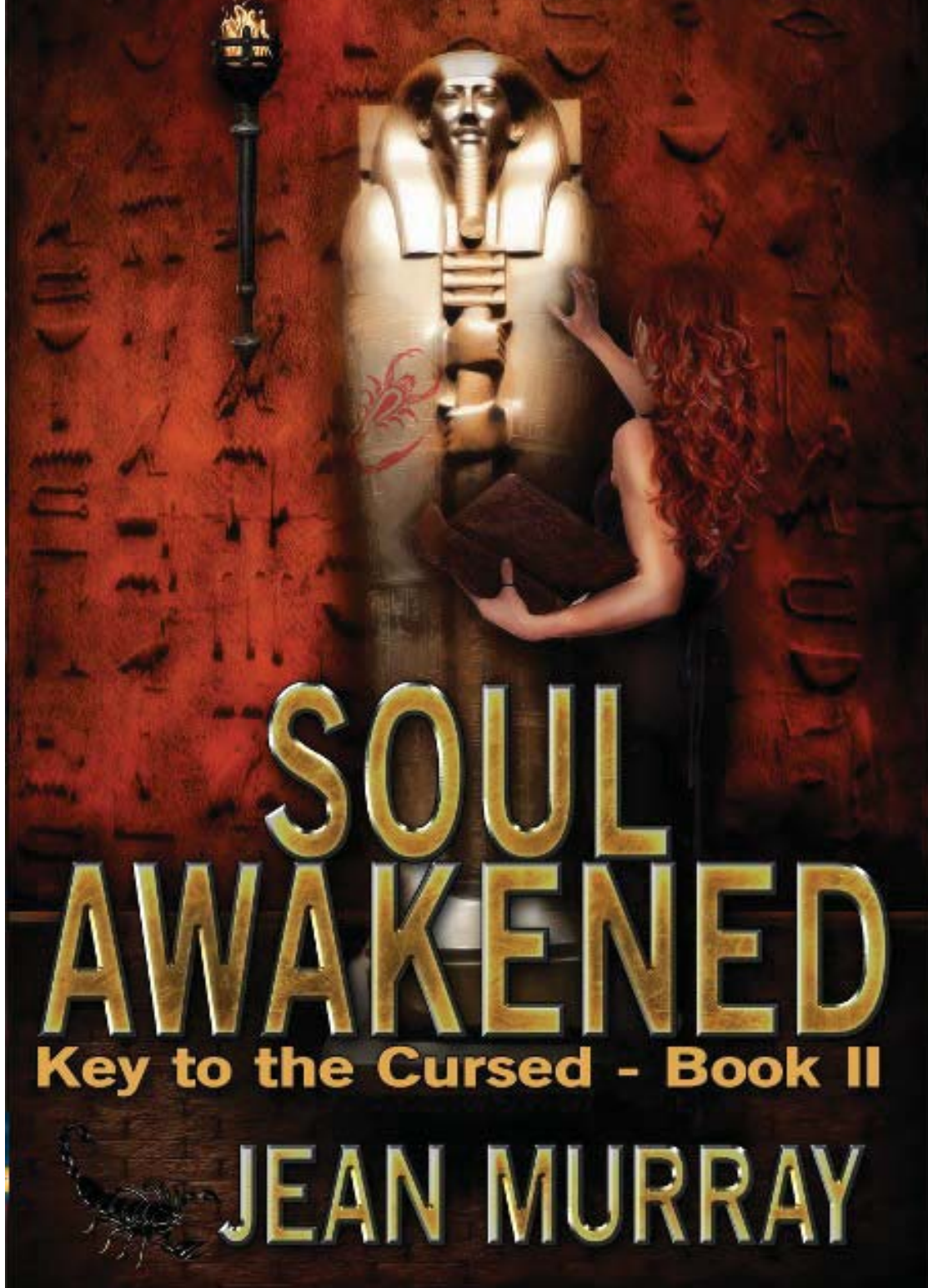


Only the strongest love can unlock the souls of the Underworld



Excerpt for reader preview

# **SOUL AWAKENED**

**Key to the Cursed Book II**

**JEAN MURRAY**



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**Soul Awakened**  
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## **Dedication**

To our American heroes: find *your* hope, hold onto it, and never let it go.

## Prologue

*Black armor glistened in the moonlight. Perfect camouflage against the sand and stone of the night desert. Poised to strike, its arms curled into large claws with back arched and tail raised to the heavens. Patiently waiting. Patiently watching. An opportunist ready to kill. The master assassin has nothing but time in the darkness. One strike to paralyze its victim. The prey will not know its enemy until it begins to savor and consume every morsel with savage glee.*

## Chapter One

A familiar refuge of horror.

Black and desolate like his soul, the darkness draped the landscape of Bakari's world. His prison for how long? He could gage only by his hunger, an unbearable pain burning through his chest and eating away what little of his soul remained. The darkness consumed everything, but his insanity.

Until now.

The onyx obscurity wavered into shades of grey. Bright sunlight danced and flickered in the barren corners of his mind beyond his reach. Bolts of lightning ripped across his skin and mind and tore at the fine fabric of his consciousness. The sheets of darkness fell like ash and scattered into the cold abyss.

His mind retreated—fearful. He had been tricked before only to suffer at the sadistic hands of his captor. The next arc struck harder and deeper. The white inferno fried what tendrils of his coma remained. In the wake of his agony, the soft caress of a human soul and the scent of sweet honeysuckle penetrated his skin. The very element that fed his power—living energy.

Like water for a dying man, the human's energy trickled but did not satisfy his ravenous hunger. His chest clenched into a ball of fire, ignited by the minuscule energy he absorbed into his soul.

The vitality extinguished as quickly as it came. Left barren and wanting, rage consumed him. The goddess Kepi would pay for this new level of depravity. To have living nourishment so close, but denied to feed his dark hunger, was a torture like no other.

The walls of his wooden crypt pressed in upon him. He struggled to move an arm or leg, but the spell of his paralysis was unyielding. He screamed but not a word past his lips. In his mind he thrashed against the invisible bonds, willing himself to break free.

He had not reacted this way since the fateful day of his confinement to his tomb. During his imprisonment he had withdrawn into himself. Numb to the world. His only safeguard against the goddess and the oppressive confines of his prison. Those thoughts of Kepi worsened his agony and current insanity.

~ ☾ ~

Silently screaming, cold tears slipped out of the corners of his closed eyes and trickled down into his hair. He called out to the merciful gods to save him, but in all this time none were answered. His despair suffocated whatever hope he may have left.

*Bakari*, a soft melody of a voice broke through the chaos in his mind.

*Ease your pain. She will come to you again. Hold your will, young god. She will set you free.*





## Chapter Two

The dark mouth of stone and steel exhaled a damp breath that set coldness in Kendra Carrigan's bones. The heavy footfalls of the large security group echoed down the sandstone hall to the enormous prison entrance. She pressed herself against the wall, afraid she would be crushed by the pall bearers' powerful strides. With the three heavy tombs upon their shoulders, the procession passed through a large iron gate that loomed ahead. Not much of a welcome home for the Underworld god's lost son after years of captivity in a wooden box.

She swallowed against her tight throat and took a few steps closer to the opening.

*Dang, if it wasn't pitch black in there.* Asar, the Egyptian God of the Underworld, assured her the confinement of the sarcophaguses to the dungeon was a necessary security precaution. He failed to mention the lack of electricity and lighting.

Large iron bars surrounded the opening like fangs, ready to swallow her the minute she stepped through. Her heart sped up to a quick drum. She nervously fingered the flashlight in her sweatshirt front pocket, along with the spare batteries she always kept with her.

She much preferred the harsh florescent lighting in the museum basement over this. But, she had a job to do. Despite her resolve, the tips of her Uggs remained glued to the lower edge of the iron gate. Worse, her clothes clung against the clamminess of her skin and tightened her shirt down like a corset. She tugged at her collar.

*Don't be a sissy,* she chastised herself for fretting over the dark. It wasn't like she was a stranger to dark and cramped spaces. She had been crawling through Egyptian tombs since she was a child, but the fact remained— nyctophobia. Whoever said, repeated exposure to your fear would dampen the physical effect, was full of it.

"Kendra?"

She yelped and threw the flashlight into the air. The metal





Maglite hit the ground with a *clink* and rolled across the sandstone.

"Sorry, I did not mean to surprise you."

She leaned forward with her hand over her heart willing it to slow. "No. I'm a little jumpy." Kendra shifted her gaze up the Underworld Legion Commander's enormous seven foot body that packed extraordinary amount of muscle under his beautiful ebony skin. Scarification tattoos on his arms and shoulders rippled with the shift of muscles underneath.

Her eyes wandered to the firm round curve of his buttocks when he bent over to pick up her flashlight. His black linen shirt pulled up in the back to reveal the intricate markings that disappeared under a waist band of weathered leather pants. From what she had heard the scroll work extended to his ankles—a status symbol of Bomani's rank and superiority among the dark warriors. She jerked her gaze to the floor.

Bomani's large hand engulfed the mini-light, which was about the same thickness of his pinky finger. He stood to his formidable height and smiled. Brilliantly beautiful for such a fierce looking man. Well, not really a man, but Egyptian god-like warrior. To hide her flushed cheeks, she warily glanced into the dark mouth of the dungeon.

"I was heading downstairs myself. May I join you?" he asked.

He asked for her company? She looked at her hands that danced with tremors. It was no secret that she hated the dark.

"Well, if you think you need my protection," she replied.

The edge of his mouth twitched and his gold eyes sparkled. "I would appreciate it." He held out the flashlight for her to take.

She wiped her sweaty palms against her jeans. The tips of her fingers grazed his callused palm before plucking her security blanket away. He clenched his now empty hand.

"These hallways are always so dark." He waved his hand and the torches on the walls ignited. The warm flames cast a yellow glow along the walls and ceilings.

"Cool." She stepped through the doorway. The Commander's proximity and the light that illuminated the darkness gave her the courage to push down the long labyrinth of steps. Hieroglyphics spanned every square inch of black stone. Spells from what she recollected from her training in Egyptology. Never once did she



believe she would actually meet the gods she studied for so many years. No dream could be this exhilarating and painful at the same time.

She dared to brush her palm along the walls. Voices roared in her head, like the blast from a stereo volume set too high. She snatched her hand away to break the connection. The ancient narration ceased. *Thank God.* The story wasn't a pretty one.

Dark and violent.

What did she expect? She descended into the halls of the damned, those found unworthy to pass through the gates of the afterlife or awaiting judgment for their crimes. A very fitting place for one of the residents of the sarcophagi carried into the cell. She shivered knowing what evil was held inside.

To keep her gift in check she stuffed her hands inside her sweatshirt's front pocket along with her flashlight and batteries. She looked warily at the torches on the wall, waiting for that moment she would be plunged into darkness. Her heart pounded harder.

With a heavy breath her heel hit the landing. Her quadriceps burned from the long descent into the belly of the prison. She looked up the staircase, but could see only darkness. Not even the light from the opening cut the stairwell's black throat. Heaviness weighed in on her chest making it slightly harder to breath. If that wasn't enough, the damp chill set further into her bones.

The flames from the torches danced across the stone labyrinth and beat back the evil that lurked in the darkness. The shadows rolled and snapped, threatening to pull her in and never let go. The prickling on her neck worsened with each step. She veered closer to Bomani. Their arms brushed as they walked. Her contact with him grounded her fear. Maybe he could grab her before the shadows took hold?

The fine current of pins and needles intensified at an intersection. Morbid curiosity overrode her dread. She stopped at the mouth of a long black corridor and peered into the eyes of the devil. She didn't have to be a god to sense the evil residing at the end of the long hall.

Bomani placed his body between her and the darkness. She looked up into his face that was drawn with tight lines. He had no love for the goddess Kepi either. He held out his bent arm. She



stole one last hateful glance down the hallway and then grasped onto the crook of his arm. He smiled at her acceptance and guided her away from... death.

"This way."

She continued beside him. The lighting of torches timed perfectly with each step. He paused at another corridor. This one at least was brightly lit. "I thought you would like to come here first." His gaze held a softness and understanding that was fitting for the moment.

She walked forward to the sarcophagus. With her hand on its center, the history of its journey played in her mind up to the point it was laid within this chamber. Sorrow filled her heart.

"Father."

She wasn't ready to say goodbye. "I'd like to be here when Inpu prepares his body. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes. You have my word."

"Thank you." She kissed the lid. "I'll be back," she whispered against the cold stone. At the exit she stole one last glance at her father's tomb. He never deserved this death—this one nor the last. The blame lay solely on one, the goddess locked tight in her sarcophagus. At least he was finally at peace, or at least she hoped so. The sooner they prepared his body for the afterlife the better.

Bitter thoughts chased her down the next damp corridor. Spanning floor to ceiling, formidable iron bars thicker than the ones at the entrance loomed ahead. The black stone at the edges swallowed the bars into its core. From appearances she could only assume the metal stretched the circumference of the cell, hidden beneath the breadth of impenetrable rock. Her mind pondered what would require such enormity to contain. Why had Asar chosen this cell for his son?

Three large guardians stood ridged against the wall. Long bladed sabers decorated their chests. Based on the way the males shifted on their feet and the weapons they brandished, there was a good reason for the isolation of this sarcophagus. Even Bomani's posture stiffened to the point that her small hand was crushed between his bicep and forearm. She wiggled her fingers free and shook them.

"Sorry." He clasped her hand and caressed her fingers gently with the rough pad of his thumb. His brows furrowed slightly



before he released her hand. He shifted his gaze to the large open crypt. His gold eyes darkened almost to the color of his skin and a cold current of energy filled the space around him.

Blanketed in Bomani's cold embrace, Kendra shivered. She had spent hours standing next to this sarcophagus in the human realm, but never felt this level of anxiety. Upon her insistence the wooden sarcophagus had been placed inside a stone vault before transporting it from Thebes, Egypt. She wanted the evidence preserved for her inspection. Her gift would help her release the god who slept inside.

She nodded to the sentry and the black bars slid open. With her heart pounding in her ears she stepped over the threshold. She maneuvered around the crypt's lid that had been laid upon the floor. The wooden tomb sat upon pillars that elevated it above the stone base. A loud click drew her attention to the gate. The heavy door sealed her in the room.

Turning to the sarcophagus, she rubbed the goose bumps on her arms. With her focus on the tomb, the darkness and the warriors standing on the other side of the bars retreated from her consciousness.

She circled around the burial chamber. The hieroglyphics carved into the wood spanned the entire circumference, even the underside. It saddened her to think Bakari had to be confined to the dungeon after all he had been through, but Asar insisted it was for everyone's safety. After five years of torture at the hands of the malevolent goddess Kepi, the god who lay inside would be forever changed. For good or bad, Kendra didn't know, but hoped for the best.

"Hello, Bakari. How are you doing today?" she asked, retracing her steps. "If you don't already know, my name is Kendra. I'm going to help you out of this box." She glanced through the iron bars at Bomani and the guards, who had taken position along the wall. Their eyes reflected a strange trepidation.

The tension in the air gave her pause. Asar assured her she would be safe, as long as the lid was closed. His reassurances did little to control the curling anxiety in her belly. She shook off the uneasiness and refocused on the task.

Not unlike archeological excavations, she approached the sarcophagus in a logical and methodical manner: broad view



working in small increments down to the miniscule. This was another unearthed tomb, kind of. The only difference, this one contained the God of Death and was sealed with a spell no one should have to endure.

Scientifically driven, she looked for any clues that might be apparent. The crypt should have preserved the evidence, if there was any. Specimen bags sat on a workbench against the wall along with collection tools. She picked up gloves, tweezers, and a clear bag. The surface of the wooden tomb was surprisingly smooth, even within the hand carved symbols. A few areas were scuffed, allowing small slivers of wood to poke out. On five separate locations she found long hairs.

Red, blonde, black, and brown. Brown?

She could account for all the other colors based on the various bodies Kepi had possessed, but brown was not one of them. She ruled out her own hair, as hers was reddish brown. The warriors had short military cuts. This one had a course wave to it. From a reven, perhaps? Kepi's undead army of soulless humans was nothing more than decaying flesh. It was reasonable to think a reven could be the source.

She took pictures prior to plucking them away from the surface and tucking the hair strands into separate bags. With her marker she wrote the locations on the labels. She dusted the fine black powder over the entire surface of the sarcophagus. Surprisingly, there was only one set of fingerprints, which were hers—left when she touched it in the human realm.

Finally, she took off her nitrile gloves and walked to the head of the tomb. "So are you going to talk to me?" She paused, waiting for his answer. "I need to understand how they did this to you."

Her fingertips traced the outline of glyphs—too chicken to actually touch her palm to it. She hesitated, fearful of what she might hear or see. The torture he must have endured made her chest ache. The spell would have relegated him to a death-like sleep, but sleep it was not. No, the incantation assured Bakari would be fully aware, locked inside a body that would never awaken from the nightmare.

She closed her eyes and imagined brushing her fingertips across his forehead to comfort him in some way. "It's going to be okay," she whispered. Her heart clenched. None of this was okay.



How could he be?

The urgency to release him weighed heavy on her shoulders. She inhaled deeply and held it. With muscles clenched she readied herself for the punch to her head. Her palms hit the wood and...

Absolute silence.

"Huh." She ran her hands across every inch of wood and came up empty, except for several small slivers. No residual history existed anywhere on the tomb. An impossibility, since Bakari was entombed by Kepi over five years ago. She locked her hands on her hips and turned to Bomani. "He's in there, right?" she asked, pointing to the sarcophagus.

Bomani entered the cell. His severe brown eyes targeted the etchings on the tomb's surface. "Yes."

She laid her palm against the lid and drummed her fingers on its surface. This had never happened before. Undeterred, she marched over to the wall of the cell and slapped her hand on the cold stone. Offending sights and sounds seared a white flame to her skull. She snatched away her hand and turned to the sarcophagus. Her gift worked perfectly on everything *but* the tomb.

Oh, God. Her gift failed her. Failed Bakari. Of all the times for her to be blinded to the history of an object—why now?

Stunned, she turned to Bomani. "I'm going to need to see the palace library. The sooner, the better." Bakari's chance at freedom lay hidden in some ancient text. She prayed to the gods she would find it quickly.

Everyone counted on her to free Bakari. His soul and the souls of the world depended on it.

