

ALMA KATSU

'Dark and super sexy'
COSMOPOLITAN



THE DESCENT

BOUND BY LOVE,
DIVIDED BY FATE

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About the Book



Even if a man can bend the forces of nature, he must never try to force the nature of the woman he loves.

Lanny McIlvrae has been on the run for centuries, desperate to escape the dangerous and otherworldly powers of her one-time lover, Adair. But now she needs him to send her into the afterlife. There she must beg the Queen of the Underworld to release Jonathan, her only true love.

Of all the forces of the universe, the most mysterious, confounding and humbling is the power of love.

The epic story of love and loss, magic and destiny that began with *The Taker* comes to an astonishing conclusion with *The Descent*.



About the Author



Alma Katsu has a BA in Writing from Brandeis University (where she studied under John Irving) and an MA from the Johns Hopkins Writing Program. She made her fiction debut with the *The Taker*, an American Library Association top debut novel of 2011. *The Descent* is the third book in her highly acclaimed *The Immortal Trilogy*. She works in U.S. intelligence and lives outside of Washington, DC with her husband.



Also by Alma Katsu

THE IMMORTAL TRILOGY

The Taker
The Reckoning

THE DESCENT



BOOK 3 OF THE IMMORTAL TRILOGY

ALMA KATSU



arrow books

*For my husband, Bruce.
Thanks for keeping things from falling apart.*

Hell is empty and all the devils are here.

—William Shakespeare, *The
Tempest*

PROLOGUE



THE DREAMS CAME almost every night.

At first, I almost didn't take notice of them. When they started, Luke had been gone only a few months and I was in that black fog that follows the death of a loved one. During the day, grief would fall on me suddenly. I'd look at the clock to find that an hour had passed and yet I couldn't account for the time. Evenings were worse; I'd lie alone in the bed Luke and I had shared waiting for the night to inch by. Evening meant long hours of insomnia, listlessness, fitful snatches of sleep, and the pale lavender-gray of dawn coming too soon. The occasional nightmare could do little to impress me compared to that slow hell.

I first realized I was having nightmares when bits would suddenly bob to the surface of my consciousness: a flash of pale pink flesh, soft ochre candlelight, a streak of crimson blood. It was only by the end of the fourth month, when I started to have something resembling rest again, that the nightmares bled through, and I couldn't fail to take notice of them then.

What made them especially unsettling was that they were not about Luke but about Jonathan. I hadn't thought about Jonathan in a long time, certainly not after Luke and I settled on the upper peninsula of Michigan, in that lovely cottage where we lived together for four years. It would've been logical for Luke to be the one haunting my subconscious considering what we'd gone through at the end: his long, lingering illness; months shuttling him through rounds of treatments that all turned out to be for naught; weeks in the

ICU; and the final stretch in the hospice, where he waited to die. That living nightmare had consumed my days for our last nine months together, and I couldn't see any reason why it shouldn't consume my sleeping hours as well.

I remember quite vividly the dream that made me realize something unusual was going on. It started up like the beginning of a movie I'd seen before, and sensing that I was about to have the same nightmare I'd by then been having nightly, I tried to wake myself up. But that never works in dreams, does it? No matter how hard you try, you can't make yourself wake up. Instead, it's like you're Houdini trussed up in a straitjacket and chains and submerged in a dread that's numbing and deadly, like ice-cold water. There's nothing you can do but struggle against the restraints in the hope of freeing yourself or just keep going until, by the mercy of God, you're released from the dream's stifling clutches.

The dreams always took place somewhere that was both familiar and yet unknown to me, in the peculiar way that the subconscious works. Sometimes it was in a dark, shaggy forest that could almost be the Great North Woods that had surrounded my childhood home of St. Andrew, but was not; or a crumbling castle that I might've visited during my neverending travels, but had not; or a dilapidated mansion with broken plaster walls and ruined woodwork that could've been one of the houses I'd lived in during my long, circuitous life, but was not. Strangely familiar, familiarly strange, these settings that tried to embrace me and push me away at the same time.

The dream that struck me as too strange to be simply the normal functioning of the unconscious mind started abruptly in a new setting, a dark, narrow passage whose walls were made of huge stone blocks. Those walls gave the impression that I was in a solidly made old fortress. From the cold dampness of the stone and the tang of mildew in the air, I assumed the passage was underground. It went on and on,

turning and turning again, twisting in on itself like a maze. What's more, the passage was disconcertingly narrow: a normal-size person wouldn't have been able to fit, and small as I am I could barely squeeze through. I hurried along as quickly as I could, desperate to get out of the claustrophobic space.

Finally, I came to a door. It seemed to be as broad as it was tall and somewhat crudely made, its heavy wooden planks held together with metal straps. The wood stain had yellowed with time and almost glowed beckoningly in the darkness, but up close, the lovely patina gave way to a frenzy of scratches, as though the door had been attacked by frantic clawed animals.

Although this subterranean room was likely used for storage or perhaps as a wine cellar, the knot in my stomach told me that probably wasn't the case. I knew from other dreams on other nights what I would find behind the door; something bad awaited me and I didn't want to go on. I wanted to wake up, to break the dream's horrible spell, but once I'd entered the dream world, I was locked in, doomed to play out the dream to its end.

I opened the door. Air rushed at me, damp and foul, the way air smells and feels when it has been shut up underground. There was very little light and I could see only a few feet in front of me. I sensed movement in the darkness ahead and went toward it. You might even say that I went toward it *because* of what was waiting for me, something I was helpless to resist under any circumstances.

The first thing I saw were his hands: a man's hands wearing heavy iron manacles. Then I saw his arms, drawn overhead by a chain attached to the manacles. There were nights in my dreams when the man had been forced to dangle at the end of his chain, and let me tell you, that was a horrible sight, tendons strained to the snapping point, his arms wrenched from their sockets. Tonight, he had been allowed to stand, though his feet could barely touch the

ground. Even though I couldn't see the man's face, I knew who it was; I could tell by the broad shoulders and the long torso, the elegant natural arch to the small of his back. All I could see of his face was a cheekbone and part of his jaw, visible through a tangle of disheveled black hair, but that, too, was enough.

It was Jonathan, stripped naked and bound in chains. Every one of the dreams, regardless of where it was set or how it started, always ended the same way, with Jonathan being tortured and punished by someone I couldn't see, for reasons I wasn't told. As he hung from his manacles, he reminded me of Saint Sebastian, his flesh pale and his head tilted sideways as though nobly resigned to his fate, ready to endure whatever punishment awaited him. There were bruises on his otherwise perfect body: a bloom of red and purple on one hip, a darker, larger one running the length of his right flank. His upper back bore crosshatched scrapes. He gleamed from head to toe with sweat and was flecked with grime. Needless to say, seeing him like this was a punch to the gut and made me violently ill. It also repulsed me to realize that despite his brutalized condition, I still found him beautiful—because it was impossible for him *not* to be.

I called his name but he couldn't hear me. It was as though we were in two separate rooms and I was looking at him through soundproof glass. It was then that I realized his wounds weren't healing instantly as they had when he was immortal, the same as I, and this meant he was again made of flesh and blood. And if he were mortal, that also meant it was possible for him to feel pain again. He was suffering.

The last I had known, Jonathan had been sent back to the underworld, to the land of the dead. It was his second trip, making him one of the select few—perhaps the only one, as far as I knew—to die twice. Four years ago, Jonathan had told the necromancer who'd brought him back that life continued on the other side, and in this life, he'd been made

the consort of the queen of the underworld. When Jonathan had been dispatched a second time, I assumed he was gone forever, that his soul had gone back to the land of the dead, the queen's domain—whoever *she* was.

Now I was having these nightmares, and they came to me almost every night. I couldn't understand why I would dream of Jonathan—and why those dreams would repeatedly be filled with him being viciously tortured. He hadn't been on my mind at all. I'd forgiven him long ago. As a matter of fact, I'd been the one to dispatch him from this world the first time, and that was only because he had begged me to. Under the conditions of our strange curse, it was the only way for him to end his immortal life, which he deeply wanted. I still felt guilty for what I'd done; after all, who can take the life of the person they love—even if it's at his request—and not be torn apart by it? Still, I would've thought that if I were going to dream about anyone, it would be Luke, so recently departed from my side.

But it was Jonathan.

In my horrific nightmare that night, I tried (as always) to set him free. The chain that the manacles were attached to fed through a pulley in the ceiling that was affixed with a padlock to a ring bolted into a stone block. First, I tried to pry off the padlock but it held firm. Then, I began to search the floor on my hands and knees, groping in the darkness for a key, thinking I might find one for either the padlock or the manacles. The entire time, Jonathan stood quietly, his arms stretched overhead, oblivious to me, unconscious on his feet.

It wasn't until I heard him make a sound, halfway between a grunt and a gasp, that I whirled back to look at him and, for the first time in any of these dreams, saw a sign of another person. A hand snaked lovingly along the side of his face, cupping his jaw. It was a woman's hand, elegant and long, whiter than snow. He didn't fight her. He let her caress him. I would be lying if I said that the sight of a woman's

hand didn't unnerve me. It wasn't because a woman was involved—this was Jonathan, after all; it was only natural that a woman would be involved. No, there was something strangely inhuman about that hand. I wanted to cry out and demand that she release him, but I couldn't. In that peculiar way of dreams, I couldn't scream. I couldn't make a sound. My throat was shut tight, paralyzed with fear and anger.

Then I woke up, exhausted and drenched in sweat. These dreams that continued to plague me night after night were taking a toll on me—and I was beginning to believe they were *meant* to, that they were a sign that Jonathan needed me. But Jonathan was no longer on this earth. He had gone to a place where I couldn't follow. Yet, if he needed me, how could I not go to him? And there was only one person I knew who could help me. Only one man could get me to where Jonathan was.

ONE



THE SUNLIGHT GLINTING off the Mediterranean that afternoon was bright enough to blind, and the boat bounced hard off the waves like a broken-down carnival ride. I'd come halfway around the world to find someone who was very important to me, and I wouldn't let a little rough weather keep me from finishing my journey. I squinted against the headwind to the horizon, trying to will a rocky shoreline to appear out of nowhere.

"Is it much farther?" I asked the captain.

"Signorina, until I met you this morning, I never knew this island even existed, and I have lived on Sardegna my entire life." He was in his fifties if he was a day. "We must wait until we get to the coordinates, and then we will see what we shall see."

My stomach floated unsteadily, due to nerves and not the waves. I had to trust that the island would be where it was supposed to be. I'd seen strange things in my lifetime—my *long* lifetime—many of them stranger than the sudden appearance of an island that heretofore had not existed. That would be a relatively minor miracle, on the scale of such things, considering I'd already lived over two hundred years and was destined to live forever. But I was a mere babe compared to the man I was going to see, Adair, the man who had given me—or burdened me, depending on your point of view—with eternal life. His age was inestimable. He could've been a thousand years old, or older. He'd given differing stories every time we met, including the occasion of our last parting four years ago.

Had he been a student of medicine in medieval times, devoted to science and caught in the thrall of alchemy, intent on discovering new worlds? Or was he a heartless manipulator of lives and souls, a man without a conscience who was interested only in extending his life for the pursuit of pleasure? I didn't think I'd gotten the truth yet.

We had a tangled history, Adair and I. He had been my lover and my teacher, master to my slave. We had literally been prisoner to each other. Somewhere along the way he fell in love with me, but I was too afraid to love him in return. Afraid of his unexplainable powers, and his furious temper. Afraid of what I knew he was capable of and afraid to learn he was already guilty of committing far worse. I ran away to follow a safer path with a man I could understand. I always knew, however, that my path would one day lead back to Adair.

Which is how I came to be in a small fishing boat, far off the Italian coast. I wrapped my sweater more tightly around my shoulders and rode along with the ship's rocking, and closed my eyes for a moment's rest from the glare. I had shown up at the harbor in Olbia looking to hire a boat to take me to an island everyone said didn't exist. "Name your price," I said when I'd gotten tired of being ridiculed. Of the boat owners who were suddenly interested, he seemed the kindest.

"Have you been to this area before? Corsica, perhaps?" he asked, trying either to make small talk or to figure out what I expected to find at this empty spot in the Mediterranean Sea.

"Never," I answered. The wind tossed my blond curls into my face.

"And your friend?" He meant Adair. Whether he was my *friend* or not, I didn't know. We'd parted on good terms, but he could be mercurial. There was no telling what mood he'd be in the next time we met.

"I think he's lived here for a few years," I answered.

Even though it appeared that I'd piqued the captain's interest, there was nothing more to say, and so the captain busied himself with the GPS and the ship's controls, and I went back to staring over the water. We had cleared La Maddalena Island and now faced open sea.

Before long, a black speck appeared on the horizon. "Santa Maria," the captain muttered under his breath as he checked the GPS again. "I tell you, signorina, I sail through this area every day and I have never seen that"—he pointed at the landmass, growing in size as we approached—"before in my life."

As we got closer, the island took shape, forming a square rock that jutted up out of the sea like a pedestal. Waves crashed against it on all sides. From the distance, there didn't appear to be a house on the island, nor any people.

"Where is the dock?" the captain asked me, as though I'd know. "There is no way to put you ashore if there is no dock."

"Sail all the way around," I suggested. "Perhaps there's something on the other side."

He brought his little boat around and we circled slowly. On the second side was another cliff, and on the third, a steep slope dropped precipitously to a stony and unwelcoming beach. On the fourth side, however, there was a tiny floating dock tethered to a rock outcropping, and a rickety set of sunburnt stairs leading to a stone house.

"Can you get close to the dock?" I shouted into the captain's ear to be heard above the wind. He gave me an incredulous look, as though only a crazy person would consider climbing onto the floating platform.

"Would you like me to wait for you?" he asked as I prepared to climb over the side of the boat. When I shook my head, he protested, "Signorina, I cannot leave you here! We don't know if it is safe. The island could be deserted ..."

"I have faith in my ... friend. I'll be fine. Thank you, Captain," I said, and leapt onto the weatherworn wooden

dock, which bucked against the waves. He looked absolutely apoplectic, his eyes bulging as I climbed the staircase, gripping the railing as I struggled against the wind. When I got to the top, I waved to him, signaling that he should go, and watched as his boat turned back the way we had come.

The island was exactly as it had appeared from the sea. It seemed carved from one lump of black stone that had emerged directly from the ocean floor. It had no vegetation except for a stand of scraggy pines and a bright chartreuse carpet of moss spread at their roots. A few goats ran by and seemed to regard me with an amused, knowing air before they scampered out of sight. They had long, silky coats of many colors and one had a frightening pair of twisted horns, wicked-looking enough to be worn by the devil.

I turned to the house, so ancient and solid that it seemed to have grown straight from the bedrock of the island. The house was a curious thing, its stone walls so sandblasted by weather that it was impossible to tell much about it, including when it might've been built, though it resembled a fortress—small and compact yet just as imposing. The front door was a big slab of wood that had been thoroughly dried and bleached by the sun. It had elaborate ironwork hinges and was decorated with iron studs in the Moorish style, and gave the impression that it could withstand anything, even a battering ram. I lifted the knocker and brought it down once, twice, three times.

When I heard nothing from the other side of the door, however, I started to wonder if maybe I'd made a mistake. What if the captain had misread his charts and left me on the wrong island—what if Adair had moved back to civilization on the mainland by now? I'd tracked him down through a man named Pendleton who'd acted as Adair's servant until Adair chose to go into seclusion. While Pendleton wasn't sure what had caused Adair to withdraw from the world, he gave me coordinates to the island, which he admitted was so small that it appeared on no maps. He

warned me there was no easy way to get in touch with Adair, as he didn't use email and didn't seem to have a phone. I had no intention of alerting him to my arrival anyway—force of habit made me wary of Adair still, but I also didn't want to risk being put off or dissuaded from coming.

I knew Adair was somewhere in the area, though, because I felt his presence, the unceasing signal that connected him to each of the people he'd gifted with eternal life. The presence felt like an electronic droning in my consciousness that wouldn't stop. It would fall off when he was far away—as it had the last four years—or grow stronger when he was close. This was the strongest it had been in a while—and was competing with the butterflies in my stomach in anticipation of seeing him again.

I was distressed to hear that Adair was living by himself, particularly because it was such a remote location. Now that I saw the island, I was more worried still. The house looked as though it had no electricity or running water, not unlike where he might've lived in the eighteenth century. I wondered if this return to a way of life that was familiar to him could be a sign that he was overwhelmed by the present and couldn't cope with the never-ending onslaught of the new. And for our kind, retreating into the past was never good.

I sought out Adair now after four years apart only because I'd been seized by an idea that I wanted to put into action, and I needed his help to make it work. I had no notion, however, if he still cared for me enough to help me, or if his love had dried up when it went unreciprocated.

I knocked again, louder. If worse came to worst, I could find a way into his house and wait for Adair to return. It seemed an arduous trip to make for nothing. Given my immortal condition, it wasn't as though I needed anything to live on, food or water, or that I couldn't deal with the cold (though there was split wood stacked against the side of the

house and three chimneys, each with multiple lots, visible on the roof). If he didn't return after a reasonable length of time, I had my cell phone and the harbormaster's number, though the captain had warned me that reception was nearly impossible to get this far off the coast. If I was lucky, however, I might be able to flag down a passing boat ...

The door flung back at that instant, and to my surprise, a thin woman with brassy blond hair stood before me. She was in her late twenties, I would guess, and though pretty, she was worn around the edges in a way that made me think she'd worked hard at enjoying life. She had on a wrinkled sundress and sandals, and hoop earrings that were big enough to wear as bracelets. Unsurprisingly, she regarded me with suspicion.

"Oh! I'm sorry—I hope I'm not on the wrong island," I said, regaining my wits in time to remember to be charming, all the while thinking: *In seclusion, my ass, Pendleton*. "I'm looking for a man by the name of Adair. I don't suppose there's anyone here by that name?"

She cut me off so sharply that I almost didn't get the last word out. "Is he expecting you?" She spoke with a working-class British accent. Over her shoulder, a second woman stepped into view at the other end of the hall, a full-figured woman with long dark-brown hair. Her skirt came down to her ankles and she wore embroidered Turkish slippers on her feet. Aside from their shared displeasure at seeing me, the pair of young women was physically as dissimilar as two women could be.

"No, he doesn't know I was coming, but we're old friends and—"

The two of them crowded the doorway now, shoulder to shoulder, a barricade of crossed arms and frowns set on lipsticked mouths. Up close like this, I could see that they were very pretty. The blonde was like a model, thin and boyish, while the brunette was lush and womanly, and a picture of them in bed with Adair came to my mind

unbidden, the three in a tangle of bare arms and legs, heavy breasts and silken flanks. Their lips on his chest and groin, and his head thrown back in pleasure. A wave of hurt passed over me, tinged with that particular sense of belittlement rarely felt out of adolescence. I fought the urge to turn around and flee.

Had I been wrong to come here? No, knowing Adair hadn't changed and had returned to his sybaritic ways made my task easier. There would be no strings, no possibility of reconciliation. I could forget about everything except asking for Adair's help.

"Look, girls," I started, shifting the weight of the knapsack in my hands. "Would you mind if I came inside to get out of this wind before I'm blown off a cliff? And if one of you would be so kind as to let Adair know that he has a visitor? My name is—"

"Lanore." His voice rang in my ear, rushing to fill a space left empty. And then he appeared at the end of the hall, a shadowy figure backlit by the sun. My heart raced, being in his presence once again. Adair, the man who'd hurt and deceived me, loved and exalted me, brought a man back from the dead for me, given me all of time in the hope I would share it with him. Did he still love me enough to help me?

As I stood in Adair's magnetic presence, everything that had happened between us rushed back to me in a tumult, all that passion and anger and hurt. The chaos of the strange world I had known when I'd lived with him tugged at me. I stood at his door ready to ask him to take a journey with me—a journey that wasn't without risk. The bond between us might be ruined forever. Still, I had no choice. No one else could help me.

A new chapter in our history was about to begin.

TWO



THE GIRLS STEPPED aside without a word, making room for Adair as he approached the front door. I could see him better as he moved out of the sunlight. I knew, of course, that physically, he would be unchanged from the last time I'd seen him. He was the same height and weight. His face was the same, with those arresting, wolfish eyes of green and gold. He wore his beard a little thicker, and had grown his curly dark hair to his shoulders, though at the moment it was held back in a loose plait. The only change—and it was striking—was in his manner.

Adair was one of those people who came off from the first as aggressive and intimidating, the kind of man who naturally set other alpha males bristling. Menace always seemed to crackle just under the surface, and once you got to know him, it only got worse. His moods were changeable and you were never quite sure where you stood with him. Remarkably, that tension was now nearly gone. His natural aggression was nearly undetectable. He was subdued, though I suppose it might've been from the shock of seeing me.

"I can't believe you came back—" Adair began, his voice full of emotion, but then stopped himself. He reached for my hand and drew me over the threshold, continuing in a more restrained fashion. "Come in, don't stand outside. A person could be killed by the wind out there."

"I hope I'm not intruding," I said as I squeezed past the two women, who stared down on me coldly.

“Not at all. We don’t often get visitors—as you can imagine, given the isolation—so your arrival is a surprise, that’s all.” Adair closed the door, and the four of us looked at one another awkwardly. “Well, I should introduce everyone. Robin, Terry, this is Lanore McIlvrae, an old friend of mine. And, Lanore, this is—”

“Robin and Terry, yes.” Terry was the brunette, Robin the blonde. They took turns shaking my hand limply, as though the last thing they wanted to do was to let me into their house.

“How long has it been since you last saw each other?” Terry asked, arching an eyebrow at Adair, her arms folded over her ample chest.

“Four years,” I answered.

“It seems—longer,” Adair offered.

The women made no attempt to mask their hostility, and I started to feel that I’d made a bad mistake by coming without warning. They both oozed sexuality—you could tell by their dress and body language—and I could only speculate as to what I might’ve interrupted. Before I could sputter another apology for the intrusion, however, Adair asked, “Will you be staying?” and gestured to the knapsack I was holding before adding, “Oh, of course you will. I shouldn’t even bother to ask: unless you have a boat at the dock or someone coming back for you soon, you’ll need to stay overnight, at least. Though you’re welcome to stay as long as you wish.”

“I realize this is terribly inconvenient of me, showing up unannounced,” I said, looking gratefully at the girls before turning back to Adair. “This isn’t purely a social call. There’s a reason why I’m here, Adair. I need to talk to you.”

His expression darkened immediately. “It must be important for you to have made this journey. Shall we do that now? We can go to my study—”

Robin sighed irritably, shaking her head as she reached for my knapsack. “For pity’s sake, did someone die or

something? Surely that can wait till later. We should get you settled, find you a room first.” She then started up the stairs without waiting for anyone to agree. He gave me a nod, indicating I should follow. I was sorry to leave him so soon but followed the blonde, the soles of her sandals scraping on the treads.

I glanced into the rooms we passed as we walked down the hall, mildly curious about the interior of this odd domicile. Adair was a rich man, after all, and could live in luxury and comfort anywhere in the world, so why had he chosen to hide away on this rock in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea with these two women? The fortress was built in a rustic Moorish style and seemed as unimproved on the inside as it was on the outside. There were no clues in the bedrooms, as each was plainly decorated and obviously unoccupied. Wooden beams spanned the low ceilings, and the walls were whitewashed stone. The furniture was all rough-hewn and probably had been made on Sardegna or Corsica a century ago. Simple woven blankets covered the beds.

Of all the rooms we passed on the second floor, only one appeared to be in use. In it, a huge feather mattress lay directly on the floor, the tangle of white sheets hinting of wanton abandon. Old Moroccan lanterns fitted with candles circled the bed, which faced a high, wide window dressed in gauzy curtains, through which you could see a panoramic view of the sea. Discarded clothing lay all over the floor, including a pale pink brassiere—Terry’s, by the size of it. Two more Turkish slippers sat at odd angles to each other, as though they’d been kicked off in a burst of bad temper. Adair’s unmade bed stirred something near my heart, but the casually tawdry display of the women’s clothing extinguished that stirring as easily as one might squeeze out the flame on a match head.

“Looking for something?” Robin asked, suddenly beside me, catching me gawking outside their bedroom. “You can’t

have this room. It's already taken," she said in her sharp way.

"I didn't mean to pry, but the door was open," I said apologetically.

She had a funny way about her, guileless, like a child. She stared at me flatly, as though she was trying to tell what was going on in my head. "You came here hoping to get back together with him—that's why you want to see if we're sleeping with him, isn't it?"

Heat rose up my neck and across my cheeks. "Not at all. He's a friend. I've come to see for myself that he's happy."

"You've come an awfully long way just for that." She narrowed her eyes at me. "That's not the only reason you came."

"No," I murmured. I saw no reason not to tell her the truth. "I need a favor from him."

"Must be some favor," she said, then stuck a lock of hair in her mouth and began sucking on it, as though she was simple-minded. It was an unnerving gesture.

"It is." The same anxiety I'd felt when I'd made up my mind to find Adair rose up in my chest, beating frantically like a bird was trapped inside me.

"And after you get what you want from him, will you leave us alone?" She practically spat the words at me. I didn't know what to say, but before I could gather my wits to answer, she spun on her heel and started down the hall again, my knapsack banging against her shins.



Before Adair and I could speak in private, there was dinner with the girls to endure. The meal was set at a dining table that wouldn't have looked out of place in a castle. The chairs were as ornately carved as thrones, the windows covered with long, heavy drapes of burgundy and gold. The walls were still fitted with iron brackets meant to hold

flaming torches, now made obsolete by a huge crystal chandelier. It was too grand a setting for our small party, and made for a strange, off-kilter meal.

For dinner, Terry had roasted squabs and fresh greens tossed with olive oil. I assumed all the food came from their larder as the island appeared to have neither a chicken coop nor a garden. Adair and the girls ate with their fingers like hedonists, and their mouths were soon slick with squab fat and oil. The girls kept Adair merry, joking and flirting, and something was going on under the table, too, no doubt, a bare foot nestled in his lap or an eager hand stroking his thigh. They did their best to make me feel like an intruder, but I would be damned if I would let them intimidate me.

"How did you two meet Adair?" I asked as I picked at my salad with a fork.

Robin and Terry exchanged looks before the blonde answered. "It happened here on the island, actually. We were staying on Corsica, on holiday. Terry and I always go on holiday together, ever since we were kids. We go anywhere there's sun and heat ..."

"And pretty men," Terry added, winking at Adair.

Robin poked tentatively at a piece of arugula. "Anyway, by the middle of the second week, it was getting sort of boring —"

"Too many German tourists," Terry interrupted, rolling her eyes. "Hans and Franz with their wives and their little Hanslings in tow. And the men all squeezed into Speedos. Too much white, middle-aged flesh on display for my taste. And, besides, it's not a proper holiday unless you find a complete stranger to shag...." Terry watched to see if she'd managed to shock me, but I betrayed nothing.

"We hired a boat to take us out on an excursion, you know, to explore the little baby islands off the coast," Robin continued, fishing a segment of tangerine out of her salad between thumb and index finger, "and we came upon the black beach below. We'd never seen nothing like it, so we

talked the captain into dropping us off for an afternoon of sunbathing.”

“Oh, but it was too bloody cold for sunbathing,” Terry said.

“We thought the place was deserted. So there we were, lying topless in the sun,” Robin went on as though she hadn’t been interrupted, “when we see *him* wandering toward us, head down, all lost in thought. I couldn’t believe my eyes at first. I mean, we thought this place was deserted. Who’d have thought someone was living here on this rock all alone?”

“He invited us in for a drink, and one thing led to another ...” Terry grinned wickedly at me, to make sure I understood what “the other thing” had been.

“... and we’ve been here ever since,” Robin finished.

“How long has it been now? Three months? Four?” Terry touched Adair’s arm lightly to get his attention. There was something possessive about her gesture and he didn’t seem to care for it, but he didn’t say anything to her. He was a gentleman—up to a point.

“Four months? That’s an awfully long holiday,” I said, looking from one woman to the other. “What about the people back home, your family, your jobs? They’re okay with the fact that you seem to have—um—checked out?”

“I suppose they’re wondering if we’ve gone mad.” Terry laughed raucously, throwing her head back, apparently not concerned in the least what anyone thought of her. “But they know we’re adventurous girls. We couldn’t turn down the opportunity. There’ll be time enough to settle when we’re older. In the meantime, will we ever get another chance to have an island all to ourselves, and to live in a fortress—with a man like Adair? Not bloody likely.”

Adair pushed back from the table and rose. From the smoldering look on his face, I could tell that he’d had enough. “If you don’t mind, girls, I think Lanore and I have something to discuss in private.” He helped me up from my chair. “Let me show you the island.”