



Desire[™]

IN PURSUIT
OF HIS WIFE

Kristi Gold

KRISTI GOLD

In Pursuit Of His Wife

«HarperCollins»

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They married for convenience. Will they stay together for the baby...or for love? Nasira Edwards has come to Royal, Texas, to escape her past and stop her brother from making a terrible mistake. But her own marital mistake has tracked her down. Her husband, shipping magnate Sebastian Edwards, has followed her across the ocean and he refuses to leave Texas without his wife. Sebastian knows their convenient marriage isn't about love. That's the way it has to be. But the passion between them is as hot as ever. And he's come west to coax the beauty back into his bed—while keeping his emotions in check. Then Nasira reveals she's pregnant....

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**“I suppose we should get this over with
so I might get a good night’s sleep.”**

Without warning, Sebastian hoisted her up on the edge of the gate, causing her dress’s hem to ride up her thighs. And while she made the appropriate adjustments, he climbed into the truck bed and had the nerve to position himself behind her, his long legs dangling on either side of hers. “Are you comfortable?” he asked as he circled his arms around her middle.

“No, I am not. I cannot have a decent conversation when I cannot see your face.”

“You only have to listen to my voice.”

Oh, that voice. That low, grainy bedroom voice that had enticed her on so many nights. And days. No matter how deep their conflicts had run, he had always been able to seduce her into submission.

Nasira found herself leaning back against him, and turning her thoughts to the danger in succumbing to his power. “This is wrong, Sebastian,” she said with little conviction.

“This is right, sweetheart. You’re my wife.”

* * *

In Pursuit of His Wife is part of the Texas Cattleman’s Club: Lies and Lullabies series—
Baby secrets and a scheming sheikh rock Royal, Texas

In Pursuit of His Wife Kristi Gold



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KRISTI GOLD has a fondness for beaches, baseball and bridal reality shows. She firmly believes that love has remarkable healing powers, and she feels very fortunate to be able to weave stories of love and commitment. As a bestselling author, a National Readers' Choice Award winner and a three-time Romance Writers of America RITA® Award finalist, Kristi has learned that although accolades are wonderful, the most cherished rewards come from networking with readers. She can be reached through her website at www.kristigold.com or through Facebook.

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[One](#)

Seated in a wicker glider on the mansion's stately porch, Nasira Edwards admired the beauty of the Wild Aces, the ranch her brother, Rafiq, had bought his beloved bride-to-be, Violet. Nasira appreciated the way landscaped lawns gave way to green pastureland. She relished the warm May breeze, the climate so different from London this time of year. When she had originally traveled to Royal, Texas—home to the legendary Texas Cattleman's Club—she had done so to prevent Rafe from exacting revenge on his friend, Mac, for a mistake she had made over a decade ago. She had come to clear the air, right past wrongs, and fortunately she had succeeded. Yet that had not been the only reason behind the journey. She yearned for the peace this place could provide, yet peace had not come. The lingering pain of loss was simply too overwhelming.

In response to the memories, she withdrew the bracelet from the pocket of her dress and studied the tiny silver rattle charm she had received upon confirming her pregnancy. A surprising gift from a husband who had not embraced fatherhood. Still, she had viewed the welcome gesture as a symbol of hope for a bright future, until the day all hope had been splintered like shards of fragile glass.

Her palm automatically came to rest on her abdomen, now as barren as her life had been for a while. The baby she had so desperately wanted, and tragically miscarried, had changed her completely. Odd how she could miss someone she had known for such a brief time. And strange how badly she missed Sebastian, though he had been emotionally absent for the past six months. She had had no choice but to continue to put physical distance between them in an effort to reassess their future.

When the door opened to her left, Nasira expected to find her brother, Rafiq, checking on her welfare. Instead, Rafe's friend, Mac McCallum, stepped outside and gave her a pleasant smile. "Are you doing okay?"

She did not deserve his good humor or respect after what she had done to him in the distant past. "I've been enjoying the Texas sunset."

"Looks to me like that old sun has been gone a while," he said. "My sister sent me out here to tell you dinner will be ready in a few."

Food held little appeal in recent days. "I appreciate Violet's hospitality, but I am not very hungry."

"Suit yourself, but if you keep going this way, you'll be blown to New Mexico if the wind picks up steam."

She smiled reluctantly and stood. "I suppose if that is a possibility, I should attempt to eat something. Are you staying for dinner?"

"Not tonight. I'm meeting up with Andrea."

Nasira suspected Mac had feelings for his personal assistant that went beyond the boardroom, even if he could not admit it to himself, according to her future sister-in-law, Violet. "Is this business or pleasure?"

He frowned. "Business, of course."

"It's rather late in the day for that, is it not?"

"Unfortunately it comes with the territory of McCallum Enterprises."

When the discussion lulled, Nasira saw her chance to verbally make amends for past mistakes. She studied the wooden planks beneath her feet for a moment before regarding him again. "I wanted to extend another apology for what I did to you all those years ago. The guilt has been unbearable."

Mac lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "Hey, you were young. We were both young. You were just trying to get out of an arranged marriage to a man twice your age."

That ill-fated visit to the university to stay with her brother had set a horrible course that had led to Rafe's need for revenge. "Yet I was wrong to use you to achieve that goal, especially when I climbed into your bed for the sole purpose of having my father discover us. And because our father blamed Rafe for not looking after me, that led to his determination to seek revenge on you. I shudder to think what might have happened had I not come here to intervene."

"It all turned out okay," Mac said. "He's no longer trying to buy up the town to get back at me, he's going to marry my sister, and we're going to be one big happy family."

Nasira was happy for them all, but still... "Even after Rafe's torture and confinement for years due to my errors in judgment, he has forgiven me. I suppose I need to know if you will forgive me as well, though I would understand if you would not."

"Consider it done, Nasira. That's old water under the bridge now that Rafe knows I didn't really sleep with you. And since he's marrying my sister, I consider us all one big happy family."

Relief washed over her, though she couldn't claim to be happy over the state of her own marriage. "I so appreciate your understanding."

“No problem. Mind if I ask you something?”

“Not at all.”

He raked a hand through his dark blond hair. “Don’t take this wrong, but I’m wondering what the hell your husband was thinking when he let you get away?”

The course of the conversation made her somewhat uncomfortable. “It is rather complicated. Sebastian is complicated. After ten years of marriage, at times I wonder if I know him at all.”

“One thing I do know. When a man doesn’t realize the value of his wife, that’s borrowing trouble. I just hope he comes around soon and realizes what he’d be giving up.”

If only she could believe Sebastian had the capacity to be transformed into someone who would fight for their relationship. “I truly appreciate your concern and understanding, Mac.”

“You’re welcome. Guess I’ll be heading home to the Double M now.” He started toward the steps but paused and faced her again. “Before I leave, I’d just like to say it’s fairly clear you don’t need another big brother, but if you ever want a sounding board, you know where to find me.”

How nice to come upon such a benevolent man. She certainly had not received so much compassion from her own husband in quite some time. “Thank you.”

Mac returned to her and rested his palms on her shoulders. “Keep your chin up and keep standing your ground. You deserve the best.”

Until six months ago, she had believed she had been blessed with the best of everything. Almost. “For the sake of clarification, Sebastian is not mean or cruel. He is simply too controlled and at times, distant. I have often wished he would lower his guard and demonstrate some sort of emotion, but I’ve accepted that it will most likely never happen—”

“Unhand my wife, you bloody bastard!”

Nasira barely had time to comprehend what she had heard before her estranged husband rushed onto the porch, drew back his fist and hit Mac in the chin, knocking the rancher backward against the brick wall.

When Mac gave Sebastian a menacing look, Nasira returned to reality in time to step between the men. “What are you doing, Sebastian?”

He pointed at Mac and sent him a menacing glare. “I’ll not allow another man to grope my wife.”

Never had she’d seen Sebastian act this way, and as much as she deplored violence, and despite her shock over his sudden appearance, she was pleasantly surprised, albeit somewhat mortified. “Oh, for goodness’ sake. He is only a friend and he was not groping me.”

Mac pushed away from the wall, rubbed his chin and glared at Sebastian. “If I didn’t think so highly of your wife and her brother, I’d invite you to take this out into the yard and finish it, you jackass.”

Sebastian balled his fists at his sides. “I would be glad to finish this.”

Nasira spun on her husband. “Stop this right now, Sebastian. No one will be fighting if I have any say in the matter, and I do.” She turned back to her friend and sent him an apologetic look. “Mac, I am so very sorry for my husband’s behavior. I assure you he’s not normally so impulsive with total strangers. And if you would not mind, I would like a few moments alone with him.”

“No problem,” Mac said before turning an acrid look on Sebastian. “I’m going to give you a pass, Edwards, and only because you’re Nasira’s husband. But don’t push your luck by trying something like that again.”

Sebastian straightened his tie and smirked. “If I find you touching Nasira again, I cannot promise there won’t be a repeat performance.”

“Just take better care of your wife and you won’t have to worry about me.”

After Mac disappeared into the darkness, Nasira prepared for a confrontation. “What were you thinking, and why on earth are you here?”

Sebastian opened and closed his fist. “I wasn’t thinking, only reacting to a man with his hands on my wife. A man from her past, no less. And I have come to escort that wife back to London.”

Her fury began to escalate. “First of all, nothing ever existed between myself and Mac, other than he was attempting to assist me in fooling my father into believing I’d been compromised.”

“He looked as if he would like to compromise you in earnest a few moments ago.”

She refused to give credence to his suspicions. “Your imagination is evidently running wild. And most important, I am not your property, Sebastian. I will return when I decide to return. If I decide to return.”

“You’re my wife. You belong with me.”

At least he hadn’t said she belonged to him, as if that were any consolation. “I came here to gain some perspective and I am going to stay until that is accomplished. You might as well climb back on the jet and wait at home for word from me.”

“I refuse to go until this issue is resolved.”

Despite his stubborn attitude, Nasira began to notice how handsome he looked and knew immediately she would lose her determination if he stayed. Too much time had passed since they had made love—the one thing that had always been right with their convenient marriage. Yet that had been his decision, not hers. “At the very least I will be here until Rafe and Violet’s wedding at the end of the month.”

“I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

She brought out the best argument to convince him to go—the shipping business he owned and ran. “I cannot believe you would ignore your duties and abandon the company for any length of time.”

“I own the company. I can do what I please.”

Such a frustrating man. “Do you have an answer for everything?”

He sent her a slow, easy smile. The smile he had given her all those years ago from across a very crowded ballroom, as if they had been thrust into a storybook scene. The smile that had convinced her to enter into an arrangement to escape her father’s clutches. “Have you had dinner?”

No, and she had begun to feel the effects. “I have not, although Violet has prepared a meal.”

“I’m certain she will understand if you would rather dine with your husband. We could continue our discussion then.”

While Nasira took a moment to consider her options, the door swung open again and out walked Rafe, her tall, dark, handsome overly-protective brother.

He immediately eyed Sebastian with disapproval. “I see you did not follow my advice and remain in London, brother-in-law.”

Sebastian looked equally miffed. “And when we spoke by phone two days ago, I made it quite clear I would make that decision without your interference.”

Nasira stared at her husband before returning her attention to her sibling. “Rafiq bin Saleed, why did you not tell me you spoke with Sebastian?”

Rafe did not appear the least bit contrite. “You mentioned on numerous occasions you did not want to be disturbed by him.”

“And he refused to allow me to speak with you when you ignored my calls to your cell,” Sebastian added.

She despised it when men insisted she could not look after herself. “You had no right to take the choice out of my hands, Rafe.”

“It makes little difference now,” Sebastian said. “I’m here and I intend to make the best of the situation.”

She only wished she knew what else he intended. That information would only be gained if she accepted his invitation to dine with him tonight. “I’m going to accompany Sebastian to dinner. I will be gone an hour or so.”

“Do you believe that is wise, Nasira?” Rafe asked.

“We bloody believe that is none—”

“I can speak for myself, Sebastian. I am no longer your charge, Rafe. I can take care of myself. Tell Violet I truly appreciate her hospitality. We should go now, Sebastian, before I change my mind.”

With that, Nasira followed Sebastian down the porch steps and when she didn't immediately spot a sedan, she paused on the pavement. “How did you arrive here?”

He nodded toward a shiny black truck at the end of the drive. “This is all they had available to rent at the airport.”

Nasira covered her mouth to keep from laughing. “Oh, my. Can you handle that?”

He looked somewhat incensed over what he apparently considered an insult to his masculinity. “Of course I can handle it. I made it here, did I not?”

“All right,” she said, and then continued toward the monstrosity.

Once there, Sebastian opened the passenger door and held out his hand. “Your cowboy chariot, madam. Let me assist you.”

“I am almost six feet tall, Sebastian. I can manage climbing into a truck by myself.”

“Only trying to be a gentleman, Sira.”

The sound of his pet name for her stopped Nasira in her tracks. “Do you know how long it has been since you called me that?”

He winked. “Perhaps too long.”

She had no clue where all the charm and machismo had been hiding. Following the miscarriage, he had spent long hours at work and little time with her. Perhaps he had turned a corner that would lead to change. Only time would tell. In the interim, Nasira would remain cautiously optimistic.

* * *

As they sat in the red booth in the Royal Diner, Sebastian found his wife to be predictably cool. And as always, very beautiful. The white cotton dress fit her to perfection, contrasting with her long, dark hair draped over her slender shoulders. Since her departure, he'd spent many a night in their bed, longing for her company. Since the loss of their child, he'd spent most of his time avoiding her out of fear. Not fear of her. Fear of losing her. Yet that was exactly what he had done by pushing her away. A bloody self-fulfilling prophecy that he couldn't explain without baring raw emotions.

Pushing the thoughts away, he turned his attention to the plastic-covered menu and scanned the unpalatable selections. “What do you recommend, Sira? The double cheeseburger or the fried catfish plate?”

That earned him her smile. “I realize this place isn't exactly your cup of tea, but I find it charming.”

“I find it overly quaint and a heart attack waiting to happen.”

“They do have salads and I hear the grilled chicken is very good.”

He closed the menu and set it aside. “I will make do with the limited choices.”

“What are you having?”

A tremendous urge to kiss her. “I'm going to sample the steak. And you?”

She laid the red-checkered napkin in her lap. “Definitely a salad.”

“You should eat something a bit heartier. You're too thin.”

“I am the same weight as I was before I left London.”

“I'm only concerned about you, Sira.”

She sent him a skeptical look. “Oh really? Where was all this concern over the past six months?”

He didn't feel this was the time or the place to get into such a serious subject, and thankfully a waitress arrived to interrupt their conversation.

She patted her rather large blond hair, pulled a pencil from behind her ear and a notepad from the pocket of the red apron. “Howdy. I'm Darla. What can I get the two of you darlin's to drink? Maybe some sweet tea?”

He couldn't quite fathom these strange Texas customs. “I prefer to sweeten my tea myself. With sugar and milk.”

“She means cold tea,” Nasira said. “I will take a glass with lemon.”

He needed something much stronger to make it through this evening. “Bring me ale.”

The woman raised a painted eyebrow. “Ginger ale?”

Bloody hell. “Beer.”

“Sebastian, I cannot drive that truck,” Nasira said. “For that reason, I suggest you forego the ale.”

She did have a point and in accordance with his plan, he needed to prove himself worthy of her company. “Water will be fine.”

“With lemon?” Darla asked.

“Why not? If that is fine with my wife.”

Nasira frowned. “Of course it is. And I would like a salad with the dressing on the side.”

“She would also like the grilled chicken,” Sebastian added despite Nasira’s disapproving look. “I’ll have the rib eye. Make certain it’s cooked through.”

Darla looked somewhat appalled. “You mean well done?”

“Precisely.”

The waitress jotted down the order then gathered the menus. “You two aren’t from around here, are you?”

Sebastian sent her a mock grin. “What gave us away?”

“The men around here order their meat rare.” With that, Darla waddled away, muttering under her breath.

Nasira immediately turned a sharp gaze on him. “Why do you insist on doing that?”

He opted to play ignorant. “Doing what?”

“Ordering my meals for me. I am quite capable of deciding what and how much I eat.”

“I’ve always ordered for you, Sira.”

“I know and I do not care for it.”

“And you waited ten years to tell me?”

“It seemed simpler not to make waves and avoid conflict.”

Did she think so little of him? “I’m not your father, Nasira. If you want something from me, you need only ask.”

She stared at him a few moments. “I want another baby.”

The one thing he felt he could not give her. “Impossible.”

“Why, Sebastian?”

He could only offer her a partial truth. “You had a devil of a time when you miscarried. The doctor said—”

“That I am quite capable of conceiving again and carrying to full term. The risk is not any greater than any woman who has lost a child in the first trimester.”

He imagined his own mother had believed that very thing. “Look, this is not the time or the place to discuss this.”

She lifted her chin and leveled a determined glare on him. “Unless we discuss it, I will not be returning to London with you in the foreseeable future.”

Sebastian swallowed around his shock. Not once during their time together had she issued threats. “We will talk about this some other time.”

The waitress returned with their drinks, and they waited in silence for their order to arrive. All conversation ceased as they ate food that was surprisingly palatable. He spent a good deal of time watching the patrons, when he wasn’t watching his wife pick at her meal.

Unfortunately, she only afforded him a glance when he asked, “How do you find the fare?”

“Adequate,” she said and then took another bite.

He wondered if he would spend the next few days dealing with one-word answers while attempting to convince her to come home. Would she rebuff his advances, or eventually return to

what they once had? He longed for the latter. He longed for her. All of her. First, he had to regain her trust and respect, if at this juncture, and in light of his mistakes, that were even possible.

By the time he had paid the bill, Sebastian worried he had ruined his chances at reconciliation.

Not yet. Not until he convinced her they belonged together, with or without children. How exactly he would achieve that goal remained to be seen. He knew only one way to do this—by using a tried and true technique that had never failed to turn her into clay in his hands.

* * *

“Sebastian, what are you doing?”

“Finding a private place to talk.”

He had definitely found it, Nasira realized when he continued past the Wild Aces and took a dirt road that forked to the right. Once he reached the fence line, he backed the truck up beneath some low-hanging tree branches.

Before Nasira could voice a protest, Sebastian slid out of the seat, rounded the hood and opened her door. “Now if you will come with me please.”

Clearly he had taken leave of his senses. “I refuse to traipse around in the dark, Sebastian.”

“We’re not going to traipse. We’re going to sit in the back of this truck.”

She felt certain that might not be in her best interests. “Why can we not remain in the front seat?”

“Because it’s a beautiful night that should be spent beneath the stars and the moon.”

She started to say they could barely see the stars but the opportunity to respond was lost when he reached in, took her by the waist, and lifted her out and onto her feet. “First that dreadful fight with Mac, and now you are manhandling me like some Neanderthal. What has come over you?”

“My behavior isn’t necessarily so out-of-character for me, though it’s been quite a few years since I’ve engaged in it.”

Nasira released a cynical laugh. “You will have a difficult time convincing me that you ever behaved in that manner. In all the years I’ve known you, I have never seen you raise your voice, much less your hand.”

He smiled. “Oh, you would be surprised what a scrapper I was in my formative years. I managed to get tossed out of three boarding schools before I finally settled down in my final year before university.”

She could barely make out his smile, but she could hear the pride in his voice. “That is definitely news to me and frankly somewhat appalling.”

He leaned over and brushed a kiss across her cheek. “Are you certain you’re appalled, or did it perhaps impress you?”

It had both surprised and in some ways set her senses on fire, not that she would dare make that admission. “It served to remind me what ridiculously volatile creatures men can be.”

“Let’s find a place to sit before we continue this conversation.”

As long as they remained upright, she should be safe from giving in to his sensual charms. Then again, he had not attempted to touch her in so long, she could not even imagine that would be his goal. “Fine. But I only wish to stay for a while. I am fatigued from all the drama tonight.”

“No more drama,” he said as he took her by the hand and led her to the rear of the vehicle. “Now to ascertain how this bloody thing opens.”

Before Sebastian could make a move to investigate, Nasira pulled the latch and lowered the tailgate. “It is really quite simple.”

“How did you learn to do that?” he asked, sheer awe in his tone.

She shrugged. “I’ve seen Rafiq open one.”

Sebastian reached out and brushed her hair away from her shoulder. “You are truly an amazing woman.”

“Why? Because I can trip a release on a truck?”

“Because you are so observant and incredibly beautiful.”

As much as she appreciated the compliment, she also recognized he had never paid her many, except about her physical attributes. “Thank you. I suppose we should get this over with so I can get a good night’s sleep.”

Without warning, he hoisted her up on the edge of the gate, causing her dress’s hem to ride up her thighs. And while she made the appropriate adjustments, he climbed into the truck bed and had the nerve to position himself behind her, his long legs dangling on either side of hers. “Are you comfortable?” he asked as he circled his arms around her middle.

Uncomfortable would be more accurate; she didn’t—or shouldn’t—welcome the close contact. “No, I am not. I cannot have a decent conversation when I cannot see your face.”

“You only have to listen to my voice.”

Oh, that voice. That low, grainy bedroom voice that had enticed her on so many nights. And days. No matter how deep their conflicts had run, he had always been able to seduce her into submission. Granted, she had done her share of seducing as well, including the night she had conceived their child—without telling him she had stopped taking her birth control pills, which was information she had concealed until she had confirmed the pregnancy. Somehow he had forgiven the deception, or so he had said, yet she believed he had never forgotten it.

Nasira found herself leaning back against him, and turning her thoughts to the danger of succumbing to his power when he moved her hair aside and feathered kisses on her neck. “This is wrong, Sebastian,” she said with little conviction.

“Remember that night in the carriage?” he said, proving he was bent on ignoring her concerns.

“Yes, I remember.” How could she forget? On their honeymoon, he had arranged for a horse-drawn tour of Bath, which had led to taboo touching beneath the blanket, all leading up to a night she would never forget. The night she had lost her virginity and in some ways, her heart.

He slid one palm down her throat and traveled beneath the bodice where he cupped her breast through the lace bra. “I recall you were trembling, as you are now.”

She hadn’t noticed that at all. Her attention remained drawn to his fingertip circling her nipple now bound in a tight knot. “I was somewhat nervous.”

“You were hot,” he whispered. “I imagine you’re hot now.”

Before Nasira could prepare, Sebastian parted her legs with his free hand while sliding his other underneath the bra. “Pull your dress up to your waist.”

The request was both startling and highly erotic. “Why?”

“So you might see what I’m doing to you.”

As badly as she wanted his attention, she did not wish to make another grave mistake by giving in too soon. “This behavior will solve nothing, Sebastian.”

He continued to fondle her breast without missing a beat. “I disagree. It will solve our need for each other. It will serve to remind us how we’ve always needed each other.”

So caught up in his seduction, she clung to the last thread of sanity, relying on bitter memories to maintain her composure. “You haven’t been concerned about my needs for months.”

He kissed her cheek. “I know, and I’m bent on making up for my neglect. Can we for once stop thinking and allow ourselves only pleasure for a while?”

“But—”

He brought her head around and kissed her soundly. “Let me make love to you, Sira. Please.”

She should issue a protest, she should be more resistant, yet she had become too caught up in the anticipation of how she knew he could—and would—make her feel. Too sexually charged over witnessing a side of him she had never seen before this evening—the jealous side, willing to defend her honor.

After she complied, he whispered, “Take off your panties.”

This time she didn't hesitate to follow his directive, and after she lifted her hips and slid the lace down to her thighs, she no longer questioned the wisdom in allowing this to happen. After all, he was not a stranger. He was her husband, and she had been without intimacy for much too long.

While Nasira watched, Sebastian moved to the apex of her thighs and began to stroke her. A flood of heat and dampness caused her breath to catch in her chest. He knew how much pressure to apply. How to tease her into oblivion. The moments seemed so surreal—both of them in the back of a truck out in the wide open spaces of Texas, a warm breeze blowing across her face, her husband's hand between her legs bringing her closer and closer to the threshold of orgasm. She wanted badly to keep it at bay, to keep her eyes open, but all to no avail. When Sebastian slid a finger inside her, whispered a few words some might find crude, the climax crashed into her, bringing with it a series of strong spasms.

Nasira was barely aware that Sebastian had taken his hand away, but very aware when he moved beside her. When she heard the rasp of a zipper, she opened her eyes to see that he had shoved his slacks down his hips, revealing what the spontaneous foreplay had physically done to him.

"I need you, sweetheart," he whispered. "Come here."

She needed him as well. Much more than she should. "You want us to lie down in the back of this truck? I question the comfort in that." She also questioned her own sanity.

He grinned. "Who said anything about lying down? I am relinquishing control to you and hoping for a memorable ride."

Awareness over what he had intimated sent Nasira's pulse on a sprint. Every word he uttered seemed to be a jolt to her libido. Every suggestion added fuel to the building fire. Realizing the fit of the dress might not allow for enough room, she hopped to her feet to face her husband. She boldly unzipped the dress, pulled it over her head, tossed it and the bra into the bed of the truck and then pushed the panties down where they fell to the ground. She was totally, unabashedly naked and remarkably ready to finish this interlude immediately.

With that in mind, she climbed back into the truck on her knees to straddle Sebastian's thighs. Yet he thwarted that immediate plan when he said, "Wait."

She didn't want to delay another moment. "Why?"

"Birth control," he grated out.

Of course that would be his primary focus, and it should be hers as well. She lowered from her knees and sat on the gate, hugging her arms to her breasts. "I have not resumed taking the pills. I had no reason to do that."

She saw dismay in his expression before he stood and pulled up his slacks. "And you should have informed me immediately."

She suddenly felt very exposed, both physically and emotionally. She also sensed a hint of accusation in his tone. "If you are intimating I planned this so you could impregnate me, I was not the one who drove here for the purposes of seduction."

He released a rough sigh. "You're right, and my apologies for doubting your motives. However, if you consider our past, you certainly shouldn't blame me for my concerns."

Furious, Nasira came to her feet and grabbed her discarded clothing. "Obviously allowing this interlude under the circumstances has been a colossal mistake."

She glimpsed anger in his expression before she pulled the dress over her head, heard it in his voice when he said, "The sounds you made alone indicated you certainly enjoyed it."

"Evidently I am not immune to your charms," she said. "But mark my words, this will not happen again until we come to terms with our issues. And we have several, including your lack of trust in me and your resistance to having another child."

He slid out of the truck to tuck in his shirt. "We have a month to work out our differences and reach a compromise."

If they could work anything out. Nasira was not certain they could. “Presently I need to return to the house and you need to return to wherever you are staying for the duration.”

He streaked a palm over his nape. “Actually, I haven’t a place to stay at this point in time. It appears there are no rooms in the inns due to some rodeo event in the area.”

Of all the irresponsible, ridiculous excuses. “You did not make arrangements before you decided to travel here?”

“It was a spontaneous plan.”

An illogical plan in her opinion. “I can’t very well have you in my room under my brother’s roof. He is well aware we’re having problems, and I prefer we not sleep in the same bed until we’ve had more time to work on our issues.”

“I will take whatever room they have available if you don’t wish me in your bed.”

“There isn’t another room, Sebastian. The house is still undergoing renovations and I have the only accommodations left.”

“Then I suppose I shall sleep in the truck until other arrangements can be made.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. “All right. You may stay in my room as long as you have no expectations and you leave before first light. I truly do not wish to explain your presence to Rafiq or to have him assume we’ve been...you know.”

“I’m certain Rafe has engaged in...you know, since his intended is living with him.”

“She is also pregnant,” she added, curious to see how he might react.

“Really?” he said with little enthusiasm. “I didn’t know the old boy had it in him.”

“He does, and he is very protective of Violet, as well as me. On the other hand, he is not particularly fond of you at the moment. He assumes you have done something to wound me.”

“And clearly you have allowed him to have those assumptions.”

“Like it or not, Sebastian, your behavior for the past few months has been very hurtful to me.”

He sighed. “And that is why I’m here now, to atone for my transgressions. Regardless, I promise to remain on my side of the bed until you are ready for me to fully atone.”

When he suggestively winked, Nasira realized having Sebastian in her bed would not be wise for many reasons. “I will make a place for you on the floor.”

He had the nerve to kiss her hand. “Whatever you wish, fair lady.”

She wanted not to be so attracted him. She wanted not to want him, yet sadly she still did. “It is late,” she said as she wrenched from his grasp. “And one more thing. When we arrive, be quiet. I prefer not to wake the household.”

Two

“What is he doing here?”

Sebastian had barely entered the two-story foyer before being verbally accosted by his brother-in-law. “I’m accompanying my wife to the bedroom.”

With her hand on the banister, Nasira sent a sheepish glance in Rafe’s direction. “He does not have a hotel room for the night. However, he has promised to leave first thing tomorrow morning.”

Rafe gestured toward a formal floral settee. “The sofa is available.”

Angry over the suggestion, Sebastian dropped his bags on the ground. “I won’t fit on the bloody sofa. And if you recall, I’m still married to your sister and I have every right to sleep with her. Once you’re married, you’ll soon learn that problems can and will arise in every union.”

Rafiq took a step toward the stairs. “She does not want you here.”

“I invited him, Rafe,” Nasira said. “But only for the night. Now if you will excuse us, we are both exhausted from the evening’s events.”

“Quite memorable events,” Sebastian added knowing he would probably incur his wife’s wrath. Rafe pointed at him. “I do not wish to see you here when I awaken.”

Sebastian saluted. “Yes, sir, commander sheikh.”

Without looking back, Nasira hurried up the stairs and paused at the landing before regarding Sebastian again. “Are you coming?”

He suddenly realized he should attempt to turn Rafe into an ally, not an enemy. “In a moment. I’d like to have a word with your brother.”

He saw a fleeting look of panic in her eyes. “All right, if you two promise to remain civil.”

A promise Sebastian hoped he could keep. “I have no problem with that.”

She glanced past him toward her brother. “Rafiq?”

“I will maintain my calm,” Rafe said.

“I am counting on that,” Nasira said before she climbed the remaining stairs and disappeared.

Sebastian decided he could use a bit of a pick-me-up and with that in mind, he grabbed up the smaller bag, set it on the sofa, unzipped it and withdrew a bottle of mediocre scotch, the only thing he had been able to find at the lone liquor store in town. “Would you care to join me in a drink?”

“No, I would not,” Rafe said.

“Then would you mind providing a glass. I find it somewhat uncouth to drink from the bottle.”

Without speaking, Rafe left through a door at the back of the parlor. He returned a few moments later with a crystal tumbler he set on the white coffee table before taking a seat in a club chair across from the sofa. Sebastian poured himself a glass of the amber liquid. Though he preferred ice, he thought it best not to press his luck.

After taking a long drink, Sebastian settled in on the settee as the low-quality scotch burned down his throat. At this rate, the combination of booze and jet lag could very well land him on his arse. Of course, he could rest assured he would sleep well...on the bedroom floor.

“Where is your lovely fiancée?” he began when Rafe failed to speak.

“She is sleeping,” he replied. “The pregnancy has fatigued her greatly.”

Sebastian remembered that all too well from the time when Sira was carrying their child. He also remembered the sound of her mournful cries when she had lost that child. “I’m sure the wedding plans have also contributed to that fatigue. How are you faring with that, by the way?”

Rafe crossed one leg over the other. “I have left the preparation up to the women. I only require knowing where I need to be and when I should be there.”

Sebastian doubted he would escape that easily. “I suppose that is probably best.”

Rafe inclined his head and studied him. “I suspect you did not detain me so you could speak about wedding plans.”

Sebastian finished off the scotch with a grimace and poured another glass. “No. I felt it necessary to outline my intentions toward your sister. Has she mentioned me at all?”

“She only intimated your marriage is in shambles and hinted the breakdown is due to your inattentiveness.”

As hard as it was to hear, he couldn’t debate that assessment. “I’ve only had her welfare in mind since the miscarriage. I wanted to give her as much space as she needed. I realize now that was probably a bloody bad idea to show up, unannounced.”

“Yes, and it has created a problem that will not be easy to rectify.”

It occurred to Sebastian that he could possibly elevate Rafe’s opinion of him if he appealed to his ego by asking for advice. “You seem to be a man who knows the workings of a woman’s mind. Do you have a suggestion on how I could get back in Nasira’s good graces?”

Rafe didn’t seem to be flattered, though. “Perhaps you should return to London and allow her to decide if she wants to resume the marriage.”

Not the answer he’d hoped for. “Look, Rafe, we’ve invested ten years in this union—”

“Convenient union, not a love match,” Rafe added.

Point reluctantly taken. “Nevertheless, I care greatly for your sister and I’m not willing to give up what we’ve had for a decade without a fight. But I need assistance in order to win her back. Who better to help me than her brother, who knows her better than most?”

When Rafe remained silent, Sebastian almost gave up until his brother-in-law said, “Shower her with small tokens of your affection.”

“You mean flowers and jewelry?”

Rafe looked at him as if he were a total dimwit. “Not only material gifts. And do not concentrate solely on sexual matters.”

No sex or hearts and flowers. What was left? “I’m afraid I am still at a loss.”

“I have learned women appreciate gestures that might seem insignificant to most men,” Rafe said. “They greatly enjoy breakfast in bed. Massages. Having their hair washed.”

Sebastian could handle any and all of those things, as long as he had some privacy to do them. “I now understand what you’re saying, but I do have another problem. If I am going to woo her, I bloody can’t do it in a hotel.”

“And I do not wish to witness this wooing.” Rafe came to his feet. “I have a possible solution to your lodging issues.”

Sebastian finished his second drink and stood, realizing all too well that he should have stopped with the first scotch. He’d always been able to hold his liquor but at the moment he felt as if he could fly without the benefit of his corporate jet. “What do you have in mind?”

“A private residence where you could reside during the duration of your stay. The owners are friends of a friend and they will be leaving for a trip out of the country for two months. I will call tomorrow and let you know if they are amenable to the request. It will be up to you to convince Nasira, without coercion, to join you.”

Sebastian had no intention of coercing her. Not when he had other ways to convince her. “I’ll try to persuade her.”

“If you are unsuccessful, will you agree to return to London?”

Only if and when he had exhausted every option. “That seems fair enough.”

“Good. I am going to retire now. I will inform you in the morning if I have secured the accommodations.”

“Thank you, Rafe. I certainly value your opinions and your willingness to assist me.”

The man seemed unimpressed with Sebastian’s gratitude. “I am doing this for Nasira. Her happiness is paramount. I will not tolerate anyone who does not respect her wishes. Keep that in mind as you move forward with your goal.”

Before Sebastian could respond, Rafe turned and started up the stairs without looking back. Sebastian dropped down on the settee and rubbed both hands over his face. If he didn’t get up soon, he could end up sleeping on the sardine-can sofa.

On that thought, he trudged up the stairs and made his way to his reluctant bride’s boudoir. He rapped on the door and when he didn’t get a response, entered the room to the sounds of running water.

He had one of two options—leave and let her have her privacy, or shower her with affection in the shower. Option two earned his vote. As long as he proceeded with caution.

He stripped off his shirt, inadvertently popping a button, then sat on the edge of the mattress to toe out of his shoes. He carelessly kicked them off, barely missing the French doors leading to a balcony. In an effort to compose himself, he removed his slacks and underwear with more patience, then tossed them aside on the window seat to his right. When he rose from the bed, he realized he would have to keep a tight hold on his libido. He also realized he wasn’t the only one standing.

“Down, old chap,” he muttered when he walked to the door, then paused to take a deep breath to regain some semblance of control.

If he played his cards correctly, this could be the first step in demonstrating that he could be the kind husband his wife needed.

* * *

Nasira needed a shower and a good night's sleep. She also needed to know exactly what Sebastian was saying to her brother, but that could wait until morning.

Standing beneath the spray, she closed her eyes, bent on washing away the memories of those intimate moments under the stars in the rear—of all things—a Texas truck. Still, her mind whirled back to the interlude and the way Sebastian had so easily unearthed sensations she had greatly missed. Sensations she still experienced with a succession of tremors and tingling. Her husband had so masterfully manipulated her into oblivion with only a few strokes, and once more the heat began to make itself known....

Nasira shook off the images, stepped to the side of the spray and opened her eyes, determined to regain some perspective without undue influence from her spouse until she was forced to face him again.

The plan went awry the moment the glass door opened, Sebastian walked into the shower and moved behind her, as if he had a standing invitation.

His audacity momentarily stunned her into silence. Yet when he reached around her and grasped the bottle of shampoo from the mosaic tile shelf, she spun on him, putting herself in close proximity to a very naked, very virile, very stimulated man. “Do you mind?”

He took a quick sniff before placing some of the liquid in his palm. “I do not mind at all. In fact, I like the lavender. Now turn around.”

She gathered all the reasons to resist him. Reasons that had ironically kept him from her over the past few months. “You may turn around and leave.”

“Not until I wash your hair.”

That would qualify as an unusual request. “Why?”

“Could you humor me, please?”

She caught the faint scent of alcohol. “Are you intoxicated?”

“Only with your beauty.”

Clearly the liquor was speaking for him. “I smell scotch.”

“I might have had a drink. Or two.”

“I consider that inadvisable in light of your fatigue.”

“I’m not too exhausted or too mashed to wash your hair. In fact, it would be an honor to do it. And I promise you will enjoy it.”

Granted, she would, though she wondered who had kidnapped her stoic husband and replaced him with this considerate clone. She mulled the offer over a few minutes and surrendered to the prospect of pleasure—with one concession. “Oh, all right. But only if you will leave after you are finished.”

“Agreed.”

Nasira faced the tiled wall again and attempted to feign indifference. Yet when Sebastian slid his hands into her hair and began to massage her scalp, she practically melted against him. “That feels exquisite,” she murmured.

Sebastian brushed a kiss across her cheek. “You deserve to feel that way. I recognize I’ve neglected my duties and haven’t exactly been a doting husband.”

She had never expected him to be doting, yet she did approve of this version of Sebastian. Then suddenly his hands drifted from her hair to her shoulders and came to rest on her breasts. Odd how he had not touched her in six months and now, as if someone had snapped on a sexual light switch, the former version of her husband had returned.

“You are exquisite,” he murmured as he pressed against her bottom.

“You are a cad.”

“Henry is the cad. I have no control over him.”

Nasira stifled a laugh. “I have always wondered what would possess a man to name a cherished part of his anatomy after his prized horse.”

He winked. "It's quite logical because that horse is a premiere stallion."

She elbowed him in the ribs. "Since you are finished washing my hair, I need to rinse out the shampoo and you need to vacate the premises."

Against her better judgment, she turned her back to him, stepped beneath the flowing water and soaked her hair, giving Sebastian complete access to her body. He took supreme advantage of her vulnerable position by running his palms down her torso, over the bend of her waist and on to her hips.

Regardless of her nagging need for him, Nasira sidestepped Sebastian and sent him a frustrated look. "You agreed that when you were finished, you would leave."

He took the blue washcloth folded on the shelf and added a small dollop of gel. "I'm not finished yet."

Unable to move, Nasira watched as Sebastian washed her body, beginning with her shoulders and arms before he moved down to her breasts, and then her belly. He knelt and bathed each of her legs gently, all the while smiling up at her until he straightened. His crystal blue eyes seemed to darken as he shifted his attention to between her thighs. He lingered there for a time, teasing slightly, setting her on edge before he stepped back and draped the washcloth over the chrome rack to his left.

"There you go," he said. "Clean as a whistle."

"Why are you doing this, Sebastian?"

His eyes looked a bit hazy now. "Because I want you to relax. I'm certain you will sleep much better now."

Not very likely. Not when she still wanted him in every way. "I am onto you, Sebastian."

He attempted an innocent expression. "I'm sure I do not know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. However, you can attempt to seduce me from dawn to dusk but we will still remain at an impasse."

"I was simply trying to be considerate." He grabbed the bottle of gel and began lathering his body. "Granted, a dawn-to-dusk seduction sounds interesting. Perhaps we shall try that in the near future."

"I'm going to bed now," she said as she quickly rinsed off without looking at him.

"I will join you shortly."

"I'll make you a nice place on the rug."

"I so cherish being treated like the family hound."

She sent him a quelling look as she opened the glass door. "We agreed on that arrangement."

He gave her a half smile. "Spoilsport."

As usual, he glossed over the seriousness of their situation with wit and sarcasm. Angry with him, and herself, Nasira left the shower, dried off, wrapped the towel around her and tucked it closed between her breasts. She then twisted her hair into a braid, brushed her teeth and returned to the bedroom, leaving Sebastian alone to finish his shower.

In the past, she would have crawled into bed without clothes but decided with her husband in the house, it would be best to dress in a short blue gown, as if donning silk armor. Of course, if Sebastian sneaked beneath the sheets in the middle of the night, the negligee wouldn't provide any real protection.

Protection. He would not attempt consummation without any form of birth control. He had made that quite clear earlier. In that case, she supposed she could be benevolent and allow him into the bed.

She questioned the wisdom of that reasoning when Sebastian entered the room, a thick white towel slung low on his hips. Even after all their years together, even after seeing him completely nude in the shower a few minutes ago, the sight of his lean swimmer's physique still took her breath away. Many nights she had explored all the masculine planes and valleys, at first under his tutelage, until she had learned exactly how to touch him and kiss him. She had possessed a certain power over him during those times. She dearly wanted to experience that now...

“Sira, are you all right?”

Startled into reality, Nasira averted her eyes and shook off the recollections, though she could not shake the heat. “I am tired.”

“As am I,” he said as he approached the bed. “So exhausted I could sleep on the floor. Oh, that’s right. I’m supposed to do that very thing.”

Nasira pulled back the comforter and pointed to the opposite side of the mattress. “I am willing to take pity on you as long as you maintain a wide berth between us.”

He grinned. “You are most generous, my lady. And I promise I will be the perfect gentleman.”

If only she could believe that. “I will hold you to that promise.”

As Nasira slid beneath the covers, her husband returned to the bathroom then came back without the towel or any clothes whatsoever. “Could you possibly put something on, Sebastian?”

He frowned as he climbed into bed beside her. “Sweetheart, you know I prefer to have nothing on when I sleep. So do you.”

“We are guests in this house.”

He rolled onto his back and stacked his hands behind his head. “I highly doubt Rafe or Violet will do a bed check to make certain we’re appropriately dressed.”

That led Nasira to another question. “What did you and my brother discuss tonight?”

He continued to stare at the ceiling. “The strange ways of women and the complete ignorance of men.”

“Be serious.”

“I am.”

“Then please explain.”

“At times women say one thing, then do another, while most men are painfully honest. You’d rather spend a day shopping and men would rather engage in sports. Women want to discuss their feelings. Men would rather discuss something as dull as the weather to avoid that at all costs.”

“The last part is definitely accurate,” she muttered.

“Perhaps that’s because we don’t necessarily have deep feelings.”

“Or at least those you care to share.”

Too weary to continue the conversation, Nasira turned off the lamp and turned her back to her spouse. “Good night, Sebastian.”

“Sleep well, Sira.”

If only she could. For at least an hour, maybe more, Nasira tossed and turned, well aware that her naked husband was very near...and deep in throes of slumber, as evidenced by his steady breathing.

Little by little Nasira began to drift off and soon found herself immersed in an erotic state when Sebastian’s hand drifted to her breast. She reveled in the intimate stroking between her thighs. Once more she was captive to his skill and to her own sexuality. Another orgasm—the second one tonight—claimed her with remarkable force. Before the climax had completely calmed, Sebastian moved atop her then eased inside her. Steady thrusts, ragged breaths, undeniable mutual desire...

He whispered her name and she stroked his hair, as if nothing bad had ever transpired between them.

Then suddenly awareness dawned of what they were doing, and what they hadn’t done. “Sebastian,” she said in a harsh whisper. “We have to stop.”

When Sebastian tensed and shuddered, she recognized she had been too late with the warning.

After he finally rolled away, Nasira waited for his reaction and wondered if he was even aware of what had transpired. She received her answer when he sighed, sat up and muttered, “Bloody hell, what have we done?”

She snapped the light on and studied his profile. “Apparently we had unprotected sex.”

He shot her a borderline distressed look. “Apparently.”

“This is not all my fault, Sebastian. I told you to sleep on the rug.”

“You offered me the bed.”

“You did not have to accept.”

“You shouldn’t be so sexy.”

“You should have foregone the liquor.”

He raked a hand through his tousled hair. “It’s clearly futile to blame each other or concern ourselves with the consequences. What’s done is done.”

“If you are concerned about pregnancy, I was off the pill for almost a year before I conceived the last time. It is highly unlikely that would happen again after only one time.”

He appeared skeptical. “Unlikely but not impossible.”

Normally Nasira would be happy to know she might finally have a baby, but not with such serious problems still looming over them. “Would it be so horrible if I happened to be pregnant?”

After punching his pillow twice, Sebastian shifted onto his side, keeping his back to her. “That’s a discussion for another day.”

“A discussion we need to have very soon, Sebastian.”

“Would you prefer I move to the floor?” he asked after a few seconds of silence, reverting back to the man who refused to have any semblance of a meaningful conversation.

She preferred he stop clamming up. “It’s too late to concern ourselves about that now.”

“Then good night, Sira.”

“Good night, Sebastian.”

As she stared at the ceiling, Nasira wondered how she could feel so bereft after making love with her husband. It was as if they’d returned to the days before she had left London—she was suspended in a state of emotional gridlock with a spouse who constantly erected emotional walls. Could they get past the standoff? In the morning she would decide once and for all if finding out would be worth the potential heartache.

Three

Nasira awoke to an empty space beside her and a strong sense of regret. She could only imagine what Sebastian was thinking. She wouldn’t be surprised if he had already summoned the pilot of his posh corporate jet and flown back to London.

After showering and seeing to her morning routine, she dressed in white slacks and a sleeveless blue blouse, slid her feet into silver sandals and started downstairs to see if he had indeed left. When she heard the sound of two familiar male voices, she acknowledged she had been wrong in her assumptions, at least for the moment.

She reached the bottom landing, crossed the parlor and headed into the kitchen to find her husband and brother seated at the built-in banquette, having coffee together. They both quickly stood, looking as if they were errant schoolboys caught in a prank.

“Good morning, darling,” Sebastian said, taking her aback with his friendly tone. “Sleep well?”

She didn’t know if he was playing at being clueless or he didn’t remember what had happened between them. “I slept well enough.”

“Good because we have a busy day planned, thanks to Rafe.”

Nasira leveled her gaze on her brother. “What does that mean?”

“I will let Sebastian explain,” Rafe said as he started toward the parlor. “At the moment, I have to accompany Violet to speak with the caterer.”

With that, he rushed away, leaving Nasira alone with her husband. “I find it difficult to believe my brother would involve you in the wedding plans, so I assume we’re not expected to meet with the caterer.”

“You would be correct. I asked Rafe to find us suitable lodging and he has the perfect place.”

“Us?”

“Yes.”

“I never agreed to that.”

He gestured toward the chair Rafe had vacated. "Please sit so we can discuss this."

"Yes, let's." She settled in to the seat and waited for him to continue.

"Would you like coffee? Or perhaps tea?" he asked.

"I would like orange juice." And an explanation for why he clearly believed she would want to cohabit with him, especially after his attitude last night.

He rose from the chair and walked to the refrigerator to retrieve the orange juice, poured her a glass and set it on the wooden table. He then took the chair opposite her and folded his hands before him. "I realize you left London to escape me, or perhaps our problems, but I am not willing to toss in the towel until we have explored all alternatives to remaining apart indefinitely."

Neither was she, though she understood they might never be able to compromise on the issue of having children. They never would unless he decided to actually discuss it. "You believe the only way we can do that would be to live under the same roof?"

"Yes, I do."

She had her doubts. "I know you, Sebastian. You will not tolerate a simple hotel room, and I do not believe you'll find a penthouse suite anywhere near Royal. If I decide to do this, I refuse to reside too far away from Rafiq and Violet."

"You're right, but there are houses available."

She suffered the second shock of the morning. "You purchased a house?"

He shook his head. "No. Rafe knows a man who is willing to open his home to us while he and the family travel abroad."

Living in a stranger's house did not seem like a favorable option. "What man?"

"His name is Sheikh Darin Shakir. I believe he hails from a country close to your homeland."

She had heard the name bandied about by Mac. "I know of him. In fact, his reputation precedes him."

Sebastian frowned. "In what way?"

"He killed a man several years ago."

"He's a bloody murderer?"

She gained some satisfaction from shocking her husband this time. "Actually, it is my understanding his love interest was being held captive by this criminal, forcing him to shoot the evildoer to save her life. Although I despise violence, I find the concept of coming to a woman's rescue somewhat romantic."

"I find resorting to murder somewhat disturbing." Sebastian sat back and sighed. "Perhaps we should explore other avenues."

"It's past history, Sebastian. He is very well respected and in fact married to the woman he saved. They have several children."

"Are you absolutely certain the man is safe? I refuse to put you in harm's way."

"As I've said, he is a hero in the town's eyes. I also know my brother would never send me into a dangerous situation."

Sebastian slapped his palms on the table and stood. "Then it's settled. We shall go meet this knight in tainted armor and see if the house passes muster. We need to hurry since they will be leaving shortly after lunch for the trip."

She refused to rush into the decision to join him. "I still have qualms about living together at this point in time."

"What qualms?"

"First of all, although I came here to confront Rafe, I also intended to have time away from you to think."

"On the contrary, last night you wanted to talk."

He did present a valid point. "Yes, but I'm not certain you would be willing to do that."

He rested his hand on the back of her chair. “If we decide the accommodations are suitable, I will strike a bargain with you.”

Always the negotiator. “Go on.”

“If you will give me one week and the arrangement doesn’t suit you, or if I don’t meet your expectations, then you are free to leave and I will return to the UK.”

She mulled the proposition over a moment and decided that it did seem fair. After all, she truly wanted to attempt to mend the relationship if at all possible. “All right. I will agree to your terms.”

“Great. Our chariot awaits.”

She pushed back from the table and came to her feet. “I wouldn’t consider that truck a chariot.”

“I had another vehicle delivered this morning from Dallas. One that is more suitable. You’ll see when I bring it around.”

“Believe it or not, I find that somewhat disappointing.”

He pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, a habit he had established from the first night they had met. “Why is that?”

“Sedans do not have beds.”

Noting the look of sheer surprise on Sebastian’s handsome face, she turned to retrieve her purse and sunglasses, smiling all the way upstairs and back down again. Perhaps she should not be encouraging her husband in a sexual sense, yet she could not seem to resist the desire his presence had resurrected. The ever present need.

If they had to exist in close quarters, she should make the best of their time together for however long it might last. If they jointly decided their marriage was over, she would make more memories to carry with her to override the bad.

If luck prevailed, the Shakirs’ family home would be a happy place perfect for new beginnings.

* * *

“This isn’t a house, it’s a fortress.”

Nasira tore her gaze away from the massive white stone structure to glance at Sebastian. “And this veritable limousine you’ve leased goes quite well with it.”

He sent her a half smile. “It’s a Jaguar, Sira. Only the best for my bride.”

She didn’t bother to ask how he had acquired it simply because she did not care. She only cared about meeting the mysterious man who resided in the residence. And of course, the woman who had been worthy of his rescue.

As soon as Sebastian pulled to a stop beneath the portico, a dark-haired, dark-skinned man dressed in black shirt and slacks emerged from the double iron doors. Nasira recognized him from the photograph she had seen at the Texas Cattleman’s Club—Darin Shakir, sheikh extraordinaire.

He opened her door and greeted her with an intense look and a guarded smile. “Mrs. Edwards.”

“Sheikh Shakir,” she said as she slid out of the luxury sedan. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine,” he said with a nod.

Sebastian rounded the hood and offered his hand to Darin. “I truly appreciate your offer, Sheikh Shakir.”

“You may call me Darin,” he replied. “I have never embraced my royal status.”

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