. Because they knew she was here looking for Mac?

A shudder of pure terror ran through her. Had they killed Mac?

Andy wanted to run from the room, find Grayson Talbot, and tell him that Katherine was giving suicidal posthypnotic suggestions in meditation class. But it was too late for that now, and besides, what would she tell him? That Katherine had told her to go to the falls? That alone wouldn't get the woman twenty to life.

It looked as if Andy would be going to the falls.

It seemed forever until Katherine returned to her mat, waited for the prescribed minute and a half, then said, "Use today to reach your peak. Go now and don't be afraid to embrace your destiny."

She wanted Andy to go to the falls now. Andy blinked the thought away. You are not following her instructions. You're going in your right mind to see what she has planned and why.

Women began returning their mats. Andy took her time coming round, getting up. Might as well play it for all she could. She just hoped Katherine hadn't managed to slip any orders past her without her realizing it.

She could feel Katherine watching her as she slowly returned her mat, then walked out the door.

She was taking a chance, but she thought that the "go now" Katherine had said was meant for her. So instead of joining the other women headed for the dining hall and breakfast, Andy veered off toward the cabins and the path to the wall.

Dillon kept one eye on the window as he carried plates and silverware from the kitchen to the buffet line. He'd been doing

it for the last few days, just to catch his first glimpse of Andy coming out of the Spa after her meditation session. Which was why he was watching when the Spa door opened, and he recognized Andy's auburn ponytail at the back of the group.

His heart jacked up a notch just knowing she was coming closer. And just as quickly it stopped, when he saw that instead of coming to the Pantheon, she struck off toward her cabin.

Had she forgotten something? Was she meeting the three Graces?

He swept a look around the dining room. Loubelle, Evelyn, and Jeannie were already in the buffet line. So where was Andy going?

Ordinarily, he would just be patient and wait for her to show up. But too much shit was going down. Grayson pushing for an arrest. Katherine Dane warning him about Andy's socalled depression.

Andy was acting strange. Or was she? Had he noticed something that wasn't there, because of Dane's suggestion? He was trained to cull truth from lies. But he was ambivalent about this.

He cared too much about Andy to let something happen to her. He didn't really think she suffered from depression or instability of any kind, but maybe Dane had picked up on something. Or—Maybe she was putting the idea in Andy's mind. And if that were true, Andy might be headed for the same fate as Imogene Southwaite.

He turned quickly to Rusty, who was carrying a basket of toast to the buffet table.

"Cover for me," he said and strode quickly across the room to the kitchen and the back door.

He ran outside just in time to see a flash of auburn hair moving through the trees. He looked around to see if Talbot and the police had arrived, but the driveway was empty except for the yard crew's two trucks. He walked briskly to the edge of the woods, then broke into a run.

He stopped at Andy's cabin, knocked, called her name, then

went inside. It was empty. Her backpack was gone, but she hadn't been carrying it when she came out of the Spa that morning. He opened the closet door. Her clothes were gone.

Fear gripped him. He made a quick search. Found her packed suitcase and backpack under the bed. So she was planning to leave. Or someone was coming later to remove the evidence of her existence.

He rushed back outside. Looked in all directions, then started uphill toward the perimeter wall. It was the only place that he could think of that she might go. But why now?

Andy knew she was being watched, but though she searched the trees, she couldn't see a soul. She felt a little unsteady on her feet, so she crawled, rather than walked, up the fallen tree. She swung down on the other side, but the sense of being watched didn't go away.

And yet she felt utterly alone. Too bad she hadn't seen Dillon or Talbot on her way here, not that she could have figured out how to alert them without giving herself away.

She kept to the path. Katherine had said the falls, so she didn't stop at the lake or the boulder where she and Dillon had made outrageous love. She kept going. No longer looking left or right, just climbed and listened.

It was cooler near the top of the falls. The air was filled with mist, and within a few minutes she was shivering with the damp cold. She climbed up the last few boulders and stepped out onto the flat ledge of the falls. The rock was slick, and water rushed over the edge in a churning cloud of mist and foam.

So now what? Was she supposed to wait? For whom or what? Or was she supposed to jump. She peered over the edge and saw the water cascade into the lake fifty feet below.

Without warning she felt someone come up behind her. Now she knew. They were going to push her in. Or try at any rate. Katherine? She fought the urge to turn around and see who it was.

Come on, bitch. Just a little closer. Then she could take her

down without risking one of them going over the falls. She breathed out, planted her feet, relaxed her knees, waiting.

"Andy! Watch out!" The warning echoed through the crash of the water, bounced off the hills. She looked down and saw Dillon far below her, across the lake, madly waving his arms. Her concentration wavered for a mere second. But long enough for her assailant to shift position, move somewhere behind her. Damn Dillon. He'd scared her away, and this might be their only chance. She whirled around—straight into the hands that were reaching for her throat.

Reflexively, she stepped back. Her foot slid on the wet rock. Her balance shifted, and for a moment she seemed to hover in the air. Had just enough wits to use her other foot to push away from the rock. Then her body fell backward into space.

Dillon stood frozen, his hands still cupped to his mouth from his warning, refusing to believe what he was seeing. Andy falling backward off the falls. A surreal slow motion that was at once beautiful and horrifying. She seemed to arc in the air; then she flipped over and fell headfirst toward the lake.

"No!" he cried.

He vaulted to the edge of the boulder. Searched the far reaches of the lake where the falls fell in an opaque curtain of mist, hoping against hope that he wouldn't find her body broken on the jagged outcroppings of rock that lay at the base of the falls.

"Andy," he called. "Andy!"

Then he saw a flash of white rising out of the water, only to disappear again. It had to be her shirt. He kicked off his shoes and dove in.

He came up for air in the middle of the lake, his lungs in spasm, his muscles numb. Mind over body. He'd done it before; he would do it now. He swam like he'd never swum before, toward the place where he'd seen her go under. He kept his face above the water, searching for any sign of her. Found nothing. He stopped, tread water while he looked frantically around. Called her name again, not caring if it drew her attacker's attention. Heard no responding call. Saw no sign of Andy. Dove down, searching underwater until his burning lungs forced him back to the surface. He panted, blew out air while he scanned the lake. Still nothing. Gulped in air and dove again.

Andy dragged herself out of the water and collapsed on the boulder, embracing its hard surface with the same gratitude that she'd felt making love to Dillon on it just a couple of days ago. It had been her only thought when she hit the water and realized she was still alive. Get to Dillon. But where was he? She was sure he'd been standing here when he yelled to her. But he wasn't here now.

She pushed herself up to one elbow, every muscle screaming at the movement. Her shirtsleeve had ripped open and the skin beneath was abraded and raw. Her face burned, and her body felt like it had been pummeled with a hammer.

"Dillon?" It came out in a whisper. She cleared her throat as her whole body began to shiver uncontrollably. "Dillon?"

She tried to stand, only to fall back hard on her butt. Pain shot up her tailbone. She shifted to one hip and saw two big sneakers a foot away. And slowly the meaning of those empty shoes penetrated her brain. He was in the water, looking for her.

She crawled up to her hands and knees. Looked out across the lake. Thought she saw someone near the middle. She opened her mouth to call to him, but he dove down just as a shot split the air, and a spray of water erupted where he'd been a moment before.

They were shooting at him. And he'd be a sitting target when he came up for air again.

She struggled to her feet, pressed herself back against the fallen rocks behind the boulder. The shot could have come from any direction. Her only chance was to get to Dillon before they killed him.

And the only way to do that was to go back in the water. She didn't want to, but she didn't have a choice. She pulled off her wet socks; she'd already kicked off her shoes when she first came up for air. Then she eased herself off the side of the rock. Nearly cried out when the cold shot through her body. Forced herself to take a breath, then slipped beneath the surface.

She swam in an arc, staying close to the edges of the lake, so she had a chance of taking in air without being seen. Twice, she went down, twice she came up for air. She'd reached the opposite side of the lake without finding him. She dove again and almost lost it, when she came face-to-face with another pair of eyes. Dillon's.

She touched his arm and turned toward the nearest shore. The lake was shallow here, tapering to a rock-strewn crescent of beach that gave way to dense forest. They crawled out and collapsed on the stones, gasping and coughing.

Then Dillon grabbed her arm. Pulled her to her feet. "The trees," he said between chattering teeth.

They stumbled into the forest, dropped onto a bed of pine straw. "Thank God," he said and pulled her close. They lay together, forcing air in and out of their lungs.

"We've got to—" she began.

"I know." He pushed to his feet. Before she could follow, a rifle butt came down on Dillon's head, and he fell to the ground. The blow didn't knock him out. He staggered to his feet, lunged at his assailant.

"Dillon, no!" she screamed. This time the rifle butt swung into his bad knee. With a yelp of pain, he went down. And stayed there. Crouched in a ball, hugging his knee with both hands.

Andy reached for him.

"Don't," said a voice above her.

She looked up, past the rifle, to the man who held it. She

thought it would be Katherine Dane. Then she remembered that brief moment when she'd mistakenly wandered into the eternal orgasm room. And it all made sense.

Eureka, she thought, just as Bernard Bliss clipped her chin with the rifle barrel and she thought no more.

Chapter 25

Andy saw spots of light behind her closed eyes, heard a buzzing of voices. She knew she'd been out for only a second, but jeez, she felt like it had been eons. She slowly opened her eyes, just enough to peer through the lashes. Bernard Bliss stood in the same place he'd been standing when she went down for the count. Only now he was backed by three of the navy-uniformed security guards.

Shit. Bliss, she could handle even frozen to the bone. But the three thugs were too much even for her. Dillon had raised himself to one knee, but she was pretty sure he wasn't going to be able to make it to his feet. Bernard had known right where to hit him to inflict the most damage.

Anger seethed inside her. The emotion was enough to make her take on all of them at once. But her brain told her that she'd be too stiff to move fast enough.

Maybe Talbot and the troops were on their way to the rescue. A glimmer of hope flickered for a second and died away. If Dillon had warned them where he was going, they would be here by now. And they weren't. She and Dillon would have to fight their way out of this themselves.

Bliss nodded to one of the guards, who stepped forward and nudged her in the ribs with the tip of his rifle. She groaned.

"Get up," said Bliss. "I didn't hit you that hard."

She struggled to sit up, making it look harder than it actu-

ally was. All the while, her mind was registering details. Four men, four rifles. It was pretty nasty odds. She glanced at Dillon. If she only knew how badly he was hurt. How much she could depend on him. But she'd better not count on that.

And was this all of the bad guys? If the whole security team was out there, they were up the creek. As it was now, they were in plenty deep shit.

"Get her up," said Bliss impatiently. One of the security guards leaned over. His rifle tipped away, and Andy saw the only chance she might have. Praying that Dillon could respond, she lunged up, grabbed the guard's head in both hands, and head butted him.

He fell over with an "oof." Andy just managed to roll out of the way before he hit the ground. Dillon threw himself at Bliss's legs. Bliss stumbled backward. The rifle bucked up and discharged into the air, before falling to the ground. The report was deafening.

Ears ringing, Andy managed to feint to the right as the two remaining guards aimed their rifles at her. She got off a back kick to the neck of one of them. He fell into the second guard, and they both went down.

For a second all four men were sprawled on the ground. "Run!" velled Andy.

Dillon scrambled to his feet and snatched up Bliss's rifle. Andy grabbed his other arm and pulled him into the trees. His breathing was jagged as he hobbled along beside her. She could hear Bliss giving orders for the guards to spread out. She crashed through the trees, dragging Dillon along. Deeper and deeper into the woods.

The incline grew steeper, the trees denser. Dillon was slowing down, growing heavier, and she knew he must be in serious pain. Andy kept pulling him along, hardly aware of where they were going, just away from their pursuers. The ground became rockier and steeper, until without warning, she ran into a palisade of rock. It completely blocked their way. She frantically scanned it for an opening, anywhere they might be able to fend

off their attackers. For a while, anyway. Hopefully, Talbot's men had heard the shots and would come to investigate.

Dillon tripped, fell to his knees. Let out a grunt of pain. She whirled around. He was braced on one hand; the rifle lay on the ground beside him. She leaned down and snatched it up. Then she reached for Dillon.

He tried to push to his feet, but fell back with a groan. "Go on without me," he said through gritted teeth.

"Are you nuts? Get up!" Andy tugged at him, but he shook his head.

"Go on, get out of here."

She scowled down at him. "From Here to Eternity. Very altruistic, but this isn't a fucking movie, and I'm not leaving you. Get up. Now."

Out of pure exasperation, she pointed the rifle at him. He muttered something that she was sure would be censored on the big screen, but pushed to one foot. She pulled him the rest of the way up. He had to hop to keep his balance. When he shifted his weight to his bad leg, the knee gave.

"Come on, baby," Andy said. "You just have to make it to that outcropping of rock."

There was an opening, a slight fissure between two massive shards of granite. They squeezed through and found themselves in a narrow, wooded crevice. Walls of stone and trees rose sharply to each side and ended at a point behind them. The fissure had been a portal, not into open woods, but into a blind valley. The woods were thirty feet above them. They were trapped.

Andy pushed Dillon against the side of the rock, and he slid to the ground. She took a minute to check out the weapon. She'd used real weapons on the firing range, but was more comfortable with the dummies that were used on the set. *Just pretend. Aim and squeeze*. She braced herself and waited for the first attacker to come through the opening.

Nothing happened for what seemed like ages; then she

heard the crackling of leaves and twigs. She aimed the rifle at the opening.

"This way," hissed Dillon, who'd eased himself behind her. "I think I may have found a way out."

She shook her head. She'd have a better chance taking them one by one as they came through the narrow opening.

There was a rustle in the trees to her right. A bevy of birds rose into the air. Someone was up there. And she and Dillon were goldfish in a bowl.

"Let's go," she said and pushed Dillon ahead of her. The narrow passage was filled with detritus, and the trees were so thick above them it seemed like night. Andy tried to look everywhere at once, ready to drill the first person she saw.

Dillon was moving slow, but he didn't tell her to leave him behind again. She could hear him panting. An occasional grunt escaped him as he tripped, stumbled, or slid, but all the time leading her into deeper cover.

She didn't know how he was doing it. Her legs were burning, despite the wet, clammy clothes that clung to her, weighing her down and sending waves of shivering through her body. Branches smacked her in the face; rocks tore at her bare feet. She skid in rotten leaves, tripped over roots that jutted out of the ground. She was breathing hard when they reached a small glade of level forest. They fell into each other, leaned against a tree while they gasped for breath.

They were breathing so hard that neither of them heard the crack of twigs, the rustle of leaves, until they were surrounded by Bliss's henchmen. *How? Where?* The rifle still hung from Andy's hand, but she didn't have the strength to lift it. They were caught. And unless she was wrong, they were going to die.

The last to appear was Bernard Bliss, empty-handed, out of breath, beads of sweat lacing his forehead. And Andy flashed on the first night she'd seen him—up on the dais, his forehead glistening with perspiration—and she wondered how someone who seemed so inconsequential could turn into someone so deadly.

Dillon shifted beside her. She willed him not to do anything stupid. Like grab her gun and try to shoot their way out of this. Even she wasn't dumb enough to try that one. She spent most of her life in fantasy land, but she knew the difference. She wondered if Dillon did.

Bliss shook his head at them, his eyes little black beads of disgust. "Nowhere to run," he said, his placid voice sounding sinister in the hushed stillness of the forest. He held out his hand. After a moment's hesitation, the guard to his right handed him his automatic. Then reached over and eased the rifle out of Andy's limp fingers.

He seemed almost sympathetic, and for a second, hope flared. "He's going to kill us," Andy said, flashing on all the great "oaters" that inevitably ended up with the hero surrounded. Sow the seeds of distrust. "Because we know he murdered Imogene Southwaite."

"Shut up," said Bliss. And Andy felt a thrill of excitement. It might work. Two of the guards looked at each other. They hadn't known about Imogene Southwaite.

"Why do you think we're out here, being held at gunpoint?" That was Dillon, and Andy had to catch herself before she looked at him in astonishment. "What lie did he tell you?"

One of the guards shifted on his feet.

"They know why they're here," said Bliss. "Apprehending two murderers. Oh, yes. We've been watching you. We're taking you back to camp where you'll be turned over to the authorities."

Okay. Maybe she'd spoken too soon. She turned to the guards. "We won't make it back to camp. He'll shoot us, say that you panicked and opened fire. Want to go to jail?"

"For a lifetime?" added Dillon.

Damn, she could swear he was beginning to enjoy this.

Except that it wasn't working. There was another rustle in the trees behind them. Goddammit, thought Andy. There were more of them. Well, at least maybe, with all these witnesses, they might actually make it back to the compound alive.

"Take them," said Bliss. Two of the guards moved forward.

The trees rustled again, followed by a bloodcurdling scream. Everyone looked up as a figure cannonballed from the trees. It soared over Andy's head, tucked in a tight ball as it flew toward the stunned guards. Then simultaneously, both legs shot out to the side in a Chinese split. Each foot connected to a head, and the two armed guards went down. Andy threw herself against the unarmed guard.

Bliss's rifle went flying, and then Bliss, as the camouflaged attacker landed a roundhouse kick to the ribs.

He screamed and dropped to the ground, just as one guard rose to his feet. He was stopped by a double kick to shin and groin.

Andy kneed the second guard in the chin as he tried to get up. Dillon had the other one in a headlock. He let go, and both guards stumbled away and fled into the woods with the third guard limping after them. Bernard Bliss had already disappeared.

Dillon was standing with his weight on one foot, looking stunned at the person who stood astride, hands planted on her hips, a look of satisfaction on her face.

Andy grinned. "Aunt Mac! You're alive!"

Chapter 26

of course I'm alive," said Mac, pushing a wild mass of auburn curls away from her face. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"We were afraid they'd killed you. I'm so relieved." Andy hurled herself at her aunt and threw her arms around her.

Mac patted Andy's back, then extricated herself from Andy's grip. "Why were those baboons after you? And what was Bernard Bliss doing with them?"

"Isn't that why you ran? You found out about what they were doing and had to flee for your life? Where have you been? How did you know I was here?"

"Hold on," said Mac. "One thing at a time." She turned to Dillon and stuck out her hand. "Mac Houston. Andy's aunt."

Dillon looked at the hand, looked at Mac. Slowly he stretched out his hand, and Mac pumped it. "You've had a rough time of it from the look of you. We'll have you fixed up in no time, but we'd better get out of here before they decide to come back with reinforcements."

"Dillon Cross," he said belatedly. "Nice to meet you." Mac was already helping him back the way they'd come.

Andy smiled at him as they passed, but he didn't look at her. His face was colorless down to the lips. He was obviously

301

struggling with pain, not to mention surprise at being rescued by a tactic straight out of a Tarzan movie. Andy hurried after them.

They were already approaching the wooded crevice. Andy couldn't believe they hadn't managed to run farther than that. It had felt like miles. "Wait," she said. "What if they're waiting on the other side?"

Mac shrugged. "Hank'll take care of it." She guided Dillon through the opening, supporting him with one muscled arm as he slowly made his way over the broken ground.

"Hank?" asked Andy, following close on her heels. "Who's Hank?"

"Watch out for this loose shale," she told Dillon. "You'll see in a minute," she said over her shoulder.

As soon as they were through the fissure, Mac stopped and leaned Dillon against one of the boulders. "Take a breather. It's only a little bit until we reach the road. Then you'll get a ride."

"But," said Andy, then stopped as a massive shadow rose out of the forest. A high-pitched, "eek" escaped her throat.

Mac snorted. "There you are. Did you see where they went?"

"Jumped in a Land Rover and beat it down the mountain," said the deepest voice Andy had heard since Lurch in *The Addam's Family*.

"Good," said Mac. "Andy, meet Hank. And this is Dillon Cross. Beat to shit." She grinned at Dillon. "Hanging around Andy can be dangerous work."

"Glad to meet you both," said Hank. "Let me give you a hand, Dillon. It isn't far."

Andy stared as he lifted Dillon away from the rock. He was at least six feet four, with golden blond hair that flowed to his shoulders. An unkempt beard framed his jaw. He was wearing a plaid shirt and jeans and had two cameras hanging around his neck.

She turned to Mac for an explanation, but Mac merely grinned back at her and said, "All in good time," and took Dillon's other side to help him through the woods.

They reached the dirt road in less than ten minutes. And there parked off to the side was a black SUV. They eased Dillon into the backseat and waited for Andy to climb in beside him. Mac pulled two blankets from the cargo area, tossed them into the backseat, then climbed in beside Hank. Hank patted her knee before he backed the SUV out onto the road.

Another ten minutes went by in silence as Hank maneuvered them up the winding dirt road and Andy tried to assimilate what was happening. Dillon lay back against the seat with his eyes closed. They climbed higher and higher until Hank turned off the road onto a narrow, winding cart track that plunged deep into the woods. Minutes later, they came to a stop on the side of a mountain with a breathtaking vista of miles of wooded hills. An impressive log house stood in the clearing along with several outbuildings.

Mac and Hank took Dillon up the steps to the wooden porch and went inside. They continued down the hall, Dillon between them. Andy stopped in a large, airy living room. Only slightly rustic, the wooden floors were polished and covered by area rugs woven in Navajo designs. A big leather couch sat facing a huge picture window that looked out on the view. The walls were whitewashed and covered in framed photographs of wildlife and nature panoramas.

Mac came back into the living room, carrying a pile of clothes, and motioned to Andy to follow her down a hall that ran toward the back of the house.

"Guest bedroom," she told Andy as they entered a large room with a pine four-poster bed and another picture window that looked over an equally breathtaking view. Mac went into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"Stay as long as you like. There's plenty of hot water. My clothes shouldn't look too awful on you. Maybe a little big in

the beam, but hey, not any worse than that getup." She looked pointedly at Andy's soggy shirt and khakis. "What were you thinking? No, don't tell me. A disguise, right?" She shook her head and pushed Andy toward the open door. Then she was gone.

Andy, feeling more than a little overwhelmed, stripped out of her clothes and climbed in the oversized tub. She didn't climb out until her skin was pink.

When she finally came into the living room, dressed in Mac's black stretch pants, a light blue mohair sweater, wool socks, and suede Birkenstocks, Dillon was sitting on the couch. He was propped up by a pile of handwoven pillows; one leg was stretched out along the seat. The jeans and sweater he was wearing made him look like the Incredible Shrinking Man.

There were several bottles of pills lined up on the coffee table, and Mac was attempting to apply an ice pack to his knee.

"I know this is the last thing you want after your adventure in the lake, but it's for your own good. Coffee's almost ready. And the pills will help."

Andy could smell the brewing coffee, and she suddenly felt like crying. She was safe. Mac was safe. Dillon was safe. But how had it all come together like this? She had a million questions to ask Mac. And just as many things to tell her. But what did it all mean? People were trying to kill them. Had probably killed Imogene Southwaite and God knew who else. Dillon was some kind of agent. And Hank? Who the hell was he? It was the most convoluted plot she'd ever worked with. And even if she managed to figure it all out, who on earth would ever believe her?

She walked over to the couch, placed her hand on Dillon's shoulder. He looked up. His eyes were slightly unfocused, but there was color in his cheeks.

"You okay?" she asked.

He nodded. "You?"

She nodded. She wanted to kiss him, but for the first time in her life, she was shy in front of an audience.

"He'll be fine. I gave him a couple of painkillers and some anti-inflammatories. He'll be right as rain in a few. Come help me with the coffee."

A few what? wondered Andy as she followed Mac into the kitchen. A few hours? A few days? Months? The kitchen was another big room, with big windows, and a big wooden table running down the center of the room. Everything big for a big man.

"Who is Hank exactly?" she asked.

"He's a nature photographer. This is his house."

"Those are his photos on the walls?"

"Sure are."

"But how did you get here?"

"It's a longish story. Let me deal with the coffee and we'll have a long chat."

"It was simple really," said Mac, looking at Andy over her coffee cup. She and Andy sat at the kitchen table. Dillon was zonked out on the couch, and Hank had taken his camera and wandered off into the woods. The two of them were alone. The kitchen was warm and cozy, and it was easy to forget frigid waterfalls and maniacal killers.

"My life was kind of blah, you know, not that much work for an aging stuntwoman." She held up her hand. "I know I'm not old, but I'm also not twenty anymore. I've pretty much been relegated to car chases."

"But a lot of people depend on you."

"I know. But getting other people work isn't exactly the same thing as working yourself. I was missing the excitement. I'd seen Dr. Bliss on TV and thought, what the hell. So I signed up for Terra Bliss. Thought it might shake up some things." She smiled. "And it did, in a roundabout way."

"You found the lake, too," said Andy. "I knew you did."

"Of course. Exercise bikes and treadmasters are a little tame for my blood... and yours, too, it seems. So I climbed over the wall and there was the great swimming hole of life. I met Hank when I was there one afternoon. He was taking photos." She wrestled with a reminiscent smile.

"Of the wildlife?"

"That and a few of me." She snorted. "In the wild so to speak."

Andy laughed. It felt good, especially since a few hours ago she'd thought she'd never laugh again.

"One thing led to another, so I went AWOL. Which I felt a little bad about because by that time I'd figured out that they were using posthypnotic suggestion to fleece their richer clientele. But hard to prove, you've got to admit."

"Yeah, but it's more than that."

"I started figuring *that* out when I saw you swimming at the lake last week. I was floored."

"You saw me? Why didn't you come down?"

Mac glanced toward the door. "You were, uh, busy."

"Oh, that day." Andy felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

Mac nodded. "Don't worry. You still had on your clothes. At first I didn't believe it was you. I came back the next day, and the next, but you didn't come. So I called Galena to see what the hell was in the air. I got the basic hysterical story from her. Didn't make a whole lot of sense then. But once I saw what you were wearing today, I figured it out. They sent you incognito to make sure I wasn't the victim of . . ." She dropped her voice to a spurious rumble. "Foul play."

"Mom saw the article about Imogene Southwaite and tried to call you. When they said you'd left, she got worried."

"Galena needs to get a life. She's beginning to take the movies too seriously."

"We were all worried."

"Our whole damn family is nuts," said Mac. "I told them I wouldn't be back until August. And I told them to call you and tell you I was fine and to go home. Betty said you had to give up your vacation."

"Acapulco." And Andy realized she didn't miss it at all. "But I never got the message."

"Why am I not surprised." Mac nodded toward the open kitchen door. "No matter. It doesn't look like the trip was a total waste. Dillon's hot, if a little beat up. And he isn't an actor, which should get Betty and Galena off your back."

"Not an actor. Worse."

Mac raised her eyebrows.

"He's an agent."

Mac's jaw dropped. "You're kidding. What's he doing here? Looking for talent among the ruins?"

"Not that kind of an agent. A James Bond kind of agent."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah."

"Then all this murder business is true?"

"It certainly looks like it. Or why try to kill Dillon and me? Not that we can prove it. Their word against ours."

"Oh, we have a little more than that," Mac said and gave Andy a satisfied smile.

"Like what?"

"Pictures. We've been hanging around waiting for you to show up again. Then when we heard about the death of that attendant, and that the police were hanging around, we became vigilant. Then suddenly, this morning, there you were about to be pushed over the falls. Nice dive, by the way. Anyway, while I was hotfooting it down the mountainside to save you, Hank was shooting the whole thing. Got Bliss pushing you over the falls, and the meatheads with the metal and everything in between."

Andy jumped up. "That's fantastic. Wait 'til I tell Dillon." "Sit down. Dillon won't be back from the land of nod for

several hours. I want to hear what happened at your end to make them out for your blood."

"I haven't figured that out. I showed up with these stupid glasses that blinded me, a wrinkled suit, and a bun. Dillon figured out right away that I was a fake. But I don't think anyone else did. I broke into the business office and rifled the files looking for info about you, but came up empty. But while I was there, Dillon broke in and nearly caught me. That's when I started thinking he was more than just a poor dumb slave."

"I bet he looks good in a kilt. Sorry. Go on."

"Well," said Andy. "I knew he was something more than a goddess slave. But he wouldn't share information. We've kind of been working at cross purposes ever since."

Mac nodded.

"But then Katherine Dane invited me to join her meditation group. And I remembered reading in the files that you and Southwaite had both been members. So I got suspicious. It took me a few days to figure out what she was doing. The hypnotic suggestion thing. And I don't know how I managed it. Just luck, I guess."

"Not at all," said Mac. "I figured out the same thing. Remember when I broke my leg from that *Inferno* fall?"

Andy nodded. For several months they had worried that Mac would never work as a stuntwoman again.

"Scared the shit out of me. I can tell you. I was afraid to go up again. Went to a hypnotist to get me through it. Didn't work. She said I wasn't a good subject. I could never get far enough under for it to do any good. You probably inherited it."

"But you went back up," said Andy, momentarily distracted.

"Sheer guts, not hypnotism." Mac paused in her story, her eyes drifting to someplace faraway. Then she was back. "Anyway. I figured out immediately what Katherine was up to. I decided to leave and maybe report it to some authority or another. But in the meantime, I'd met Hank, and thought what

308 Gemma Bruce

the hell, it could wait. So I took everything and went over the wall. Had a wonderful time."

"Had?"

"Well, this latest development sort of changes everything, doesn't it?"

Chapter 27

When Dillon awoke, the day had turned to dusk. He was stretched out on a leather couch, a blanket over him. His knee was throbbing. He felt disoriented and sluggish, but gradually he remembered the fight, the trip to this house, Andy's aunt and the man named Hank.

His knee. They'd bashed the butt of a rifle into it. Panic rose up through the fog and he sat up. His head swam and his stomach turned over. He blinked, took in a few slow breaths, then pushed the blanket away. The ice pack that Mac Houston had placed on his knee fell to the side. He scooped it up and seeing that it had a screw top placed it on the floor beside the couch. He dropped his feet to the floor, gingerly touched his knee. It was swollen. But was that all? He had to know.

Cautiously, he stood up, resting his weight on his good leg and bracing his hand on the arm of the couch. He shifted his weight onto his injured knee. Nausea rolled through him as pain shot up his thigh, but when it passed, he was still standing. He shuffled to the side, past the coffee table. With a supreme effort of will he let go of the couch, tottered on his feet until he found his balance. Took a minute step. And was still standing.

He heard voices from another room and the sounds of chopping, and became aware of an aroma that made his stomach growl. He took another step, gritting his teeth. And another, until sweat beaded his forehead and trickled down the inside of his arms. Another step. And another.

"Ah, you're back," said Mac, looking toward the door. "Come on in." She turned back to the stove and tipped a cutting board full of carrots into a cast-iron pan.

Andy turned around, expecting to see Hank. Dillon stood in the doorway, looking like a waif in Hank's large jeans and bulky sweater. Even the socks swallowed his feet. He was pale, looking as if he'd barely returned from the grave, and totally yummy.

He swayed and Andy started forward. Mac stepped in front of her to reach for the potatoes and gave her a look. *Don't baby him*. And she knew Mac was right. Dillon would hate being seen as weak.

He walked slowly to the table and eased himself into a chair.

"You want some water? Coffee?" asked Andy, trying not to look concerned. "How are you feeling?" She had to ask. He looked so awful.

"Okay," he said. "And yeah, I'd like some water. Please."

Andy got down a glass and filled it from the spring water dispenser. She set it down on the table, lingering over Dillon's shoulder just to feel him, alive, warm, solid. She longed to put her arms around him. Make sure he was okay. This slightly dopey, quiet, injured Dillon was unsettling. She wanted him back in his satirical, bad boy angry self.

"Hank should be back soon," said Mac. "He went into the nearest town to get you some clothes that fit. And some shoes." She grinned at him. "Since we didn't have time to pick yours up on the way back."

Andy moved away and concentrated on stirring the stew. "I told Mac about what we found out. Do you think Talbot's still inside the retreat? Do you think we can get in touch with him?"

311

Dillon put down his glass. "I can't think at all at the moment." He rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"You don't have to think until after dinner," said Mac. "Hank is also stopping by the police station to leave a message for your friend."

Dillon attempted to get up.

"Don't worry. He knows how to be discreet. And he's well known in these parts. After dinner is soon enough to worry about what to do next."

But when Hank came back a half hour later, he had nothing but disturbing news.

"The whole patrol, including your Mr. Grayson, is holed up at the retreat. I guess all hell's broken loose. They've locked down the entire establishment, since two people have gone missing. I guess that would be you. And since communications are blocked, they can't get a message to him. They're waiting until one of their boys comes out." He placed a bag and a shoe box on the table in front of Dillon, shrugged out of his jacket, and tossed it onto a peg by the back door. "Best I could do under the circumstances."

"Thanks," said Dillon. "I owe you."

Hank grunted. "Better look at them first." He pulled a bottle of red wine out of another bag and began rummaging in a kitchen drawer. "Where's the damn cork screw," he muttered.

Mac leaned over him and lifted it out of the jumble of utensils inside. He smiled, patted her on the butt, and went to work on the wine bottle.

Andy stared. Men had lost vital parts for less. But Mac seemed to enjoy having her butt patted by Hank. Wonders never ceased.

She hadn't gotten a chance to really look at the man Mac had been living with for the last three weeks. Now she gave him a good once-over.

The blond hair was shot with silver. He was older than she'd thought at first. But pretty damn buff for a big guy. Not so bulky as he'd seemed in the woods, but definitely substantial. His eyes were a greenish blue that sparkled continuously beneath bushy dark eyebrows.

She looked up to see Mac watching her. They exchanged mutually approving looks. Not bad, being stuck in the woods with a couple of body beautifuls. Andy was beginning to see romantic comedy here, with no stunts more dangerous than falling out of bed.

Too bad the bad guys were still out there.

Mac dished up the stew, and Hank passed around the wine, bypassing Dillon's place. "Sorry, man, but you're dopey enough for one night."

And strangely enough, Dillon smiled at him.

"Definitely a keeper," whispered Mac as she passed Andy a basket of homemade bread.

He was a keeper, but it probably wouldn't be her doing the keeping. Once they saw this through, they'd go back to their separate lives. It was all in a day's work for him. He'd have another, probably more exciting assignment, and she'd become a dim memory. If he remembered her at all.

Maybe it wasn't just actors she couldn't keep. Maybe there was something wrong with her. She shook the thought away. There were more important things at stake here than her deplorable love life.

The stew was delicious and Andy was ravenous. It worried her that Dillon didn't eat much, but she reminded herself that he was hopped up on painkillers, which tended to kill your appetite as well as the pain.

After dinner, Hank went out to the living room to build a fire. They were pretty high up in the mountains, and the air was definitely colder here than it had been down at Terra Bliss. Dillon followed him out and Andy and Mac were left in the kitchen.

"You're going to do his dishes?" asked Andy, astounded.

Mac made a face. "I can load a state-of-the-art dishwasher, hon, just watch." She pressed a panel, it slid to the side, and

the double racks of a dishwasher rolled out. "This is my idea of roughing it," said Mac and began putting bowls and silverware into the plastic slots.

"Whew," said Andy. "Works for me. Hank lives here?"

"Year-round. Except for winters in the Yucatan."

"And he got rich on nature pictures?"

"Don't know. Didn't ask."

Andy nodded. She wondered if Mac would feel as bereft as she did, when it was time for them to head back to L.A. She, too, knew better than to ask. It occurred to her that she wasn't the only one in her family with a bumpy road to romance. Galena had never remarried. Hardly ever dated. Lucian was one of those men your mother warned you about. And Liz just worked. Just like Andy. Just like Mac. God, they really did need to get lives.

After the food was put away in a built-in, sub-zero refrigerator, Andy and Mac went out to join Hank and Dillon.

The fire was roaring. There was no sign of the two men.

"Out on the porch. Hank's one bad habit. A pipe. Part of the mountain man image."

Andy sat down on the couch and Mac pulled out a decanter of brandy. Hank came in a few minutes later. "Heard a loon," he said as he passed by and lumbered down the hall.

"Night shoot," said Mac. "Can't get away from them."

Hank came back loaded down with equipment.

Mac stood up. "I'm the bag girl."

Hank handed her one of the camera bags; then he nodded in the direction of the porch. "I think our young agent out there could use some TLC about now. From the look of those scars on his leg, he's been through the wars, and is probably feeling pretty piss-poor ineffectual right about now."

"That's your department, Andy," said Mac, hoisting the camera bag to her shoulder.

"I... What should I say? I haven't seen him like this before. And he's not ineffectual. He saved my butt, more than once."

"So go for it."

"But I don't know how to, you know . . . "

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Andy. It doesn't take a four-thousand-dollar goddess camp to know how to treat a man. Make him feel needed." Mac shoved her toward the back door. "We'll be gone for hours maybe. The spare room is yours and Dillon's. I assume you're sleeping together. Just don't hurt his knee."

"Come on, woman," said Hank and hustled Mac toward the door, shaking his head as he followed her out.

Andy waited until she was sure they were gone, then went to the door. She could see Dillon sitting on the porch rail, looking out at the night. She opened the screen and stepped outside.

The woods rose around them in soaring shadows. Above the trees, stars sprinkled the vast sky, but Dillon just kept looking out into the dark.

Andy shivered. "There's a big, warm fire inside."

"Hmm."

She moved toward him, stopped when she was close enough that the side of her arm touched his. She could feel him shivering.

"You're cold."

"I'm fine."

"Thanks for coming to my rescue today."

"For all the good it did."

"It did. I mean, you had no way of knowing I didn't smash down into the rocks when I fell. I wasn't sure of it, either. I would have been toast if you hadn't called out to me."

"I broke your concentration. And gave him his chance to push you over."

Andy hoisted one hip to the rail and pulled herself up to sit beside him. "Bullshit. He didn't push me. I slipped. How's that for a trained stuntwoman?"

"You slipped?"

Andy laughed ruefully. "Yep. It was a miracle that I didn't land headfirst on the boulders below."

Dillon shuddered. "Let's not think about the might-have-

beens. It doesn't do any good, one way or the other." There was bitterness in his voice.

Andy felt out of her element. Her asset was action, not talking. "I couldn't have handled those guys without you."

"You don't know that."

"Of course I know that. I'm a stuntwoman. *Stunt*," she repeated, suddenly exasperated. "It's all tricks and smoke and harnesses."

Dillon finally turned to face her. "Now who's talking bull-shit."

"It's not bullshit. I mean, I'm trained in martial arts, and weaponry. I can even ride bulls and jump from flaming buildings—as long as I'm harnessed and wearing asbestos. But I've never had to use any of those skills in reality."

He gave her a half smile. Then flicked her chin. "Well, they worked pretty well today."

"So did you, in spite of what that asshole did to your knee."

"Yeah. My Achilles' heel. I envy you your skills. I used to have them—some of them. Now I can't even go through airport security without setting off the metal detectors."

Andy tightened her lips. It was awful, but the idea of bells going off as Dillon walked down the concourse dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts popped into her mind, and she couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled out. "I'm sorry. That was cruel, but you have to admit, it's pretty bizarre."

He chuckled, not quite a laugh. "Yeah, I guess it is. But it sure puts a limit on the kinds of assignments I can take."

"That's why you were here?" Sort of like being relegated to car chases, thought Andy.

He nodded.

"And that makes you angry?"

He shrugged and she moved closer. "I was at first. But it's a risk you take. I'm disappointed, but I'm alive."

"For which I'm very grateful."

He smiled at her then and shifted to put his arm around her. "I grew up on superhero movies. I didn't know about stunt

people when I was younger. I just watched the actors become real heroes, and I wanted to be like them. To save the world."

"And do your own tricks."

"And do my own tricks."

"So now what?"

"More rounds of physical therapy, try to get back into shape, see if I can still be of use in some way."

"I like the shape you're in. And I'm sure you can get back up to speed." She paused. "But I can see how the metal detector thing could be a problem."

"Damn it, it isn't funny."

"I know," she said and buried her head in his shoulder.

"Okay, so maybe it's a little funny."

"No." She looked up, suddenly serious. Took his face in her hands. "It isn't funny. It's your career. Which is your whole life, I bet. And I know how it would feel to be cut off from that. But you'll find a way through it. I know you will." She leaned toward him and kissed him. "I know you will."

Chapter 28

Andy crawled into bed beside him and pulled the covers over them. She was soon fast asleep and didn't awake until the sun coming through the window woke her the next morning.

Dillon was gone. Of course. But at least she knew he had to be close by. She eased out of bed, feeling stiff and sore in a hundred places. She dressed in her borrowed clothes and shoes and padded down the hall to the kitchen.

Mac, Dillon, and Hank were sitting at the table over coffee and pancakes. Andy sat down and Mac poured her a cup of coffee.

"We're having a council of war. Drink up so we can bring you up to speed."

Andy drank her coffee and immediately felt better. Dillon must be feeling better, too. The color was back in his face and the intensity back in his eyes.

"Okay," she said. "Shoot. Have you heard from Talbot?"

"No," said Hank in a low rumble. "And Dillon's insisting on going back into Terra Bliss."

"No way," said Andy. "We barely got out with our lives."

"I have to," said Dillon. "It's my assignment. You stay here."

"The hell I will. If you go, I go."

Dillon scowled at her. Mac grinned. Hank just shook his head.

"We'll all go," Mac said and won scowls from everybody. "Oh, come on. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"This isn't the movies," said Dillon. "It's my job. Not yours."

"It is, too," said Mac. "Some asshole just tried to murder my favorite niece. And I'm not going to let them get away with it."

"Yeah," added Andy.

Dillon turned to Hank, ignoring the two women. "Can you give me a ride back to the retreat?"

"Sure," said Hank.

Dillon stood up, put his plate and cup in the sink, and started toward the door. His limp was less pronounced this morning, but he still wasn't in prime shape. He needed her, thought Andy. And he was going to get her. And Mac, too, if she knew her aunt.

"We'll be ready in five minutes." Mac pushed back her chair.

Dillon turned around, blocking the doorway. "No."

"If I can just fit in one little question?" said Hank.

The three of them turned on him.

"Just how do you plan to get back inside?"

"The way *I* came out," said Dillon. "No one else is going." Andy, Mac, and Hank simultaneously looked down at his knee.

"I can make it. And the element of surprise might tip their hands."

"You don't even know how many are involved, and they might be watching the wall," said Andy, desperate to keep him from going in alone. Which was exactly what she shouldn't be feeling. This was something he had to prove for himself—or die trying. Talbot and the police were on the inside—if he made it that far. Why didn't they come out?

As if in answer to her unspoken plea, a car rumbled up the dirt road and came to a stop in front of the house. Hank went to open the back door, and Andy caught a glimpse of a black sedan. Seconds later, Grayson Talbot stepped out.

There was a brief round of introductions. Talbot's eyes widened a fraction when he met Mac. Then before Andy knew what was happening, Talbot and Dillon were sitting in the sedan. She glared at the tinted windows; she had no doubt the doors were locked.

She and Mac exchanged looks. Mac was humming the tune to "Secret Agent Man" under her breath. They watched from the window while twenty minutes went by and nothing happened. Then both car doors opened and the two men stepped out. They walked around the car and out of sight.

Andy and Mac moved to another window and saw Talbot and Dillon conferring with Hank, who was stacking wood under a corrugated roofed shed. This meeting lasted only a couple of minutes; then all three men got into the sedan and drove away.

"Well, of all the . . . ," said Mac.

"They're going without us," said Andy. "And they've taken Hank."

"Yeah, but I've got the keys to the SUV."

In no time they were following the sedan down the mountain.

"Not too close," warned Andy. "They're trained to spot tails."

"Yeah, yeah," said Mac. "I was doing those movies before you were born."

The sedan drove down into a small town at the base of the mountain. It passed through without stopping, but turned into a graveled drive where a green sign advertised the TAHOE LAND-SCAPING COMPANY.

"That's the lawn service the retreat uses," said Andy.

"Hmm," said Mac and pulled the SUV into a clump of roadside bushes.

Ten minutes later, a Tahoe Landscaping truck pulled out of the parking lot and passed them going in the direction of Terra Bliss.

"Well, damn," said Mac. "It looks like our men in black

have just turned into our men in green." She revved up the SUV and followed. But at the fork of the road that led to Terra Bliss, she turned right, in the direction of Hank's cabin.

"Where are you going?" asked Andy.

Mac gave her a look.

Andy grinned.

Ten minutes later, Mac stopped the SUV on the dirt road where it had been parked the day before. "Let's get hopping, then." She ran around to the back of the truck and came back with a rope and grappling hooks. "You never know," said Mac.

"I have one in my cabin."

"That's my girl."

Keeping eyes and ears on the alert, they cut diagonally through the woods and found a secluded spot were they could climb over the wall without being spotted. Mac swung the grappling hook up to the top. It snagged on the brick and the rope went taut.

Andy went first, hand over hand, keeping the rope steady while her feet climbed the surface of the wall. A quick look-see for the guards and she motioned Mac to join her. As soon as she was squatting next to Andy, they repositioned the hook and rappelled down the opposite side.

Andy quickly coiled the rope and hid it under a pile of leaves.

"What do we do now?" whispered Mac.

Andy hadn't thought about that. She'd been so anxious to be a part of the operation that she hadn't really made a plan. One look at Mac told her that they had both gone off a bit—if not a lot—half-cocked.

"Let's try to get over to the cabins. I'd really like to get a pair of my own shoes. Yours are giving me blisters."

Mac nodded, and they skulked single file toward the cabins.

They were nearly there when Andy threw her arm out, stopping Mac while two patrol guards passed by within feet of

them. Andy couldn't tell if they were the same ones that had accompanied Bernard Bliss, but she wasn't taking any chances.

Andy's cabin appeared to be unguarded, so after a quick look around, they crossed the clearing and slipped inside. It looked just like she left it, until she pulled her suitcase out from under the bed and opened it. Everything was wadded up and thrown carelessly back inside. The backpack was on the floor, its contents dumped beside it.

"I wonder what they were looking for?" she whispered.

"Possibly evidence that you were some kind of investigator."

Andy's lips tightened. "My whole masquerade would point to that, wouldn't it? How dumb was that?"

"Pretty dumb, but imaginative."

"I hope I didn't mess up the real investigation."

She turned to go back to the living room and gasped. A face was looking in at the window. Andy's heart jumped to her throat until she registered the big red hair. "Oh, God, it's Jeannie. We've got to stop her from saying anything."

But Jeannie was no longer there. They heard the screen door open and slam shut.

"Ariadne. Where the hell have you been, hon?" Jeannie rushed into the bedroom, hands gesticulating wildly. "Everybody's worried as all get-out. Katherine said you'd left on a family emergency, but hell, that's what they said about Miranda." Her head swiveled toward Mac. "Ohmigod, it's you. Where have you been? What's goin' on?" Her head swiveled back to Andy. "How'd you find her? We've all been worried sick.

"Come on down to my cabin. I'll get the girls and we'll celebrate. First, maybe we should tell Dr. Bliss that you're back."

"No," said Andy and Mac simultaneously. They pulled Jeannie away from the door. "You can't tell anyone, okay?"

Jeannie looked hurt. "But-"

"Promise. There's about to be an arrest."

"An arrest? Did they find out who killed my Demetri?" Her

eyes filled with tears. "Well, they'll have to let me at him first. I'll tear the so and so limb from limb."

"Go back to your cabin and stay there," said Andy. "Let the authorities take care of this." She saw the belligerent set to Jeannie's jaw and touched her arm. "Jeannie, I know how you feel. But this is the right way." Andy saw Mac roll her eyes behind Jeannie.

She was right. They had no business interfering, either. But that was different. Dillon was involved.

"Go on," said Mac. "You want him arrested, don't you?"

Jeannie nodded. "So it's a he? Which one? Just tell me." She turned from Mac to Andy. "Not Dillon? Not that sweet piece of sugar?"

"No," said Andy. "Not Dillon."

"Then tell me who." She crossed her arms. "I'm not leaving until you tell me."

Andy sighed. "Okay, but promise you'll go to your cabin and stay there."

"Promise," said Jeannie, hugging herself more tightly.

"Bernard Bliss."

Jeannie's mouth dropped open. "No."

"Yes. Now go." Andy nudged her toward the door.

"But how do you know?" asked Jeannie as they propelled her through the living room. "Are you a detective? I didn't think you could be as plain as all that, and now I see it all. This is so exciting."

"Jeannie, we'll tell you everything as soon as it's over. Now go to your cabin and don't say a thing to anybody." They pushed her out the door.

"Think she'll stay quiet?" asked Mac.

"I hope so. But I couldn't think of any other way to get rid of her. Let's get down to the main lawn and see what's happening."

They stayed within the trees and peered out across the expanse of perfectly manicured grass. A large landscaping truck was pulled up alongside the pool, and they could hear the dis-

tant hum of the ride-on mower. There was no sign of the smaller truck that Hank, Dillon, and Grayson Talbot had commandeered.

"Where are they?" asked Andy. "They should already be here. What if they weren't let inside?"

"Shit," said Mac.

"What?" And then she saw Jeannie hurrying across the lawn toward the main building.

"Shit," said Andy. She automatically stepped forward to go after her, but Mac pulled her back.

"You'll never make it without being seen. We'll have to wait for the guys."

"Well, they better hurry."

They waited, Andy biting her nails, Mac sighing at regular intervals. They both jumped when the front entrance of the Pantheon opened and Bernard Bliss and Katherine Dane walked down the front steps with Jeannie between them.

"Oh, no," said Andy.

"Shit," said Mac.

In silent agreement, they moved through the trees parallel to the three people who strode rapidly across the lawn toward the pool.

"Why doesn't she run?" asked Andy. "No. Don't tell me. They've got weapons. This is much easier in the movies. Real danger sucks. What are we going to do?"

Mac shrugged and kept moving.

They watched them skirt the pool. Then they were lost from view.

"Where are they—Oh, damn. The helicopter pad. They're going to use her as a hostage."

Mac was standing on tiptoe to get a better view of the lawn. "Where's that damn truck?"

"Can't wait," said Andy and broke into a run. She could feel Mac running behind her. She was dimly aware of passing people as they made their mad dash toward the far hill where the emergency helicopters were held in readiness. They heard the engine even before they saw the blades churning over the crest of the hill. They reached the pad just in time to see Bernard Bliss push Jeannie inside and climb in after her. But where was Katherine?

The copter revved up.

Andy looked desperately at Mac.

"Go."

Andy raced toward the tarmac, slowed down by the wind stirred up by the rotors. Flying bits of newly cut grass and grit lashed at her skin.

She was still twenty feet away, when the helicopter lifted off the ground. She raced after it, with some vague notion of stopping it before it was airborne. Soon it would be impossible. She took two running leaps and vaulted off the tarmac.

She managed to grab the rudders with both hands. It was a trick she'd done before, but this was the first time she didn't have a lead wire. The copter swerved, nearly flinging her off. She swung her legs up to the rudder and hung there like a monkey, trying not to think about where she was or what she had just done. She looked up and saw the startled face of Bernard Bliss staring back at her.

She knew what came next. The gun. And after that the fist-fight. Only this time the gun wouldn't hold blanks, and whoever fell wouldn't live.

She grabbed the support beam and pulled herself upright. The wind seemed to be pulling her face apart, flattened her clothes to her body. It was almost impossible to move. But she had to. She kept inching her way up the bar and finally managed to grab the door frame. Bliss leaned over and tried to push her away.

The wind was whipping her hair so that it stung her eyes. Bliss's coattails flapped across his legs as he tried to pry her hands from the doorway. She'd managed to get a firm footing on the rudders, and she released one hand long enough to grab Bliss's jacket. Bliss screamed and tumbled out of the helicopter.

For a moment, time stood still. Andy didn't move. The helicopter hovered just above the tarmac.

She risked a look down. Bernard Bliss lay spread-eagle on the ground. Had she killed him? She'd only meant to use him to hoist herself into the helicopter. They were only about ten feet off the ground, but he didn't move.

Dillon hit the gas as soon as the gates to Terra Bliss opened. Damn them and their security. It had probably cost them this arrest. Because somebody had churned up a chopper. Just the sound of it made him sick.

He didn't bother to slow down at the main building because he already saw the crowd gathered on the hill, the wind whipping their clothes in a fury.

He sped toward the helipad, bouncing over grass and whatever else got in his way. And that was when he saw the body fall out of the chopper and disappear behind the group of onlookers.

His stomach lurched. His foot jerked on the accelerator, and the truck bucked forward. *Falling*.

"Steady," came Talbot's voice from beside him. He was sitting forward in his seat, peering out the front window. "Get as close as you can. Hell, honk the horn and drive up the goddamn hill."

Dillon pressed on the accelerator and the horn at the same time. The truck bumped up the hill. People dove out of the way as it skidded onto the tarmac. The truck's doors opened simultaneously, and three men in green gardener's coveralls leapt out.

"They've got Jeannie," someone yelled over the roar of the copter.

Dillon's eyes were fixed to the man lying on the ground. Bernard Bliss. *Falling*. What the hell had happened in that helicopter?

"And Andy went after them. She's up there now."

Andy. *Falling*. Andy? He jerked his head toward the voice. Mac was standing next to Hank almost hidden in his arm.

"What?" yelled Dillon.

"Andy's up there." Mac pointed toward the copter. "Do something."

The helicopter lurched. The crowd screamed and pulled back.

"Who's flying the damn thing?"

"I don't know," Mac yelled back. "The regular pilot is in the other copter trying to raise radio communication."

Talbot ran up. "Katherine Dane has her pilot's license."

The helicopter lurched again, tipping treacherously close to the ground.

"What the hell is she doing? Why doesn't she take it up?"

The helicopter operator came running toward them. "I've made contact, but no one's answering."

Dillon looked up incredulously at the helicopter. "Andy."

"Damn." Talbot turned to Dillon, but Dillon was already sprinting toward the MedEvac copter on the second pad.

Chapter 29

Andy looked at Jeannie over the prostrate body of Katherine Dane. Jeannie's eyes were wide with fright. The helicopter lurched. Jeannie screamed. Andy jumped into the pilot's seat.

The copter tilted to the left. She grabbed a control and, channeling every episode of *MASH* she'd ever seen, pressed it to the opposite side. The helicopter swung in the opposite direction. She eased it back until it was relatively upright. And they hovered there. Not able to go up and not able to land.

Then she heard static coming out of the headset. With one hand she slipped it over her head. Managed to get the ear pieces over her ears. The horrible whirring muted out, and a voice replaced it, loud and clear. "Bring the chopper down. Immediately. You are being tracked. There is no possibility of escape."

"Dillon?" she said.

Silence on the other end.

"Dillon," she said louder. "Dillon, don't go away. I don't know how to drive this thing."

"Andy? Where is Katherine Dane?"

"Jeannie knocked her out. She didn't have a choice. Katherine was going to shoot me."

"Who's operating the controls?"

"Me. I guess. We're just sitting here and I don't know what to do."

"Is there anybody else who can operate it?"

"No, there's just me and Jeannie. And she knows less than I do. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Now listen, honey, do you think you could set it down if I instruct you?"

"I . . . I'll try."

"Good girl. Now listen carefully."

Andy listened with everything she had, but when she placed her hand on the controls, the helicopter dipped forward. Dillon barked out another order. She tried to comply, but the helicopter began to shudder.

"Okay, just hold it steady," said Dillon. "Look around. Do you see a winch for the rescue cable?"

She looked, but she already knew the answer. "No."

"Then there should be an emergency rope or rope ladder on the floor under one of the seats."

"Yes, I see it."

"You stay put. Hold the chopper steady. Have Jeannie drop it over the side."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just tell Jeannie."

"Dillon."

"Now."

She told Jeannie. Jeannie crawled over to the ladder and unfurled it out of the open door.

Andy tried to see what was happening below her, but she could only cling desperately to the throttle and try to hold the helicopter steady. She felt a tug on the right side and knew someone was climbing the ladder. And she knew it was Dillon. *Please don't let him die*, she prayed and concentrated on holding the helicopter steady.

Dillon ordered himself not to look down. Or up for that matter. He was hanging on to the rope with both hands. He'd

managed to pull himself up until he could get his feet on the sagging rung, but only one leg was strong enough to push him up. The other could barely hold his weight as the ladder swayed beneath the chopper.

Don't think about that. Andy. Just think about Andy. He had to save her. He released one hand. Grabbed the next rung. This would be so much easier with a harness and a winch. But this was what he had. He pushed himself up with his good thigh. Rested the other foot on the crosspiece. Released a hand. And the other hand. Over and over, until at last he could see inside the helicopter. Jeannie was huddled on the backseat. Andy didn't turn to look. Maybe didn't even know he was there. Her body was tense with concentration. And maybe fear. He'd never been so glad to see anyone in his life.

He let go of the rope long enough to grab the metal leg of the copilot's seat. The rope swung wildly beneath him. His fingers were growing numb; sweat was dripping in his eyes faster than the wind could dry it.

Andy glanced over. He saw her intake of breath, and the chopper dipped, nearly throwing him out. Her eyes widened before she looked away and steadied the chopper.

With a final push, he threw himself into the cab. He lay there for a few seconds—half in and half out of the flying beast—while images of another flight racketed his brain. Groping for a handhold, as he slid toward the open door. Struggling against the hands that held him. Feet scrambling for purchase on the slick steel. The push, his body sliding away. The look on Isabelle's face when he grabbed her scarf and they tumbled to earth together.

Dillon pulled his legs inside and lay on the floor, panting. It was hard to move. But he had to bring the chopper down.

He pushed to his hands and knees. Now he wiped the sweat away. Andy didn't look at him. Just sat frozen like Lot's wife over the controls.

He crawled into the copilot's seat. Reached over and tried to

ease her hand from the throttle. Her fingers were gripping it so tightly that he had to yell at her before she let go. Then he took over the controls. It came back to him as if he'd never stopped flying. As if he hadn't been nearly paralyzed with fear only moments ago.

And when they finally touched down and a cheer rose up from the crowd, he just sat there, staring at his hands. Hands that had brought them to safety.

Andy sat beside him. Not moving. He cut the engine. Slowly the rotors came to a stop, and the sound died away.

"I'm sorry," she said. Then fell across the seat into his arms. He hugged her back. Fiercely. For a moment. "See about Jeannie."

She moved away without a word. He still sat there, unable to move out of the seat.

"Well done."

He turned to see Talbot grinning up at him.

He shook his head. A small movement. He couldn't really believe what he'd just done. He was afraid if he tried to get up, he'd fall to the ground. His legs would be too weak to hold him.

"Come on down." Talbot reached toward him. Dillon took his hand and felt Talbot squeeze it in reassurance.

Slowly he got out of the craft. He didn't fall. But he felt pretty damn weak.

"See. Told you you still had it." Then Talbot turned away and helped Andy and Jeannie out of the copter.

Dillon was waiting for her when she jumped down from the helicopter. She nearly fell into his arms. But if she'd been expecting an impassioned kiss, a declaration of love, she'd have been immensely disappointed. What she got was a reaming. At the top of his lungs until she was about to burst out into tears of relief at being alive and humiliation at being yelled at for preventing Bliss and Dane's escape.

Talbot finally interceded. She was banished to the sidelines without even a thank-you. And he spirited Dillon away.

Now there were four helicopters on the landing pad. Two Black Hawks had appeared out of the clouds ten minutes after Dillon had set down the getaway copter. Their landing had caused the occupants of the goddess retreat to run in all directions to keep from being knocked over or having their perms turned to mincemeat. Bernard Bliss and Katherine Dane were being loaded on board, the two newest residents of the federal penal system.

Andy looked over to where Fiona Bliss stood, red-eyed, but standing tall. She was surrounded, for once not by her two acolytes, but by a bevy of priestess underlings and Hans, the masseur. She didn't look like a woman who would be willing to post bail for her murderous, adulterous, embezzling husband. And who could blame her.

Talbot had confiscated Katherine Dane's briefcase from the helicopter. It just happened to fall open. Inside were two plane tickets to South America, numbers of several Geneva bank accounts, and an information sheet on Ariadne "Andy" McAllister, stuntwoman.

"They knew about me," said Andy. "Probably gave them a good laugh."

"They weren't laughing," said Talbot. "They tried to kill you."

"And Demetri?"

"They did kill him. He probably stumbled onto something and, being the greedy bastard everyone says he was, tried to squeeze them for it. That's my guess." Talbot shrugged. "But we may never know." And with that, as usual, he and Dillon walked away.

Andy, Mac, and Hank watched the final unfolding along with the rest of the retreat. Loubelle and Evelyn stood nearby with their arms around Jeannie, while Jeannie described and redescribed "the most exciting day of my life."

Grayson Talbot and Dillon stood away from the crowd, talking with two other suits who had come in the second Black Hawk.

"A little anticlimactic, if you ask me," said Andy on a heavy sigh.

"Next week you learn to fly a helicopter." Mac shuddered. "Hell, girl. You pushed me right past retirement into an early grave. Remind me never to watch an aerial stunt from the ground. I don't have the nerves for it." She grimaced, then wrapped her arm around Andy's neck and squeezed for about the fifth time since Andy had climbed down from the cockpit.

The group of men broke up, and the new arrivals headed for the Black Hawks. Hell, she wouldn't be surprised if Dillon got into one of them and flew away never to be seen again.

But he and Talbot were walking toward Andy. Dillon was still scowling. Which was weird. He'd proven his worth by his rescue. Talbot was crazy if he didn't give him a promotion.

Talbot gave her a crooked grin. "Got your land legs back yet?"

Andy nodded. For some reason she couldn't bring herself to talk. And the revving up of the two Black Hawks gave her a good excuse not to.

As soon as they lifted off, swerved and flew away, the crowd began to disperse.

"We'll need you to stick around for a few days for some interviews. Then Dr. Bliss is canceling the rest of the session."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Good. You were amazing."

"She was a damn fool."

"Thank you, Agent Cross, for your expert analysis. Now give the girl a break." He turned to Andy. "Don't mind him. He's an adrenaline junkie. He'll calm down soon. See you later." He gave her a quick two-finger salute, nodded to Hank and Mac, and sauntered off across the lawn toward his car.

333

Andy watched him go. Then Hank and Mac sauntered away, and she and Dillon were alone.

Andy stood looking at the ground. "I guess you're pretty mad, huh?"

"I was scared out of my wits," Dillon said tightly.

"But you did it. You were amazing."

"Yeah. But I was talking about you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Don't ever scare me like that again."

She looked up at him then, and the look in his eyes made her heart flutter. Get a grip, she warned herself. Adrenaline rush. We all get them. Don't expect it to last.

"Yoo-hoo, you two." Jeannie trotted toward them, with Evelyn, Loubelle, Rusty, JoJo, and Louis following close behind. "You were incredible, fabulous, remarkable, the cat's whiskers. You saved my little ole life." She hugged Andy and planted a kiss on her cheek. Then she hugged Dillon and gave him the same, but on the mouth. Andy thought it went on just a little too long for a thank-you-for-saving-my-life kiss.

JoJo pulled her away. "That's enough, Jeannie. You'll make me jealous."

Jeannie laughed. "Honey. It feels so good to laugh. I can't tell ya. I thought I was a goner for sure. Well, would you look at that."

Everyone turned to see Carmen and Jane walking across the lawn, hand in hand, heads together.

"What's with those two?" asked Jeannie.

JoJo sighed. "I guess they found themselves when they were banished to the Bower of Bliss. They're leaving the goddess program and taking an extended vacation in Hawaii as soon as they're released by the police."

"Will wonders never cease," said Jeannie and looked at her watch. "Now, how about that? It's happy hour."

"It's only two o'clock," said Evelyn.

Jeannie grinned at her. "Like I said, happy hour." And began ushering everyone across the lawn to the pool. "You and Dillon coming?"

"Maybe a little later," said Andy, distracted by the sight of Mac and Hank indulging in a serious kiss.

Carmen and Jane were holding hands, Mac and Hank were slobbering all over each other. Jeannie was flirting shamelessly with JoJo, and it seemed like there was no place for Andy but her trailer. Only she didn't even have a trailer.

She sighed. "Seems like everybody but Dr. Bliss and the two murderers are getting a happy ending."

"What about us?"

Andy's eyes widened. Oops. Had she said that out loud? She guessed she had. "What about us?"

"Do we get a happy ending?"

"Well, uh. You've got your job back, right?"

He nodded, and Andy's stomach flipped over. She was glad he was reinstated in whatever agency he worked for. But a tiny little selfish part of her wished he could stick around.

"I heard Talbot say you had to stay around for a few days."

"I do," she said, trying not to look at him.

"I do, too. Got any ideas what I should do with my time?"

Her heart skipped. She glanced up. Was he smiling? "Well, you *were* supposed to be my slave for three weeks. I figure you owe me a couple more weeks."

"You're right, I do."

"But won't Talbot need you?"

He moved closer to her, lifted a strand of her hair, began to wrap it around his finger, drawing her nearer. "I still have a few loose ends to clear up first."

She looked up into his face and her knees kind of wobbled.

"A lot of loose ends."

She blinked, drew away to look at him. His eyes were dark and his devilish half smile was back.

"Two weeks?"

Dillon shrugged. Released her hair to take her in his arms. "I was thinking much, much longer."

Much longer. Andy grinned. "Sounds like a plan." And for once, no one yelled, "Cut!"

Nobody does funny and sexy better than MaryJanice Davidson.

Here's a sneak peek at

DOING IT RIGHT

coming soon from Brava...

Tap-tap-tap.

"What the hell is that?" Jared muttered, getting up and crossing the room. He had a flashback to one of his literature classes. "Who is that tapping, tapping at my chamber door?" he boomed, pulling back the curtain and expecting to see... he wasn't sure. A branch, rasping across the glass? A pigeon? Instead, he found himself gazing into a face ten inches from his own. "Aaiiggh!"

It was her. Crouched on the ledge, perfectly balanced on the balls of her feet, she had one small fist raised, doubtless ready to knock again. When she saw him, she gestured patiently to the lock. He dimly noticed she was dressed like a normal person instead of a burglar—navy leggings and a matching turtleneck—and wondered why she wasn't shivering with cold.

He groped for the latch, dry-mouthed with fear for her. They were three stories up! If she should lose her balance . . . if a gust of wind should come up . . . the latch finally yielded to his fumbling fingers and he wrenched the window open, grabbing for her. She leaned back, out of the reach of his arms and his heart stopped—actually stopped, ka-THUD!—in his chest. He backpedaled away from the window. "Okay, okay, sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Now would you please get your ass in here?"

She raised her eyebrows at him and complied, swinging one

leg over the ledge and stepping down into the room as lightly as a ballerina. He collapsed on the cot, clutching his chest. "Could you please not ever, *ever* do that again?" he gasped. "Christ! My heart! What's going on? How'd you get up there?"

"Quoth the raven, nevermore," she said and helped herself to a cup of coffee from the pot set up next to the window. At his surprised gape, she smiled a little and tapped her ear. "Thin glass. I heard you through the window. 'While I pondered, nearly napping, suddenly there came a rapping, rapping at my chamber door.' I think that's how it goes. Poe was high most of the time, so it's hard to tell. Also, the man you saw me bludgeon into unconsciousness dropped a dime on you today."

"He what?"

"Dropped a dime. Rolled you over. Put you out. Phoned you in. Wants to clock you. Wants to drop you. Made arrangements to have you killed, pronto. Sugar?"

"No thanks," he said numbly.

"I mean," she said patiently, "is there sugar?"

He pointed to the last locker on the left and thought to warn her too late. When she opened it (first wrapping her sleeve around her hand, he noticed, as she had with the coffee pot handle), several hundred tea bags, salt packets and sugar cubes tumbled out, free of their overstuffed, poorly stacked boxes. She quickly stepped back; avoiding the rain of sweetener, then bent, picked a cube off the floor, blew on it and dropped it into her cup. She shoved the locker door with her knee until it grudgingly shut, trapping a dozen or so tea bags and sugar packets in the bottom with a grinding sound that set his teeth on edge.

She went to the door, thumbed the lock with her sleeve, then came back and sat down at the rickety table opposite the cot. She took a tentative sip of her coffee and then another, not so tentative. He was impressed—the hospital coffee tasted like primeval mud, as it boiled and reboiled all day and night. "So that's the scoop," she said casually.

"You're here to kill me?" he asked, trying to keep up with the twists and turns of the last forty seconds. "You're the hitman? Hitperson?" Who knocked for entry? he added silently.

"Me? Do wet work?" She threw her head back and pealed laughter at the ceiling. She had, he noticed admiringly, a great laugh. Her hair was plaited in a long blond braid, halfway down her back. He wondered what it would look like unbound and spread across his pillow. "Oh, that's very funny, Dr. Dean."

"Thanks, I've got a million of 'em." Pause. "How did you know my name?"

She smiled. It was a nice smile, warm, with no condescension. "It wasn't hard to find out."

"What's your name?" he asked boldly. He should have been nervous about the locked door, about the threat to his life. He wasn't. Instead, he was delighted at the chance to talk to her, after a day of thinking about her and wondering how she was . . . who she was.

"Kara."

"That's gorgeous," he informed her, "and I, of course, am not surprised. You're so pretty! And so deadly," he added with relish. "You're like one of those flowers that people can't resist picking and then—bam! Big-time rash."

"Thanks," she said, "I think." She blushed, which gave her high color and made her eyes bluer. He stared, besotted. He didn't think women blushed anymore. He didn't think women who beat up thugs blushed at all. He was very much afraid his mouth was hanging open and unable to do a thing about it. "Dr. Dean—"

"Umm?"

"—I'm not sure you understand the seriousness of the situation-"

"Long, tall and ugly is out to get me," he said, sitting down opposite her. He shoved a pile of charts aside; several clattered

342 MaryJanice Davidson

to the floor and she watched them fall, bemused. "But since you're not the hitman, I'm not too worried."

"Actually, I'm your self-appointed bodyguard."

"Oh, well, then I'm not worried at all," he said with feigned carelessness, while his brain chewed that one . . . bodyguard? . . . over.

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