



THE DI SIONE

# Secret

BABY

MAYA BLAKE

MODERN™



Maya Blake

**The Di Sione Secret Baby**

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“This antique box can be my wedding gift to you.” Charity CEO Allegra Di Sione can’t fail in her mission to retrieve her grandfather’s beloved box from Sheikh Rahim Al-Hadi, which is why she gets caught in Rahim’s sumptuous bedroom trying to steal it! Seducing the gorgeous sheikh is her only chance at escape! But when Allegra slips away the next morning she’s unaware she now carries something infinitely more precious – and that when Rahim finds out, he’ll have no choice but to make his enticing thief his queen!

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**‘This is how you want to make amends?’ Rahim enquired, his voice gravel-hoarse with arousal. ‘Think carefully before you answer, *habibi*. Because once you answer in the affirmative, once I have you in my bed, there will be no going back.’**

Allegra wanted to tell him that she knew she’d already burned bridges where he was concerned. From the moment they’d touched she’d known Rahim Al-Hadi had an inexplicable power over her. Allegra knew it was why she’d reacted so uncharacteristically strongly to him. Whether she wanted him to matter or not, Rahim spoke to a need in her soul she couldn’t deny.

And right here, right now, she didn’t want to.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. Then in a stronger voice, because her very soul demanded it, she repeated, ‘Yes, I want this.’

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# The Di Sione Secret Baby

## Maya Blake



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**MAYA BLAKE**'s hopes of becoming a writer were born when she picked up her first romance at thirteen. Little did she know her dream would come true! Does she still pinch herself every now and then to make sure it's not a dream? Yes, she does! Feel free to pinch her, too, via Twitter, Facebook or Goodreads! Happy reading!

To my readers and happy-ever-after lovers everywhere.

This one's for you.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

ALLEGRA LOOKED UP and smiled at the flight attendant. With a slight shake of her head and a numb smile, she refused the proffered glass of champagne. Thankfully, the first-class cabin was nearly empty. No one could witness her shock or deep worry. No one could tell she still reeled from the news her brother Matteo had delivered two days ago.

How could Grandfather have kept the true extent of his illness from her? She'd known he was undergoing tests since doctors suspected his leukaemia had returned, but he'd brushed her off when she'd asked him about his prognosis two months ago. Now she knew.

One year to live.

Her heart clenched. It was impossible to believe the man who'd always seemed larger than life wouldn't be here for Christmas next year. Tears welled in her eyes. She quickly dashed them away

as she sensed the effervescent flight attendant returning. She couldn't lose her composure. The world was watching. And these days, with technology streamed faster than the speed of light, maintaining the right appearances at all times was even more paramount.

For she was Allegra Di Sione, oldest granddaughter of one of the most powerful men in the world. She was also the face of the Di Sione Foundation, a charity she'd dedicated her life to. A full-time job she was more than happy to immerse herself in, even if it meant embracing a life that more often than not felt desperately lonely.

Shaking herself free of the self-involved thoughts, she glanced out the window as the plane left its berth at Dubai International Airport and slotted into place on the runway.

The early May sunshine was dazzling. Almost as dazzling as the wealthy guests and stunning success her foundation's latest gala had been. Her well-oiled charity team assured her it was their best yet, with almost double the amount raised last year, but Allegra, as proud as she was of her achievements, couldn't dwell on that now.

Not when Matteo's words continued to spin in her head. Besides the news of the old man's declining health, her brother had dropped another bombshell.

Grandfather's little fable wasn't a fable at all, if Matteo was to be believed.

For as long as she could remember, she'd thrilled to the story about her grandfather's Lost Mistresses. At one time she'd even wondered if her grandfather had led as decadent a life as her parents to possess such wild stories. She'd discarded that idea because she knew her grandfather had remained devoted to her grandmother until she'd died. His integrity was one of the many stalwarts she'd tried to emulate. Besides that, building the Di Sione fortune had been his number-one priority.

Discovering that the Lost Mistresses held real-life meaning, however, was one reality she hadn't been prepared for. Because why would her grandfather task her brother with retrieving a long-lost necklace on a whim?

As for the look in Matteo's eyes when he'd told her to return home without delay...

Allegra sucked in a deep breath as the plane thundered down the runway and lifted into the arid desert sky.

She'd faced losing her parents in the most horrific, media-guzzling way when she was six years old. She'd smothered her own pain in order to be there for her six siblings, despite desperately missing the mother whose love had been as volatile as it'd been all-encompassing.

Whatever her grandfather had to tell her, she would face it.

\* \* \*

Despite the bracing pep talk she'd given herself all through her flight, Allegra couldn't stop the full-body tremble as the town car turned into the long driveway that led to the place she called home. She kept a three-bedroom condo on the Upper East Side in New York City, but the Di Sione family estate in Long Island where she'd grown up with her brothers and sisters was her true home.

As with most homes, the memories that came with it were bittersweet, although in the case of her siblings and her, they were more bitter than sweet. Allegra couldn't stop her gaze from darting up the northwest corner of the stunning sprawling mansion that was the Di Sione estate. Cultivated lawns surrounded it with just a glimpse of Long Island Sound further beyond.

It was where she'd been brought after the night she'd stood at her parents' home, watching her mother and father enact what was to be their ultimate screaming drug-fuelled row.

Two hours after that harrowing performance, a single, ominous police cruiser had arrived; an officer had stepped out, and, with a few words, turned her and her siblings into orphans.

Enough.

Allegra pushed the bad memory to the back of her mind, and exited the car.

The double doors opened and Alma, the housekeeper, who'd been part of their family for longer than Allegra could remember, stepped out. Although the elderly Italian woman's smile was huge and

welcoming as always, Allegra spotted the worry in her soft brown eyes and in the furtive wring of her hands.

‘Miss Allegra, it has been too long,’ she murmured when Allegra stepped into the vast marble-floored hallway.

Allegra nodded, but her gaze was already seeking the familiar figure of her grandfather, her heart slamming against her ribs anew at the thought of him being taken away from them. ‘Where is he? How is he?’ she asked.

Alma’s smile dimmed further. ‘The doctor has advised bed rest, but Signor Giovanni...he insists he’s having a good day. He’s sitting outside, in his favourite spot.’

Allegra turned away from the imposing wrought-iron staircase that soared three floors, intending to head for the west wing of the villa, to the place where her grandfather had taken his breakfast for as long as she could remember.

‘Allegra?’

She stopped and turned back to Alma. The distress on her slightly wrinkled face was pronounced enough to send a cold shiver down Allegra’s spine.

She hadn’t doubted her brother for one moment, but truth be told, Matteo had been a little preoccupied with the woman he’d attended the foundation gala with. In a secret part of her, Allegra had hoped he was exaggerating the severity of the situation when he’d spoken to her in Dubai.

The expression on the housekeeper’s face now confirmed to Allegra that Matteo hadn’t been exaggerating.

‘He’s not as he was the last time you saw him. Be prepared.’

Mouth dry, Allegra nodded, ran her damp palms on her knee-length navy blue linen dress and continued down the west hallway, neither seeing nor appreciating the light that filtered through tall windows onto priceless works of art that graced the walls.

All she cared about was making it to the end of the corridor, and through the double French doors that led to the pillared terrace.

Be prepared.

Despite the warning, Allegra gasped as she stepped out into the sunshine. She’d expected her grandfather to be sitting in his favourite outdoor armchair. The sight of the bed, rigged with what looked like an oxygen canister, was such a shock to her system she froze in the doorway.

In the bed, her grandfather lay, with folds of cashmere blankets tucked up to his waist. His chest rose and fell in shallow breaths and his lids were lowered. But it was his normally vibrant complexion, now turned pasty and shrunken, that hit her hardest. Against the thick white hair, since the last time she saw Giovanni two months ago, the transformation was startling in the extreme.

‘Are you going to stand there like a statue all day long?’

Allegra jumped at the gruff query. Her platform-heeled feet freed themselves from the shock and moved towards the figure, whose frailty was outlined harshly in the morning sun.

‘Grandfather.’ Allegra stopped, not sure of the appropriate words to tackle what was in front of her.

‘Come. Sit down,’ Giovanni Di Sione urged, patting the side of the bed with a gnarled hand.

She closed the gap and perched on the edge, swallowing a sob when her eyes met her grandfather’s. She couldn’t have borne it if the spirit of the indomitable man who’d arrived on Ellis Island over half a century ago had dimmed. But thankfully, his clear grey eyes were as piercing as ever, if a little shadowed with pain.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she whispered, her voice hoarse from the emotions she was trying to suppress. ‘We’ve spoken on the phone so many times since I was last here. And why didn’t you send for me sooner?’

‘You had other things on your mind.’

Allegra frowned. ‘Things like what?’

‘I know how important the foundation gala was to you, and from the reports I’ve heard it was a rousing success. I didn’t want you to worry about an old man when you had a big event needing your attention.’

‘My work will never be as important to me as you are. You know that. You should’ve sent for me!’

A wry smile twisted his thin lips. ‘Consider me suitably berated.’

Chagrined, Allegra shook her head. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. Your quiet fire is one of the many things I’m proud of you for, piccola mia.’ He held out a large hand and she placed hers in it. His touch was warm and reassuring, but her heart dipped to notice that it lacked its usual gripping strength. ‘So, Matteo spoke to you?’

Swallowing hard, Allegra nodded. ‘Your leukaemia is back? And the prognosis is a year if we’re lucky?’ Her voice shook with the question, and the pit in her stomach she’d been struggling to keep from widening yawned open as she stared back at her grandfather. With every fibre of her being she had wanted it not to be true, but heart in her throat, she watched Giovanni nod.

‘Si,’ he confirmed, his eyes steady on hers in a way that told her he wouldn’t let her shy away from the reality of the situation. ‘And this time, there will be no medical intervention. The last time was risky enough, or so the doctors tell me.’

‘There’s absolutely nothing they can do? Are you sure? I could make some calls...’

‘Allegra, cara mia, that is not why I asked you to come home. I have beaten the odds for over fifteen years since I was first diagnosed. I’ve had a good life, and been blessed in so many ways. I’ve accepted my fate. But before I go...’

‘Please don’t speak like that,’ she pleaded.

Her grandfather regarded her with sympathy, then shook his head. ‘You will accept this, much as you’ve accepted so many hard things in your life. You are strong, Allegra mia. You will be even stronger for this challenge. I know it.’

Allegra wanted to childishly shut her ears, to dismiss the old man’s philosophical waxing. But she’d never been one to bury her head in the sand. She’d been ejected from childhood to a role of responsibility over her younger siblings almost overnight. Alessandro, her oldest brother, and Dante and Dario, the twin hellions who’d made the life of every single person they came into contact with at the Di Sione mansion a misery, had been sent to boarding school as soon as they were old enough, but her three younger siblings had been her responsibility. And while she knew deep in her heart that she hadn’t succeeded in her efforts to be the best role model for her sisters and brothers, she’d tried her damndest to make their orphaned lives as easy as possible. In a world where nannies had come and gone with the frequency of a revolving door, and a grandfather who’d been fully immersed in building his empire, Allegra had tried to bring stability to her younger charges.

More often than not, she’d failed, and Giovanni had had to step in. While with each failure, she’d doubted her ability to be what she needed for her family, she’d never shied away from doing the right thing.

And the right thing was her family. Grandfather and her siblings came first and foremost. Always.

Stemming the pain slashing her heart, she took a deep breath and nodded. ‘What do you need me to do?’

Whether it was the briskness in her voice or the hard acceptance that she couldn’t change the wiles of fate that did it, her grandfather sat upright, his face showing a trace more colour than it had a few minutes ago. Allegra was grateful for it, even as her heart hammered at whatever he was about to ask of her. Giovanni wouldn’t have summoned her if it weren’t important.

‘I need you to recover something for me. Something rare and precious that I lost a long time ago.’

Allegra nodded. ‘Okay, I’ll call the head of the investigative firm I use...’

‘No, you misunderstand. I don’t want this item found. I need it recovered. I already know where it is.’

She frowned. ‘If you know where it is, then why don’t you just send for it?’

Giovanni relaxed in his bed with a slight shake of his head. ‘I need you to go and get it.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Her grandfather exhaled. ‘Perhaps I need to elaborate. You remember the story of my Lost Mistresses?’

Warily, she nodded. ‘The collection you told us about when we were kids? Matteo said you asked him to find one of them for you. So it’s really true? They exist?’

A sad smile flitted over the old man’s lips. ‘Yes, my dear, it’s true. I sold them off to get the capital to start our family business. But now...’ His gaze drifted off and Allegra’s heart lurched at the bleakness she witnessed. ‘Now, I need them back. I must have them back before I die!’

Unable to deny the man whose love—even when it was distant and buried beneath the huge responsibility of caring for his numerous grandchildren—had never dimmed, she nodded. ‘I’ll find it for you, whatever it is.’

Giovanni sighed deeply. His head lolled against the snow-white pillow, but his gaze never wavered from hers. ‘I knew I could count on you. If my memory serves me right, my beloved box was sold to a sheikh decades ago. He wanted it for his bride and, at the time, he made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.’ He smiled, although it was tinged with an even deeper desolation. ‘Besides, who was I to stand in the way of true love?’

‘Do you remember his name? Where he was from?’ Allegra pressed, partly because she wanted the facts as quickly as possible so she could pull her grandfather from the memories that were clearly causing him such great sadness. The grandfather she remembered had always been focused very much in the here and now, the future of his family business and the welfare of his grandchildren, his paramount concern. To see him dwelling on the past he so rarely talked about heightened the fear of impending loss.

‘I don’t recall his first name, but he was the Sheikh of Dar-Aman. When we met, he was about to marry the woman of his dreams. He wanted the box as part of his wedding gift to her. It was one of many he’d accumulated over the years.’

‘Nonno,’ she murmured the Italian term she hadn’t used in a long time. ‘I’ll do all I can to get it back, but you have to bear in mind that this was a long time ago. The box may have been sold on.’ The last thing she wanted to do was disappoint her grandfather, but she had to prime him in case she hit a dead end.

Giovanni shook his head. ‘No. I tried to buy it back after the sheikh lost his wife. He refused to part with it. He swore that he would never give it up. I tried one more time a few years ago without success. But it’s still in the Dar-Aman palace.’

The conviction with which he said it made Allegra suspect her grandfather had been keeping a close eye on his precious box. Which made her wonder why he hadn’t made moves to reacquire it before now.

The Di Sione name alone could open the most hallowed doors, never mind the fortune that went with it.

‘Will you find it for me, my dear?’ The plea in his voice was hard to miss. And hard to take in that he’d yearned secretly for this box, which he’d let go in order to lay a foundation for his family.

‘Of course I will.’ Whether it was a long shot or not, Allegra intended to do her utmost to locate the box. ‘How did you come about it in the first place?’

Her grandfather coughed, the rough sound echoing around the sun-drenched terrace. Then he began to wheeze. Panicked, Allegra jumped to her feet. ‘Grandfather?’

Giovanni pointed feebly at the oxygen canister. She reached for it and settled the mask over his face just as an orderly rushed through the French doors.

Matteo had mentioned that the doctors had agreed for Giovanni to come home only if he arranged to have private medical care on-site. Nevertheless, the appearance of the nurse hammered home the severity of her grandfather's condition. And the fact that things would only get worse.

'I'm sorry, Miss Di Sione. He needs to rest now.'

Allegra watched the rapid rise and fall of her grandfather's chest with stinging eyes. 'Grandfather...'

He reached up and pulled down the mask, much to the disapproval of the nurse. 'It's okay. These bouts are short and much worse than they look. There's life in this old dog yet.' The brief twinkle in his eye triggered her smile, but the fear gripping her heart remained. When he reached for her hand again, she stepped closer.

'Bring me back the box, Allegra mia. It needs to come home.'

Nodding, she leaned down and kissed his pale cheek. 'I'll find it. I promise. Rest now, please.'

His grip tightened on hers for a brief moment before he let go.

Allegra walked away with a head full of questions and a heart filled with tears. Plucking her phone from her dress pocket, she dialled Matteo's number, then exhaled in frustration when it went straight to voicemail. She contemplated contacting the rest of her siblings, but discarded the thought. Besides Matteo and Bianca, she hadn't spoken to the rest of her brothers or sisters for a couple of weeks. They all knew about their grandfather's illness, and would make time to see Giovanni when they could, but they led busy lives. She couldn't burden them with the sadness weighing her down.

Besides, she needed to get on with keeping her promise to her grandfather. A promise she intended to keep, come what may.

## CHAPTER TWO

'ALLEGRA, IT'S TEN O'CLOCK.'

Allegra highlighted another section of the document she was reading with her marker pen, then glanced up.

'What?' she enquired absently, her mind still tackling how best to encourage the powers that be in the tiny Asia Pacific country to ratify a few more women's rights laws. As she'd found with countries great and small, diplomacy went a long way, but never far enough. She made a mental note to speak to her brother Alessandro about directing a few business deals to the country to grease her efforts. Allegra had learned the hard way that the lines of communication opened up wider with a promise of tangible reward. She'd fought too hard to win further rights for women in the country to let anything stand in the way at the last hurdle.

'Sheikh Rahim Al-Hadi's personal secretary agreed to grant you a fifteen-minute window, remember?' Her assistant, Zara, glanced at her watch and smiled. 'You now have fourteen minutes.'

Allegra dropped the marker pen with a grimace.

Wondering what sort of man she would be dealing with after her visit with her grandfather, Allegra had spent a quick half hour researching the Kingdom of Dar-Aman and its current ruling sheikh. Her initial discoveries had been appalling and an affront to everything she stood for as a champion of women's rights.

But she had a task to perform. A promise to keep.

Her fingers flew over the numbers and she breathed out as the line connected. 'Allegra Di Sione for Sheikh Al-Hadi, please,' she said calmly, trying and failing to erase the images of the sheikh's very vivid and very public playboy lifestyle, the pictures of gold-threaded sheets, diamond-studded mirrors and treasures in every room in the royal palace that were superimposed on her mind.

That those exploits and excesses were enjoyed at the cost of his kingdom's subjects made her hand tighten on the phone as she was put on hold.

Sultry Arab music filled the brief silence, the sounds so surprisingly beautiful and poignant Allegra's breath caught. She relaxed against her high-backed leather chair, a reluctant smile curving

her lips as the hypnotic music washed over her, momentarily eclipsing every worry blotting her horizon.

Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift, back to a time when romance books had been her secret pleasure, her selfish escape. In a flash she was transported to hot Arabian desert nights and tall figures in flowing white robes. To whispered promises in the dark and soulful brown eyes that promised forever.

‘Hello?’

Allegra jerked upright, chagrined that she’d missed the first prompt.

‘Um... Sheikh Al-Hadi, thank you for taking my call.’

‘You can thank me by stating the purpose of this call, and giving it the proper attention it deserves,’ he replied, the pitch of the deep, masculine voice powering down her spine.

His intonation, the way his voice caressed the vowels of the words he spoke, threw Allegra for a moment. A moment too long, if the harsh exhalation at the end of the line was anything to go by.

She hurried to speak. ‘My name is Allegra Di Sione...’

‘I’m very much aware of who you are. What I’m still waiting to find out is why you wished to speak to me.’

She bit her tongue against an acerbic response. As the head of her family’s charity, she’d been well practiced in diplomacy, even when she least felt it.

Allegra reminded herself why she was doing this, and regrouped. ‘I have a matter to discuss with you—one of the utmost importance—which I’d prefer not to do over the phone.’

‘Since you and I have never met before, I assume this matter you wish to discuss concerns your Di Sione Foundation?’

Allegra frowned, a little aghast by her body’s unwanted but deeply decadent reaction to his voice.

The notion that the answer she gave would determine the course of this conversation made her hesitate. The matter she wished to discuss was intensely personal. She had no intention of failing her task. But neither did she want her access blocked before she’d even started her quest to regain the treasured box for her grandfather by admitting that her visit would be personal. For one thing, with the previous sheikh dead, she wasn’t even sure Sheikh Rahim Al-Hadi was still in possession of the box Giovanni spoke so fondly of.

She framed her words carefully. ‘I’ll be visiting you in my capacity as the head of my family’s foundation, yes,’ she prevaricated, fighting the urge to cross her fingers.

She didn’t believe in luck. Or fate. Or destiny. Or she would be unbearably heartbroken that the cosmos had seen it fit to orphan seven small children, then given the only loving substitute parent she’d known a life-threatening condition.

Life was what it was.

She’d long ago accepted the fleeting happiness along with the abiding pain that came with being a Di Sione. Once she reached Dar-Aman, she would explain the true purpose of her visit.

If she got there.

‘I’m leaving the capital on Thursday morning. Perhaps you can arrange to see me when I return in a month’s time.’

‘What? No. I need to see you before you go away.’ Presumably to Europe or the Caribbean. After all, he was rumoured to keep homes in Monaco, St-Tropez and the Maldives. When her response was met with even more silence, she continued. ‘Our business won’t take more than a few hours, half a day at the most.’

‘Very well. My private jet is currently hangared at Teterboro Airport. It’s returning in two days. I’ll have my people arrange for you to be on it.’

Allegra’s mouth twisted. ‘That won’t be necessary. I’m perfectly okay with taking a commercial flight.’ She couldn’t quite keep the censure from her tone.

‘Shall I make my own inference from your tone or do you wish to tell me why the offer of my jet offends you?’ he rasped icily.

‘There’s the very small matter of concern about my carbon footprint.’ It was a position she felt strongly about, even though it earned her ridicule from her brothers, who made use of private jets when they pleased.

‘Very well. I’ll leave you to discover for yourself the many connecting flights you’ll need to take to reach Dar-Aman from New York. You might also want to bear in mind that the half a day window might be reduced to mere minutes if you arrive late. If you change your mind about my offer, let my secretary know. Your time is up and I have other pressing matters to attend to. Goodbye, Miss Di Sione.’

‘Wait!’

‘Yes?’

She clicked on her diary and scrutinised it quickly. The earliest she could get to the Kingdom of Dar-Aman were she to leave tonight—which was impossible because she had a dinner appointment with a UN ambassador—would be the early hours of Thursday morning after three flight changes. She would be in no state to have a coherent conversation with the sheikh, never mind attempt to make him a fair offer for the Fabergé box. Her grandfather’s request was too important to arrive in Dar-Aman tired and ill-prepared.

‘I... I accept your offer.’

‘Good choice, Miss Di Sione. I look forward to welcoming you to Dar-Aman.’

\* \* \*

Sheikh Rahim Al-Hadi perused the in-depth report his aide, Harun, had put together for him. After a second read, he closed the file and sat back from the large, polished antique desk hewn from one of the oak trees said to have been planted by the first man to have set foot on Dar-Aman. That man had been his direct ancestor, the first Sheikh Al-Hadi.

The responsibility ingrained into that desk wasn’t lost on Rahim. Each time he sat down he felt its oppressive weight. Each time he made a decision that drew a frown, or a protest from a council mired in the old ways, the weight of that frustrating responsibility pressed down harder on him.

He smiled wryly.

There had been a time when he’d gladly have tossed the desk onto the pyre and gleefully watched it burn in an all-night bonfire. Preferably surrounded by three dozen sycophants and an endless supply of willing females.

Unfolding his arms, he touched the left side of his chin, where a remnant of his old ways resided in the form of a scar earned while abseiling down a sheer cliff face on a stupid dare.

That adrenaline-fuelled, life-endangering roller-coaster living had come to an abrupt end with the death of his father six months ago.

Then he’d been forced to return home. Forced to face the path his life had taken...

Cutting that mental road trip short, he pressed the intercom.

‘Harun, have the state guest rooms in the east wing prepared. And delay my trip for another three days.’

‘But... Your Highness...are you sure?’ the middle-aged man enquired.

Rahim suppressed a sigh. He was sick to the back teeth of his chief aide’s second-guessing. If the man weren’t a veritable mine of information on everything to do with Dar-Aman, Rahim would’ve fired him a long time ago.

Rahim hadn’t needed palace spies to tell him that Harun didn’t want him in Dar-Aman. Had the decision been left to Harun alone when the council had presented Rahim with the ‘Rule or Abdicate’ choice, Harun would’ve preferred Rahim abdicate, so Harun’s own son, Rahim’s distant cousin, could take the throne.

But despite being presented with a decision he hadn't been expecting until he was well into his fourth or fifth decade, Rahim had known he had only one choice. Dar-Aman was his home. His ancestors had fought and sacrificed to keep this their home. Rahim wasn't about to turn his back on it because of hurt feelings or the sentimentality of youth. If anything, his eyes had been opened to the fact that love and fairy tales existed in the minds of the weak and foolish.

He'd thrived without those ephemeral emotions and there was certainly no room for that in the future of Dar-Aman. Just as there was no room to cater to Harun's sense of entitlement. But for now, Rahim needed him. Because until he wrought the changes he desperately needed to bring to his kingdom, his hands were tied. In so many ways that he'd lost count. And with each knot he unravelled, it seemed several more sprang up elsewhere.

'I also want a banquet held on Friday night. Make sure all the necessary dignitaries and ministers and their wives are invited,' he added.

'Of course, it will be done as you wish' came the reluctant reply. 'Do you require anything else, Your Highness?'

'If I do, I will let you know.'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

He disconnected, and strode back to the window. The view that greeted him was the same. Verdant grass rolled for almost a quarter mile from the grounds of the royal palace, interspersed in several places by shining mosaic fountains, majestic in stature and elaborately pleasing in their water displays. Much like everywhere in the royal palace, each facet of the landscape had been created with pleasure in mind. Everything his father had done had been first and foremost to please the wife he'd loved above everything and everyone else. Therefore his late father had spared no expense in providing the palace to rival the most magical and luxurious fairy tales, in order to please his mother.

While she'd been alive, that love had flowed to him, and beyond, to the Dar-Aman people. His home and kingdom had been a charmed place indeed.

And then she'd died, taking his unborn brother with her, and turning Rahim's world to darkness.

Rahim gritted his teeth as long-suppressed wounds threatened to rip open. Those wounds had been straining against the bandages of time since his return to the palace, a place he'd sworn on his eighteenth birthday never to return to. That last, blazing row with his father remained seared in his memory, along with the stiletto-sharp words his father had thrown at him that day. It had shocked him then how quickly fond and happy memories could be replaced with pain and desolation. But no matter how much he'd wished it otherwise, his mother's death had changed everything, including, for a very long time, his life's path.

Even his people hadn't been spared. Dar-Aman had suffered greatly since the death of its queen.

Shock didn't begin to cover his emotions at what Rahim had returned home to six months ago. And he had only himself to blame. From the moment he'd left Dar-Aman fifteen years ago, he'd mentally and emotionally cut all ties with his homeland. The people he'd surrounded himself with might have known he was the heir to a sheikhdom, but they'd been warned in no uncertain terms never to speak about his homeland. The blackout when it came to everything Dar-Aman had been complete.

Now he stared at the kingdom spread beneath him with regret and sadness.

Beyond the fairy-tale palace lay miles and miles of construction work, evidence of a painful rebirth where there should've been proud growth. Dar-Aman's infrastructure had been left in the hands of a corrupt and greedy few who'd run the economy to the ground until his return had put an end to the chaos. The government that was once held up by the international community as forward-thinking had been perverted to the point where they were almost archaic.

His mind veered from the monumental task that lay before him, to the impending visit of Allegra Di Sione. Although Rahim had crossed paths with the Di Sione twin brothers during his 'party hard' phase in college and afterwards, he hadn't taken much note of the rest of the dynastic family. After college, Rahim had been too busy forging a life for himself that didn't involve Dar-Aman, even

though at the back of his mind he'd known he'd have to assume the mantle of sheikh one day. He'd built a successful hedge fund company worth billions, while living life to the fullest in every sense.

And all the while, his home had been crumbling into decay and apathy. While he could channel his own personal fortune into restoring his kingdom to the respectable powerhouse it'd once been, he was aware of the more problematic issue of his personal image, his past exploits having raised more than a few eyebrows since his return.

The attention-seeking antics of his teenage years, before he'd parted ways with his father, could have been explained away as youthful hormones.

But Rahim knew his less than conservative lifestyle was the reason he'd met with so much resistance since his return to Dar-Aman.

Turning from the window, he returned to his desk.

Allegra Di Sione's visit to Dar-Aman couldn't have come at a more opportune time. Her foundation's work on rights-enhancing on behalf of women, especially in poverty-stricken countries, was just the launching ground Rahim needed for his people. And it wouldn't hurt to have his own image makeover in the process.

The Dar-Amanian people needed to believe he was invested in their future. They needed to believe he wasn't just a playboy flashing by to throw money at a problem before disappearing again. He could do nothing about the reams of media reports about his high-octane lifestyle in the past decade. What he could do was demonstrate that he was here for the long haul. Once their confidence in him was restored, he could lay the firm foundations for his kingdom's future.

And Allegra Di Sione was the key to that plan.

\* \* \*

Allegra rose and stalked to the door of the plane the moment the seat belt lights flashed off. The anger roiling through her belly threatened to rise up and choke her. She was ashamed that part of it was directed at herself.

She'd boarded the royal Dar-Aman jet with every intention of hating every minute of the fourteen-hour flight. Instead she'd melted into the soft, luxury leather club chair, and after a brief resistance, graciously accepted the care and attention the staff had lavished on her. Plus the peace and quiet had been heaven to work in, the state-of-the-art technology keeping her linked with her office. She'd even grudgingly accepted why her brothers highly rated private jet travel. With the amount of international business they conducted, the ability to work or rest in transit without distractions would be a godsend.

Allegra had even gone as far as to silently praise Sheikh Rahim Al-Hadi when one member of his plane staff had let slip that the jet was also used to transport food aid in the Arab region as and when needed.

But all of that had been before she'd opened the glossy magazine Zara had included in her hurriedly put together 'Things to Know about Dar-Aman' dossier. The article had juxtaposed life on the streets as a common citizen against life as the ruler of the oil-rich kingdom.

The dichotomy had been staggering.

Shock had held her rigid as she'd leafed through glossy picture after glossy picture showing the sheer, almost nauseating wealth displayed in the royal palace. Compared to the neglected citizens and woefully inadequate infrastructure, Allegra had been deeply saddened and angered as she'd taken in the gold-leaf ceilings and Fabergé boxes dotted in careless abandon in guests' rooms. Even the pillars and arches that flowed from hallway to room were painted with gold. Reaching the end of the article, she'd been truly stunned at the estimated wealth of the palace and its yearly upkeep. Since Zara had also included the annual gross domestic product of Dar-Aman in the dossier, Allegra had a direct comparison at her fingertips. The result had made her fingers clench hard around the magazine till she'd heard a rip.

That rip echoed through her now as she stepped into the early-morning sunshine and onto the red carpet and spotted the convoy of black SUVs speeding towards the plane. In the middle of the gleaming vehicles, with miniature royal flags billowing from the bonnets, was a top-of-the-line Rolls Royce Phantom.

Since one of her brothers had been toying with purchasing one last Christmas, Allegra knew the cost of the luxury car. She swung her gaze from the gleaming white, gold-trimmed car, to the man in flowing white robes striding towards her.

Her breath caught as she watched him move. Despite the crisp robes covering him from neck to ankles, she couldn't mistake the natural grace in his walk, or the animal awareness that whipped through his lean frame. As he drew closer, her gaze rose to his face.

Disgruntlement morphed to something else. Something equally all-consuming, but a lot more dangerous, as her eyes met golden hazel ones. Surrounded by long, sooty lashes, the gaze was direct, piercing in a way that made her step falter and grind to a halt. Ashamedly dazed, she took in the high cheekbones, the square, chiselled jaw which sat beneath neatly trimmed designer stubble and the aristocratic nose that flared slightly as he conducted his own inspection of her.

She'd met enough heads of state to separate the natural born leaders from those who relied on their position to throw their weight about. The sheer magnetism of the man who she'd only ever seen in a two-dimensional picture in a magazine didn't need the trappings of wealth, or the majestic Dar-Aman royal-crested keffiyeh that rested effortlessly on his proud head, to show he was an alpha in every sense of the word.

Allegra was still wrestling with the direction of her thoughts and the confusing emotions warring within her when he bared his teeth in a smile so charming and disarming her heart flipped in her chest.

'Miss Di Sione, it's good to meet you. Welcome to Dar-Aman. I'm Sheikh Rahim Al-Hadi. I would've been here to meet you earlier, but matters of the palace delayed my arrival. Please forgive me.'

Forcing her mouth not to gape at the raw sensuality and beauty of the man before her, Allegra scrambled to remember why she was incensed with this man and everything he stood for.

But he was holding out his hand, and being too polite and conscious she was greeting the ruler of a kingdom in full view of his members of state, she had no choice but to place her hand in his.

Fire sizzled up her arm. There was no other way to describe it. Allegra tore her gaze away and glanced down at where their hands joined to verify that he wasn't doing something absurdly juvenile, like zapping her with a hand buzzer. She knew it was possible because Dante, the crazier half of her twin set of brothers, had played that trick on her once.

There was no trick this time. Her fingers shook within his large, firm hold, the result sending goose pimples all over her body.

'That's quite all right. The last thing I expect is special treatment,' she added, once she'd clawed back a bit of sense.

After one further press of her flesh, he dropped her hand. Allegra wasn't sure whether to sigh with relief or rub her hand on her thigh to alleviate the tingle that lingered.

'You are an invited guest to Dar-Aman—that means you're entitled to special treatment. Come and meet my council, then we will travel to the palace.' He stepped back and she noticed the small group that had surrounded them. A middle-aged man was the first to step forward. The disapproving gleam in his eyes took her aback for a moment.

'This is Harun Saddiq, my personal aide and advisor.'

Allegra summoned a smile. 'I believe we spoke on the phone. Thank you for your help in getting me here.'

The older man inclined his head and shook her hand, but offered no response. Allegra silently shrugged him off. Whatever issue he had with her, she wouldn't be here long enough for it to matter.

She conducted the rest of the meet and greet with accustomed diplomacy, but as she turned away, she caught Sheikh Rahim's sharp gaze on her as he led her towards the luxury car.

The driver leapt forward, but Rahim Al-Hadi waved him away. Mildly surprised by the dismissal of protocol, Allegra glanced up. And met keen hazel eyes regarding her.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

The sensation was absurd, but she couldn't dismiss the idea that he was seeing more than she wanted him to. That he knew his effect on her. 'Yes, of course. Why shouldn't I be?'

One sleek eyebrow went up. 'It's perfectly acceptable to be exhausted and perhaps a little cranky after such a long flight.'

'I'm not cranky.' She paused, willing the snap out of her voice and reminding herself that she was here for her grandfather and nothing else. 'And you didn't need to come out and meet me. I would've been fine making my own way.'

'Perhaps I have ulterior motives for your visit.' He smiled, displaying perfect teeth in a sexy, dangerously arresting face that had her senses going into free fall.

Tucking her briefcase closer against her body, she dragged her gaze away, silently thankful for the reminder of Sheikh Rahim's playboy reputation. He was probably a man who saw every woman as a potential conquest.

'It's a shame I won't be here long enough to find out what they are,' she said, faking a smile as she slid into the back seat.

The door shut with a soft, decadent whoosh, and she watched, almost against her will, as he walked around to the opposite side from which he'd emerged to slide in next to her.

Outside, in the arid desert air, Allegra had only been visually aware of Rahim Al-Hadi's presence. Tucked in close proximity to him, his scent washed over her. Spicy, exotic, with a touch of sandalwood, the scent was powerful and overwhelmingly male.

She'd dated during her college years and afterwards, although none of her relationships had gone beyond the casual phase. She'd even indulged in a brief physical relationship when she'd been curious to see what she was missing that wasn't fulfilled by her work.

None of the men who'd crossed her path had had the effect that Rahim Al-Hadi had on her now. She surreptitiously drew in another breath and again sensations bombarded her.

Reassuring herself that she was blowing things out of proportion, probably due to lack of sleep, she cleared her throat. 'Your Highness, I'm grateful to you for agreeing to see me on such short notice. I promise I won't take up too much of your time.'

He sent her a wider, even more devastating smile, and in that moment Allegra knew her emotionally dazed state had nothing to do with lack of sleep. The man was sexual charisma personified. While the men she'd dated had had charm going for them, what this man wielded in his small finger alone would flatten them. She stared as his even white teeth gleamed in the brilliant sunshine. 'You'll be pleased to know I've rearranged my schedule to accommodate your visit. For as long as you're here, my staff and I are at your service. Any luxury you wish for will be yours with just the asking.'

And with that, Allegra was brought back to earth with a hard bump. The reminder of Rahim Al-Hadi's unspeakable wealth made her bristle. 'Thank you, but the luxury of my hotel bed and a cup of strong coffee are all I'll need once I've discussed the reason for my visit with you. My return flight is booked for tomorrow, so I hope you won't think me rude if I insist on our meeting as soon as possible?'

Straight black brows clamped together in a thunderous frown. 'You're leaving tomorrow?' he rasped, the gleam of his teeth disappearing as his full, sensual lips compressed in a displeased line.

'You did mention you would only be available for a short time, did you not, Your Highness?'

'Rahim.'

'Excuse me?'

‘You may call me Rahim when we are having a one-to-one conversation,’ he elaborated, but his smile this time lacked its previous warmth. It was almost as if she’d done something to offend him. ‘May I call you Allegra?’

For a moment, she lost herself to the sensual intonation of her name. While his accent was mostly American—due to his having spent over a decade and a half in the US—every now and then the exotic tones of his homeland’s dialect curled around his words, lending them a mesmeric quality.

‘I... Yes, of course.’ In a distant part of her mind, Allegra knew she should be thankful that this meeting was going better than she’d hoped it would.

‘Allegra, I confess to not giving our telephone conversation the careful attention it deserved.’ Another blinding smile that slammed lightning straight to her midriff. ‘After we spoke I had a change of heart. I’ve already prepared rooms in my palace for your convenience. My trip has also been postponed to Sunday, which means I will devote myself to you until then. Tonight, I’m holding a banquet in your honour.’

Her mouth gaped. ‘A banquet? But I’m only here to discuss...’

He waved her protest away with a flick of an elegant hand. ‘We’ll discuss your business here later, after you’ve had a chance to rest. For now, allow me to give you a brief tour of Shar-el-Aman, my country’s beautiful capital.’

Allegra swallowed her surprise, although the notion that there was more going on here than met the eye didn’t dissipate.

‘I really wasn’t expecting you to go to all this trouble,’ she started.

‘But you will humour me nonetheless, yes?’

Unable to think of a way to dissuade him, she nodded. ‘If you wish.’

‘I wish.’

The satisfied smile her response produced drew her attention to his mouth. As male specimens went, Rahim Al-Hadi had inherited more than his fair share of good looks. It was no wonder he’d been voted the world’s most eligible bachelor more times than Allegra cared to count. It was probably also why he thought that smile could win any man, woman or child round to his way of thinking.

It’s won you over, hasn’t it?

She suppressed the irritating observation and followed his finger as he pointed out a sprawling group of buildings nestled on a hilltop. ‘That’s our state university. Dar-Aman University boasts world-class academics and state-of-the-art facilities.’

Within ten minutes he’d drawn her attention to several more of Dar-Aman’s highly regarded treasures. When he pointed out yet another monument, whose sole purpose was to provide superficial pleasure, she couldn’t hold her tongue.

‘Fountains and memorials with gold-plated plaques are all very nice to look at, I’m sure, but Dar-Aman’s current economic situation is a little bit more pressing, don’t you think?’ Allegra’s earlier anger began to resurface.

The arm he’d raised to indicate yet another statue dropped a fraction. ‘My mother loved beautiful things. And my father couldn’t say no to granting them to her. As to my country’s economic situation, I have it well in hand, Allegra.’

‘Do you? Not according to world views,’ she replied before she could curb her response.

He stiffened, his eyes narrowing as his gaze zeroed in on her. ‘And do you believe everything you read in the papers?’ His voice had turned arctic.

Allegra cleared her throat, the knowledge that the information in the report she’d read on the plane had been hastily put together by her assistant suddenly flaring in her mind and giving her pause. ‘I didn’t mean to cause offence.’

‘On the contrary, I think you meant to make an exact point. Perhaps you want to elaborate on what you mean?’

They stared at one another for a charged moment, the tense atmosphere burning between them. Allegra shook her head to clear it, and also to backtrack a little before things got out of hand.

‘I didn’t mean to put it quite that way. Trust me, I’m a lot more diplomatic than that usually, or I’d be out of a job by now.’ She gave a little laugh in the hope of alleviating the tension, but his continued stony regard tightened her skin. Almost afraid to breathe in case she’d done irreparable damage to her chances of retrieving her grandfather’s treasure, she continued hurriedly. ‘I simply meant I know that not everything is shiny and rosy in the Kingdom of Dar-Aman so this tour really isn’t necessary.’

His mouth tightened. ‘Look around you, Allegra. My country is in the middle of a rebirth, yes, but things are far from dire. The tour wasn’t intended to pull the wool over your eyes. I was merely extending the hospitality that is afforded any invited guest. Unless things have changed in the States since I lived there, your president doesn’t parade his state guests through the ghettos on the way to the White House, does he? In all things he puts his best foot forward, does he not?’

Feeling chastised, Allegra nevertheless cursed the heat washing into her face. ‘No, he doesn’t, but I can’t help but mourn what was once a unique and powerful kingdom...’ Her voice drifted off when she realised she was letting her personal feelings cloud what should be a clinical transaction. What Rahim Al-Hadi chose to do with his wealth and about his people’s suffering wasn’t part of her visit. ‘I just didn’t want you to waste your time with all this...schmoozing.’ She bit her lip when his eyebrows elevated and a mildly censorious look crossed his face. Then his face turned thoughtful before he nodded. Pressing an intercom next to his elbow, he spoke rapidly in Arabic.

‘We will head to the palace now. When you’re better rested, I hope you’ll be more receptive to what my kingdom has to offer.’

She frowned. ‘I’m not sure I know what you mean.’

‘It’s clear you have preconceived notions where my kingdom and I are concerned.’

‘Do you blame me?’

His jaw tightened briefly before he exhaled. ‘No. And while it’s understandable, I assure you that some situations—as well as individuals—are not irredeemable if things are handled expertly.’

‘I think that depends on who does the handling, don’t you?’

To her surprise he nodded readily. ‘Indeed it does. And I prefer to think of this period as the darkness before the light shines once more on my people.’

She firmed her lips. ‘True change comes not with words but with actions.’

‘Then I look forward to showing you what I mean.’

He’d once again become the charming host whose smile upset the regular rhythm of her heartbeat, but Allegra didn’t miss the shrewd and assessing gleam in his eyes each time he looked at her, or miss the fact that his gaze lingered on her face, and brushed down her body a few more times than her flailing senses could deal with.

By the time their convoy rolled through wide pillared gates manned by armed soldiers, Allegra understood why women fell over themselves to be his playthings. Rahim Al-Hadi wielded his voice, his body and his keen intelligence the way a composer wielded his baton.

Had she not vowed a long time ago never to get involved in relationships, especially volatile ones like the one that had ultimately seen her parents dead at a young age, Allegra was sure she’d have been swayed by Rahim’s magnetic charm.

But she’d been immune to the charms of men for a long time, ever since she’d recognised that she didn’t have what it took to make a man happy or to build a loving home. Even after watching her mother fail ceaselessly to change her father and to make a home in which her children were secure and safe, Allegra had believed she could take a different path, succeed where her mother had failed. Seeing her every effort turn to dust, and her sisters and brothers grow apart, had spelled her own spectacular failure in her ability to create a home or make another human happy.

Divesting herself of emotional entanglements after her one attempt at a relationship had failed had almost been a relief. It had freed her to pursue a cause she excelled in.

Her work was her life. She was safe from lethally charming, emotional landmines like Rahim Al-Hadi.

Suitably rearmoured, Allegra turned her attention to her surroundings. They were driving down a dual carriageway, the palm-lined road made of white stone. To the left and right, the blue waters of the Arabian Sea sparkled like a million tiny jewels in the distance. Before them, set atop a sprawling hill, the royal palace sat, a white, elaborate, triple gold-domed structure that could've been reproduced straight from an Arabian fairy tale.

Even from the outside, she knew the magazine pictures hadn't done the palace justice. And despite reminding herself what the cost of this palace meant to the rest of the Dar-Amanian people, Allegra found herself leaning forward, absorbing the breathtaking structure as the Rolls Royce slowed and stopped.

'My God. It's stunning!'

'Yes. It's the jewel in the crown that is my beloved homeland. I hope you will make it your home too, for a short while.'

### CHAPTER THREE

RAHIM WATCHED HER eyes widen at his words, and wondered if he'd overplayed his hand. He was still irritated by her veiled comments about his leadership and the general state of Dar-Aman. As much as he'd wanted the disapproving Miss Di Sione delivered to the airport and sent on the next plane back to the US, he'd curbed his tongue, and laid on the charm.

'Thank you,' she murmured in response to his offer of hospitality.

'I looked further into your foundation's work and must commend you for the extraordinary results you've achieved in so short a time.' Everything he'd learned so far had solidified the belief that she was the one who could turn things around for him.

What he hadn't counted on was her sharp tongue. Or her beauty.

Despite willing himself not to do so, he found his gaze drawn back to her as a light blush rose up her neck. Her rich, chocolate hair was pulled back a little too severely and knotted with a clip at her nape for him to know whether the tresses were the sexy waves he preferred or straight. And her flawless skin had a golden hue to it, as if she'd recently spent time in a hot climate.

'My team and I are committed to what we do, but the people we work with do most of the work. I find that if the people I try to help want that change it happens quicker and lasts much longer than if they're spouting rhetoric simply to garner whatever political clout they need to attain immediate power.' Her words flowed with an innate passion that caught and held his attention. Her mouth, painted a neutral colour, was naturally full and plump, with a mole above her upper lip that drew his attention every time she spoke.

'You're passionate about your work.'

'I am. I take what I do very seriously.'

'As do I, Allegra.'

Deep azure eyes met his. Despite their heavy scepticism, the colour reminded him of the whirlpools he used to play in as a child at his family's beach house outside the city.

From nowhere his mother's voice cautioning him to be careful lest he got sucked into the water flared across his mind. The memory was vivid and unexpected, enough to make him frown.

Shrugging away the mildly unsettling feeling as an inevitable consequence of the decisions he knew he had to make concerning his kingdom, he looked at Allegra, and found her staring back at him.

'Is something wrong? I really don't mind staying at the hotel if...'

'I'm a man of my word, Allegra. I extended an invitation. I will not take it back.'

Alighting, he extended his hand to help her out. He saw her hesitate a moment before accepting his aid. A whisper of a smile touched his lips.

He'd also experienced the sizzle when they'd touched back at the airstrip. Back then he'd thought it a figment of his imagination. Or a product of his year-long abstinence. Sex had been the last thing on his mind once he'd found out his father had fallen ill and died without Rahim's knowledge. Guilt and bitterness had effectively killed his libido, and he'd been in no hurry to resurrect it once he'd arrived in Dar-Aman and seen what his father's apathy and neglect had caused his people. What the result of his own disinterest and self-imposed estrangement had wrought.

Allegra's hand slid into his. Heat flared in his belly and arched straight to his groin. Beneath the flowing robes of his abaya, his heart thundered as he stared down into her eyes, then to the colour surging beneath her silky skin.

He had no intention of bedding Allegra Di Sione, but he'd bedded enough women to know his effect on them. Sexual tension was a hugely effective tool. One he would shamelessly use to get Allegra to do his bidding if that was what it took.

Holding on to her hand, he let his thumb caress the soft space between her fingers. She gave a tiny gasp and tried to pull her hand away.

Rahim held on, absently aware that he was getting just as equally affected by the attraction crackling between them. But he had enough control not to allow it to go too far. He would play on it only until he got what he needed from her. He blithely ignored the sting of his conscience.

'Welcome to my palace,' he murmured.

She blinked, then jerked and looked around her before glancing back at him. 'I... Thank you.'

With one last caress, he allowed her hand to drop, aware that Harun and a few advisors lingered close by.

He strolled through the quadruple doors that led into the extensive space too large to be named a hallway. Two dozen pillars, which had provided endless amusement to play hide-and-seek as a child, rose from the floor and flared in gold and silver painted tentacles to the ceiling.

Beneath his feet, gold and silver inlaid marble floors gleamed and echoed his and Allegra's footsteps as they crossed the wide expanse to the east wing.

Rahim was aware of Allegra's suppressed gasps with each new visually stunning Moorish archway and new room they passed through. For the first time in his life, he was forced to see his home through another's eyes. *Objets d'art* and rare, priceless paintings he'd taken for granted since birth took on a new meaning. The precious collectibles his father had showered on his mother were laid out in cabinets and displayed on shelves and walls at every turn.

A touch of unease fizzed through him at the thought of the excessive display of wealth—which, now that he took a moment to acknowledge, bordered on the obscene—and he gave a small sigh of relief when they walked through another archway and reached the double doors he sought.

Allegra glanced behind her. 'We're alone,' she observed. Then she blushed, hurrying to elaborate. 'I mean, I thought your advisors were accompanying us so they could speak to you.'

'They are, but they're not allowed in the women's wing. Only I am.'

Her lips pursed in an unmistakable show of anger. Her eyes flashed before she lowered them. 'The women's wing? And you have the access-all-areas pass because you're the sheikh, I suppose?'

'Naturally.'

'And here I thought you were a modern man, Your Highness. You do realise that some would think you positively archaic that you still segregate your women?'

'I've never been one for popularity contests. And there is a good reason for keeping separate sleeping quarters for the women under my roof.'

Her mouth worked, as if she wanted to challenge him as to what those reasons were. Before she could, the doors to the suite were thrown open.

The young girl who emerged took one look at him and dropped to her knees with a loud gasp.

‘Your Highness, everything is ready as you requested.’

‘Good. You may stand up now, Nura.’

She scrambled up, but kept her head bent low.

He turned to Allegra. ‘Nura will be your personal maid while you’re here. If you need anything...’

‘It really is unnecessary. I don’t need a maid.’ Allegra sent a stiff smile the young girl’s way. At Nura’s crestfallen expression, she added, ‘I’m sorry, but I’m used to taking care of myself, and I don’t want to waste your time. Time I’m sure will be better spent elsewhere?’

Irritation bubbled beneath Rahim’s effort to remain a civil host. ‘Nura will remain here. Every member of the palace staff has a role. Nura’s is serving you during your stay.’ When Allegra continued to look mutinous, he exhaled in frustration. ‘Things are done a little differently here, Allegra. The earlier you accept that, the smoother your visit will be. I’m sure we both want that?’

‘We do,’ she replied tersely.

‘Good. Then it’s settled.’

Her gaze clashed and battled with his, but she didn’t respond. Instead she followed Nura into the suite, the young maid’s eagerness garnering a less stiff smile from Allegra.

He followed, despite the pressing awareness that he was needed elsewhere. While she was absorbed in the room that his own mother had used as a girl before marrying his father and relocating to the royal bedchamber, Rahim’s gaze traced her elegant neck, lower to her slender waist and rounded bottom, to the slit at the back of Allegra’s dress, which displayed her elegant legs.

Again heat stamped through him, harder this time, reminding him that he was very much a red-blooded male, who’d gone too long without the release that had been his to take once upon a time.

He’d taken and indulged a little too much in hindsight.

A predicament he wouldn’t be able to fix without Allegra’s help. The reminder curbed the insane need to reach out and trace his hand over that trim waist, change that expression on her face from condemnation to something more...malleable.

Halting the direction of his thoughts, he refocused his attention higher. She held one of the many trinket boxes that had been his mother’s personal joy, her interest keen as she examined it.

Sensing his regard, she hastily placed the Russian artefact down and faced him.

‘When will we have a chance to talk, Your Highness?’ she asked.

‘I have back-to-back meetings this morning, and engagements outside the palace this afternoon. We will speak after the banquet.’ It would give him time to summon a few key people he trusted to meet her tonight. Rahim was confident once he laid out his immediate and long-term plans for Dar-Aman, she would revise her preconceived views.

‘Oh. I’d hoped we could speak sooner.’

Rahim shook his head. ‘My meetings this afternoon are outside the city. The tribal lands aren’t exactly a hospitable place for...’

‘A woman?’ she inserted, her chin raised in challenge.

‘For anyone not used to a harsher climate. Besides the rough terrain, I’ll be travelling when the sun’s at its peak. Heatstroke is a credible threat, one I would be remiss not to point out.’

‘Oh...well, it won’t be a problem for me. I came prepared.’ She left the display cabinet and moved closer. In her heels, she came up to his chin. Her eyes met his, bold and clear. ‘I could come with you. We would make efficient use of the time and talk on the way?’ Her head tilted and the subtle scent of her perfume hit his nostrils.

Rahim breathed her in, struggling momentarily with the desire to lean in closer, place his mouth at that juncture between neck and shoulder where her pulse throbbed. Dragging his gaze from that tempting area, he looked down at her.

‘Are you always this impatient, Allegra, or just efficient to the point of risking your health?’ he murmured.

Harun had voiced his suspicion that her visit might be a secret scouting mission, to see if Dar-Aman fitted the criteria for the Di Sione Foundation's charity work. Rahim had dismissed the idea, but now he wondered whether his aide was right. She had made her opinion clear of what she thought of his kingdom.

'I'm just not one to sit around twiddling her thumbs. I'm here, and I'm not as frail or susceptible to the harshness of the desert as you think, so if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to come with you.' The determination in her voice spoke of a will that intrigued him. Not to mention his inability to look away from her alluring face. 'Please, Your Highness. This is important to me.'

Her soft plea echoed the softer look in her eyes. Had he not witnessed her displeasure before, Rahim would've been fooled into thinking she was trying to seduce him.

But his instincts warned him that despite the vivid, unmistakable attraction that whipped between them, Allegra Di Sione, the head of the Di Sione Foundation, was here for one reason only—to vet his kingdom.

Releasing an inner smile, Rahim nodded. He would play along. He had no intention of granting her a meeting until he was sure he'd satisfied every criteria her foundation needed to work with him. 'Very well. Provided you're rested and ready to go at three, you may accompany me.'

Her smile hit him off guard, its dazzling brilliance striking the heart of his awakening libido. As he stepped back and prepared to walk away, he experienced a tinge of regret that the possibility of Allegra Di Sione in his bed would never materialise.

'Thank you, Rahim.'

His brisk nod didn't dissipate the effect of hearing his name said seductively in that polished New York accent. In fact, he heard its sultry echoes long after he sat down to his first meeting of the morning.

\* \* \*

Soft, insistent beeps from her phone's alarm woke Allegra three hours later, giving her ample time to get ready so Rahim wouldn't have any excuse to leave her behind.

She didn't need a crystal ball to guess that his reluctance stemmed from the need to hide the true extent of Dar-Aman's deterioration from her. Although why that would bother him now, when he'd failed to do much in the years as crown prince and in the six months since he took the throne, was beyond her. It was true that his kingdom was undergoing a resurgence economically, but the change was new and shaky, and in Allegra's view, far too late in coming.

Disappointment flared through her, but she curbed it and focused on her goal.

She might not have achieved the quick meeting, followed by a swift departure after they'd agreed terms for Rahim to sell her back her grandfather's long-lost box, but she was still on point. With any luck, she'd be back in New York within twenty-four hours.

Tilting her head back on the pillow, she sighed and allowed herself a brief, awed absorption of her surroundings.

The headboard above her head was beyond anything she'd ever seen before. Made up of richly embroidered panels in red and ochres connected together with gold thread, it rose halfway to the ceiling. Resting on a raised dais, the bed itself boasted expensive satin sheets and a heavy coverlet in colours that complemented the rest of the room.

Allegra had grown up with enough wealth for her not to be reverential over most luxuries, and yet each new discovery in the Dar-Aman palace took her breath away.

Her gaze lowered and swung across the room to the exquisitely carved console table, on which rested six stunning pieces of art. The intricately designed eggs were immediately recognisable as the much-fabled Fabergé eggs once belonging to the Russian dynasty. And those weren't the only jaw-dropping items in the room.

Everywhere Allegra looked, objects of priceless beauty graced surfaces, from rare Egyptian coins in glass cabinets to solid gold bridal head ornaments from India.

The article she'd read on the plane had mentioned Rahim and his parents as being great collectors of art. But how could they find beauty in inanimate objects while the economy suffered?

A knock came on the door before she could let loose the frustration growling through her belly. At Allegra's beckon, Nura entered, her slippered feet gliding silently across the marble floor.

'Mistress, can I get you anything? Some tea and sandwiches, perhaps? Or I can summon your personal chef to prepare a light meal if you wish?'

'No, Earl Grey tea with a dash of lemon and sandwiches would be perfect, thank you.'

Nura lifted a nearby phone and relayed the request, then turned just as Allegra was making her way to the bathroom.

'You are travelling outside the city walls with His Highness this afternoon?' she enquired. At Allegra's nod, she continued. 'You're going to visit the Nur-Aram tribe. It is the place I was named after.' She smiled, then worry creased her youthful face. 'It is a difficult place to get to. The journey can be quite rough.'

'It's fine,' Allegra reassured. 'I've visited worse places, I'm sure.'

Nura continued to look worried, but then dashed forward when Allegra reached the wide marble bathtub. 'I will draw your bath for you, Mistress.'

'Please, call me Allegra.'

Nura looked horrified, her soft brown eyes widening in alarm. 'No, I cannot.'

Surprised, Allegra asked, 'Why not?'

'Because it would be disrespectful to call a mistress of His Highness by her first name.'

Allegra wasn't sure why her stomach dropped and rolled with such acrobatic skill it would've made an elite athlete proud. She was pretty sure something had been lost in translation. Or assumptions had been made because of where Rahim had placed her in his palace? 'Are there a lot of mistresses in this wing?' she blurted before she could stop herself.

Nura nodded. 'At this time of the year, all of the fifteen residences are occupied.'

Nausea rose in Allegra's belly. She tried to bite her tongue, but the next question spilled out anyway. 'And all the fifteen occupants...they're related to Sheikh Rahim?'

Nura looked puzzled as she straightened from checking the temperature of the four gold-plated taps that gushed water into the cavernous bath. 'No, they are not His Highness's relations. But they're very important to him.'

Allegra tried to laugh but the sound came out skewed. 'Wow, next you'll be telling me there's a secret passage between this wing and the sheikh's bedchamber, like in the movies.'

Nura's laugh was more natural, a shy twinkle in her eye as she plucked warming towels from a rail and laid them within arm's reach of the bath. 'There is a connecting passage, but it's not secret. Everyone knows it is the last door along this hallway.'

Allegra's nausea increased. She'd visited enough cultures around the world on behalf of her charity to know that harems and the taking of concubines were still a thing, even in the twenty-first century.

She didn't know how else to ask the question burning on her tongue without coming straight out with it—does the sheikh keep concubines?—so she pulled hard on her diplomatic nerve and bit back the urge.

As detestable as the idea was, it was none of her business. Rahim Al-Hadi's sexual conquests, singular or numerous, shouldn't be something she wasted valuable time or brain matter over.

With a wrench at the master tap, she shut the water off. 'Thanks for your help, Nura. I've got it from here.'

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