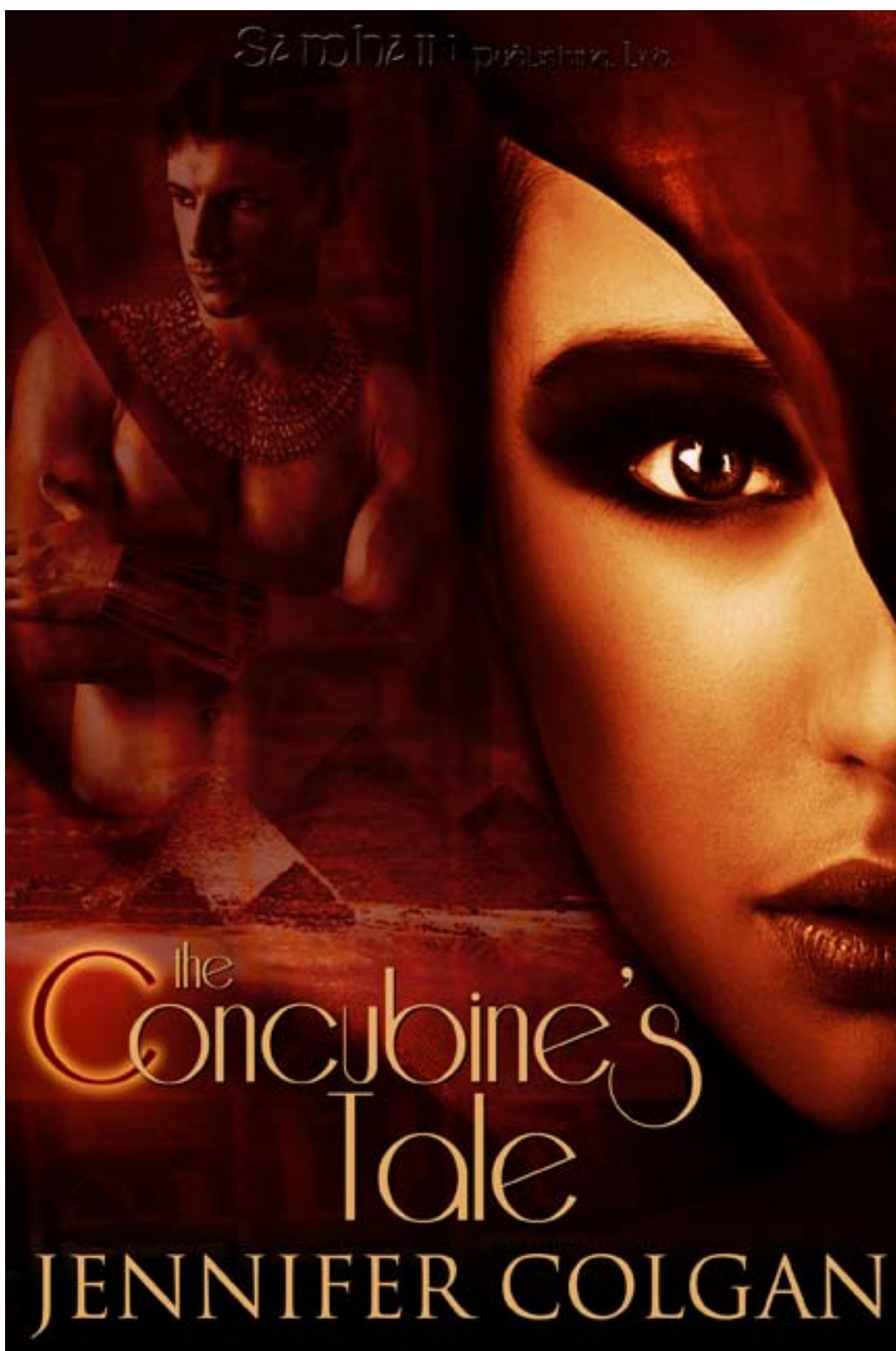


Samhita Publishing, Ltd.



The  
Concubine's  
Tale

JENNIFER COLGAN

*Separated in time. United by forbidden passion...*

When an ancient papyrus scroll comes up for auction, gallery curator Cait Lang draws the distasteful task of notifying her boss's favorite client, Grant Pierson. The rare art and antiquities collector's arrogance grates on her nerves, but most of all she resents her own weakness for his athletic body and deep brown eyes.

It's the hieroglyphic scroll that draws Grant to a private, after-hours showing at the gallery. But the lovely Cait's narration of the erotically charged story captures his interest. Determined to hear the rest of the tale—and spend more time in Cait's company—he convinces her to join him for dinner.

The intricate, sensual tale transports Cait's and Grant's imaginations into the past. And the depictions of sexually charged temple rituals inspire them to explore their own hidden passions—in Cait's apartment.

Even as Grant succumbs to Cait's charms, the drive to own the scroll hums in the back of his mind. If he isn't careful, though, he'll not only lose the chance to hear the end of the story, he'll lose something more precious. The missing piece of his own life—Cait.

Warning: This title contains explicit, forbidden sex, ritual sex, a sex god, and naughty hieroglyphics.

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

The Concubine's Tale  
Copyright © 2010 by Jennifer Colgan  
ISBN: 978-1-60928-214-1  
Edited by Linda Ingmanson  
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: October 2010  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# The Concubine's Tale

*Jennifer Colgan*

# Dedication

For Jillian, thanks for all your encouragement!

# Chapter One

Cait Lang tried to ignore the bristle of annoyance that tightened the back of her neck as she dialed the all-too-familiar phone number. She'd put on a bright, compliant smile when her boss, Matthew Greer, asked her to make the call. Back in her office, she'd waited patiently while her assistant, Jeri, finished some filing, before she indulged in a long-suffering sigh and some therapeutic eye-rolling.

Why did Mr. Greer always give that arrogant know-it-all Grant Pierson the right of first refusal on any new piece that came into the gallery? Certainly Madison-Greer had plenty of wealthy, polite clients who deserved a shot at owning a coveted piece of antiquity as much as Grant Pierson did. What bothered Cait most, though, was that she had Grant Pierson's number memorized.

Not just his number, either. She leaned back in her chair, listened to the electronic trill through the receiver and recalled the chiseled planes of his face, his chocolate brown eyes, and blond, professionally mussed hair that was just the right length for running fingers through in the heat of passion. The gorgeous ones always had a fatal flaw, though, and Grant Pierson's was his personality. Self-assured to the point of cockiness, the unflappable rare art collector alternately made Cait want to throw herself at him, or throw something heavy at his head. Fortunately for her, the Madison-Greer Gallery had a strict policy about employees dating clients, so the former option was safely out of the question. The latter, however—that nice Etruscan vase that sat in the corner of her little office would make a wonderful projectile, wouldn't it?

When Pierson's answering machine picked up, Cait sighed and halted the impatient drumming of her ballpoint pen on the desk. All violent fantasies aside, this was business, and Cait was nothing if not professional. She doubted Pierson even knew how much she resented the special treatment he received, since each time they'd met, she'd followed Mr. Greer's lead and treated the man like visiting royalty. He'd probably come to expect it now.

She stammered at the beep, realizing she'd daydreamed through his message. "Ah...Mr. Pierson, it's Cait Lang from Madison-Greer. I'm calling to give you advance notice of a new item we received at the gallery—"

"Pierson here."

Cait started at the intrusion of his deep voice. He sounded a little breathless, like he'd run to catch the phone. The clock on the wall across from her desk read two p.m. Maybe he'd just returned from a power lunch. Or maybe he was out of breath from an afternoon liaison. That thought sobered her. Why did her angry thoughts about Grant Pierson always turn to sex?

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pierson." Cait slipped into her game voice and studied her shipping manifest as though it might contain information she hadn't read a hundred times before.

"Cait. Matthew Greer's personal assistant?"

Heat gathered beneath the collar of her silk blouse. "Head curator," she corrected him, keeping her voice even. "I'm calling to let you know about a fascinating new piece we've just acquired."

She heard the crinkle of a deep leather chair and imagined him leaning back and planting his long legs on the edge of his mahogany desk while he loosened his tie. "Hit me."

*Love to.* Her fingers played at her collar, and she deftly released one of the tiny pearl buttons of her blouse. Had someone turned off the air conditioning in the gallery offices again?

"It's a scroll. Papyrus. Circa 1200 BC."

"Hmm, a scroll." He sounded bored.

She nodded, directing her gaze at the ceiling once again. "Yes."

"Where did you acquire it?"

"A private collector obtained the scroll in 1962. It's going to be auctioned as part of the dissolution of the man's estate."

"Museums interested?"

"A few, but I've been instructed to let our preferred customers know about it ahead of schedule. You're first on the list." As always. Grant Pierson's private collection of Egyptian art and artifacts was legendary. His ruthlessness in acquiring rare and unusual pieces was surpassed only by his generosity in allowing museums and researchers access to his finds.

"Could I come by and take a look at it?"

"Of course. When is convenient for you?"

"How about this evening, around seven?"

Cait glanced at her day planner. Another late night. Ugh. "Seven. Certainly. I'll be here."

"I look forward to it, Cait. Thanks for calling me."

"I'll see you at seven."

When he hung up, Cait took a deep breath. Now she'd have to hang around after closing and wait for him. Why did it have to be tonight, when Mr. Greer was out of town and unable to entertain his favorite client?

"Did I hear you say seven, as in p.m.?" Jeri ducked her head back into Cait's office and frowned. "I can't work late tonight."

Cait gave the younger girl a tight smile. "No problem. I don't expect you to stay two hours overtime to accommodate Grant Pierson." She waved her hand, dismissing him as just another eccentric art collector. "I'll handle him."

Jeri nodded, and a knowing smile replaced her frown. "I bet you will."

Grant Pierson considered which held more fascination for him, a Nineteenth Dynasty Egyptian scroll to add to his collection of rare antiquities, or an evening with the undeniably alluring head curator for Madison-Greer.

Among rare works of art, Cait Lang certainly stood out. He pictured her as he'd seen her last, in a severe herringbone suit over the laciest satin chemise. Her legs, in pearl gray hose, seemed to go all the way to Neverland. Her honey-blond hair begged to be released from a flawless bun at her nape. Her coral-shell lips had shimmered with every clipped word of her conversation. Even her voice was graceful and curvaceous. That sexy purr she adopted when discussing a new artifact always gave him a jolt that lingered long after the conversation ended. He told himself it was just her passion for antiquities that made her powder blue eyes sparkle—a passion they shared.

If it wasn't for her ice princess attitude and that cool veneer of aloofness she adopted whenever he was around, he might have asked her out, regardless of Madison-Greer's archaic dating policies.

He hated to admit it, but he liked that diamond-hard exterior. Her professional polish always made him curious as to what lay underneath the buttoned-up, business-woman exterior. Maybe it was time to find out.

He straightened his tie and hit the call button on his phone. "Anna, I'd like reservations for two at Del Monaco's tonight for eight-thirty."

"Will do," his secretary replied.

"And Anna—"

"Yes?"

"Not my usual table. I'd like one in the back tonight."

"I'll see what I can do."

Something out of the way would give them a little privacy, and maybe he could get Cait to come out of her polished shell for a while. He swiveled in his chair to take in the view from his office. A few hours alone with the lovely Ms. Lang would certainly put him in the mood to spend a small fortune on a piece of ancient papyrus.

Cait stared at the scroll and thought of the first pair of hands that might have touched it. Sheathed now in tempered glass, its brittle remnants spread in a broken oval shape, it reminded her of a half-finished jigsaw puzzle. She found it sad that the missing pieces would never come together.

Lost in thought, she jumped a little at the sound of the gallery's door chime. She smoothed her dark skirt and hurried to the front door.



Grant Pierson appraised her through the frosted MG logo that decorated the upper half of the glass.

"I hope I'm not keeping you from something," he said as she backed up to let him inside. He stepped aside while she relocked the door.

*Of course not, she thought. What social life can a girl have when she works all the time?* "No problem. I was able to rearrange my plans." Cait let her curious gaze follow him across the main display area. His charcoal suit and polished Fiorello shoes said boardroom all the way, but the broad shoulders and tight butt said weekend athlete. He moved like he owned the place. With the amount of money he'd spent here over the years, he might as well have been a partner in the business.

He bent to study the rare coin case in the center of the room. "You've changed the lighting in here."

She nodded. "We added some tracks down the center of the ceiling and replaced the top panels of the cases with a new type of glare-free glass. A major improvement for a small investment."

"Your idea?" His expression gave her pause. She couldn't tell if he approved of the change or not.

She crossed the room before answering, conscious of his gaze on her. "Not really. Mr. Greer is the display expert. The scroll is in the back, if you'd like to take a look."

"Can't wait."

They met at the narrow doorway leading to the back room. There, she caught a warm, spice-scented whiff of his aftershave as she passed him. Their shoulders brushed, and the feel of textured wool over lean muscle sent a charge through her nerve endings. Goose bumps rose under her blouse.

The sudden chill of excitement caused by the brief contact became a languid heat as she watched his expression change. His eyes lit when he saw the scroll, and his long fingers seem to flex with the desire to touch it. *Figures an ancient artifact would turn him on*, she thought.

He circled the display case. "Tell me about it." He clasped his hands behind his back, as if to prevent himself from reaching for the inaccessible treasure.

"Of course."

Beautiful. That was the first word that came to Grant's mind when he saw it. The rich color of the aged papyrus, the fine crazing where time had begun to disintegrate the fibers, gave the piece such character, like wrinkles on an aged face. The ink used to paint the hieroglyphics had once been vibrant shades of kohl black, berry red and deep ochre. Now the edges of the word symbols were faded and chipped, but enough of the work remained to be legible to those who knew the complicated ancient language.

So beautiful. He looked up into eyes the color of delicate lapis lazuli and smiled. He wanted it. He wanted her.

"According to the journal of the original owner, the piece was discovered in a limestone cave just outside of Coptos. It had been sealed in a clay jar."

Grant closed his eyes and tried to picture the vessel and imagine the thrill of discovery. “What happened to the jar?”

“It had been sealed with beeswax, and the boy who found it unfortunately broke the jar while trying to open it. The shards were thrown away.”

The sorrow in her voice touched him. It meant something to him that she appreciated the loss as much as he did. “What year was it found?”

“Probably 1951. It was purchased by the collector from the boy’s family in 1962. They’d emigrated from Egypt to the US at great personal expense and sold a few family treasures to get back on their feet financially.”

“Who was the collector?”

He watched her purse her lips. She looked down at her fingertips where they rested on the edge of the case. “I’m not at liberty to—”

“His name was Charles Layton, wasn’t it?”

“No fair trying to guess. Do you know him?”

“I met him once, several years ago. He’s paid next to nothing for a number of rare artifacts over the years. He befriended displaced foreign nationals and managed to get his hands on things that should have been donated to museums.” Grant shook his head. He wanted the scroll just so he could see it on public display—something Layton never allowed with his ill-gotten treasures. “Has it been translated?”

“Roughly.”

He leaned toward her and drank in the enticing scent of her perfume. “Tell me more.”

Did he imagine that she blushed when his gaze dropped to the delicate neckline of her blouse?

“The translator believed it might have been a memoir of sorts. An account of two lovers who ran away together.”

“Lovers?” There was something about the way she formed the word. The tip of her tongue peeked between her perfect teeth, tantalizing and sweet. “Is the complete translation included in the price?”

She gave him a dark look. “Normally that’s extra, but Mr. Greer left instructions that we should accommodate any special requests you had.”

Grant held back a laugh. He could think of a number of special requests he’d bet good money Matthew Greer would never sanction. He gave her a languid smile. “Tell me everything you know.”

Cait walked around the display case, putting the ancient treasure safely between her and Grant. The look in his dark eyes and the arrogant set of his jaw told her he was enjoying this way too much. Having her at his beck and call was not part of her job description, but she couldn’t resist the allure of the remarkable story. She took a deep breath and began.

“The first glyph is a woman’s name—Nayari. The consensus is the story was written about her, possibly dictated to a scribe. According to this, she was a concubine in the house of a magistrate named Ammonptah. His name appears in the cartouche below hers.”

The butterflies in Cait’s stomach fled the moment she began to tell the story depicted on the scroll. This was a part of her job she loved. Learning the history of an artwork or artifact gave her even more pleasure than the work itself sometimes. The story Charles Layton had recorded in the accompanying journal was tragic and compelling. One look into Grant Pierson’s bottomless brown eyes and she knew he was hooked already, just as she’d been the moment she began reading.

He ran one finger over the edge of the glass case. “Some say Ammonptah was related to the Pharaoh Seti II, is that right?” he asked, his expression distant.

Cait nodded at his astute question. Very few people knew details of that obscure period in Egyptian history. “That’s an unsubstantiated rumor. Some say Ammonptah was Seti II’s elder brother, the son of a princess from Asia traded to the Pharaoh Merneptah. Others believe he was the child of a servant and his lineage was suspect. Either way, he wanted Seti’s throne and was ruthless enough to try anything to get it.”

“This seems like it’s going to be a long story.” Grant checked his watch, and her heart sank a little. How could the tale be boring him already?

“If you’re in a hurry, I can fax you a synopsis of the trans—”

“Actually, I’m starving. How about you?”

Cait felt lightheaded for a millisecond. Was he actually asking her to dinner? “Well...” Normally, that was forbidden, but Mr. Greer had said to do anything necessary to pique Grant Pierson’s interest in the piece.

“Do you like Del Monaco’s?” he asked.

The most exclusive restaurant in town? Who wouldn’t? “Sure.”

“Why don’t you tell me more about the concubine and her ruthless master over dinner?”

“I shouldn’t.” Cait’s mind whirled around the idea of just this one time in her life, actually breaking a rule. Who would know? And since it was a personal request of Mr. Greer’s favorite client...

Grant cocked an eyebrow. “Consider it a business meeting. I have a lot of questions about the piece if I plan to bid on it at auction.”

“I’ll get my coat.” He certainly knew how to work her, didn’t he?

## Chapter Two

Grant's gaze roamed up from Cait's Dolce & Gabbanas to the hem of her skirt as she slid into the high-backed booth in the darkest corner of Del Monaco's. A single tea-light flickering in a cobalt hurricane glass gave just enough light for him to maneuver in next to her without stepping on her feet.

The waiter greeted him by name, took their drink order, and politely disappeared.

"You come here often." The lilt in her voice told him she was testing the waters, trying to find out more about him than just his dining preferences.

"It's one of my favorite places. I get tired of cooking for one."

"You cook?" Her sculpted brows rose in amused surprise. "I'm impressed."

The waiter returned with their drinks and took their dinner order. When he'd gone again, Grant settled forward so his head was close to hers.

"I'm competent in the kitchen. I *excel* in other areas." He watched her swallow that statement with a demure sip of her pink martini. "How about you?"

"Can I cook? Or where do I excel?" One hand toyed with the top button of her blouse, purposely drawing his attention to the V of soft skin beneath the dark silk.

"Yes." He licked his lips in anticipation of the answer.

"I make an award-winning coq au vin."

"One of my favorites." The look she gave him was skeptical but playful. He laughed. "I'm serious. I love it."

She ran one finger around the frosted rim of her glass, and her expression sobered. "What else do you love?"

"I'd love to hear more about Nayari. What do you suppose the life of a concubine was like in 1200 BC?"

"Well, there's not much in the scroll about her day-to-day life, but the details of the particular incident that the scroll describes are quite vivid, thanks to the interpretation of Layton's translators. They may have indulged their creativity a bit, though."

Grant leaned in a little closer, his curiosity piqued. "I can't wait to hear it. Start from the beginning."

"Is Ammonptah displeased with me?" Nayari wrung her hands and paced the confines of the small salon at the back of her master's house. Around her, servants gathered her few belongings and packed them into woven baskets.

Ammonptah's head wife, Baakah, supervised the work, her painted lips set in a satisfied line.

"Not displeased. He has merely asked that you travel to Coptos to meet him." Baakah's explanation rang false, but Nayari dared not question her. "You will reside at the temple there until Ammonptah arrives."

The temple? Nayari had never lived in a temple. Why would Ammonptah send her there? "Will I be coming back?" she asked when the servants began carrying the baskets from the room.

Baakah nodded absently. When the servants left, she took Nayari's slender hands in her own and squeezed them. The jewels on her wrinkled fingers dug into Nayari's flesh, but her dark eyes held sympathy for once. "Be well," she said.

The servants escorted Nayari out of the salon and through the house, which would no longer be her home. Just beyond the low stone wall that skirted the courtyard, a small caravan waited. A stern-faced warrior stepped forward and bowed to Baakah, then to Nayari. He put his hand on hers and drew her toward the wheeled cart into which the servants were piling her belongings.

She looked up into dark eyes ringed with kohl, and something tightened in her belly. She placed her hand on her stomach, beneath the woven belt that girdled her long, flowing dress. The emptiness there began to fill with fear and a strange form of excitement when the warrior's gaze met hers.

"Who are you?" she dared to ask. She'd never seen a man so tall and broad-shouldered. His skin, a shade darker than her own honey tone, glistened with fragrant oil. Bronzed bands circled his upper arms as if to keep his muscles imprisoned and controlled. A collar of beaten gold hung across his upper chest.

"I serve Ammonptah. That's all you need to know."

Nayari glanced back at the house. Baakah hurried across the courtyard and went inside, shutting the door behind her. No one remained outside to see her off. Even the servants who had packed her baskets were gone.

With a heavy heart and a hot ache in the back of her throat, Nayari climbed into the cart. The oxen tethered to its front shuffled their feet and made noises of bovine complaint when the warrior urged them to motion. Nayari drew the shawl from around her shoulders and covered her head against the glare of the afternoon sun. She huddled there, swaying with the movement of the cart, staring at the warrior's broad back and narrow waist and trying to keep herself from crying.

“Let me guess, Baakah didn’t like Nayari and arranged to have her removed as competition for Ammonptah’s affections?” Grant asked when Cait paused for breath. She’d been transported by her narrative, and the bustling restaurant had seemed to fade away. Grant’s question brought her back to reality.

“You know a lot of Egyptian history. I’m impressed. I’ve spent a lot of time reading the journals that came with the scroll. Layton paid a lot of money to his researchers to get the details right. He must have had them working on it for years.”

“It’s unusual to find a story about the life of a concubine. I know back then the Egyptians were meticulous record keepers, but it’s more common to find a ledger of household accounts than a diary.”

Cait nodded. “Layton believed this story was written as both a warning and a confession of sorts. It seems as though someone wanted future generations to know what happened to Nayari, so she wouldn’t be forgotten.”

“I bet the warrior never forgot her.”

Cait looked up and thanked the waiter who had returned with appetizer salads and a basket of fragrant rolls. Her insides trembled at the thought of the young Nayari being cast from her home by the man who owned her. “As Ammonptah’s head wife, Baakah had quite a bit of leverage in the household and enjoyed a coveted place in society. If she didn’t like Nayari, she could have arranged for the girl to fall out of favor with her husband, but this was more complicated. It was Ammonptah who chose Nayari to be moved to the temple in Coptos.”

“That was the temple dedicated to Min, correct?” Grant’s eyes flashed, and Cait wondered what else he knew about the ancient Egyptian god of male fertility and sexual prowess.

“That’s right. Ammonptah became a disciple of Min later in his life, apparently around the time he decided to maneuver himself into Seti II’s throne. It would have been unusual for a non-religious figure to live at a temple, but apparently Ammonptah had enough influence to be granted a special favor.”

“Nayari was a sacrifice?”

Cait shook her head and took another sip of her drink. “No. Min preferred wheat or lettuce as an offering, and some speculate on the sensual rites and dances that were held to honor him and invoke his blessing on a man’s...performance.”

Dark eyes locked on hers, and she felt a flutter in her chest. She imagined the distant beat of drums and naked worshippers writhing together on the temple floor. Maybe a practical demonstration would be in order—later.

What was she thinking? Had those few sips of martini already gone to her head? Breaking one rule was enough. She didn’t dare try breaking them all in one night, especially with Grant Pierson. She never would have imagined enjoying dinner with the man, but here, away from the gallery, he seemed different. The arrogant businessman had become charming and attentive. Was it only due to his interest in the scroll?

“Tell me more. Ammonptah had some nefarious plan in store for Nayari, didn’t he?”

“According to the scroll, yes. But it took her a while to find out exactly what.” Cait took another sip of her drink and continued her story.

The journey to Coptos was tedious. Only the warrior seemed unfazed by the heat and the dry dust that rose along the road as they plodded along. His posture never wavered, and he slowed his stride only long enough to water the oxen and ask Nayari if she needed to relieve herself. She declined the offer and pulled her shawl farther over her face to distance herself from his disconcerting stare and to hide from the prying eyes of the people they passed along the way.

She imagined what the other travelers must think of her, being led along in an old cart with the stiff-backed warrior trudging ahead of her. She felt like an outcast, and she began to hate Ammonptah for visiting this torture upon her.

She thought back to the last time she'd been with him and wondered if she'd done something to make him dislike her.

Then it occurred to her that Ammonptah probably thought she was barren! She'd been in his household for several years now and, at age twenty, she had yet to bear a child for him. Obviously he was sending her to the temple to ask for a blessing of fertility. That had to be it. That thought eased her apprehension somewhat. A blessing from the gods would certainly help. Then she could return home, fully prepared to serve Ammonptah's household properly.

Her spirits buoyed now, she straightened her spine and clapped her hands to get the warrior's attention. “What's your name, servant of Ammonptah? I must know what else to call you if you are to be my servant as well.”

He stopped mid-step, and the thick muscles of his back bunched before he turned to her. “I am Ammonptah's servant. Not yours.”

“I demand to know your name.”

He turned away from her and began walking again. The oxen snorted, and their tails flicked in unison to dislodge the flies that had settled on their angular backsides.

“I am a servant of Ammonptah.” He said nothing more until sunset.

“He didn't like her, I gather.” Thanks to Cait's colorful description, Grant had a clear picture of the scene in his mind. The strong warrior reduced to babysitting a spoiled princess for his master. It sounded like a dishonorable job reserved for someone who'd screwed up royally and needed some humiliation to keep him humble.

“On the contrary.” Cait grinned and popped a bite of her smoked salmon entrée into her mouth. Grant watched her lips again, tantalized. Did she taste sweet or spicy? How many buttons between her cleavage and her skirt? “According to the scroll, the warrior was smitten with Nayari the moment he saw her. She was considered very beautiful in an exotic way. Her skin was light, and her eyes were the color of dark honey. Her hair was probably black, long and straight and shiny. He, of course, was forbidden to think of her as anything other than cargo to be transported at the whim of Ammonptah.”

“Did he know why she was being brought to the temple? Did he wonder if he might get to see her dance for the fertility god?”

“He didn’t know yet. It wasn’t his place to question. However, he was clever and strong-willed and not exactly sure that he supported Ammonptah’s ambitious bid for the throne.”

“He was a man of integrity.” Grant sipped his wine and tipped his glass to touch Cait’s. “To integrity.”

“Of course, it wasn’t a time in history when integrity was well received. Political alignment was everything. Wealth and power were the only avenues to a comfortable life and, as a soldier, he had to be on the winning side to reap the rewards of his station. He had to bide his time.”

“But he had the hots for his boss’s woman.”

“One of his boss’s many women. A young, beautiful woman who was about to need his help desperately.”

“Don’t leave me hanging. I need to know more.” At his prompt, Cait’s eyes seemed to lose focus, as if she were seeing into the past as she described it to him. Grant kept his gaze on her and let the rhythm of her words transport him once again to another world.

A river of stars dusted the sky when Nayari and her stoic escort finally reached the temple at Coptos. The heat of the day had faded, and Nayari shivered in her thin shawl. The warrior reached up to help her down from the cart. When she laid her hand in his, the heat of his skin felt like fire. His black eyes smoldered when his gaze met hers, and once again she felt a jolt of unexplained anticipation.

Acutely aware of her movements now, she slid her legs down and pointed her sandaled feet at the ground. As she lowered herself from the cart, her billowy skirt rose up her legs, revealing the thin leather ties that crisscrossed up her calves.

His rough fingers slid upward along the curve of her hip to steady her.

“Thank you, servant,” she said, mimicking the tone she’d often heard Baakah use with lower members of the household.

He dropped his hand and turned without a reply. Nayari thought of ordering him to remove her belongings from the cart just to see how he might react, but she didn’t have a chance. At that moment two



priests emerged from the temple, and behind them came two women. All were bare-chested and wore thick belts of beaten gold and linen skirts. Their bare feet made no sound on the cool sandstone pathway that led into the temple, and they said nothing to their guests.

The four people bowed to the warrior and then to Nayari, and the women began removing the baskets from the back of the cart.

One of them touched Nayari's shoulder and beckoned her to follow. Uncertain, she glanced at the warrior, and he nodded.

Would he leave her here? Would Ammonptah be waiting inside? Nayari pushed the disturbing questions out of her mind and followed the women into the dimly lit interior of the temple.

Just inside the entrance of the temple, the women stopped and ushered Nayari toward a narrow passageway to the right. Over their shoulders she saw into the cavernous main room of the temple, and she craned her neck for a better view of the forbidden space.

"You can't enter there," one of the women whispered. She placed a firm hand again on Nayari's shoulder and guided her into the corridor where oil lamps lit the deeply inscribed walls. "Only priests and acolytes may attend Min. You will stay back here in the special chambers."

As she followed the women deeper inside the temple, Nayari gazed at the inscriptions that covered the walls. Though she couldn't read everything, the pictographs were fairly explicit, and they set her imagination alight.

Here a man knelt in supplication at an altar while a woman anointed his head with oil. There a woman and a man embraced while above them the Chief of Heaven, Min himself, blessed their marriage union.

Nayari leaned closer to the next pictograph. This was a portrait of the god, a tall man with a beautiful face and a strong physique. Protruding from his waist at the juncture of his closed legs was the longest, straightest erection Nayari had ever seen.

He held his arrow-like member in one hand and pointed it at a group of worshippers who offered him sheaves of wheat in return for his blessing.

The paintings and carvings held Nayari's attention and made her think of Ammonptah. Her master was the only man she'd ever seen in such a state of arousal, and his penis was certainly no match for that of the god.

Warmth rose to her cheeks when she found herself wondering if Ammonptah's member was normal or unusually small for a man of his age and stature. She thought of the warrior, with his bulging muscles and glistening dark skin, and wondered if his cock might look more like Min's, long and straight and powerful.

"You'll sleep here." One of the women gestured Nayari into a small room set off the corridor at the back of the temple. "We will bring you food and help you bathe."

“When will Ammonptah be coming?” she asked in a hushed voice. While she respected the sanctity of the temple, Nayari’s insides trembled at the thoughts she’d been having about the warrior. She covered her mouth with her fingers, as if that might quiet the giddiness in her voice.

“We will inform you,” the other woman responded. “Rest now.”

Nayari turned to survey her quarters and frowned. The small bed held rough blankets and a thin mattress. She sniffed at the musty odor of it. An oil pot sat on a ledge carved into the far wall, and a small wick burned within it. The rushes on the floor looked wilted as though they’d not been changed before her arrival.

*This is only temporary, she told herself with a sigh. Ammonptah will be here soon.*

Cait looked up from her dessert, a decadent chocolate confection laced with liquor-soaked fruit. She felt Nayari’s anticipation and her fear, wondering if her master would come for her and see that she was properly blessed by the fertility god, and at the same time entertaining forbidden thoughts about the dark warrior.

Grant filled her wine glass and studied her intently. His gaze was languid and warm. “What was the warrior doing while she waited in her little temple room?”

Gaining control over her emotions, Cait smiled wickedly and took another succulent bite of dessert. “He was thinking about her and trying not to betray the trust Ammonptah had put in him.”

“He wanted her.”

Cait nodded. “The sultry atmosphere of the temple didn’t help. The rites of Min were thought to be quite explicit.”

Grant leaned closer again, and Cait floated on the heady scent of his cologne. She smiled when he loosened his tie and wondered if the rest of her tale would have a greater effect on him.

“The warrior took up his post outside of Nayari’s room as he’d been instructed. Only a woven screen covered the doorway, so he could hear what went on inside. The women returned to bathe her, and his imagination ran wild. By the time he encountered Nayari again, he was half out of his mind with desire.”

When the female acolytes returned, they brought a bowl of perfumed water, cloths to bathe her, and a tray of bread and roasted meat.

Nayari helped herself to some of the food while the women unlaced her sandals and removed her belt. She sighed as they bathed her feet and legs, and the glorious scent of jasmine enveloped her and calmed her rattled nerves. She lay back against one woman while the other opened the top of her dress and rubbed a fine cloth over her arms and her breasts.

"Ammonptah will be pleased," Nayari murmured, trying to keep her thoughts centered on her master. It was difficult, with the sensual feel of the cool cloth riding over her skin, to think of her master's touch. His hurried movements during the times she'd been called to his service always made her wonder if he truly enjoyed coupling, or if it was more of a chore for him, as it often was for her.

If Ammonptah had ever touched her like this, bathed her, smoothed her hair, she might long for him now, not as the man who owned her and had the power to send her back home where she belonged, but the man she loved and wanted. Once again, unbidden, her thoughts turned to the warrior. His hands were twice the size of Ammonptah's, rough from hard work and dark from days spent under the sun. Together his hands could span her waist, and she had no doubt his arms could lift her without effort to settle her over his cock. He could hold her hips in his hands, his long fingers inching between her buttocks as she rode him—

"You're trembling," one of the women said with a light laugh. "And look, Min calls to you."

Nayari's face burned when she realized her nipples stood hard and erect. She hastily pulled her dress up around her. "Leave me. I'll await Ammonptah alone."

"Of course." The women bowed and left with knowing smiles. They took the bathing water with them, but left the remains of the food. Nayari stared at it and willed herself to take another bite, but her appetite had fled.

Perhaps someone else might want the food. It would only attract flies if left in her room all night. Carefully, she lifted the heavy tray and padded barefoot across the floor. She turned and let herself out of the room, backside first to push the reed mat out of the way. When she collided with a warm body, she nearly dropped the tray.

She whirled around and glared up into the face of the warrior. He gave her a curious shrug. "The food isn't to your liking?" he asked.

"I...was going to give it to the oxen." She raised her head in defiance of his tone, but then shifted her arms to cover her chest, aware that her strange excitement still showed in the hard peaks of her nipples that raised the thin fabric of her dress. A cool current of air stirred the hem of her skirt, and a tingle raced up her legs to her inner thighs.

"The oxen have plenty of food," he said. His voice rumbled in his chest, and he stared over her head as if he wished to avoid looking at her.

"Then perhaps you would like it."

"The priests have brought me food."

Nayari sighed. "Then take it away before it rots."

Now his gaze dropped to hers, and she held herself still under his blazing scrutiny. "I am not a maidservant," he said.

"Neither am I."

Their gazes held, battled for a moment, and Nayari swore a faint smile lifted the corners of his lips. "I'll alert the acolytes. Go inside and wait for them to return."

Nayari wanted to stamp her foot in frustration. She leaned back against the cold stone wall and looked up at him. With his arms crossed over his chest and his brows lowered over those onyx-colored eyes, he looked far more imposing than a god. She should have cowered in fear, but instead he made her feel strong and defiant. She had absolute certainty he would never harm her, even if she provoked him.

"Where is Ammonptah? Please tell me."

"I do not know."

"Yes, you do!"

"No, I don't. He merely—"

Nayari stepped forward, craning her neck to meet his gaze. "He what?"

"Gave me instructions to follow, and that's what I will do. That and nothing more."

"Tell me your name."

"No."

Annoyed beyond reason, Nayari whirled around and flung herself back into her room. She plunked the tray onto the shelf and fell into the bed, which creaked under her meager weight. The musty odor of it crawled into her nose, pushing aside the sweet smell of flowers that had lingered on her skin since her bath. How would that do? she thought. To smell of mold when Ammonptah came to claim her would be unseemly. He would be angry with the priests and acolytes for not taking proper care of his property.

And that last word echoed in her mind. *Property. I belong to Ammonptah, and I'm bound to do as he wishes.* She fell asleep with that thought battling with visions of the warrior, naked, his skin hot and sweaty, holding his thick, hard cock in his hand and writhing to the beat of the ceremonial drums.

## Chapter Three

Grant ran one finger along the inside of his collar and tugged at the knot of his tie. He'd never known Del Monaco's to be uncomfortably warm, but tonight...whew. He finished the last sip of his wine and motioned the waiter to bring the check.

Next to him, Cait was the picture of composure. Did she have any idea what her sexy story was doing to him? He certainly didn't need to hear another word to know he wanted the scroll, at any cost. More than that, he wanted to know the rest of the story, and he wanted to hear it from those sensuous, coral-colored lips of hers. Were those the ceremonial drums he heard, or just the pounding of his own heart?

"Shall I take you back to the gallery now?" He had to be polite and give her an option at this point. If her story went any further, he aimed to let her know she'd have to finish it for him tonight—finish *him* before he lost his mind.

"I'm done for tonight, unless you'd like to look at the scroll again."

"Then I'll take you home? I could use a second cup of coffee."

The look in her pale blue eyes told him he wouldn't have to beg for an ending. "All right," she agreed as they rose.

The waiter floated by and whisked away the folder and Grant's credit card.

"Or maybe you could whip up some coq au vin."

She laughed. "I'm fresh out of coq."

"I can fix that."

With the bill settled, Grant escorted Cait back to the sidewalk. The evening dinner crowds that had choked the avenue when they arrived were long gone, and the late night traffic had slowed.

"Which way?" he asked.

"We can walk from here, unless you'd prefer a quick cab ride."

"It's a great night for walking." The temperature hovered in the high sixties, according to the display on the bank across the street. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, or a star, for that matter. Of course, in Midtown, the only twinkling lights usually came from buildings or air traffic. What he wouldn't have given to see the river of stars that dusted the sky back in Nayari's time.

He offered Cait his arm. "Where were we? Our lovely Nayari was dreaming of her virile warrior."

“While he stood guard outside her door, keeping her safe—or so he thought—for the man who owned them both.”

“Where was Ammonptah? We still don’t know why he had Nayari brought to the temple.”

“The warrior was about to find out.”

“Does he have a name?”

Cait gave him an enigmatic smile. “Don’t you want to find out when Nayari does?”

“I’m impatient. Tell me now.”

“His name was Khanu. The meaning of his name isn’t clear, but there’s speculation it meant ‘within him resides the blood of kings’.”

“A lofty name for a warrior.”

“Perhaps he was destined to serve a higher purpose.”

“To save Nayari?”

“Or perhaps to stop a political coup that would have put an imposter on the throne of Egypt.”

“Now I’m really intrigued. What happened next?”

Hours passed and the oil pots that lit the dusty corridors of the temple burned low. One of the priests arrived to relieve Khanu at his post.

“There’s a pallet for you in the far room,” the priest told him. “Rest now.”

Khanu rubbed the stiff muscles of his neck and glanced back at the reed mat that separated him from Nayari. Her rhythmic breathing reached him, but he longed to push the barrier aside and see for himself that she slept peacefully.

“She’ll be safe,” the priest said.

“I must ask, do you know when Ammonptah will arrive?” Khanu admonished himself for such curiosity.

“We’ve been told only to give quarters to the woman. I don’t know for how long or for what purpose.”

Khanu gauged the answer and bowed to the priest. He made his way to the room that had been assigned to him and slept until dawn.

When he woke, he heard the commotion in the corridor and sprang to his feet. He heard Nayari’s voice raised in alarm and cursed himself for leaving her side.

He found her in the corridor outside her room, surrounded by four acolytes.

“There you are!” she said when he bolted through the small crowd. The others obediently moved out of his way.

“What’s happened?”

"They won't allow me to go outside. I've been in this room all night, and I smell of oil smoke and stale rushes."

Only a woman would be so sensitive. He smelled only jasmine and the enticing scent of female skin.

"I will escort her outside," Khanu said. He waved the acolytes away from Nayari. "See that her room is cleaned before she returns."

Nayari stared at him, her golden tiger-eyes wide as if she hadn't expected him to take her side in the dispute. The women backed up, but eyed him warily, obviously uncertain whether he had the authority to make such a decision.

None of the four dared to defy him, though, and he took Nayari's elbow in his hand and led her down the corridor.

When the acolytes had disappeared, she pulled her arm from his grasp. Her anger showed in her stiff posture and quick steps. She drew ahead of him in the narrow corridor and turned on him. The ferocity in her expression amused him and, to his chagrin, aroused him as well. Seething, her eyes flashing and her breasts heaving beneath the thin sheath of linen she wore, she reminded him of a desert wildcat in desperate need of taming.

"I never needed an escort to go outside when I resided with Ammonptah. I don't see why I need one now." With her hands planted on her slim hips, she seemed to fill the narrow corridor. Khanu took one step forward, forcing her to crane her graceful neck to hold his gaze.

"Ammonptah is obviously concerned for your safety and doesn't wish you to be wandering around alone. I will accompany you wherever you go, or I will assign an acolyte to stay with you."

"I don't see what danger I would be in, sitting in the courtyard."

"That is precisely why you need to be guarded, because you don't see any danger."

His logic apparently escaped her, and she frowned. "I know Ammonptah has enemies."

"All powerful men do."

She dropped her arms, then crossed them over her chest. With one hip thrust forward, she managed to maintain her defiant posture, even though her expression softened. "If we need to fear enemies of Ammonptah, why were there no guards at his home? Surely Baakah and his other wives would be in danger also?"

"There may have been no guards when we left, but we have no way of knowing if there are guards now."

She sighed loudly and whirled around again. He indulged in a smile as she began walking toward the main temple room. "You're far too smart to be a soldier. You should have been a scribe or a priest, with all those clever answers in your head."

“And you are far too talkative to be a—” Khanu stopped when Nayari backed up one quick step and collided with his chest. He felt the tense set of her muscles and the gentle swell of her buttocks pressed against his thigh. She held up one hand to shush him and pointed into the temple room.

The deep thrum of half a dozen drums began, echoing through the huge rectangular chamber. Like the heartbeat of a giant, the rhythmic sound traveled through the stone floor and seemed to settle directly in Khanu’s loins. His balls began to ache with the sound and the nearness of Nayari’s supple body.

He peered over her shoulder at the ritual taking place before the altar of Min.

The priests knelt before a huge statue of the god clutching his erect penis. The long, straight shadow of his member fell between them, cast by an oil lamp hanging from a sconce high on the wall.

Sheaves of wheat and bowls of grain decorated the altar, and the acolytes, now completely naked, circled the pile of offerings. They chanted in time to the drumbeat and bowed their heads in unison to pray to the god.

Khanu felt Nayari tremble, and he placed one hand on her shoulder, drawing her gently back against him. They dared not enter the temple and defile the ceremony, so they stood in the shadows, captured by the spectacle.

The rhythm of the drums increased, and the acolytes broke away from the altar. The priests rose and moved to the back of the room where a man stood, garbed in dark robes. They brought him forward and removed his robes, leaving him also standing naked before the statue of the god.

One by one, the acolytes danced around the man. Their fingers fluttered over his chest, his back and his own member, which grew erect as the ritual continued.

Finally, when the drumming became a crescendo that rattled the walls, the man reached out and drew one of the acolytes to him in a backward embrace. He pulled her against him and bent her forward. She threw back her head and let out a moan of pleasure as he entered her. He grasped her hips and took her, moving to the beat of the drums, while the other acolytes danced and the priests chanted.

Nayari sank against Khanu’s chest, and the heat of her skin burned him. She began to sway with the beat as well, bumping her buttocks against his thighs. She had to feel his own hardened member, had to be aware of his growing arousal. She moaned softly, and his cock surged. Without thought, he slid his hand from her shoulder to her waist and held her, trapped against him until the ritual ended. The man and the acolyte collapsed on the floor before the altar, panting from their exertions. Once again, the priests knelt before the statue of Min and bowed their heads.

The tableau remained for a moment, all the participants utterly silent, then they rose, gathered discarded robes and skirts and left the room. Only Min remained, still holding his member, its long shadow stretching across the room to point at the corridor where Nayari and Khanu stood, trembling.



"I'll take you outside now," he said finally, finding his voice. He removed his hand from her and stepped back. She didn't turn, but he saw the tremor in her posture. Silently, he followed her out into the brilliant sunlight of the temple courtyard.

"Interesting ritual," Grant said when they reached Cait's apartment. Her story definitely had an effect on him. His voice had gone deep and husky, and when she glanced over her shoulder at him, she caught the hint of arousal in his eyes. "I'm going to have to do some research on Min."

Cait's hand shook a little as she maneuvered her key into the lock on her apartment door. There was still time to back out of this and send Grant on his way. After all, this evening had never been intended as a date. Why, suddenly, was she willing to endanger her job for Grant? Was it simply because she hadn't been out with anyone in months, or because maybe she'd been holding out for just this moment? For the first time, she saw past his arrogant exterior to the man beneath and wondered why she hadn't bothered to look that closely before.

Pushing her inner debate aside, she turned the key and opened the door. She hit the light switch, and Grant followed her inside. "Much of what's written in Layton's journal seems to be speculation, but the description of the rite witnessed by Nayari and Khanu is very specific. It may not have been a standard ritual that was practiced often."

She led Grant through the small entry hall into her living room. "Have a seat. I'll make some coffee."

"That can wait. I'd like to hear more. At this point, they both must have been supercharged. How did they keep their hands off each other?" His grin was mischievous. He took her hand and drew her toward the couch.

"Escaping the sultry atmosphere of the temple was probably a wise thing at that moment. Outside there would have been a number of people milling around, traffic on the street, merchants, caravans, people waiting to leave offerings for Min. They wouldn't have been alone." She sat, leaned back into the corner of the overstuffed couch and stretched her legs.

Grant loosened his tie and took off his jacket. His crisp, cream-colored shirt fit as though it was hand-tailored, and she found herself admiring the hard lines of his angular torso. He was probably a weightlifter, she decided, but not fanatical about it.

"How many times have you read the translation?"

She laughed. "More than once. Layton includes a literal, line-by-line account, which can be a little hard to follow at times due to the syntax. But he also commissioned an interpretive translation to smooth out the rough spots in the text. That writer embellished here and there, obviously, but really made the story come alive."

"You seem to have that talent as well."

Cait felt herself blush. How had she managed to end up with Grant Pierson sitting on her couch, flattering her, ready to hear more about the ancient lovers who had captured her imagination? “Nayari didn’t want to be forgotten. It’s wonderful that we finally get the chance to know her story.”

Grant’s eyes darkened momentarily. “Layton would have kept it to himself forever.”

“Fortunately, his heirs are more generous.”

“Or greedy. They’re asking a hefty price for the scroll and the journals, right?”

“The bidding is going to be hot.”

“You bet it is.” He licked his lips. “Tell me more. How long did it take Khanu to make his move?”

Nayari’s first full day in residence at the temple was long and frustrating. After watching the shocking ritual, she could think of nothing else for hours. Still dutiful to Ammonptah, she struggled to keep her eyes off the warrior and found a shady spot in the courtyard to sit and contemplate her fate.

When the acolytes came to find her later in the day, she tried to pick out which one it had been that had participated in the coupling with the man in the dark robes, but all the women looked very much alike. With their eyes ringed in kohl and straight black wigs on their heads, she could scarcely tell one from the other. When they escorted her back to her room, the warrior remained in the courtyard, talking to one of the priests. That suited Nayari since she could think of nothing to say to him.

Alone with her thoughts once again, she wondered how long Ammonptah expected her to wait for him. Perhaps merely living in the temple would bestow some of the blessings of Min on her and make her fertile, but she began to think perhaps she would be expected to participate in a rite like she’d seen that day.

Her mind wandered, recreating the fevered dancing and the incessant beat of the drums. In her mind’s eye, she saw the warrior, felt his hands on her waist, and finally imagined the thrust of his cock inside her as she bent in supplication to the god.

Why couldn’t she think of Ammonptah the same way?

Perhaps that was why she hadn’t conceived yet. She thought of Ammonptah only as her master, a man whose clumsy attentions were to be endured rather than enjoyed.

She paced the confines of her room for what seemed like hours, hoping to work off the nervous feeling that had settled in the pit of her stomach. A dozen times she went to the door and, without disturbing the reed mat, tried to peer through the miniscule holes between the weave to see if the warrior had returned to his guard post.

She nearly fell over when the mat swept aside and one of the acolytes hurried into the room.

“Shh.” The woman hushed her and turned to peer back into the corridor. “I’ve come to bring you news.”

"Of Ammonptah?" Nayari's heart thundered. Was he finally here? Had the warrior left? She found herself wanting to call for him, except she still didn't know his name.

"There is a man coming here from Saqqara. A wizard. You are to be given to him."

A startled laugh escaped Nayari's lips. What absurdity. Ammonptah was a magistrate, a man of stature and intelligence. He had no use for wizards...did he? What could a wizard possibly offer Ammonptah?

"I overheard Menep the priest saying that the wizard's entourage would take an extra day to arrive and that he was going to instruct your guard not to take you out into the courtyard again. In fact, the other acolytes are preparing a room beneath the temple for you where you'll await your new master's arrival."

"Why are you telling me this?" Nayari's voice rose, and the acolyte hushed her again with a nervous glance at the door. "This can't be true."

"It is what I heard. I'm telling you because I've heard tales of this wizard. He's called Benak-Ra, and he is an enemy of Pharaoh."

"An enemy of Seti?"

"As is Ammonptah."

"That's impossible! Ammonptah loves Pharaoh. They are brothers."

"They are rivals. Ammonptah wishes to unseat Seti and has engaged Benak-Ra to cast a spell."

"How do you know all this? You're merely a temple servant." Nayari's heart lurched in her chest. She clutched at her stomach to still the urge to slap the insolent woman. This had to be a trick, a test perhaps to force Nayari to denounce her master.

"I'm loyal to Pharaoh. I will not help Ammonptah steal his throne. I'm giving you a chance to escape and disappear. If the offering your master makes to the wizard is not here when he arrives, there will be no spell."

"Surely the gods will protect Pharaoh from Benak-Ra." Of course they would. He was their chosen son, after all.

"Perhaps the gods act through me. I am telling you, little one. Go while you can and save yourself. Benak-Ra is a cruel master, and when his plot is uncovered, all who are with him will die." The woman said no more. She slipped out of the room, leaving the reed mat swinging behind her. Nayari only stared, shocked and terribly frightened. It all had to be a trick. If she ran away from Ammonptah her punishment would be severe. But if she ran away from Benak-Ra...

Finally, Nayari found the strength to move across the room. She looked out into the empty corridor. Where had her nameless warrior gone? Why had he abandoned her? Would the other acolytes be coming soon to take her to the room below the temple and keep her prisoner?

She had to make her decision now. Run for her life on the word of an acolyte, or remain, loyal and faithful to her master until he was her master no longer.

Nayari ran.

“How about a glass of wine instead of coffee?” Cait asked.

Grant felt as though he’d been snapped back through time—a journey of over three thousand years in the span of a heartbeat. “Wine sounds great.”

He watched her rise from the couch, unfolding her long legs, and he counted those pearl buttons on her blouse. Six. He imagined sliding them through the buttonholes in the shimmery silk and discovering what treasures lay beneath.

He turned to watch her cross to the kitchenette. She kicked off her shoes in a fluid motion, leaving her a few inches shorter.

“Do you need help with the cork?” he asked with a grin when she set two crystal goblets on the open counter.

She gave him a mischievous look, one perfectly arched eyebrow raised. “If you want wine with a cork, you’re in the wrong neighborhood, Mr. Pierson. This is screw-top wine.”

“Ah.” He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. “I had no idea this was screw-top territory. What about your coq au vin?”

“For that, I use the good stuff. You’ll have to wait until I invite you for dinner.”

“How long will I have to wait?”

Cait poured a blush-pink wine into the glasses and carried them back to the couch in her cupped hands. “Quite a while, I’m afraid. I’m not allowed to date clients.”

He tasted the sweet wine and pursed his lips. “In that case, how about Friday?”

“I can’t. Besides, I have appointments with clients. Other people are interested in the scroll, and I’ve got to show it to them.”

He frowned. “They don’t get a guided tour of the translation in Layton’s journals, do they?” Why on earth would he feel a surge of jealousy? Because he wanted the scroll so badly? Or because he didn’t like the thought of another man hearing Nayari’s sensual tale from Cait’s lips?

“No. They get a fax of the synopsis.”

“Good. Now, let’s get back to it. Tell me a little more about Benak-Ra.”

“There’s not much in the journals about him except speculation. He may have been a well-known magician of the time working under a false name to keep his dealings with Ammonptah secret. Defying the Pharaoh was a dangerous proposition, of course, so he must have thought he had a powerful spell. The price was certainly high enough.”

“Nayari’s life.”

“Along with other things, I’m sure. Taking on a concubine would have meant an added expense for the magician, even if he was already a wealthy man. Likely Ammonptah offered him a political position as well, payment he could collect only if his magic worked.”

“And I have a feeling it wasn’t going to.”

“It seemed there was already a network of loyalists in place to protect Seti II’s throne. Ammonptah had no idea he’d sent Nayari right into their arms.”

“And into Khanu’s.”

“Literally, at this point.”

## Chapter Four

Khanu's heart clenched at the spectacle that met him when he returned from the courtyard. The sight of Nayari lying limp in the arms of one of the priests nearly sent him to his knees.

"What have you done to her?" He didn't wait for a reply but scooped her fragile body into his arms. The other priest bowed and backed up a step.

"I had to stop her from escaping. I found her scurrying through the back corridor searching for a way out through our chambers."

"You had no right to injure her. You should have called me." Khanu swung Nayari around and headed for her room.

"This way, warrior. We'll take her to a room below where she won't escape so easily."

Khanu hesitated. He looked down at her face, so beautiful in this artificial sleep. Her shallow breathing worried him.

"What did you do to her?"

"A balm to make her sleep."

Khanu growled. She'd be groggy and sick when she awoke. Grudgingly, he followed the priest to a dark flight of stone stairs. He squeezed his broad shoulders through a narrow door and set Nayari on a small cot in a windowless chamber lit only by a torch in a sconce on the wall.

"Bring water." He cradled her head in the crook of his arm. "Then stay out of my sight."

"Of course." The priest bowed out of the room, and Khanu indulged in a curse upon the man's family ten generations to come. Why would she try to escape? Surely the priest was mistaken. As the dutiful concubine of the magistrate, it should have been her pleasure to await the arrival of Ammonptah.

She lay in his arms, her face a portrait of innocence. He brushed her lustrous hair from her brow and pressed the back of his hand to her fevered skin. What would Ammonptah do if he found her thus?

The priest returned with a bowl of water and a cloth, and Khanu glared at him. "Post a guard at the temple gate. Enemies of Ammonptah are everywhere it seems." Even in this room, he added silently.

Once the priest had gone, Khanu tended to Nayari. Drops of cool water squeezed from the cloth onto her head roused her slightly, and she moaned.

"You're safe," he said when her eyes fluttered open. She stared at him for a moment, her eyes blank. Then she surged upward, fear clouding her expression. She screamed once—a short, tortured sound that

Khanu cut off by clamping a hand over her mouth. She struggled in his arms, and he hushed her, rocking her against his chest.

"No, I'm not." Her voice trembled as she recounted what the acolyte had told her.

Khanu had heard the name Benak-Ra before. He'd seen tales of the man's cruelty strike fear in the hearts of many seasoned warriors. A fragile creature such as Nayari would wither at his hands.

His loyalty to Ammonptah dissolved as she finished telling him about the plot to unseat Pharaoh. "I will not let them give you to the wizard."

She settled against him finally, and her breathing returned to normal. When he looked down at her, tears spilled over her cheeks. "But Ammonptah is our master."

"Not any longer."

"What?" She trembled in his arms. The sensation of her supple body shuddering against his turned his thoughts to further betrayal of Ammonptah.

"We will escape."

"How? The priests are watching."

"They're watching the front of the temple. They believe I'm loyal to Ammonptah and will do as I say. We will leave here in a few hours, before they rise for their morning prayers."

Her honey-colored eyes searched his and, beneath the fear, he saw trust and admiration. She put her hands on either side of his face and brought her lips close to his. Her breath was sweet. "Tell me your name."

"Khanu," he whispered, so close to her mouth that the word echoed between them. "Servant of Nayari."

She kissed him then, and a sensation that had to be borne of the gods shot through his body. Every muscle went taut, and the ache in his loins exploded into flame as her tongue slipped between his lips.

"Have you ever felt like that?" Cait set her wine glass on the low table next to the couch. She felt an ache herself, low in her belly. The thought of Nayari clinging to her virile warrior, knowing her life was in his hands, made her long for that kind of surrender.

Grant set his glass down also and leaned forward. "I've had a few great first kisses, but it sounds like Khanu got the wind knocked out of him."

"It must have been amazing to have been mentioned in the writing. It makes me think the writer knew them intimately, to include a description of how Khanu felt the first time they kissed."

"It's like someone reaches into your chest and pulls out your heart for you to look at."

Cait giggled. "That sounds more like an Aztec custom. I've always imagined it felt like having your stomach land on your knees."

“Anatomically impossible.” He winked.

“Do you want to discuss anatomy or hear the rest of the story?”

“I think I want to kiss you.”

Cait’s breath caught, and she leaned forward as if an invisible string drew her toward him. *He’s a client*, the damnable voice in her head shouted over the pounding of her heart as he brought one hand up and cupped the back of her head.

*I quit*, she decided immediately. *There. He’s not a client anymore.* Cait leaned forward just another inch, and Grant took her mouth in a kiss that left them both breathless. He delved into her, drawing her tongue into his mouth, holding her steady while he explored. When he pulled back, he left her weak and wanting more.

“I think I know how Khanu felt,” Grant said.

He traced the line of her lips with his thumb, and Cait resisted the urge to take it in her mouth and show him just what she could do with proper motivation. She licked her lips and settled back on the couch. “There’s a lot more to the story.”

“Good. I was hoping we weren’t finished yet.”

Nayari huddled beneath a rough blanket and strained to hear any sound from the narrow corridor outside of the cold stone room. The warmth of Khanu’s searing kiss had worn off long ago, and now, while she waited for him to return, she began to shiver uncontrollably.

What if the priests found him sneaking through the temple, or caught him spying on them to make sure they were asleep? What if Benak-Ra had arrived and was even now preparing to claim her as payment for his services to Ammonptah?

She froze when she heard the scrape of sandals on the dusty floor and nearly screamed when a large hand peeled back the edge of the blanket.

“We can go now,” Khanu said. He held out his hand, and Nayari unfolded her body from the cot. She drew close to him for a moment, reveling in the heat of his skin and his masculine scent. The weight of his arm across her shoulders calmed her. “We need to hurry, but nothing stands in our way. We cannot risk taking the cart and the oxen, but if we stay to the alleyways behind the marketplace, we can be well on the road to Amun by sunrise.”

“Will we be safe there?”

“We can lose ourselves for a while, then travel to the sea. From there, we can go anywhere we desire.”



Nayari stared at her savior. Fear and hope battled in her heart. "You mean leave Egypt?" She thought about the family she'd left behind so long ago and wondered if perhaps she might find her back to them one day.

"If we must, until Ammonptah forgets about us."

"If he succeeds in becoming pharaoh—"

"Then perhaps the loss of your sacrifice might not matter to him. Come, Nayari. We have to go now."

Nayari followed him into the dark, up the stairs and quickly through the empty temple room. The face of the statue of Min seemed to stare in disapproval when she glanced up at it. Would the god punish them for their betrayal, or reward them for their greater loyalty to Seti? Nayari supposed that depended on who actually was the rightful pharaoh.

The courtyard was silent and lit with the silver light of the nearly full moon. Nayari pulled her shawl around her head as they hurried past the low stone wall and toward the first closed stalls of the marketplace. With such bright light, surely someone would see them.

With her hand clasped firmly in Khanu's, she felt free despite the fear. The world lay before them, and anything was possible. For the first time in her life she had the power to direct her own fate. The prospect made her head spin and her heart race.

"Slow down and breathe," Khanu said when he pulled her into a shallow niche in the wall that ran through the marketplace. Very soon the merchants would begin to open their stalls for business, and the sight of two weary travelers panting in the avenue would raise suspicions. He pulled her into his embrace and held her steady while she struggled to breathe normally.

"What if the wizard can find us with his magic?" she asked finally.

"Don't consider that now."

She looked up once more into his eyes and lost herself for a moment. Khanu bent his head and brushed his lips against hers. This time her trembling stopped. She reached up, reveling in his height and his strength, and slid her hands around his neck. He took her mouth again, but halfway through the kiss he stiffened, and Narayi's lips went dry.

A commotion sounded from the direction of the temple.

Khanu pulled her after him, and they broke into a run through the mazelike corridors of the market place. "Even if we get separated," he warned as they flung themselves through the alleyways, "keep running."

Grant's lips came down on Cait's again, this time with an urgency that left her heart thumping. He'd been stroking a strand of her hair, which he now brushed behind her ear. The movement brought him close to her, and he took full advantage of the moment.

She surrendered to the thrill of his hands when they settled at her waist after a lazy journey down from her shoulders. The weight of his torso as he angled across her felt wonderful, and she arched against him, urging him with her movements.

“That’s not the end of the story,” she panted when he broke the kiss.

“The lovers didn’t escape and live happily ever after?”

“Not yet.” Cait’s reply was muffled by another kiss, and a faint moan escaped her lips when Grant brought one hand up to flick open the first button of her blouse.

“Do they get captured in the marketplace?” One finger roamed inside her collar and dipped beneath the lacy edge of her bra.

She shivered. “N-no.”

“Are you going to make me guess what happened to them?”

Cait didn’t answer right away. She watched Grant’s fingers find the next button of her blouse. She’d need to clear her head to remember the rest of the story. “Let’s slow down. The best part is coming up.”

His hand paused in its exploration, and he gave her a searching look. “Right.”

Cait’s breathing settled. She didn’t want Grant to back off. She only wanted to savor the moment. No need to rush.

She kissed him once, lightly, and then settled against him. His arm came around her, and she took a deep breath before continuing her tale.

The sounds of the marketplace died away behind them as the sun climbed above the distant horizon. Khanu slowed his pace, counting the narrow streets in his head as they made their way through the outskirts of the city. Here, the houses stood close and the odor of livestock was strong.

Fabric sails hung between the mud-brick walls, providing patches of shade for miniscule courtyards and alleyways. Children with large, dark eyes scurried between pens of goats, throwing feed from wooden bowls.

No one gave the couple a second glance. Nayari’s grip on Khanu’s hand relaxed, and when he turned to look, he found her smiling at a small boy leading a pregnant goat by a tattered rope. The creature waddled obediently on the end of its tether, its abundant belly nearly scraping the ground.

The boy grinned back at Nayari, showing the gaping hole where his two front teeth belonged.

“We are looking for Horeb, the weaver. Do you know him?” Khanu asked.

The boy hesitated, looking to the goat as if it might give him permission to answer. “Horeb is my father’s brother,” he said finally. “His house is that way.” He pointed down the street with one skinny arm.

Khanu nodded. He regretted having nothing to give the boy as a reward, but made a note to repay the kindness someday if he could. He took Nayari’s hand and drew her forward.

"Who is Horeb?" she asked. The worried look in her golden eyes made him long to comfort her.

"A friend. He will help us."

Khanu recognized the house of his friend at the end of the street. Years had passed since Khanu had left to train as a warrior. Horeb had remained, apprenticed to his older brother as a weaver of mats and baskets. Khanu offered a silent prayer to the gods that Horeb remembered their boyhood friendship as well as he did.

A small, round woman met them at the door of Horeb's home. She was so heavy with child, her hips practically touched both sides of the narrow doorway at once. Though she gave Khanu a wary look, she smiled at Nayari.

"Are you the wife of Horeb?" he asked.

"I am," she replied, her arched brows knitting together. "But he is not here right now."

"I am Khanu, his friend from many years back."

"Khanu?" A voice boomed from behind the woman.

Khanu exchanged a glance with Nayari.

The pregnant woman shrugged. "I thought he was not home." The woman blushed. Obviously the sight of a warrior at their door made some people uneasy.

She moved aside, maneuvering her girth around a reed-thin man with a short, black beard and a completely bald head. Horeb. He'd aged in the intervening years. Worry lines creased the sides of his mouth, and there were strands of silver hair in his beard. He looked a decade older than Khanu now, though they shared their birth year.

Horeb smiled, showing even, white teeth, and reached a sinewy hand to grasp Khanu's thickly muscled forearm.

"The life of a warrior agrees with you, my friend. Forgive Setma. She is cautious."

"A good woman is cautious," Khanu said. "And very wise. Setma and Horeb, this is Nayari."

Setma waddled forward again, pushing her husband aside. She wrapped Nayari in a hug and patted her cheek in a motherly fashion. "The wife of Horeb's oldest friend is my friend. Welcome to our home."

Khanu's smile faltered. Dare he tell Horeb the truth? Yes, but not here in the courtyard where anyone might overhear.

"We ask a favor, Horeb. I pray our friendship will bear it."

"Anything I have is yours, my friend." Horeb clapped Khanu on the shoulder and drew him into the house. "Come in and tell me what I can do for you."

## Chapter Five

Cait pulled Grant's tie slowly out of his collar and draped it around her neck. She kissed him and swung one leg over his waist so that she straddled him on the couch.

"I surrender," he said, holding up his hands. She leaned forward, her hands on his chest, and settled herself carefully over his hips. She liked being in control, he decided. She'd slowed him down before, clearly not because she was uncertain if she wanted their evening to continue on to intimacy, but because she wanted to take charge and set the pace.

*Fine by me*, he thought. He looked up into her eyes, dilated by her growing desire, and wondered why he hadn't made it a point to ask her out sooner. That cold, business-like exterior was obviously nothing more than a necessary professional veneer, hiding the warm, intriguing woman underneath. He'd wasted so much time wondering why she disliked him, only to finally discover he'd been reading her wrong all this time.

He sighed when she popped the two top buttons on his shirt. "Now we're even." She leaned forward again, raising her hips to relieve the mounting pressure under his fly.

"One thing I need to know," he said before her lips reached his. She looked at him and caught her lower lip seductively between her teeth. "Are you going to finish the story tonight? Are you sure you want to take it all the way to the end?"

Her expression told him she understood his meaning. It wasn't the story he wanted to finish—or at least that wasn't all he wanted to play out to the end tonight.

"Hmm." She hummed her response, arched and came down on him again. Her hands explored the button on his pants. "We'll go all the way to the end...and then some."

He smiled and reached up to claim the next button on her blouse. Three to go. "Now we're not even anymore."

Nayari folded the top of her dress down around her waist and soaked a cloth in cool water for bathing. It felt good to wash away the dust of their hurried journey through the marketplace, and the prospect of spending a night safe in Horeb's home made her feel something close to contentment. Though she'd expected to live out the rest of her days under Baakah's rule in Ammonptah's home, Nayari had never felt

as comfortable there as she did now with her stomach full of a hearty meal prepared by Setma and the knowledge that Horeb would hide them in his cellar if anyone came looking.

Despite her newfound calm, she stiffened when she heard footsteps behind her. She felt Khanu's gaze on her bare back.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice low. The sound of it made her skin tingle and her nipples rise to hard peaks. She remained still, resisting the desire to turn around and face him.

"For what?" She held her breath after the question, fearful of his answer.

"I'm sorry I did not tell Horeb and Setma that you are not my wife. I would have, but perhaps it's better if they know less of the truth. No one can force them to tell what they do not know."

Nayari sighed. "Of course. I agree. That's wise."

"Tomorrow, before sunrise, Horeb will take us to a cave in the desert where we can hide safely for a few days. From there we can join a passing caravan and journey to Wa-Set."

"Horeb is a good friend. You're lucky to know him."

Khanu bowed his head. "I am fortunate he remembers me. I've been gone from here a long time and when I left, I believed I would never have cause to return."

"I can see he's honored by your visit. He respects your strength."

"Yet I'm the one who is envious of him. I would not have expected to find his life appealing after all these years in service to Ammonptah."

Nayari stared at her warrior. He'd achieved a position many men would have risked death to attain. "You would trade your station for a life like Horeb's?"

"I have already traded my life away. To have one such as Horeb's in return would be a great gift."

Nayari nodded. She barely heard the words. The longing in his eyes stirred her, and his voice carried her like a caress. Her body began to ache for his touch.

Khanu dismissed his melancholy mood with a wave. "We must share this room tonight, but I will sleep on the floor." His voice became tight. "I will return when you've finished bathing."

"No." Suddenly bold, Nayari turned. "Stay."

Khanu's eyes locked with hers, but she felt him everywhere. His heat enveloped her body, chasing away the chill of the cool water. She dropped one hand and loosened the belt at her waist. Her dress fell silently around her feet, and she held her hands out to him.

"If Horeb and Setma believe we are wed, then we must behave as such." She wondered if Khanu saw her trembling, if he heard the thundering of her heartbeat as well as she did.

He closed the distance between them with one step and drew her against him. "It will not be for just one night," he whispered against her ear. Nayari's legs became weak. Her body molded against his, and she felt the hard shaft of his cock against her belly.

“Do you want me, warrior?” she asked, stroking the back of his neck and pressing herself against him. “Do you want me as your wife?”

“I could not ask the gods for anything more.”

“Then I am yours.”

“But what can I offer you except a life of hardship? All I can promise you is that we may never be able to stop running away from Ammonptah.”

Nayari bowed her head and smiled. “A life running with you will surpass even a single day resting in luxury as the slave of a powerful wizard. You’ve offered me the world, Khanu, and I accept.”

A moment later she gasped when Khanu’s hands found her bottom and lifted her against him. He moved skillfully toward the wide cot, made for two to share, and lay down, settling her atop him.

With eager hands she removed his belt, and he bucked his hips up to allow her to remove his wrap and loincloth. When she settled herself again, it was against the hot, bare skin of his erection. She squeezed her thighs around his hips and lowered herself until the soft tip touched her intimate entrance.

“I am at your mercy, Nayari. I will do only what you ask of me.”

She arched her back, reveling in the solid form beneath her. “Touch me, Khanu. Touch me inside.”

He grasped her hips and brought her down quickly. She cried out, unconcerned that Horeb and Setma might hear. Considering Setma’s state, they would certainly not question the sounds of desire coming from the room. Khanu filled her, deeply and completely, and when she moved with him, rising slowly then taking him deeper still, a feeling spread through her that she’d never known.

Khanu guided her, held her, and helped her, caressing and cupping her body, arching his hips each time she came down on him. Within her, the most delicious pressure built, a feeling of strength and power she’d never experienced even when she lay under Ammonptah and he reminded her of his coveted position as a magistrate and brother to the pharaoh.

At this moment, Nayari was no longer a possession, yet she was more cherished than she’d ever been before. She was no longer a body slave, and yet she felt in her heart that she belonged to Khanu in every way.

She curled herself forward, moaning as her body spasmed within. Beneath her hands, his sweat-slick skin hardened. His muscles became like steel, and his body shuddered. He held her with his gaze and clutched her tightly. With a final claiming thrust, he spilled his seed within her and, when his breath finally escaped, he whispered her name reverently as a prayer to the gods.

“Praise to Min,” Nayari whispered against his chest. His heart pounded beneath her breasts, and his lips found the soft spot at the base of her ear and nuzzled, causing shock waves of pleasure to rush through her exhausted limbs.

“Perhaps he smiles on us because we saw his sacred ritual in the temple.”

"I've wanted you since that moment," Nayari confessed. Heat washed over her face, and Khanu chuckled. "Had we been going into the temple, rather than out, I'd have thrown myself atop you the moment we were alone."

"We are alone now, and you are atop me. Perhaps we could—"

"Khanu! Nayari!" Horeb's urgent whisper interrupted their breathless conversation. Nayari's blood ran cold as she removed herself from Khanu and scrambled for her discarded dress.

"There are soldiers at the edge of town. We must hide you now."

Cait had barely gotten to Horeb's warning when Grant rose and captured her in his arms. The image of Nayari and Khanu clinging to each other, taking sustenance from each other in the tiny room, tumbled through her mind when Grant released the hem of her blouse from the waistband of her skirt.

He sent a line of fiery kisses down her neck and spread her shirt wide. She threw her head back and let out an encouraging moan when he dragged the lacy strap of her bra off one shoulder. When his lips closed over her nipple, she cupped the back of his head to hold him there, urging him to feast on the hardened peak.

The ancient lovers faded from her imagination, but the heat of their passion remained. The ember of desire became a flame that engulfed Cait and Grant, growing hotter when he rose from the couch and pulled her to her feet. While she worked the buttons of his shirt, he pulled off her skirt and slid his fingers into her panties. She caught her breath when he found the hot center of her desire and caressed her clit.

"Oh, yes!" She clung to his bare shoulder, resisted the urge to sink her teeth into his skin.

"You like that?" His husky whisper in her ear made her whole body quiver. She nodded and gasped when he dipped a finger inside her. A tease, a taste... He unhooked her bra expertly with one hand and let it fall to the floor. "Couch or bed?" he asked.

"Right here." She nipped the base of his jaw with her teeth. "Right now."

He had her on the floor in an instant, cradling her with one arm against the soft pile of the carpet. The firm surface of the floor at her back made Cait feel wanton and sexy. She reveled in the feeling of being held motionless beneath him while he explored her body with his free hand.

"Take these off," he said, tugging on her panties. "I've got to find my pants for a second."

"Condom in the side table drawer." She winked, shimmied her underwear off and kicked the frothy lace toward the couch.

He gave her a wry smirk as he leaned over and pulled the narrow drawer open. "I like a woman who's prepared for anything."

"Don't get the wrong idea—" She gave him an innocent look and reached for him as he knelt between her legs.

“That you had this planned in advance, or that you just like doing it on the living room rug?” His voice dropped, and he gave her a gleefully evil look before he tore the foil packet open. She squirmed in anticipation as he rolled the condom on and trapped his hips with her legs when he settled across her.

“Both.” She sighed, grasped the back of his neck and bit her lower lip as he slid inside her.

“So...what’s the right idea?” He nuzzled her neck, drew his teeth over a sensitive spot above her collarbone and began to move with an easy rhythm that sent her spiraling.

“I... I...didn’t have any expectations for tonight.”

“Me neither. In fact, I always thought you didn’t like me. I don’t know why I waited so long.” He sighed into her ear, and one hand made a lazy journey down her side, igniting the nerve endings before resting on her hip. He tightened his grip there and increased the urgency of his movements.

“Funny, I thought the same thing.” Cait felt the wave building, and again she thought of Nayari and her first time as the object of a man’s desire, rather than just an object. The expression in Grant’s dark eyes had to be the same as the one in Khanu’s had been—a longing fulfilled, a need sated.

She hung on, digging her fingertips into the hard muscles of his shoulders. With her legs locked around him, she rode the wave until they came together in an explosion that stretched across the ages.

He kissed her again, languidly, while she shuddered around him. “Now, before we continue this, what happened to our lovers?”

Cait closed her eyes and let the sensation wash over her. Grant rolled over and pulled her onto his chest, wrapped his arms around her and fixed her with a sober gaze.

“The gods must have been smiling on them,” she replied finally, her voice low and sleepy. She reached up to trace the hard line of his jaw, and when she found his lips, he kissed her fingertips. “The soldiers were looking for Benak-Ra, the wizard.”

“The scroll tells that?”

“The narrative does—apparently all the details of the story came out years later. Rumors of Benak-Ra’s involvement in a plot to harm Seti came to the fore. He fled into the city, and the soldiers were searching for him.”

“Nayari and Khanu couldn’t have known that at the time.”

“No. They hid in the cellar of Horeb’s home that night, and Khanu asked Nayari if she wanted to go home. He offered to make up a story—that he’d kidnapped her—so she could return to Ammonptah unharmed.”

“But Ammonptah would still have given her to Benak-Ra. They couldn’t have known Benak-Ra was on the run.”

“Khanu wanted it to be Nayari’s choice. He knew they’d face a lot of hardships in hiding from Ammonptah, especially if his plot succeeded. They had no choice but to leave Egypt and make a life for themselves somewhere else.”



"She didn't take him up on the offer." Grant shifted and settled Cait into the crook of his arm, then shifted again. "Can we move?"

"Come to the bedroom." She untangled her legs from his and rose. She stretched for him, and noted with satisfaction that she wouldn't have long to wait for a repeat performance. "I'll finish the story in there."

With Grant trailing behind her, Cait stopped to retrieve another condom from the drawer, then sauntered into her bedroom. She never sauntered, but it felt right somehow, sexy and fun.

With a wink, she pulled back the thick comforter, exposing almond colored sheets of Egyptian cotton. Funny that Nayari and Khanu probably slept on straw mats and thought them luxuriantly comfortable.

Grant slipped into the bed. "Nice room." He pulled her close. His warmth surrounded her, and she sighed.

"To answer your question, no. Nayari didn't let Khanu sacrifice himself for her. She wanted him with her always, and she couldn't bear the thought of going back to Ammonptah. She pledged herself to Khanu and agreed to accept whatever life had to throw at them. The next morning, just as planned, Horeb led them into the desert."

The cave to which Horeb led them was nothing like Khanu expected. He'd imagined a dark, damp hole where they would huddle in fear of every sound, waiting for a safe time when Ammonptah would no longer care what happened to them. Instead, Horeb took them to a wide, sunlit grotto of rock near an oasis of tangled palm trees and low bushes. A spring bubbled up amid a pile of smooth stones, and the water was cool and clear.

"Others must know about this place, Horeb. Can you be sure we'll be safe here?" he asked his friend. He hated to sound ungrateful, but a magical spot like this would not remain unknown for long.

"I come here often. I discovered it when Setma and I were younger. We spent quite a bit of time here...alone." Horeb winked.

Khanu turned to look for Nayari, who had wandered off beneath an overhang of striated rock. She sat on a smooth shelf of sandstone that looked to be the perfect shape for sleeping. She sighed, and her eyes drifted closed as she relaxed against the warm stone. He prayed they were as safe and content as she looked. The journey had been long and exhausting, and she needed to rest, but Khanu wasn't sure he'd be able to enjoy their solitude.

Horeb clapped his shoulder. "Now would be a good time to change your names and think about who you have been and who you will become. If someone does arrive, they will meet a pair of young lovers hiding in the hills to escape the disapproval of their families." Horeb raised his eyebrows and glanced at

Nayari, now sleeping peacefully in the rock alcove. “The farther you go, the less likely anyone will recognize you.”

Khanu nodded. Horeb had always been the clever one, the cautious boy who managed to break the rules without ever once getting caught.

“Take care of her, Khanu, and be well, my friend. I will come back in a few days with some supplies for you.”

“Thank you, Horeb. You have done more than any friend should ask of you.”

Horeb only smiled. He left the cave, and Khanu stared after him for a long while, then moved to stand near Nayari. She slept deeply, her dark head resting on her crossed arms. He let his gaze wander the luxurious curve of her hip and down her thigh. He felt a stirring, but he would not wake her—yet.

He settled next to her and curled himself around her. Had he realized he would fall asleep almost instantly, he might not have closed his eyes just for a moment to rest them. With her clutched against his chest, her rhythmic breathing matching his own, he began to dream.

## Chapter Six

The Chief of Heaven danced in a circle around Nayari, his long, swollen member protruding from his hand, straight as an arrow. She stood silently, naked before him, her eyes closed in ecstasy. Khanu waited outside the circle in which Min danced, watching the god weave closer and closer to Nayari. He wanted to step in, to claim her for his own, but how could he challenge a god?

A hand fell on Khanu's shoulder, startling him. His heart raced when he turned and looked into the fearsome visage of Set. The god himself, part man, part animal, and all-powerful, gestured to Min and Nayari.

"Take her." His command was clear and strong, delivered in the voice of Ammonptah. "She is yours. Don't let that creature have her."

"He is Min—"

Pain lanced through Khanu's shoulder, and the hand of Set became a claw with the talons of a hawk. The talons dug into his flesh. "He is inferior to me. I am the god of the pharaohs. God of kings. I am their blood and their flesh. Take her in my name, and your union will be blessed."

Khanu needed no further encouragement. Even as Min thrust his straining erection at Nayari, Khanu reached across the circle to claim her. She danced out of his way and fell into Min's outstretched arms.

"You can't have her just for the taking. You must earn her." Set released his death grip on Khanu's shoulder and rivulets of blood ran down his arm. With eyes the color of the sun, Set followed the trail of crimson drops. "Like me, the blood of kings runs in your veins. You must prove yourself worthy to claim your prize."

"How?"

"Save Pharaoh. Blessed of Set, he is the true ruler of this land. Ammonptah is a pretender to the throne, and he will hold your heart in his hands if he gains power. He will hold her body beneath his again and ravage her in a fruitless effort to bring forth progeny. She will die at his hands, having failed her purpose. Do you want that?"

"What can I do?"

"Stop Ammonptah. You run from him like a rabbit runs from the jackal. You must prove your loyalty to Seti, and you will have everlasting peace. Then you will have her by your side forever."

"I'll kill Ammonptah." The words sounded strange in Khanu's mouth. How could he pledge to kill the man who had been his master?

“No. You will help Seti to kill him. And then no man but you will touch your beloved Nayari.”

Khanu looked back to the circle, and anger surged in him at the sight of Nayari cradled in the arms of Min, eyes closed, head back, her slender throat exposed to the god’s lips.

“I will do whatever you ask of me.”

“Then wake.”

Khanu sat up with a cry of defiance. Cold sweat covered his body and, for the first time in his life, his hands shook. The god Set had come to him in a dream and commanded him. He had to obey.

He looked down at Nayari, who stirred fitfully in her exhausted sleep. He smoothed her hair and kissed her brow. “I will do as Set commands me, for you. You will not have to leave Egypt in shame.”

Grant slid his eager hands over Cait’s hips, molding her to him in the sensual warmth beneath the crisp sheets of her bed. She moved beneath him, wrapped her legs around his and moaned softly when he kissed her neck and worked his way to her lips.

“Khanu dreams big,” he said against her mouth. She stretched and laughed.

“The gods were so much ingrained in everyday life that it wasn’t uncommon for people to feel their actions were guided by them.”

“Khanu believed his dream was a message from Set directly.”

“Of course. An offer he couldn’t refuse, so to speak.”

“What did he do about it?”

Cait’s response was lost in a sigh as Grant’s tongue swirled around her nipple. She drew her legs tighter around him and took him inside her again, reveling in his length.

“He left her in the cave.”

Nayari woke alone, silver moonlight bathing the grotto where she’d slept so long, dreaming of Khanu. His scent lingered on her hands, and the flavor of his mouth remained on her lips. She shivered for want of his arms around her.

Where had he gone? She called his name, straining her tired eyes in the half-light, wishing he would appear.

A faint breeze stirred through her hiding place, and a deep fear gripped her. He’d abandoned her, but why?

With her heart pounding and her empty stomach aching with fear, she crept from the smooth shelf of sandstone that had been her bed and peered out into the desert between columns of rock. Beyond the wind-

gnarled trees of the oasis, a ribbon of stars dusted the black sky. The brilliant disk of the moon seemed to mock her, its smiling face pale and harsh, reminding her of Baakah's disapproving glare.

With a prayer to Isis for his safe return, Nayari wrapped her arms around herself and sank to the rocky floor of the cave to wait for her missing warrior.

"Did he come back?" Grant asked, his voice thick and sleepy now. With Cait's head resting on his chest, her supple body stretched next to him, he felt completely at peace, except for the nagging anticipation. He had to know what happened to the concubine and her lover.

Cait mumbled something, and her long fingers flexed against his chest, stirring a feeling in him that he hadn't expected. He thought of Khanu and wondered if a mere dream would ever entice him to leave a woman he loved at the mercy of the elements, even if the life of a king hung in the balance.

At this moment, he could think of nothing that could tear him out of Cait's arms. "Don't fall asleep now. I want the rest of the story." He shook her gently, stroked her silky hair and rubbed one foot along the decadent expanse of her leg beneath the tangled sheets. "You said you'd go all the way tonight."

"Hmm. I did." She yawned and stretched languidly beside him. "Okay. Well, the story depicted in the scroll fragment ends there."

"No! There has to be more—"

"Layton speculated only a few more sentences remained of the narrative. His researchers filled in the rest from obscure references to both Ammonptah and Seti found in the tomb of a man suspected to have been the magistrate's successor. Layton's journal entry concludes with some blatant embellishments."

"You mean he made up the rest?"

"I'll tell you what he wrote, and you decide for yourself."

Nayari woke stiff and cold at the entrance to the cave. Moments after she opened her eyes a familiar sound startled a scream from her.

A team of oxen stood in the oasis, tethered to a cart emblazoned with the symbols of Ammonptah's rank and station.

Her heart sank. He'd found her, and very likely Khanu as well.

Her instincts told her to run, but where? There was no other exit from the cave. She scuttled backward toward the sandstone shelf, but a shadow fell across her intended hiding place and a rough hand closed over the back of her dress, tearing the delicate linen as she struggled for freedom.

The arms of a warrior circled her, drawing her against a hard wall of muscle. Her dress hung, torn at the neckline and spilling from one shoulder. A familiar hand reached up to adjust the fabric against her breast.

Ammonptah himself stood before her. His black eyes held no compassion, none of the benign disinterest she'd come to expect from her master.

"Tell me he took you against your will, Nayari," Ammonptah said, his voice rising over her indignant cursing at the warrior who held her fast. "Tell me the traitor seized an opportunity to avail himself of your nubile body while under my orders to protect you."

Nayari clamped her lips shut. She would never betray Khanu.

Ammonptah paced before her, his wrinkled hands clasped behind his back. "He's told me as much. That he saw you at my house and wanted you for himself out of jealousy for my station. Thinking you a virgin, he wanted to be the first to sample your pleasures and drew you off the road on the way to Coptos. He claims you put up some resistance, but he threatened you with injury, and thus you complied with his demands. He tells me you ran away from the temple out of shame, unable to bear the possibility that the child of someone other than your master might grow in your womb."

Nayari kept her eyes averted. Her heart ached for Khanu, to have shamed himself with such a terrible confession in order to spare her Ammonptah's wrath.

Her struggle had dislodged the shoulder of her dress again, exposing her breast, the nipple taut with fear. To her disgust, she felt the arousal of the warrior behind her, pressing against the curve of her bottom. She arched away from him, bile rising in her throat.

"You've only to corroborate his story, Nayari. Tell me he violated you, and I'll set you free. I'll give you to the house of my nephew, who would be glad of a concubine for himself, even one so misused as you have been."

"What of Khanu?" The question slipped out unbidden. No matter what Nayari said to Ammonptah, there would be no mercy for her brave warrior.

"He'll die quickly or slowly, depending upon your answer. Confess his crime to me, and I will see that his entrails are fed to the dogs this evening. Protect him, and I'll think of a more fitting punishment for a man who would betray his king."

"You are not pharaoh, and you will never be." Nayari spat the words, consumed with hatred for the man she'd once thought of as her benefactor.

Ammonptah's vicious slap snapped her head to the side. The sting of it felt like acid against the delicate skin of her cheek.

"I will be pharaoh. But your disloyalty has cost me. Benak-Ra will not want you now that a common servant has taken his pleasure with you. I will have to make another payment in your stead."

Nayari only stared defiantly. Tears stung her eyes at the pain Ammonptah had inflicted, but she held her master's gaze. Secure in the knowledge that both she and Khanu would die no matter what, she denounced her loyalty to the magistrate and spat at his sandaled feet.

Rather than slapping her again, he laughed. "Take her to the cart. I tire of this."

The warrior dragged Nayari from the cave and threw her bodily into the back of the oxen cart. He climbed in after her and secured her wrists together with a leather thong. Musky darkness closed over her when he drew a tightly woven mat across her body. She lay there, sweltering, her hands tingling and her body aching with misery.

Somewhere along the journey back to Coptos, she fainted in the overwhelming heat, and her fevered dreams turned to Khanu and the precious life they might have created together.

Cait's torpor began to lift as she told the rest of the story from Layton's journal.

Though just as compelling as the account contained in the scroll fragment, she'd often wondered about the veracity of what came next. It seemed too fantastic, even for the mystery-shrouded world of ancient Egypt.

Beside her, Grant leaned on one elbow, his gorgeous eyes intent. He seemed to be drinking in every word. "Tell me Khanu rescued her," he prompted, then he induced an electric shiver in her when he ran one hand over the curve of her hip.

She shook her head sadly, wishing the details were different. "He'd already been captured by Ammonptah's soldiers, some of whom he had counted as friends only a few days before. Layton speculated that Khanu attempted to kill Ammonptah on the advice of Set and that some of the magistrate's own men were loyal to Seti and tried to help. Those who were not discovered the plan after Khanu confessed his true story to a trusted few. Since none dared reveal themselves, no one could help the lovers, who were taken back to Coptos and bound to stakes on opposite sides of a windowless temple room. What happened next is largely speculation, but—"

Grant lowered his gaze. "Ammonptah tortured them to death, no doubt."

"Worse." Cait closed her eyes, trying to block out the more lurid details of the tale Layton had cobbled together from so many obscure references. She'd fallen in love with Khanu and Nayari, and she preferred to believe that somehow they'd escaped the terrible fate Ammonptah devised for them. "At that time, belief in the afterlife was the guiding force in Egyptian society. Their entire social structure revolved around preparations for life after death. The wealthy were almost assured a coveted place at the right hand of the gods, purchased with gold and the sweat of countless servants and slaves. The poor had a lesser hope of salvation, but they did whatever they could to gain favors that would help them into heaven.

“Ammonptah had once been a good man, so Layton’s journal says, but his association with Benak-Ra and his quest for power corrupted him. He decided that Khanu and Nayari didn’t deserve a place in the afterlife. Working with the wizard over the course of a fortnight, he devised a fabled object. It’s no more than a myth, but Layton seemed to believe in it.”

“The Soul Jar?”

Cait stared at Grant. His eyes shown in the dim moonlight filtering through the lace curtains of her bedroom. “You’ve heard of it?”

“I found one reference to it in my studies over the years. Supposedly it was an alabaster jar the size and shape of a heron’s egg. I had no idea what it was used for.”

“Apparently Benak-Ra put a spell on the jar and devised a ritual that would drag the souls of Nayari and Khanu from their bodies and imprison them in the jar forever.”

“A wizard that powerful could certainly help elevate Ammonptah to the throne.”

“According to Layton’s journal, the spell worked.”

Grant sat up, his brows drawing together and his lips tight in anticipation. “No wonder Layton wanted his finds kept secret. A theory like that would have destroyed his academic reputation.”

“He seemed to think the jar existed, but in all his years of research, he never found any evidence to support his belief.”

“So tell me what happened. This can’t be the end of the story.”

“Almost.” Cait drew the cool sheets around her body and crossed her legs. She felt like a teenager telling campfire stories at a slumber party. If only this tale had a happier ending.



## Chapter Seven

On the fourteenth day of their captivity, Ammonptah entered the torch-lit cell where Khanu and Nayari lay barely conscious on the dry stone floor. Benak-Ra followed the magistrate, his hunched, skeletal body nearly hobbled by the weight of golden robes and a headdress that rivaled that of Pharaoh himself. The wizard hovered over Khanu first, anointing his head with foul-smelling oil. Then he moved to Nayari, his black eyes soulless and terribly cold.

Khanu roused himself, drawing on the last ounce of strength in his battered body to protect the woman he loved. "Don't touch her!" he croaked through dry lips.

Nayari stirred at the sound of his voice and pulled herself away from Benak-Ra's bony touch. Unmoved, the wizard completed his task and turned to Ammonptah. "I believe she has conceived. We must perform the magick now, before the gods intervene to protect the soul of the child."

Khanu rolled to his knees, his eyes focused on Nayari's pale form. Could the evil wizard be right? Did she carry his child?

Two warriors entered the room on Ammonptah's command and cut their bonds. Weakened by hunger and thirst, though, neither had the strength to break free of their captivity. Together they were dragged across the room to a stone altar on which sat an oval jar of the purest white alabaster.

Ammonptah stood before the altar and invoked all the powers of Min. Beside him, Benak-Ra called on darker forces with an ancient, forbidden chant.

The warriors who held them drew close together and, for the first time since he'd left her in the cave, Khanu felt Nayari's fingers brush his arm. "I love you," she whispered, her voice raw.

"I love you, my wife. We'll be together on the other side of the sky. I promise you that."

In Khanu's ear, the warrior who held his arms tightly behind his back whispered barely audible words. "Forgive us, brother. Your sacrifice will be remembered by Pharaoh."

Khanu's eyes widened at the strange message, but he dared not ask any questions. He'd been betrayed by those he trusted with his story, tortured for all the information he'd learned from the acolytes at Min's temple. Had someone taken the knowledge and used it to assure Seti's safety?

Ammonptah turned at that moment, the small jar clutched in his hand. He raised the vessel and shouted an incantation that seemed to echo against the soot-stained walls.

Benak-Ra fell to his knees in supplication as a fine mist swirled forth from the open jar. Beside Khanu, Nayari struggled feebly in the arms of her captor as the white vapor settled around her mouth and

nose. A moment later she hung limp in the soldier's arms, her eyes open and lifeless. Khanu screamed, cursing the name of Ammonptah for all eternity. With the last of his strength, he reared back, holding his breath to avoid breathing in the poisonous smoke the magistrate had released.

Despite his efforts, his lungs seemed to still, and his heart slowed. His vision dimmed, then brightened momentarily, and he felt himself floating toward Ammonptah.

Something brushed against him, and he sensed Nayari. Her voice, strong now, renewed, reached his thoughts. "I'm here, my husband. I am with you always."

He turned, but saw nothing but her lifeless body and then his own. Ammonptah's soldiers lowered them to the floor, but Khanu felt nothing.

"It is done," the wizard said. "Close the jar."

Khanu searched for Nayari as darkness closed around him, and once again he heard her voice. "I am with you forever, my warrior."

Grant shivered involuntarily. He didn't want Cait to know how deeply the story of the ill-fated lovers had affected him.

He stole a glance at her and she looked away, wiping her eyes with a trembling hand.

"Good story," he said. "I wonder how much of it is true."

"The ancient Egyptians didn't write much fiction."

"No, but Layton obviously did. His wild speculation doesn't diminish the value of the scroll, though. Tell Mr. Greer I'll be bidding on it. And I intend to have it."

Cait nodded. "I'm sure he already knows."

Grant hesitated a moment, drew his fingers over her shoulder and up to the graceful curve of her jaw. "I should be going. We both have to get back to work in a few hours." He hated to leave her, but he had a lot to do. If even half of what Layton wrote was true, there were far more valuable objects than the scroll that were yet to be found. He kissed her once and found he wasn't too tired to be turned on by the taste of their lovemaking that still lingered on her lips. He forced himself to ignore the start of an erection and slipped out of bed. "Don't get up. You sleep. I'll call you."

She blinked up at him, her bottom lip caught between her perfect teeth. He'd seen that look before. She didn't believe him, and he needed her to. He bent and kissed her again. "I promise. I had a phenomenal time tonight. I don't care what Greer says. I intend to do this again."

Cait sat in her office three days later staring at the phone and hating herself for wishing Grant would call. She'd heard nothing from him, and neither had Mr. Greer, who seemed to be glaring at Cait more than

usual. She supposed her boss thought she'd somehow talked Grant out of bidding on the scroll. Maybe she had. Giving him all of Layton's wild speculations might have turned him off. Perhaps he'd only said he still wanted the artifact to be polite while he was climbing out of her bed.

How could she have been so dumb? Grant Pierson, after all, was what he was. Eccentric, arrogant, fantastic in bed—but he'd used her. At least after the auction today, she'd know for sure how royally she'd screwed up.

"Are you ready?" Jeri asked after a polite knock on Cait's half-open door. "They're here."

"Who's here?" Cait's heart began to thud. Would Grant have the audacity to show up at the auction now? Would he have some half-assed excuse for not calling her? She whipped out a makeup mirror and reapplied her lipstick under Jeri's scrutiny.

"There are at least five clients in the auction room. Greer is strutting around like a peacock. You'd better get in there and keep him from losing his feathers."

"Right." Cait smoothed her skirt and scooped up the newly printed auction catalog from her desk. Head high, her shell of professional aloofness intact, she headed for the auction room with Jeri on her heels.

Grant sat in the chair nearest the display case, his dark head bent, studying his catalog. Cait remained at the back of the room, her eyes boring holes in his skull. The nerve of him to show up without even saying hello!

Matthew Greer stepped up to the small podium from which he conducted his auctions. He nodded to Cait, who dimmed the lights in the room, and he began his spiel.

"Normally I would leave the most exotic object on the roster for last, but since several of you have other pressing engagements, I've decided to begin the bidding with our newest and most interesting item." While he went into a brief but detailed description of the scroll, Cait zoned out, her mind on the evening she'd spent with Grant. He hadn't even turned his head in her direction.

A tap on her shoulder startled her when the bidding began, and she turned to see Mack, one of the gallery's independent auditors, standing at her side.

Tall and rugged, he resembled a blond Indiana Jones more than a buttoned-up bean counter. Cait liked him, especially his crisp Australian accent.

"G'day, love. You're looking pensive this morning," Mack said, his slate blue eyes sparkling.

"This is a big sale for the gallery. If it doesn't go well, I'm sure I'll get some flack for it."

"No worries, love. You've got some players out there." Mack leaned casually against the wall, taking in each of the clients that had begun bidding on the scroll. Cait noticed Grant seemed to be holding back. He hadn't made a bid yet.

"Players is an interesting choice of word," Cait mumbled. Fortunately Mack didn't seem to have heard her. His attention seemed to be on a dark-haired woman in the front row who had jumped into the bidding with a vengeance. Cait tuned into the price war, scanning back and forth as different clients raised

their hands or nodded to Mr. Greer. The bidding had reached several hundred thousand dollars when Grant finally raised his hand. The other clients seemed shocked that he'd joined in, and Mr. Greer seemed pleased that someone was going to jack up the price even further. In the end, to Cait's dismay, it was the dark-haired woman who won the bidding after pledging an exorbitant sum. Mack nodded his approval and left Cait at the back of the room. She watched him congratulate the beautiful young woman, holding her hand just an instant too long. Grant smiled ruefully as he shook hands with Mr. Greer, and the two men exchanged a few words while Mack led the new owner of the scroll to the back where she could pick up her purchase.

Grant still didn't look in Cait's direction, and finally she left the auction room, annoyed at herself for caring what Grant Pierson did or didn't do.

Jeri appeared at her office door again half an hour later. "That was the fastest auction ever. They're all gone."

"All of them?" Cait tried to sound casual.

Jeri nodded. "We must have made a mint, because Mr. Greer is ordering lunch for everyone. Do you want Thai chicken or Tandoori beef?"

"I'm not hungry."

The soft knock on her door at half-past seven that night startled Cait out of a deep reverie. She'd been half asleep, her arms around a fat pillow, the television blaring an old romantic comedy she'd seen half a dozen times. Her mind had been in Egypt, with the souls of two tragic lovers who dared to break the rules of their complicated society.

She yawned and unfolded herself from the couch, brushing cookie crumbs from her blue sweatpants. Panic swept over her when she saw Grant's dark eyes peering back at her through the security lens in her door.

"What are you doing here?" She hadn't wanted to sound angry, but the words slipped out, loud and sharp.

"I'm here to apologize. I had to leave town for a few days before the auction, and I didn't have a chance to call you."

Yeah. There was the lame excuse she'd been expecting. "Ever hear of a cell phone?"

"Please let me in, and I'll explain."

She sighed. Her body told her to let him in, invite him back into her bed which seemed cold and lonely without him these past three nights. Her head told her to open the door just enough to slam it closed on his toes. Besides, she looked like hell. How could she let him in when she was wearing laundry-day clothes? Her T-shirt bore a drop of pizza grease, and her underwear—not that she'd let him see it, of

course—consisted of a pair of holey white briefs and her most comfortable sports bra. Her hair hung in braids, and she wasn't wearing a scrap of makeup. He'd be shocked to discover she didn't always wear satin and lace.

Reluctantly, she opened the security chain and flipped the lock below it. She opened the door a crack, and he held up a bottle of wine and pointed to the cork. "Not screw top," he said.

"That's not much of an explanation."

"I've got something else for you. Something you'll find amazing. If you let me in."

*Oh, please. Spare me.* "All right." She stood back, and he slipped through the narrow opening.

"God, you look great," he said handing her the wine.

"I'm not in the mood for flattery."

"Seriously. You look adorable. I thought you only wore those uptight business suits." He grinned at her, and she noticed he wore jeans and a T-shirt too. He had a book and a file folder under his arm and a corkscrew in his pocket. Or maybe it wasn't a corkscrew.

"What's up, Grant? Why did you ignore me at the auction?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to get you in trouble with your boss."

"You could have said hello." Her tart reply seemed to affect him. He looked contrite, staring at her with those bottomless brown eyes.

"You're right. I could have. I should have. If it means anything, you were on my mind. I didn't like that Mack the auditor was chatting you up."

"He wasn't. Were you jealous?" Cait stifled a satisfied grin.

"Extremely. I couldn't wait to get you alone. I have something to show you, and a question to ask you."

Cait set the wine down on the kitchen counter and crossed her arms over her chest. *This better be good*, she thought. She didn't like the way her resolve to stay mad at Grant seemed to disintegrate so quickly.

He opened the book he'd brought to a page marked with a bright yellow sticky note. "Here it is. This is the only reference I've found to the Soul Jar." He pointed to a small footnote at the bottom of a page of nearly microscopic text. "The author mentions a rumor about a jar fitting Layton's description having been found in the ruins of a small, obscure temple in Coptos. The jar disappeared shortly after it was uncovered."

A shiver of anticipation ran down Cait's spine. Could the jar really exist? "Do you think the jar can be found?"

"Apparently it's already been found. After losing the auction, I decided to contact the woman who outbid me for the scroll. I wanted to make sure she had plans to display the item publicly, and I managed to find out a little more about the Soul Jar and the fate of Nayari and Khanu."

Cait's breath caught. Could it be that the lovers had somehow managed to survive after all? She nodded to the wine bottle in Grant's other hand. "Open this while I put on something a little less comfortable. This, I have to hear." She handed him the wine and a glass, and he popped the cork.

On the way to her bedroom, Cait silently berated herself for letting Grant in so easily. She should have made him suffer a bit in exchange for leaving her hanging for so long, but the prospect of finding out what had actually happened to Nayari and Khanu overshadowed her annoyance.

She shed her sweatpants and T-shirt and unbraided her hair while rummaging through what little was left in her underwear drawer. She slipped on a lace bra and panties and shrugged into a wrap shirt and a pair of sexy jeans. Let him drool, she thought as she breezed back out into the living room.

Grant sat on the chair across from the couch. He'd opened the file on the coffee table and was sifting through papers. The corners of his mouth lifted in a sly smile when he looked up.

"You didn't have to change for me."

"I didn't..." Lie. Lie. Lie. "I changed because...never mind. Tell me what you found out. Who was that woman who bought the scroll?"

"Her name is Bree Sennett. She's a collector of Egyptian antiquities, and apparently she's seen the Soul Jar, even held it in her hands. These pages are notes I made of the conversation I had with her today."

A tingle of anticipation feathered up Cait's spine. Whether it was caused by Grant himself or his story, she couldn't tell.

"So what happened to the jar and to Nayari and Khanu?"

Grant handed her a wine glass. "Take a drink first. You're going to need it."

Time had ceased to exist for Nayari and her warrior. For eons, it seemed, they knew nothing but an endless void, a darkness through which only their thoughts reached each other across a deep, terrifying chasm.

This was not the coveted afterlife of which they'd been taught. Of that much, Nayari was certain. The priests and acolytes, and even Baakah and the servants in Ammonptah's household, had spoken of a glorious heaven where the gods bestowed blessings and generous gifts on the souls of the departed. She'd long imagined that when her time on earth ended, she would be reunited with her mother and father and the siblings she'd left behind in her native land.

Perhaps somewhere that heaven did exist, but now Nayari despaired of ever reaching it.

Little held meaning in their isolated netherworld until the light came to them. Nayari could not have said if a year or a thousand had passed while she waited, longing for nothing but the occasional brush of Khanu's mind against hers and his gentle reassurances that one day they would be free.

She'd felt nothing for so long that the sensation of being torn away from the darkness frightened her. She cried out to Khanu, and his voice reached her through a swirling mist that replaced the endless blackness.

"Stay with me, my love."

"What's happening? Are we finally free?"

There was no answer at first, and then the world began to form around her. For the first time in longer than she could dare remember, Nayari saw. She saw the rough walls of the temple room and smelled the heady aroma of incense and the dry, stale scent of old stone.

In a frenzy, she whirled around, searching for her warrior, calling to him. When she turned, what she saw made her long for the safety of her dark prison. Ammonptah stood behind a narrow altar, his dark-skinned hands wrapped around an alabaster jar.

Free of her confines, unchained and unencumbered by the strong arms of the ruthless guards, she had one chance to seek her revenge against her former master. Nayari flew at him and reached out her hand to touch the fine linen that lay above his black heart.

Terror blanched Ammonptah's skin. His eyes bulged, and his breath rattled in his lungs. Behind him hovered the faint outline of a broad-shouldered warrior—Khanu! He placed his hands on Ammonptah's throat as if to squeeze the life from him, but almost instantly, the magistrate slumped forward. His hands fell limp, and the alabaster jar rolled away from him, nearly to the edge of the altar.

"The spell has failed." Khanu's voice rang in Nayari's ears, and her heart soared. "We're free."

"But what have they done with us?" Nayari felt the warmth of the flickering torches on the wall and tasted the incense smoke on her tongue...yet she couldn't see her own hands or her body. She remembered lying on the floor of the temple, too weak to move, wishing only that the end of her suffering would be swift.

"There." Khanu's vaporous hand gestured to a dark-haired body reclining on the floor. A woman. Above her stood a man, tall and slim, with hair the color of spun gold. Both were dressed strangely and speaking words in a language Nayari had never heard before.

The man reached down and pulled the woman up from the floor. Their hands were clasped tightly together, and that gesture arrowed to Nayari's core. These were lovers, seeking escape from Ammonptah just as she and Khanu had.

Without exchanging another word, she and her warrior moved toward the couple. It seemed natural somehow, to settle within these foreign bodies and take temporary residence there.

Nayari felt Khanu's hand in hers, and she nearly wept at the sensation. When she looked up into the eyes of the golden-haired man, they were no longer foreign. The eyes of her husband stared back at her, and Khanu's lips curved in a smile.

He pulled her to him and kissed her until the chill of their long incarceration faded to nothing. She sank into the strong arms of her warrior, reveling in the touch that had been denied them for so long.

Suspended time came rushing back at them all too soon, though, and Nayari was the first to see the brilliant light of the nether world beckoning them. She dragged her needy lips away from Khanu's and pointed over his shoulder.

"We need to go now. We've been trapped here long enough," she said.

He squeezed her hand once, then together they stepped away from the borrowed bodies and moved into the light where the gods waited to welcome them into life everlasting.

Cait wiped at the corners of her eyes when Grant finished his story. Part of her wanted desperately to believe that the ancient lovers had finally found peace, but part of her remained skeptical.

"How does this woman know this? None of this was part of the narrative on the scroll."

Grant's eyes sparkled, and Cait wondered if he were playing her. This couldn't be true, no matter how satisfying it was to know that Nayari and Khanu found peace together at the end of their long imprisonment.

"She was the woman in the temple."

Cait took a deep sip of wine. "Seriously?"

"She claims she found the Soul Jar, though she wouldn't tell me where. When it was opened, the souls of the lovers escaped, and finally, after three thousand years, they passed into the afterlife."

"Do you believe that's what happened?" Cait asked. Even though the events he'd described seemed too fantastic to be real, they felt right somehow.

"Yes, I do." Grant set his wine glass down. He collected the papers and slid them back into the file folder. "I offered her double what she paid for the scroll, but she turned me down. At least she promised it would be put on public display along with the Soul Jar, which has been given back to the Egyptian government. The bad news is, we'll have to go to Cairo to see it."

Cait managed a chuckle at the hopeful expression in Grant's dark eyes. "It'll be a while before I can afford a trip to Cairo. Maybe one day..."

"How about next month?" From the back of the file folder, beneath the sheaf of papers and handwritten notes, Grant produced two white envelopes and handed them to Cait. "I managed to get myself an invitation to help oversee the opening of the exhibit. I'd like you to come with me."



Speechless, Cait opened one of the envelopes and stared at the airline tickets inside. Her jaw dropped, and she managed a nervous laugh. "I'd love to go, but—"

"Mr. Greer might fire you. I know. You don't have to decide right away, but don't worry about a job for now."

Cait hesitated only a second before throwing her arms around Grant's neck. "I've decided. Let's go. I want to say a proper goodbye to Khanu and Nayari."

Grant smiled and planted a kiss on her nose. "I figured we should thank them for bringing us together. Maybe that's their legacy. Anyone who hears their story falls in love."

"Are you falling in love, Mr. Pierson?" Cait's heart nearly stopped at the thought. If a concubine and a warrior could fall in love over the space of a few days, why couldn't she and Grant?

Grant rose and scooped her up in his arms. "I think I am, Ms. Lang. I think I am."

## About the Author

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The Rebound Guy  
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Uncross My Heart

*A romance three thousand years in the making.*

## The Soul Jar

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When Bree Sennett breaks into Ming Xiao Chen's Curiosity Shop to recover the fabled Soul Jar of Ammonptah, the last thing she expects to find among the tacky souvenirs is a ghost. But there he is, Mason "Chance" MacKenzie, back from the dead and stirring a confusing mix of joy at seeing him alive...and betrayal for leaving her.

Two years ago, Chance faked his own death to save both their lives. It's taken him that long to convince himself she's better off without him, that she'll never forgive him much less love him. Yet as their mutual search for the Soul Jar brings them face to face, he realizes the only one he was fooling was himself.

Now the woman who stole his heart is about to steal the Soul Jar, but a life he promised to protect hangs in the balance. There's only one way to satisfy both their clients. Make a deal. And hope he can trust her to help him complete his mission before he loses her forever.

*Warning: This title contains too much caffeine, just the right amount of fireworks and a heaping scoop of steal-your-heart Australian hunk.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Soul Jar:*

Bree Sennett clamped her lips shut on a startled gasp as a long shadow fell across her hiding place. She pushed her body deeper into the narrow niche where she crouched and listened to the measured footsteps coming across the dark, crowded storeroom.

Ming Xiao Chen's curiosity shop was supposed to be closed tonight. Bree had made certain the old man found his usual spot at the bar down the street. She'd seen him there, drinking rice wine with his two sons while the Chinese New Year parade snapped, crackled and popped its way through the narrow streets of Chinatown. Certain that the shop's eagle-eyed proprietor and his burly offspring were occupied for the night, Bree had let herself inside through the storeroom window.

Who else could be here? No one else had after-hours access to the shop, not even the Chen women. Lit only by the occasional flare of fireworks and the feeble glow of a single string of paper lanterns entwined around a clothesline several stories above, the alley out back had been heavily shadowed and completely empty when Bree arrived. No one could have seen her enter.

That meant the slow, deliberate footsteps that creaked across the shop's dusty back room belonged to an intruder, a thief.

Bree slowly exhaled through clenched teeth. *I don't have time for this.* She had a schedule to keep and a client to appease. She had to retrieve the artifact tonight or face losing more than just a percentage of her

meager commission. The plane ticket wedged into the back pocket of her tight black jeans was non-refundable. Perhaps as a testament to her client's confidence in her abilities, her travel arrangements had been made for her on a promise—one guaranteed by her life.

Bree waited another ten seconds before climbing out of the niche behind a towering curio cabinet. She listened and gauged her rival's whereabouts in the mazelike storeroom.

One aisle over to the left, a shadowy form stretched to snatch an object off a high shelf. Bree took mental inventory. That's where Chen kept the dragon bones and the pearl handled daggers that he claimed could produce non-healing wounds with their short, blunt blades.

*Nothing there worth taking.* Chen had those objects mass-produced to appeal to the souvenir hunters and seekers of the macabre.

Bree took one measured step, then another. If the intruder wanted only dime store novelties, she might be able to grab the real treasure and be gone before he—or she—noticed.

"I'll give you sixty seconds to climb back out that window and get lost before I call the police."

Bree went still at the incongruous threat. That voice! Deep and sharp with a hint of Australian accent, it pierced her confidence to the bone. She caught her breath and berated herself for indulging in foolish fantasies when she was supposed to be focused on her job. Much as it might sound like him, she didn't believe in ghosts.

She held her position, calling the intruder's bluff.

"Thirty seconds."

God, that voice sent shivers through her body and froze the breath in her lungs. *It can't be. It just can't be.* Fatigue and stress had to be causing her to hallucinate. Her conscience told her to run, to ignore the tumult of long-forgotten feelings and get away before the memories derailed her mission.

Her heart had other plans, though. How could she slink away in the night, leaving her treasure behind, and never know to whom the haunting voice belonged? She turned the corner, her heart thumping against her ribs as if it meant to escape and flee the scene.

The intruder hesitated only a moment before stepping out of the shadows next to a shelf lined with Yeti hands and petrified dinosaur brains. Bree let her gaze ride up from his black boots to the familiar cattle-horn belt buckle at his waist, past the white T-shirt and scuffed black leather jacket to the shaggy mane of sun-streaked hair.

She might not have believed it, might have dismissed his appearance as coincidence, until she looked into his unsettling smoke-gray eyes. Her heart seemed to plummet to a spot just below her navel where it lay fluttering like a wounded bird. The air in her lungs hardened, and her blood congealed. Had she lost her mind, or was she staring at a dead man?

Fortunately she'd survived too many tight spots to be rendered mute and immobile for long, but the single second of complete, numbing agony at seeing him again cost her.

Swallowing the bitter taste of his betrayal, she smiled at the man who had shattered her soul two years ago. At least he had the decency to look equally shocked when he recognized her.

“Mason MacKenzie,” she said, proud that her voice remained steady and smooth. “I thought I killed you.”

Recognition hit Chance MacKenzie like a cold blade in the gut. Bree. Good Lord, she hadn’t changed at all. Even with her raven hair pulled back in a thick ponytail and her luscious figure hidden by a black sweatshirt, she took his breath away.

Of all the places he might have encountered her—all the places he’d studiously avoided since their last disastrous adventure—he’d never have imagined finding her here in New York’s Chinatown, slinking around in the back room of Chen’s famous curiosity shop.

This was no place for priceless treasures of any kind.

“You used to call me Chance,” he said as soon as he found his voice. The shock made his heart skip a beat. He could not have been more nonplussed if he’d encountered one of the Yetis that supposedly belonged to the gnarled, shriveled hands lying on the shelf behind her head.

“Only your friends call you Chance, and I’m *not* one of your friends.” Her reply stung, like a sharp pinprick in the callus that had grown over his heart since he’d seen her last, since he’d held her in his arms and planned a future with her at his side. Pushing aside the ache that had begun in the middle of his chest, he smiled wide, partly to throw her off guard and partly because the pain reminded him that he hadn’t *actually* died two years ago.

“Aw, can’t we get past that, luv? I forgive you for killing me. Since I’m not really dead, I can’t hold a grudge.”

The corners of her lustrous blue eyes sparkled. After what he’d put her through, he’d never have expected to see tears in those eyes, only the cold hatred of a woman badly scorned.

He looked away as she swiped at her eyes. Her voice wavered when she asked, “So how is it you’re not really dead?”

*Love sometimes comes late and, perhaps, at too great a price.*

## Damon's Price

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Widowhood agrees with thirty-eight-year-old Claudia Sabina. Her husband and father left her wealthy, but her most prized possession is their gift of independence. She enjoys a freedom few women in male-dominated Roman Society will ever know.

One of her most valuable assets is Damon, a young Greek slave bequeathed to her by her father. Intelligent, resourceful and educated beyond the norm for even a freeborn Roman citizen, Damon is a man of many talents. It doesn't hurt that he is also a pleasure to look at.

For months, Damon hides the fact he's fallen in love with his new mistress. He convinces himself he can be satisfied with her nearness—until the night he walks in on her bath, and his rigid control deserts him. Consequences fail to matter as he offers her full use of talents that, until now, he's never revealed.

In a moment of weakness, Claudia crosses the line laid down by Roman law and custom, immersing herself in an illegal and dangerous love affair. A choice that threatens both their futures.

*Warning: Imagine what you might do with a naked, Greek god whose sole purpose is to satisfy your every whim, then keep on imagining. This title contains an abundance of hot, hot, hot M/F loving.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Damon's Price:*

Damon crossed the room to deposit the tablets and take his place beside the desk.

"I knocked," he said.

"The right thing would have been to leave quietly and come back later," she warned him coldly. She slid into the chair without looking in his direction.

"I didn't want you to worry about who had tried the door."

"Kind of you." She should tell him to leave. He could wait elsewhere for the correspondence.

Instead, Claudia tried to focus on the first letter. Damon's meticulous transcription decayed to a blur on the tablet. She needed all her concentration to control the trembling in her hands.

She heard a sharp intake of breath and glanced up to catch him staring at her breasts.

Her body's instant reaction stunned her. Her nipples grew taut against the slick fabric of the robe. A warm, liquid rush dampened her sex.

The evidence of his arousal swelled behind the fabric of his tunic. She turned in the chair to face him. The robe didn't turn with her. It slipped open, exposing her chest and all of one leg. She made no attempt to correct the problem.

With one hand gripping the back of her chair, she returned his scrutiny. The boy was certainly a pleasure to look at. She'd admired his form often enough, but always with the appreciation one might give to an especially fine marble likeness—almost always.

At the moment, there was no comparing him to any image carved from stone. His living heat radiated between them. She drank in his rugged charms—sweetly disheveled hair, black as night, worn longer than was fashionable, black brow, midnight eyes. The shadow of a beard darkened his face. He was slim but well fed and well muscled, and he was the most intelligent man she'd ever known.

*Yes, man*, she reminded herself.

"How old are you, Damon?" she asked.

"Twenty-six, *Era*."

Titus, her son, would soon be twenty-three.

"Why would you suggest such a thing? What do you expect in return?"

The question clearly insulted him. He cast his gaze aside, but not fast enough to hide a spark of anger.

"To watch your pleasure," he said.

As simple as that? Not likely. She read no dissemblance in his face, however.

Against her better judgment, Claudia continued her examination of his beautiful body. She was playing with fire, but the fire in her loins and in his eyes compelled her. Without diverting her interest from the breadth of his shoulders beneath the loose fitting tunic, she amazed herself by asking, "If I said yes, what would you do?"

A sudden gasp stopped the rise and fall of his chest. The quick glance with which she'd intended to judge his reaction became a prolonged gaze into his eyes when she recognized in them something she had not seen in a very long time. This beautiful young man lusted for her—for her, a woman twelve years his senior.

"What would you do?" she whispered.

His full lips parted for a sigh. "First, I would take down your hair." His hand twitched. "Do you know how beautiful your hair is? How it shines in the sun? Why do you hide it in a knot behind your head?"

"This is how matrons wear their hair."

"You're no matron."

"I am a matron with two grown children, Damon. I've outlived a husband and a son." Her words did not have the sobering effect she'd expected—on either of them. "Tell me, what do you want?"

His gaze traveled over her exposed throat and chest. A little groan escaped him.

"I want to feel your flesh quiver under my touch." Again, his lips parted. His tongue slipped between to wet them. "I want the weight of your breasts in my palms. I want to drown in the sounds of your pleasure."



Every hair on her body stood on end. She shivered, as much at the sound of his voice as at the words he spoke. It was madness to encourage him. Death came to mind. Rome did not look lightly on her women having sex with slaves.

“What you’re suggesting might be quite costly for either of us. Both, more likely.” Yet everyone knew the practice was as common as a man taking a mistress.

“I have a mouth for your pleasure,” Damon said. “No one will know. I’ve longed to taste you from the first moment I saw you.”

His breathy baritone purred over her skin, raising goose flesh. Once the possibility took root, it would not be wrenched free.

*Too far*, she thought. *I’ve let this go too far*. She had invited him to seduce her and had willingly succumbed.

“Show me,” she breathed.

Before the words passed her lips, Damon moved in to straddle her knees. He swept the band from her hair, letting the steam-dampened curls shiver down her back. His long, slender fingers combed through the curls, tugging slightly, smoothing them.

Claudia’s eyes drifted closed. Fingertips grazed the length of her neck and nudged the robe past her shoulders. The soft fabric whispered to her waist.

He knew just where to touch, how hard, how fast. His hands fluttered over her back and shoulders. Her flesh quivered beneath their callused surface. These were not a scribe’s hands, but the hands of a man used to sharing in the planting, pruning, harvesting, hauling—hard labor their business required. Labor he was not obligated to do.

Those wonderful hands trailed fire wherever they fell. The rough pads of his thumbs brushed her aching nipples. Claudia bit her lip, willing herself to silence. Though her rooms had their own wing, she couldn’t take the chance any of the servants might hear. Her breath came in silent gasps.

One knee insinuated itself between her legs. Without volition, they opened to him and he knelt on the floor in front of her, tugging at the knot of her robe until the fabric fell away and the reality of what they were doing sank in.

Her breath seized in her throat. She shouldn’t allow this. She didn’t know this man, not like this. He was loyal, but to whom? She’d moved in on him, usurping his position when she took over her inheritance. Until four months ago, he was in charge and she’d never considered he might resent her. Yet, here she was, considering it. Common sense warned her. This shouldn’t happen. He could ruin her. She needed to stop.

But when his whispered endearments reached her ears, “...beautiful...*Era mea*...”, and she felt his hot breath bathe her flesh, she knew there was no stopping. The tenderness in his voice drew her eyes. Even in the dim light, she could see the heat in his half-lidded gaze. He appraised her with something akin to worship. Right or wrong, she trusted him. No one could look at her like that and mean her harm.

But how would she forget that look in the morning?

Without warning, Damon dug his fingers into her sides and yanked her toward him. The coarse shadow of his beard rasped over her skin as he covered her breast with his mouth and sucked.

Claudia stifled a moan and leaned into him, encouraging him. The smooth surface of his tongue stroked the sensitive nipple. Her sex throbbed to his rhythm, seizing now and then, hinting of things to come.

Damon shuddered. His kisses moved north, alternately nipping and kissing in a line to her shoulder and neck, nuzzling his way to her ear. His lips brushed her cheek and over her lips, just a breath.

Fire surged through her. All thought of consequence melted in the heat. Like an infant seeking sustenance, she turned into the caress, chasing the gentle kiss. She needed that kiss, a real kiss. But his lips didn't part for her when she captured his mouth, though his breath quickened and his heart pounded beneath her palm which had somehow found its way to his chest. A desperate, painful longing burst inside her. She drew away.

He removed her hand. "Best you don't touch me," he whispered, his voice full of gravel. He stood, lifting her from the chair, his hands cradling her ass as he carried her to the bed and laid her atop the woolen covers.

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