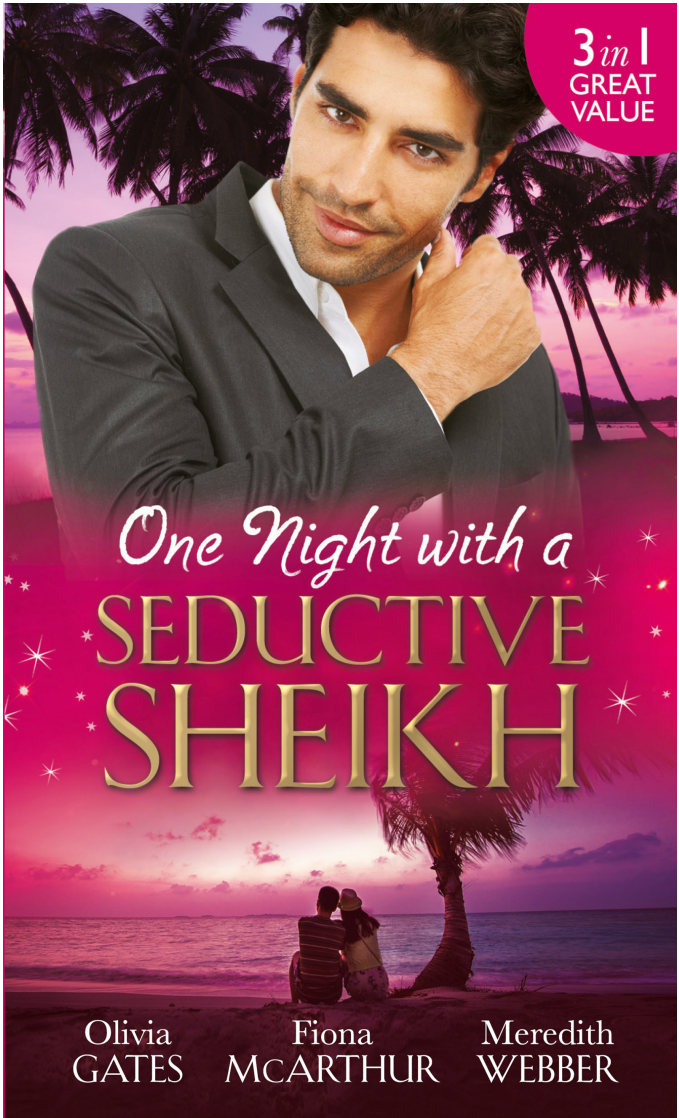
3 in 1
GREAT VALUE
One Night with a
SEDUCTIVE SHEIKH
Olivia GATES
Fiona McARTHUR
Meredith WEBBER

Fiona McArthur
Meredith Webber
Olivia Gates

One Night with a Seductive Sheikh: The Sheikh's Redemption / Falling for the Sheikh She Shouldn't / The Sheikh and the Surrogate Mum

Аннотация

Nights with the Sheikh are hotter than the desert sun! For Prince Haidar Aal Shalaan, taking the reins of his kingdom in chaos is a matter of honour. And then there is Roxanne Gleeson, the lover who once rejected him. He will not be denied the throne or Roxanne. Together they are…his redemption. Fiercely independent Carmen O'Shannessy's in trouble. Becoming temporary midwife to Zandorran royalty solves her financial woes, but working alongside sinfully gorgeous Prince Zafar sets her dreaming of Arabian nights with her enigmatic new boss. Expectant surrogate mum Liz Jones has come to Sheikh Khalifa's kingdom to do her job. But Liz feels giddy every

time she's around the handsome prince. It's probably just hormones – but their chemistry is distracting!

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The Sheikh's Redemption

Olivia Gates

It was fascinating, *shattering*, this glimpse into his past.

Another reminder that she hadn't known him at all, another proof of how unimportant she'd been—that he hadn't shared this with her, clearly a major incident in his life.

But it was worse than that. She'd believed he'd been born without the capacity for emotional involvement. It had been what had mitigated her heartache and humiliation. Believing he'd never given her what he hadn't had to give.

But his emotions existed. And they could be powerful, pure. It seemed that it took something profound to unearth it, like what he'd shared with others. Not as trivial as what he had with her.

The discovery had the knife that had long stopped turning in her heart stabbing it all over again.

Dear Reader,

Writing Haidar Aal Shalaan's story was a surprise with each word. He first appeared in *Pride of Zohayd*, his half-brothers' trilogy. In the last book, *To Touch a Sheikh*, he found out his mother was conspiring to depose his father and brothers to make him king. But even though he did all he could to abort her conspiracy, I knew then that it wouldn't end with him a hero and the near-catastrophe forgotten, or forgiven.

And it wasn't, least of all by him. As I wrote his story, he showed me his turmoil over his dichotomy, a man both blessed and cursed by birth. He shared with me how he'd had to fight all his life against what he thought to be his inherited nature, which he believed had cost him everyone he'd ever loved and stigmatized him forever. He was on a mission to redeem himself from the taint of his mother's treachery, and to reclaim his heart from the woman who'd once trodden all over it. I thought he'd be a stoic, vengeful, hot-blooded knight of the desert as he accomplished both missions.

But he kept surprising me, demonstrating his duality in every word and action. He was fierce yet tender, unyielding yet flexible, unstoppable yet vulnerable and most of all, the last thing I expected him to be, he was funny. And fun. And boy, was he irresistible for it. His heroine, Roxanne, wholeheartedly agrees.

I truly hope you enjoy Haidar and his journey toward making

peace with himself—and finally loving Roxanne well—as much as I did.

I love to hear from readers, so e-mail me at oliviagates@gmail.com. And please stay connected with me on Facebook at my fan page, Olivia Gates Author, and on Twitter, @OliviaGates.

Thanks for reading!

Olivia

About the Author

OLIVIA GATES has always pursued creative passions such as singing and handicrafts. She still does, but only one of her passions grew gratifying enough, consuming enough, to become an ongoing career—writing.

She is most fulfilled when she is creating worlds and conflicts for her characters, then exploring and untangling them bit by bit, sharing her protagonists' every heart-wrenching heartache and hope, their every heart-pounding doubt and trial, until she leads them to an indisputably earned and gloriously satisfying happy ending.

When she's not writing, she is a doctor, a wife to her own alpha male and a mother to one brilliant girl and one demanding Angora cat. Visit Olivia at www.oliviagates.com.

To my mom. The most courageous, persevering and accomplished woman I know. Thanks for being you.

Prologue

Twenty-four years ago

The slap fell on Haidar's face, stinging it on fire.

Before he could gasp, another fell on his other cheek, harder, backhanded this time. A ring encrusted in precious stones dragged a ragged line of pain into his flesh.

Disoriented, he heard a crack of thunder as tears misted his sight. Admonishments boomed again as more slaps tossed Haidar's head from side to side. One finally shattered his balance, sent him crashing to his knees. Tears singed the fresh cut like a harsh antiseptic, mingling with the blood.

A tranquil voice broke over him. "Shed more tears, Haidar, and I'll have you thrown in the dungeon. For a week."

He swallowed, stared up at the person he loved most in life, incomprehension paralyzing him.

Why was she *doing* this?

His mother had never laid a hand on him. He'd never even gotten the knuckle raps or ear twists his twin, Jalal, drove her to reward his mischief with. He was her favorite. She told him so, showed him her esteem and preference in every way.

But there *had* been times lately when she'd been displeased with him, when he'd done nothing wrong. Actually, when he'd done something praiseworthy. It had bewildered him. Still, nothing could have prepared him for her out-of-the-blue, ice-

cold fury just when he'd expected her to shower him with approval.

She stared down from her majestic height, looking as he'd always imagined a goddess of myth would, her eyes arctic. "Don't compound your stupidity with whimpering. Stand up and take your punishment like your twin always does—with dignity and courage."

Haidar almost blurted out that it was Jalal—*and* their cousin Rashid—who deserved the punishment. The "experiment" he'd warned them against and had refused to take part in had caused the fire that had consumed a whole chamber in the palace and ruined his and Jalal's tenth birthday party.

Being habitually wild and reckless, Jalal and Rashid had long depleted their second chances with their elders. Their punishment would have been severe. Being the one with a track record of caution and commitment, his reserve of leniency was intact. So he'd stepped forward as the accidental culprit.

Just when his confession had garnered what he'd expected from his and Jalal's father and Rashid's guardian—surprise followed by acceptance of his explanation and dismissal of the whole debacle—his mother had walked up to him.

Her eyes had told him she knew what had really happened, and why he'd stepped forward. He'd expected admiration to follow the shrewdness that made him feel she could read his slightest thought. What had followed were the slaps that hadn't stopped even when her husband, the king of Zohayd, had ordered her to

cease.

Haidar rose and lifted a trembling hand to the sticky warmth oozing across his left cheekbone. She swatted it away.

"Now beg your twin's and cousin's forgiveness for being slow in coming clean about your thoughtless transgression, almost causing them to be punished in your stead."

Disbelief numbed him, chagrin seared his chest. It was one thing to take punishment for them, another to apologize *to* them, and in front of everyone present, relatives, servants … *girls!*

His mother clamped his face in a vicious grip, her long nails digging into his wound. *"Do it.*"

She released him with a shove, made him stumble around to face Jalal and Rashid. They were staring at their feet, faces red, chests heaving.

"Jalal, Rashid, look at Haidar." His mother now spoke as Queen Sondoss of Zohayd, her voice clear and commanding, carrying to the whole ballroom. "Don't spare him the disgrace of groveling for your forgiveness in front of everyone."

Jalal's and Rashid's gazes wavered up to her before turning to him, apology and contrition blazing in their eyes.

His mother prodded him with a head whack. "Tell them you're sorry, that you'll *never* do anything like this again."

Burning with mortification, he looked into his twin's eyes, then into his distant cousin and best friend's, and repeated her words.

"I didn't do it!"

Haidar blurted the words out as his mother finished dressing his wound. Now that they were in the privacy of her chambers, he had to exonerate himself, if only in her eyes.

Her smile was filled with pride and love as she kissed the injury she'd inflicted. "I know." So he'd been right! "I know everything. Certainly about you and Jalal and that rascal Rashid."

His confusion deepened. "Then … *why?*"

She cupped his cheek tenderly. "It was a lesson, Haidar. I wanted to show you that even your twin and best friend wouldn't say a word to spare you. Now you know that no one deserves your intervention or sacrifice. Now you know to trust no one. Most important, you know what humiliation feels like, and you'll always do anything you must to never suffer it again."

His head spun at her explanations, their implications.

He didn't want to believe her, but—she was always right.

Was she about this, too?

She came down beside him, hugged him. "You're the only true part of me and I'll do anything so that you never get hurt, so that you become the man who will get everything you deserve. This world at your feet. Do you understand why I had to hurt you?"

Shaken by the new perspective she'd shown him, he nodded. Mainly because he wanted to get away, to think.

She stroked his hair and crooned, "That's my boy."

Eight years ago

"You're just like Mother."

Haidar flinched as if from a teeth-loosening slap.

Jalal was twisting the knife that had been embedded in his chest ever since they'd been old enough to realize what their mother was. What she was called. The Demon Queen.

To Haidar's heartache, no matter his personal feelings for her, he'd been forced to concede the title had been well earned.

While his mother possessed unearthly beauty and breathtaking intelligence and talents, she wielded her endowments like lethal weapons. She flaunted being *unpolluted* by the foolish weakness of benevolence. Instead of using her blessings to gain allies, she collected cowed servants and cohorts. And she relished making enemies, the first of which being her own husband.

If it weren't for her fierce love for her sons, or for him mainly and to a lesser degree, for Jalal, he would have doubted she was human at all.

But what had always tormented Haidar was that the older he got, the more he realized what a "true part" of her he was. He'd felt the taint of her temperament, the chronic disease of her traits spreading inside him. He'd lived in fear that they'd one day obliterate his decent and compassionate components.

It was ironic that Jalal had thrown that similarity in his face now, when he'd been feeling his mother's shadow recede, her legacy loosening its noose from around his thoughts and inclinations. Ever since he'd met Roxanne …

"I take it back." Jalal, the twin who resembled him the least of probably anyone in the world, shook his head in disgust. "You're

worse than her. And *that* I didn't think was possible."

"You talk as if she's a monster."

They'd never spoken this openly about their mother. They'd been speaking less and less about anything at all.

Jalal shrugged, the movement nonchalant but eloquent with leashed force. A reminder that though they were similar in size and strength, Jalal was the … physical one.

"And I love her nonetheless. But that's the unreasoning affection a mother wrings from her child. You don't get the same leniency. Not on *this*. This is one instance where I cannot, *will* not, rationalize or forgive your heartlessness."

Unable to deal with his twin's disapproval any better than he ever had, he let the fury and suspicion that had brought him to this confrontation take over. "So this is your strategy? Like they say in Azmahar, 'Yell accusations lest your opponent beats you'?"

"It's you who are resorting to 'Hit and weep, preempt and cry foul.'"

Jalal's derision scraped his already raw nerves. "I never suspected you'd be such a sore loser when Roxanne chose me."

Jalal snorted, his eyes smoldering like black ice. "You mean when she was manipulated by you. *Conned* by you."

Haidar suppressed another spurt of indignation, the frost at his core resurfacing. "Can't find a more realistic excuse for trying to steal her from me? We both know I can get any woman I want without even trying, no manipulation involved."

"You couldn't have gotten Roxanne without it. She saw you for

the ice-cold fish that you are that first night. It must have taken some Academy Award–winning acting to create the fictional character that she fell for."

Haidar had never resorted to violence, not even while growing up among an abundance of male-only relatives who relished rough … resolutions. He'd always suppressed his temper, used cold deliberation to outmaneuver them. Now he wanted to smash in Jalal's well-arranged face.

He gritted down on the urge. "The fact remains—she's *mine*."

"And you have been treating her like property. Worse, like a dirty secret, making her hide your intimacies from even her mother, forcing her to watch you flaunt the other women 'you have without even trying' in public. You told her they're decoys to draw suspicion away from her, right? It must be killing her, even if she believes your self-serving lies. I can't imagine what it would do to her if she knew you'd been playing her from the start, that she's just another source to feed your monstrous ego."

Haidar vibrated with a charge that seemed as if it would burst his every cell if it wasn't released. "And you know all about her supposed turmoil because you're her selfless confidant, right? And you want to take your so-called friendship from your squash dates into her bed. Well, hard luck. That's where I am. Constantly."

Jalal's snarl felt like an uppercut. "Very gentlemanly of you, to kiss and tell."

"No need for evasions since you know we're intimate. And

still you try to take her away from me."

"You don't even want her," Jalal hissed. "You seduced her to beat me. She's just a pawn in another of your power games."

"You were the one who started *that* game, as you've conveniently forgotten."

"I forgot about that silly bet in five minutes. But you took it like you take everything, with obsessive competition. You went all out to entrap her."

"And you're out to save her from monstrous me? You're admitting you want her for yourself?"

Jalal's jaw hardened. "I won't let you use her anymore."

Rage blotched Haidar's vision. He wanted to pulverize Jalal's convictions. Arguments and defenses pummeled his mind. Then he opened his mouth and something from the repertoire of his lifelong rivalry with his closest yet furthest person came out.

A taunt. "How are you going to stop me?"

Jalal shot him a lethal glance. "I'll tell her everything."

His head almost burst.

Out of the rants clanging there, he snarled only "Good luck."

If he'd thought he'd seen antipathy in his twin's eyes before, he was wrong. *This* was the real thing. "Nothing good can come of this. You're not only like Mother—you inherited the worst of both sides of our families. You're manipulative and jealous, cold and controlling, and you have to win no matter the cost. It's time I exposed your true face to her."

Haidar's blood charred with the futility of watching this train

wreck. “There’s one hitch in that plan. If you do, it won’t only be my face she won’t want to see again, but yours, too.”

“I’m okay with losing Roxanne, as long as you lose her, too.”

The detonation of fury and frustration shattered his brakes. “If you tell her, Jalal, never show me *your* face again.”

Bleakness spread in Jalal’s eyes. “I’m okay with that, too.”

A door closed, aborting the salvo of reckless bitterness he would have volleyed at his twin’s intention.

Roxanne.

As she walked into the sitting room, his blood heated, his breath shortened. Her effect on him deepened with every exposure. Even when he *had* thought theirs would be a mutually satisfying liaison that would end when his fascination dissipated. Until her, he hadn’t suspected himself capable of attaining such heights of emotion, plumbing such depths of passion.

She was fire made flesh, incandescent in beauty, tempestuous in spirit, consuming in power. And she was his.

He had to prove it, know it, once and for all.

The fear that she had feelings for Jalal had been compromising his sanity. His mother’s passing comment about how Roxanne and Jalal shared so much had colored his view of their deepening closeness. But dread had taken root when he’d realized Roxanne had revealed the essence of her self to Jalal but not him. That had snapped his restraint, forced him to have this confrontation with both of them.

Jalal had made his position clear.

But it wouldn't matter, not if she chose *him*. As she had to.

He tried to get confirmation from the hunger that always ignited in her eyes at the sight of him. But for the second she spared him the touch of her focus, her eyes were blank. Then they swept to Jalal.

Haidar pounced on her, his fingers digging into her flesh, almost vicious in their urgency, his heart thundering. "Tell Jalal that he can't come between us no matter what he does or says. Tell him that you're mine."

Her face became a canvas of stupefaction. Then it set in hardness, her eyes becoming emerald icicles. She knocked his hands off as if they soiled her. "That's why you so imperatively demanded I drop everything? How creepy can you get?"

It was his turn to gape. "Creepy? And this *is* imperative. I've sensed Jalal developing … misconceptions about you. I had to nip them in the bud."

Her eyes narrowed into lasers of anger and disgust. "I don't care what you 'sensed.' You don't get to summon me as if I'm one of your lackeys, and you can't trick me into a confrontation where you go all territorial on me and demand I parrot back what you say. You're the one who's under the misconception that you have any claim to me."

His heart slowed to an excruciating thud, the pillars of his mind shuddering. "I have a claim. The one you gave me when you came to my bed, when you said you love me."

"You do remember *when* I said it, don't you?" When he'd been

arousing her to insanity and driving her to shattering orgasms. "But thanks for bringing things to a head. I'm going back to the States, and I was debating how to say goodbye. You men always take a woman walking away as a blow to your sexual ego, and it gets messy. I was worried that it would get extra messy with you, being the Prince of Two Kingdoms with an ego the size of both."

His shook his head, as if from too many blows. "Stop it."

She gave a careless shrug. "Sure, let's do stop it. You were the best candidate for the exotic fling I wanted to have while living here. But since I decided to move back to the States, I knew I had to end it with you. I have needs, as you know, and no matter how good in bed you are, I'm not about to wait until you drop by to satisfy them. I have to find a new regularly available stud. Or three. But a word of advice—don't pull that territorial crap on *your* new women. It's really off-putting. And it makes me unable to say goodbye with any goodwill. Now that I know what kind of power you imagined you had over me, I'm so turned off I don't want to ever see or hear from you again."

He watched her turn around, walk in measured steps out of the room.

In seconds the penthouse door closed with a muted thud, the very sound of rejection, of humiliation.

From the end of a collapsing tunnel he heard a macabre distortion of Jalal's voice. "What do you know? She has sharper instincts than I gave her credit for, took you only as seriously as you took her. Seems I shouldn't have worried about her."

He looked at Jalal through what felt like a stranger's eyes. "You should worry about yourself. If you ever show me your face again."

The twin he barely recognized now looked back at him with the same deadness. "Don't worry. I think it's time I detoxified my life of your presence."

Haidar stared into nothingness long after Jalal had disappeared. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

Jalal should have told him he'd never trespass on the sanctity of his relationship with his woman. Roxanne should have denounced his doubts as ludicrous.

He should have had his twin back and his lover forever.

Those he'd thought closest to him shouldn't have walked away from him. But they had.

Trust no one.

His mother's words reverberated in his head. She'd been right.

He'd ignored her wisdom at a cost he might not survive.

Never again.

One

The Present

It wasn't every day a man was offered a throne.

When that man was Haidar, it should have been a matter of never.

But the people of Azmahar—at least, the clans that made up a good percentage of the kingdom's population—had offered just that.

They'd sent their best-spoken representatives to demand, cajole, *plead* for him to be their candidate in the race for the vacant throne of Azmahar. He'd thought they were kidding.

He'd kept his straightest face on to match their earnest efforts, pretending to accept, to brainstorm his campaign and the policy direction for a kingdom that was coming apart at the seams.

When he'd realized they were serious—*then* he'd gotten angry.

Were they out of their minds, offering him the throne of the kingdom that his closest maternal kin had almost destroyed, and his paternal ones had just dealt the killing blow? Who in Azmahar would want him to set foot there again, let alone rule the damn place?

They'd insisted they represented those who saw him as the savior Azmahar needed.

One thing Haidar had never imagined himself as was a savior.

It was a genetic impossibility.

How could he be a savior when he was demon spawn?

According to his estranged twin, he amalgamated the worst of his colorful gene pool in a new brand of bad. His recruiters had countered that he mixed the best of the lofty bloodlines running through his veins, would be Azmahar's perfect king.

"King Haidar ben Atef Aal Shalaan."

He tried the words out loud.

They sounded like a premium load of bull. Not only the "king" part. The names themselves sounded—*felt*—like lies. They no longer felt as if they indicated him. *Belonged* to him.

Had they ever?

He wasn't an Aal Shalaan, after all. Not a real one like his older brothers. Without the incontrovertible proof of their heritage stamped all over Jalal, he'd bet cries would have risen that *he* didn't belong to King Atef. From all evidence, he belonged, flesh, blood and spirit, to the Aal Munsoori family. To his mother. The Demon Queen.

The *ex*–Demon Queen.

Too bad he could never be ex–demon spawn.

His mother had besieged him from birth with her fear that her abhorred enemy, the Aal Shalaans, starting with her husband and his older sons, would taint him, the "true part" of her. She'd made sure they had no part of him. Starting with his name.

From the moment she'd laid eyes on her newborn sons, she'd seen that he was the one who was a replica of her, hadn't bothered

thinking of a name for his twin. Their father had named Jalal, proclaiming him the "grandeur" of the Aal Shalaans. Jalal was doing a bang-up job proving their father's ambitious claims right.

She'd named *him*. Haidar, the lion, one type of king. She'd been plotting to make him one that far back. When she'd known it was impossible. Through non-insurrectionist means, that was.

As a princess of Azmahar, she'd entered into the marriage of state with the king of Zohayd knowing her half-Azmaharian sons would not be in line to the throne. As per succession rules, only purely Zohaydan princes could play the game of thrones.

So she'd plotted, apparently from day one, to take Zohayd apart, then put it back together with herself in charge. She would have then been able to dictate new laws that would make her sons the only ones eligible for the throne, with him being first in line.

Two years after her conspiracy had been discovered and aborted, he still had moments when denial choked him up.

She could have caused a war. She would have, gladly, if it had gained her her objective.

She'd stolen the Pride of Zohayd jewels that conferred the right to rule the kingdom. She'd planned to give them to Prince Yusuf Aal Waaked, ruling prince of Ossaylan, so that he could dethrone her husband and claim the throne. Having only a daughter and being unable to sire another child, he would have named *her* sons his successors.

Haidar imagined she would have gone all black widow on Yusuf right after his sitting on the throne in the *joloos*,

intimidated her brother—the newly abdicated king of Azmahar—into abdicating then, and put *him*, her firstborn by seven minutes, on the throne of a new superkingdom comprising Zohayd, Azmahar and Ossaylan.

She'd had such heartfelt convictions for such a heartlessly ambitious plan. When he'd pleaded with her to tell him where she'd hidden the jewels, to save Zohayd from chaos and herself from a traitor's fate, she'd calmly, *lovingly*, stated those convictions as facts.

After heavy initial damage, her plans were for the ultimate good. For who better than he to unite these kingdoms, lead them to a future of power and prosperity instead of the ruin they were heading for under the infirm hands of old fools and their deficient successors? He, the embodiment of the best of the Aal Munsooris? She was certain he'd one day surpass even her in everything.

He'd heard *that* before. According to Jalal, he already had.

But no matter what he'd thought her capable of, what she'd done had surpassed his worst predictions. And as usual, without obtaining his consent, let alone his approval, she'd executed her plans with seamless precision to force his "deserved greatness" on him. She'd been positive he'd come to appreciate what she'd done, embrace the role she'd tailored for him.

And she could have so easily succeeded.

Even Amjad, his oldest brother and now king of Zohayd, who suspected everything that moved, hadn't suspected her. As queen

of Zohayd, she had seemed to have as much to lose as anyone if her husband was deposed. Ingenious.

He recognized that convoluted, long-term premeditation in his own mind and methods. But he consciously confined it to business, driving himself to the top of his tech-development and investment field in record-breaking time. His mother used her intricate intelligence with every breath.

"Please, fasten your seat belt, Your Highness."

He swept his gaze up to the flight attendant. He'd almost forgotten he was on board his private jet.

The beautiful brunette could have said, *Please, unfasten me*, for all the invitation in her eyes. She'd jump on the least measure of response in his attitude.

He regarded her with his signature impassiveness, which had frozen hardened tycoons and brazen media people in their tracks.

Her color heightened. "We are landing."

He clicked his seat belt into place. "As I gathered."

She tried again. "Will you be needing anything?"

"La, *Shokrun*." He looked away, dismissing her.

Once she'd turned, he watched her undulate away, sighed.

He would order Khaleel to assign her a desk job. And to confine his immediate personnel to men, or women at least twenty years his senior.

He exhaled again, peered from his window at Durrat Al Sahel —the Pearl of the Coast—Azmahar's capital. From up here he had an eagle-eye view of the crisis he'd been called upon to

wrestle with.

He'd thought he'd seen the worst of it in the oil spill off the coast. The ominous blackness tainting the emerald waters was terrible enough. But seeing the disorganization and deterioration even from this altitude was a candid demonstration of how deep the problem ran. How hard it would be to fix.

His heart tightened as the pilot started the final descent, bringing more details into sharper focus.

Azmahar. The other half of his heritage. Decaying.

What a crushing pity.

He hadn't thought he'd ever see this place again. The day Roxanne had walked out on him, he'd left Azmahar swearing he'd never return.

He wasn't only returning—he'd promised to consider the kingship candidacy. He'd made the proviso that his return would be unannounced, that he'd make his own covert investigations and reach a decision uninfluenced by more sales pitches or pleas.

He was still stunned he'd conceded that much. From all evidence, this was one catastrophic mistake in the making.

Life really had a way of giving a man reason to commit the unreasonable.

After his fatherland had rejected him, his motherland claimed to be desperate for his intervention. Investigating if he could be the one to offer it salvation was near irresistible.

He also had to admit, the idea of redeeming himself was too powerful a lure. No matter that logic separated him from his

mother's treachery, the fact remained. Her actions *had* skewered into his very identity, which had already been compromised from birth by her influence. Her most outrageous transgression had tarnished his honor and image, no matter what his family said. Most of them, anyway.

Jalal had less favorable views. Of course.

Jalal. Another reason he was considering this.

His twin was another candidate for the throne, after all.

Then there was Rashid. His and Jalal's best friend turned bitterest rival. And yet another candidate.

Was it any wonder he was tempted?

Trouncing those two blowhards was an end unto itself.

So whether it was duty, redemption or rivalry that drove him, each reason was imperative on its own.

But none of them was the true catalyst that had him Azmahar-bound now.

Roxanne was.

She was back in Azmahar.

He took it as the fates nudging him to stop trying not to think of her. As he'd done for eight years. *Eight* years.

Way past high time he ended her occupation of his memories, her near monopoly of his bitterness. He had enough unfinishable business. He would lay the ghost of her share of it to rest.

He would damn well exorcise it.

"… repercussions and resolutions, Ms. Gleeson?"

Roxanne blinked at the distinguished, silver-haired man

looking expectantly at her.

Sheikh Aasem Al-Qadi had been her liaison to the interim government since she'd started this post two months ago. And she had to concentrate to remember who he was, and what he—hell, what *she*—was doing here.

She cleared her throat and mind. "As you know, this affects the whole region and many intertwining international entities, each with their own complexities, interests and ideas about how to handle the situation. A rushed study would only cause more misinformation and complications."

The man raised an elegant hand adorned with an onyx-set silver ring, his refined face taking on an even more genial cast. "The last thing I intend to do is rush you, Ms. Gleeson." And if he did, he knew nothing about her if he thought an inperson nudge would make her step up her efforts. She and her team had been flat out digging in that sea. "I'm merely hoping for a more hands-on role in your investigations, and if it's available, a look at a timeline for your intended work plan."

"I assure you, you'll be the first to know when a realistic timeline can be set." She tried on the smile she'd long practiced, formal and friendly at once, which always gained her cooperation. "And my team could certainly do with the highlevel insider's perspective you'd bring to the table."

After much cordiality and what she felt was a reaffirmed faith in her effectiveness, Sheikh Al-Qadi left her office.

She leaned against the door she'd closed behind him, groaned.

What *was* she doing here?

So this post *was* a politico-economic analyst's holy grail. And she *had* been bred for the role. But it had brought her back to where she could stumble upon Haidar.

She'd been certain she wouldn't. She'd kept track of him, and he'd never come back to Azmahar. And then, she was no longer the girl who'd fallen head over heels in love with him. She was one of the most sought-after analyst-strategists in the field now, Azmahar being her third major post. If the "ax lodged in the head," as they said here, and she did meet him, she'd treat him with the neutrality and diplomacy of the professional that she was.

But she wouldn't have risked it if not for her mother.

When all you had in the way of family was your mother, a word from her wielded unfair power. She hadn't stood a chance when her mother had shed tears as she'd insisted that this post, an expanded version of *her* old job, was *her* redemption, the perfect apology for the way *she'd* been driven from Azmahar in shame.

When Roxanne had argued that they should have been reinstating *her*, she'd revealed she had been offered the job but didn't want to come out of retirement. It was Roxanne who was building her career, who was in the unique position of possessing her mother's knowledge along with her own fresh perspective and intrepid methods. She'd been the second on the two-candidate shortlist for this post, and the only one with the skill set to make a difference in it now.

She'd capitulated, signed on and packed up. And she'd been excited. There was so much to fix in Azmahar.

According to Azmaharians, the one thing King Nedal had done right since his *joloos* decades ago was arrange his sister Sondoss's marriage to King Atef Aal Shalaan, winning them Zohayd's alliance. Which had nearly been severed by Sondoss herself, the snake-in-the-grass mother of that premium serpent, Haidar.

Roxanne had no doubt Sondoss's exile-instead-of-imprisonment verdict had been wheedled out of the Aal Shalaans by Haidar, who could seduce the stripes off a tiger.

But when Amjad had become king, everyone had thought the first thing he'd do was deal Azmahar the killing blow of letting go of its proverbial hand. He hadn't owed his ex-stepmother's homeland any mercy. Strangely enough, he hadn't ended the alliance.

Then, one month after she'd arrived, all hell had broken loose.

The arrogant fool of a now ex–crown prince had voted against Zohayd for an armed intervention in a neighboring country in the region's latest defense summit, snapping the tenuous tolerance Amjad had maintained for Azmahar. And the kingdom that had been held together by the glue of its ally's clout had come apart.

Just as Azmahar was gasping from the alienation, catastrophe struck. An explosion in one of its major oil drills caused a massive spill off its shores. Unable to deal with the upheavals, in response to the national and regional outcry, the overwhelmed

and disgraced king had abdicated.

His brothers and sons, held as responsible, would no longer succeed him. Azmahar was in chaos, and Roxanne was one of those called upon to contain the situation, internally and internationally, as the most influential clans started fighting among themselves.

Out of the anarchy, consolidations had formed, splitting the kingdom into three fronts. Each backed one man for new king.

One of the candidates was Haidar.

Which meant he would come back. And she *would* stumble upon him.

She wanted that as much as she wanted a hole in the heart.

Then again, he'd already pulverized hers.

She cursed under her breath. This was ancient history, and she was probably blowing it out of proportion, anyway. She'd been a twenty-one-year-old only child who'd been sheltered into having the emotional resilience of a fourteen-year-old.

And *man*, had he been good. *Phenomenal* wouldn't do him justice.

It had only been expected that she'd gotten addicted, physically, emotionally. Then she'd woken up. End of story.

She'd moved on, had eventually engaged in other relationships. One could have worked, too. That it hadn't had had nothing to do with that mega-endowed, sizzling-blooded, frigid-hearted creature.

God. She was being cornered into defending her feelings and

failures by a memory. Worse. By an illusion. Beyond pathetic.

She pushed away from the door, strode to her desk, snatched up her briefcase and purse, and headed out of the office.

It took her twenty minutes to drive across the city. One thing this place had was an amazing transportation system. Zohaydan —planned, funded and constructed.

It *would* take a miracle to pull Azmahar's fat out of the fire without Zohayd. No wonder Azmaharians were desperate to get their former ally back in their corner. And a good percentage of them had decided on the only way to do that. Put the embodiment of the Zohayd/Azmahar merger on the throne.

But as people in general were addicted to dispute, and Azmaharians were no different, they couldn't agree on which one. But disunity would serve them well now. Going after the two specimens in existence doubled their odds of having one end up on the throne.

She turned through the remote-controlled gates of the highest-end residential complex in the capital. This job came with so many perks it … unsettled her. Luxury of this level always did.

When she'd asked for more moderate accommodations, she'd been assured the project's occupancy had suffered from so many investors leaving the kingdom. They hoped her presence would stimulate renewed interest in the facility.

Seemed they'd been right. Since she'd moved in, the influx of tenants had tripled. One neighbor had told her her reputation, and her mother's, had preceded her, and her presence had many

investors feeling secure enough to trickle back to Azmahar, considering it a sign things would soon be put back on track.

Yeah. Sure. *No* pressure whatsoever.

But the "privilege" she dreaded was being at ground zero with every big shot who would grace the kingdom as the race for the throne began. Word was, none of the candidates had announced a position or plans to show up. That only made stumbling across Haidar a matter of later instead of sooner.

She would give anything for never.

But then, she would give anything for a number of things. Her mother with her. A father. Any family at all.

In minutes, she was entering the interior-decorating triumph of an apartment that spanned one-quarter of the thirty-thousand-foot thirtieth floor. She sighed in appreciation as fragrant coolness and calibrating lights enveloped her.

She headed for the shower, came out grinding her teeth a bit less harshly.

She would have thrived on rebuilding the kingdom's broken political and economic channels. But now the Aal Shalaan "hybrids," as they were called here, would feature heavily in this country's future—and consequently, partly in hers. Contemplating that wasn't conducive to her focus or peace of mind. And she needed both to deal with the barrage of information she had to weave into viable solutions. Even if a new king took the throne tomorrow, and he and Zohayd threw money and resources at Azmahar, it wouldn't be effective unless they

had a game plan …

An unfamiliar chime sundered the soundproof silence.

She started. Frowned. Then exhaled heavily.

Cherie was almost making her sorry she'd invited her to stay.

They'd been best friends when they'd gone to university here, and they'd kept in touch. Roxanne's return had coincided with Cherie's latest stormy split-up with her Azmaharian husband. She'd left everything behind, including credit cards.

After the height of the drama had passed, Roxanne should have rented her a place to stay while she sorted out her affairs.

Though she loved Cherie's gregarious company, her energy and unpredictability, Cherie took her "creative chaos" a bit too far. She went through her environment like a tornado, leaving anything from clothes to laptops to mugs on the floor, dishes rotting in the sink, and she regularly forgot basic order-and-safety measures.

Seemed she'd forgotten her key now, too.

Grumbling, Roxanne stomped to the foyer, snarling when the bell clanged again. She pounced on the door, yanked it open. And everything screeched to a halt.

Her breath. Her heart. Her mind. The whole world.

Across her threshold …

Haidar.

Air clogged in her lungs. Everything blipped, swam, as the man she remembered in distressing detail moved with deadly, tranquil grace, leaned his left arm on her door frame. His gaze

slid from her face down her body, making her feel as if he'd scraped every nerve ending raw, before returning to her sizzling eyes, a slow smile spreading across his painstakingly sculpted lips.

"You know, Roxanne, I've been wondering for eight years."

The lazy, lethal melody emanating from his lips swamped her. His smile morphed into what a bored predator must give his prey before he finished it off with one swat.

"How soon after you left me did you find yourself a new regularly available stud? Or three?"

Two

Something finally flickered in Roxanne's mind.

Not an actual thought. Just … *Wow*.

Wow. Over and over.

She didn't know how long it took the loop of *wows* to fade, to allow their translation to filter through her gray matter.

So *this* was what eight years had made of Haidar Aal Shalaan.

Most men looked better in their thirties than they did in their twenties. Damn them. A good percentage improved still in their forties, and even fifties. The loss of the smoothness of youth seemed to define their maleness, infuse them with character.

In Haidar's case, she'd thought there had been no room for improvement. At twenty-six he'd seemed to have already realized his potential for perfection.

But … wow. Had photographic evidence and her projections ever been misleading! He'd matured from the epitome of gorgeousness into force-of-nature-level manifestation of masculinity. Her imagination short-circuited trying to project what he'd look like, *feel* like, in another decade. Or three.

His body had bulked up with a distillation of symmetry and strength. His face had been carved with lines of untrammeled power and ruthlessness. He'd become a god of virility and sensuality, hewn from the essence of both. As harsh as the desert's terrain, as menacing as its nights. And as brutally,

searingly, freezingly magnificent.

Whatever softness had once gentled his beauty, warmed the frost she'd always suspected formed his core, had been obliterated.

"Well, Roxanne?" He cocked that perfectly formed head, sending the blue-black silk that rained to his as-dark collar sifting to one side. She would have shivered had her body been capable of even involuntary reactions. She could actually hear the sighing caress of thick, polished layers against as-soft material. Mockery tugged at his lips, enhanced the slant in his eyes. He could see, feel her reaction. Of course. He was triggering it at will. "I've had bets about which of us found a replacement faster."

"Why bet on a sure thing? I had to settle in back home, reenroll in university before I started recruiting. That took time. All *you* had to do was order a stand-in—or rather a lie-in—from your waiting list that same day."

His eyebrows shot up.

If he was surprised, it wasn't any more than she was.

Where had all that come from?

Seemed she had more resentment bottled up than she'd known. And his appearance had shaken out all the steam. Good to depressurize and get it over with.

"Touché." He inclined his head, his eyes filling with lethal humor. "I was in error. The subject of the bets shouldn't have been how long until you found replacements, but how many you found. I was just being faithful in quoting your parting words

when I said a stud or three. But from … intimate knowledge of the magnitude of your … needs, I would bet you've gone through at least thirty."

Her first instinct was to take off his head with one slashing rejoinder. She swallowed the impulse, felt it scald her insides.

No matter how she hated his guts and his nerve in showing up on her doorstep, damn his incomparable eyes, he was important. Vital even. To Azmahar. To the whole damn mess. His influence was far-reaching, in the region and the world. And he had the right mix of genes in the bargain.

And then, she wasn't just a woman who was indignant to find an ex-lover at her door unannounced, but also one of the main agents in smoothing out this crisis. Whether he became king or not, he could be—*should* be—a major component in the solution she would formulate. She should rein in further retorts, drag out the professional she prided herself had tamed her innate wildness and steer this confrontation away from petty one-upmanship.

Then she opened her mouth. "By the rate *you* were going through women when I was around, you must be in the vicinity of three hundred." Before she could give herself a mental kick, the bedevilment in his smile rose, prodded her on instead. "What? I missed a zero? Is it closer to three thousand?"

He threw his head back and laughed.

Her heart constricted on what felt like a burning coal. The sound, the sight, was so merry, so magnificent, so—so … missed, even if she didn't remember him laughing like this …

"You mean 'regularly available' … um, what *is* the feminine counterpart for stud? Nymph? Siren?" He leveled his gaze back at her, dark, rich, intoxicating laughter still revving deep in his expansive chest. "But that number would pose a logistical dilemma. Even the biggest harem would overflow with that many nubile bodies. Or did you mean three thousand in sequence?"

She glared at him. "I'm sure you can handle either a concurrent or a sequential scenario."

He let out another laugh. "I *knew* I should have approached you for endorsements. But I also have to burst your bubble. Whatever tales you heard of my … exploits were wildly exaggerated. I had to prioritize, after all, and other lusts took precedence. Success, power, money. The drive to acquire and sustain those doesn't mix well with deflating one's libido in a steady supply of feminine arms. And then, time is not only all of the above, it is finite. You know how time-consuming women can be."

Her lips twisted, with derision, with the twinge that still gripped her heart. "I don't. I'm still playing for the same team."

His eyes turned pseudo-amazed. "You never even … went on loan? I would have thought someone with your … needs wouldn't mind widening her horizons where the pursuit of pleasure was concerned."

"Why? Have you? Widened your horizons?"

He let out another bark of distressingly virile amusement. "How can I, when I'm a caveman who's unable to develop beyond

my programming? The only thing I managed was to take your advice—purged myself of any trace of 'creepy territorial crap.'"

She reciprocated his razzing, sweeping his six-foot-five frame with disdain. By the time she came back to his eyes, she was kicking herself. It didn't do a woman's heart or hormones any good, getting a load of how his sculpted perfection filled, pushed, *strained* against his black-on-black clothes. Inviting touch, inciting madness …

She gritted her teeth against the moist heat spreading in her core. "And *that* must be the legendary eidetic memory some of you Aal Shalaans are said to possess. As if you need more blessings."

He slid an imperturbable glance down the foot between them. "If you feel we've received more than our fair share, you can take up your grievance with the fates." A sarcastic huff accompanied a head shake. "But if you think perfect recall is a blessing, you have evidently never been plagued by anything like it. True blessing lies in the ability to forget."

Her heart squeezed with something that confused her. Regret? Sympathy? Empathy?

No. That would indicate she was responding to something *he* felt. And everyone knew that the ability to feel was not among his abilities or vulnerabilities.

She narrowed her eyes, more exasperated with the chink in her resolve than with him. "Come to think of it, it *must* be terrible to have an infallible memory. There must be so much you would

have preferred to forget, or at least blur enough to rationalize and romanticize."

All traces of devilry vanished as he thrust his hands into his pockets. Her gaze dragged from his stunning face down to the silky material stretching across the potency she remembered in omnisensory detail …

"I can certainly do with some blurring to take the edge off at times." The predatory challenge flared again. "But one thing about possessing clarity that time doesn't dull—I make one hell of an unforgiving enemy, if I do say so myself."

She snorted. "Yeah. And I hear so many love you for it."

"Does it look like I'd want or even abide 'love'?"

His mock affront would have been irresistible if it wasn't also overwhelmingly goading. She felt just a second away from venting her unearthed frustration in a gnawing, clawing physical attack on this unfeeling monolith!

She exhaled. "That simpering, useless sentiment, huh? No. From what I hear, you want only obedience, blind, mute and dumb."

His smile was self-satisfaction itself. "And I get it, too. *Very* useful, and blessedly soothing, for someone in my position."

"Your mother's son to the last gene strand, aren't you?"

"I like to think I'm the updated and improved version."

His smirk made her want to drag him to her by the hair to taste those heartlessly sensual lips—and to bite them off.

Had he always been this … inflammatory?

He *had* been exasperating, unyielding in demanding his own way. And getting it. One way or another. Mainly one way. But she'd been so in love—or so in raging, blinding, enslaving lust—that the edge of fury his overriding tactics kept simmering beneath the blissful surface had only made everything she felt for him more explosive.

But now the addiction had been cured. Now that she knew what he was without a trace of the "rationalizing or romanticizing" she'd been guilty of heavily employing, she was reacting to him as she should have all along.

Yeah? With thinly suppressed hostility overlying a barely curbed resurgence of lust?

"Invite me in, Roxanne."

Her heart choked out another salvo of arrhythmia.

The electrifying invocation he made of his demand, her name.

She swallowed, trying to extricate herself from his influence, damning him and herself for how effortless it was for him, what a struggle it was for her. "You … you want to come in?"

"No, I came to conduct a verbal duel on your doorstep."

He moved forward and she surged to abort the step that would have taken him over her threshold. "I couldn't care less what you came to do. But said duel is done. Not so nice of you to drop by, Prince Aal Shalaan. Hope I don't see you again."

He resumed his former position, feet braced farther apart, hands in pockets again. "Tsk. All those reports lauding your ability to deal with the most thorny situations and the most

exasperating individuals must have been exaggerated."

"No one factored you in when they were gauging thorny exasperation. Even my super diplomacy powers have a limit."

"Or maybe I'm your kryptonite." His smile was now the essence of patience. A hunter with unlimited time to set up his quarry's downfall. "As much as I enjoyed our opening skirmish out here, I would continue our battle in a more private setting. For your sake, really. You're the one who lives here. Surely you don't want your neighbors to witness our … escalations?"

"Since those won't occur, there's nothing for them to witness. Nothing but your departing back." She started to shut the door.

The polished, maple surface met a palm with two-hundred-pounds-plus of sinew, muscle and maleness behind it.

"You know who I am, right?"

Her eyes widened. "You're pulling rank?"

"You think I use my status to get my way? How boring and juvenile would that be?"

"If you're not referring to being the all-powerful Prince of Two Kingdoms, what the hell was that threat about?"

"No threat. Just statement of fact. Take all the trappings away and who am I?"

The most magnificent male in history.

Out loud she seethed. "A huge pain?"

The look he gave her had all her hairs standing on end. "The son of the queen of bitches."

She stared at him. She couldn't agree more about his mother.

But she hadn't thought he had that brutal clarity about her, either, let alone would admit it.

She exhaled. "That you are."

Unperturbed, even satisfied by her agreement, his smile widened, raising the voltage of her distress. "So you realize how far I'll go to gain my objectives. Or do you need a demonstration?"

The seventy-five-hundred-square-foot apartment at her back closed in on her.

"Why is coming in even an objective? If I've aroused your confrontational beast, tell it to go back to sleep. We've used up all the digs we can make at each other. Anything else would be redundant, and neither of us likes to waste time."

His shrug was dismissal itself. "First, we're just getting warmed up. Second, surely you don't think I'll allow another abrupt ending between us? Eight years ago, you took me by surprise. *And* I was young and soft. Third, that was a rhetorical question, right? About why it's an objective to get inside … your personal space? You do look in the mirror on occasion? And you have an idea of how you look now?"

For the first time, she focused on how she must look. How she felt. Tiny and defenseless without her towering heels, business clothes and makeup, with her hair drying in a rioting jungle around her shoulders. With the added vulnerability of being just a bathrobe away from total nakedness.

She could almost feel his gaze slipping beneath the terry

cloth to explore, reminisce and appraise the changes eight years had wrought in the flesh he'd once thoroughly possessed and pleasured.

Judging he'd disrupted her to the desired level, he gestured, encompassing her. "Add all *that* to the delights of your tongue of mass destruction, and you're wondering about my motives?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Quote, 'How creepy can you get,' unquote. You think I'll invite a man twice my size, twenty times as strong and two million times as powerful in every other way into my 'personal space,' after he's made his lewd intentions clear?"

His face lost all lightness. "You think you won't be safe with me?"

Haidar might be many things, but to women he would always be master through pleasure, not pain; seduction, not coercion.

Unable to get rid of him that way, she exhaled. "No. But you *are* trying to persist your way in when I don't want you here."

A smile transformed his face back to the supreme male who knew the exact level of estrogen overproduction he commanded in females. "You do. I remember, in unfailing detail, how you want, Roxanne. My knowledge of your mind may be deficient, especially with eight years of maturity and experience, but your body hasn't changed, and I know everything about it. I can sense its every nuance, decipher its every signal."

She wrestled with the overwhelming urge to knee him.

Knowledge glittered in his eyes, threatened to snap her

control. “My sudden appearance rattled you. That made you defensive, and *that* made you angry. You want me to go only so you can regroup.”

One little kneeing. Surely it wouldn’t be too damaging. To her position.

His grin was designed to loosen her restraint another notch. “But you can get yourself together while I’m around. I’ll make myself a cup of tea until you do. You can even dress if you must. If you need the fortification of clothes, that is.”

“How condescending can you get?”

He inclined his head. “Condescending *is* several steps up from creepy. I must be evolving after all.”

“The jury will remain out on that.” He leaned more comfortably against her door frame, as if preparing to spend hours hanging around until he achieved his “objective.” She looked pointedly at the foot strategically placed across the threshold. “But I still advise you to leave now. You need your beauty sleep to deal with what awaits you here. I heard you were approached for a job. The top job.”

His expression remained unchanged, but she could feel his surprise. And dismay. He had hoped that was still a secret. Why?

He finally jerked one formidable shoulder. “News still travels faster than a speeding bullet around here. As well as rumors, exaggerations and fabrications.”

“This isn’t any of those. It’s why you’re here.”

His lips quirked. “And if I tell you I’m here for you?”

"I'd say that's bull. I'll also issue you further advice. My neighbors are always coming and going and receiving tons of visitors at all times. You're a famous figure, and I bet if someone sees you standing on the doorstep of a woman in a bathrobe—one who's leaving you standing there, to boot—the footage will be on the internet in minutes and will go viral in hours. Not a prudent way to start your campaign for the throne."

He pretended to worry for a moment before he grinned again. "See? You progressed to giving me strategy advice. You can do that much better when we slip into a more comfortable … environment."

She exhaled. "Very mature. Go away, Haidar."

He folded his arms over his chest. "Why?"

Why? "You want the reasons alphabetized?"

"Just pull out a random one."

"Because I want you to."

"We already established that's a false claim."

"I have no interest in what *you* established, and no intention of arguing its merit."

"Your prerogative. Mine is waiting until you give me a reason I can accept."

"Who says you have to accept anything?"

He cocked his head, his steel-dawn eyes taking on a thoughtful cast. "Still getting back at me for 'summoning you like a lackey' and daring to presume I have a 'claim' to you?"

She balled her fists. "Use that infallible memory of yours and

remember that there was nothing to get back at you for. It just …"

"Put you off. *Aih*, I remember. But you can't have been cringing ever since. And you're not doing so now. This is the very healthy reaction of the hot-blooded spitfire I was afraid had disappeared, from all reports of the imperturbable goddess of analysis and mediation you've become."

This was so unfair. That he could debate as superlatively as he did everything else. But she was no slouch in that department.

Before she could find anything to say to back up that claim, he said, "With that out of the way, repeat after me. 'It's all in the past, and will you please come in, Haidar?'"

"It's all in the past, and will you please go away, Haidar?"

He unfolded his arms, braced his hands on his hips. "You think it's a possibility I will? I'm beginning to lose faith in the clarity of your insight and the accuracy of your projections."

She gritted her teeth. Exchanging barbs was like quicksand. The more she said, the further she sank. She'd say no more.

He gave her one last brooding glance. Then he turned around.

He—he was … leaving?

She watched him walk away, got a more comprehensive view of his … assets as he receded. Just looking at him had longing clamping her chest.

He was messing with her. Haidar didn't give up. He didn't know how.

But he was now at the far end of the hall that led to the

elevators. He was really leaving.

Before he made the left that would take him out of sight, he stopped. Her heart revved a jumble of beats. Would he …?

He turned, rang the bell of her farthest neighbor.

What the hell …?

Without stopping, he continued retracing his steps, stopped by the second-farthest apartment, ringing its bell, too. Without slowing down this time, he did the same at her closest neighbor's.

Then he moved to the middle of the hall, semifacing her, calmly sweeping his gaze across all the doors.

Before his actions could sink in, one door opened. Two seconds later, another did. The last followed.

Then her neighbors—and, just her luck, the female components only—stood staring at Haidar. Their wariness at having their bells rung without a preceding intercom alert turned to amazement as recognition dawned.

Haidar let them marinate in it before he said, "Sorry for disturbing you, ladies. I wasn't sure which apartment I wanted."

Roxanne's jaw dropped. Or dropped farther. Where had that accent come from? He sounded like a redneck!

"Oh, my *God!* You're him!" Susan Gray, the forty-something CEO of the Azmaharian branch of a multinational construction company, babbled like a teenager. "You're Prince Haidar Aal Shalaan!"

Haidar shook his regal head, making his mane undulate in a swish of silk—on purpose, she was sure. "Oh, I'm just his

doppelgänger. I was paid five grand online by some lady who wants to act out her fantasy of dominating him. I usually come for less, but I charged extra since she wants to get real kinky. I was given this address, the floor, but not the number of the condo. So which of you has a thing for this Haidar guy?"

Her neighbors gaped at him, at each other, then finally, at her. She was the one in the bathrobe, after all.

Her brain was too zapped to function. But she had to. If she didn't do something, this … this … *madman* would demolish her image. And his own.

She staggered out of her apartment, her perspiring bare feet making her advance on the polished marble precarious.

He watched her with feigned uncertainty. "Oh, it's you?" His gaze swept her with what looked like earnest assessment. "I somehow thought you wouldn't be a babe. So why can't you find guys to dominate the regular way? Hey … you're not nuts, are you?"

He looked to her neighbors for confirmation as she stumbled the last step to him, grabbed him by the lapel of his jacket.

He pretended to ward her off. "Whoa, lady. The deal is degradation in private. Public displays will cost you extra."

She grimaced at her neighbors, expending all her restraint on not thumping the huge lout. "Sorry, ladies. Haidar is an old friend, regretfully. I left him eight years ago without a sense of humor, but it seems he's contracted some terminal prankster disease. He thinks this is a fun way to say long time no see."

She was dragging him toward her apartment while she talked, for the second time in her life wishing grounds yawned open and swallowed people. The other time had also involved him.

He resisted her, looked back at her neighbors imploringly. "I don't know this dame. Is she dangerous?" She smacked him hard on the arm. "Hey! We agreed on domination, not abuse!"

The son of a literal royal bitch was making the situation worse with every word out of his mouth.

Who was she kidding? It was irretrievable already. *God*.

She could think of nothing to say but "Shut up, Haidar."

He looked down at her, eyes morphing from vapid porn-actor mode to a dozen devils' cunning. "I'm a working dude, lady. Show me some respect. When I'm not on the clock, that is."

Her neighbors' expressions kept yo-yoing from the verge of bursting into laughter to wondering if their neighbor did have a kinky—or worse—side to her.

"You win, okay?" she grumbled for his ears only. "Now stop with the act, take your bows and let the ladies get on with their evening."

He raised his voice for all to hear. "So you'll pay extra if I start pretending I'm this Haidar guy right now?"

"*Ooh!*" She shoved him ahead of her across her threshold.

This time he surrendered to her manhandling, clung to the edge of the door, addressed them over her head. "Do you mind checking up on me in an hour's time?"

She shot her flabbergasted neighbors another dying-of-

embarrassment glance, dragged him away from the door, slammed it shut.

Then she rounded on him.

His grin lit up his impossibly gorgeous face. "I did warn you. Next time, give in gracefully."

She stomped her heel over his foot. It felt like ramming rock-enclosed steel. Pain shot through her whole leg, had her hopping on one foot yelping.

He caught her by the arms, steadied her, chuckling. "Go put on your most lethal stilettos and we'll try it again."

Grimacing, she punched his chest, hard. "You reckless jerk."

He groaned, definite pleasure darkening the deep, rich sound.

So the bastard hadn't been lying about his predilections after all. The savage, dominating edge to his desire used to thrill her. But maybe he didn't mind exchanging roles. Something to keep in mind …

The trajectory of her thoughts made her whack him again.

He bit his lip with what looked like intense enjoyment, his eyes sparkling like turbulent seas in a full moon. "Is that the political adviser's indignation? How sweet of you to care."

"I care about *my* effectiveness. As for you, by the time this gets out, and boy will it, you can kiss the throne goodbye."

"Fair enough. As long as I can finally kiss you hello."

He dragged her up until only her toes touched the hardwood floor, swooped his head down to hers and did just that.

At the first touch of his lips, she spiraled like a shot-down

plane into the past. All her being was captured into a reenactment of that first kiss that had swept her away on a tide of addiction. He took her mouth with that same lazy savoring laced with coiled ferocity. Her body had learned then what kind of heart-stopping pleasure such deceptively patient coaxing would lead to, had burst into flames at his merest touch, fire raging higher with each exposure.

The conflagration was fiercer now, with the fuel of anger, of eight years of repression. This was wrong, insane. And it only made her want it, want him, more than her next breath.

Gravity loosened its hold on her, relinquished her to the effortless levitation of his arms. The world spun in hurried thuds, then she was sinking into the firmness of a couch as his weight sank over her. Her moans rose, confessions of the arousal that had fractured the shackles of hostility and memory and logic, drowned them and her.

The rough heat of him electrified her as her bathrobe and his shirt came undone. His chiseled, roughened steel flesh crushed her swollen breasts, teasing her turgid nipples into a frenzy. His bulk and power settled between her spread thighs, and he ground against her molten core, plunged into her gasping mouth.

She writhed to accommodate him, enfold him, the decadence of him on her tongue, lacing her every sense.

Suddenly he severed their meld. She cried out as he rose above her. His gaze scalded her, his lips tight with grim sensuality.

"I should have listened to what my body knows about yours

and done this the moment you opened the door."

His arrogance should have made her buck him off. But lust gnawed her, ruled her. Hunger for him, as he was now, memorized yet unknown, the same yet changed beyond comprehension, brimming with contradictions, seethed its demand for satisfaction.

He'd come here for this possession, this closure. She'd been aching for it, too. She's only be hurting herself if she denied—

A slam sent the crystal on the mahogany table beside them emitting a harmony of hums, felt like being drenched in ice water.

Cherie.

"You won't believe who I found waiting for me. Ayman in all his glory, wanting to talk. Why now, I ask you …"

Cherie's prattling trailed off. Roxanne met her eyes over Haidar's shoulders, would have giggled at her friend's deer-in-the-headlights expression if she weren't as distressed.

If Cherie had been any later, Haidar would have been buried deep inside her, thrusting her to oblivion.

Even now, with horror at her actions crashing over her, her body still whimpered for his completion.

"Cherie …" was all she could wheeze.

"Uh … I … God, I didn't mean—" Cherie stopped, before spluttering again, "I never thought you'd … you'd …"

She'd never thought she'd find her cerebral friend beneath a lion of a man, naked and wrapped around him, in full view for

her to see as soon as she walked in the door.

Haidar began to rise off her. She stared up into his face as it changed from ferocious lust to deprecating resignation.

"A flatmate, Roxanne? Seriously?"

"What am I *doing* still standing here?" Cherie babbled as she ran inside. "Sorry, guys. Please, carry on. I'm not really here!"

By the time they heard Cherie's bedroom door slam, he was on his feet, buttoning his shirt. For one mad moment, she didn't see why they couldn't take Cherie's advice.

Then sanity lodged back into her brain.

She scrambled up, pulled her bathrobe tight around her.

He shook his head at her far-too-late modesty as he turned away.

At the door, he half turned again, his eyes hooded with stillsimmering desire. "We'll meet again, *ya naari*."

She lurched. *His fire*.

She'd never thought she'd hear that again. From him. Or ever. She'd long thought her fire had been extinguished.

"But next time, it will be on my turf. And on my terms."

He touched his tongue to the lip she'd bitten, as if tasting her passion. Then, with one last inflaming look, he whispered, "Until then."

Three

"I'd give an arm to know your secret, Roxanne."

Roxanne stared at Kareemah Al Sabahi. Hers was the third and last door she'd knocked on to explain away Haidar's shenanigans.

She hadn't been up to facing another day, let alone those who'd witnessed Haidar's innovative blackmail tactics. But damn him to an as-novel hell, she had to live among them, as he'd said.

Kareemah was the only one who hadn't needed explanations, having watched developments through her intercom camera. Cherie's arrival had had her mind going into hyperdrive. But Haidar had left minutes later, aborting her visions of threesomes. She'd opened her door, hoping for an explanation, when he'd suddenly turned. In his real voice, he'd said he hoped she'd enjoyed the show, had her giggling like a fool as he'd bowed to her before he'd walked away.

"I mean, you're gorgeous and all, but it can't only be that. You have to have a secret. Women everywhere would kill for a tip."

Roxanne shook her head. She wasn't up to deciphering neighbors' riddles. Now that Haidar had rematerialized in her life with the force of a live warhead and left promising further destruction, her brain was officially fried.

Either that, or Kareemah was talking gibberish. Which was an imminent possibility. The woman *had* been exposed to Haidar,

too.

"So what *do* you do to get gods knocking down your door?"

"Uh, Kareemah, if you mean Haidar, I already explained—"

"And I might have bought you explaining one god away. But how do you explain another?"

Suddenly, she realized Kareemah wasn't looking at her. Her eyes were glued to a point in the distance.

Someone was standing behind her.

She whirled around. And her heart hit the base of her throat.

No. Not another Aal Shalaan "hybrid."

Jalal.

He was standing by the door she'd left open, in a charcoal suit with a shirt the color of his golden eyes, hands languidly in his pockets, looking as if he'd teleported off a *GQ* magazine cover.

That might not be far-fetched. She hadn't heard the whir of the elevator or the fall of his footsteps.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, one of the two men she never wanted to see again had managed to sneak up on her.

Kareemah tugged on her arm, made her stagger around. "Like we say here, 'the neighbor takes precedence in charity.' I anxiously await a glimpse at your methods."

With that, she cast Jalal another starstruck glance and stepped back into her apartment.

Roxanne stared at the door Kareemah had just closed, her mind in a jumble.

"*Koll hadi's'seneen*, *kammetman'nait ashoofek menejdeed*." All these years, how I wished to see you again.

Her heart squeezed so hard she felt it would implode.

Suddenly fury spurted inside it, incinerating all shock and nostalgia. She wasn't letting another Aal Shalaan twin mess her up all over again. She'd hit her limit last night.

She turned, hoping she didn't look as shaky as she felt. "If it isn't one of the region's two most eligible bastards."

The warmth infusing his face didn't waver as he slipped his hands out of his pockets, spread his arms in a gesture that had always had her running into them. "*Ullah yehay'yeeki*, *ya* Roxanne."

Ullah yehay'yeeki—literally, may God hail you, one of the not-quite-translatable colloquial praises he'd once lavished on her, usually when she'd said something that had resonated with his demanding intellect and wit. Which had been almost every time she'd opened her mouth. They'd been so alike, so in tune, it had been incredible. It had also turned out to be a lie.

For years afterward, she hadn't known which betrayal had hurt more, his or Haidar's.

She stuck her fists at her sides. "Listen, buddy, I had one hell of a night, and I'm expecting a spiral of steady deterioration for the foreseeable future. So why don't you just piss off. Whatever made you pop up here, I don't want to hear it."

"Not even if it's me groveling for forgiveness?"

She walked toward him, each step intensifying her anger. "I've

heard that before. Still not in the least interested."

He'd called her out of the blue two years ago, begging her for a face-to-face meeting. She'd hung up on him.

He hadn't called back.

She came to a stop a foot away, had to still look way up, even when boosted by her highest heels.

In response to her glare, he did something that made her heart stagger inside her chest. He cupped her cheek, his touch the essence of gentleness, his face, his voice that of cherishing.

"*Alhamdu'lel'lah*—thank God the years have been as nurturing as you deserve. You've grown into a phenomenal woman, Roxy."

Only the drowning wave of longing stopping her from scoffing, *Look who's talking*.

Jalal was another case where time had conspired to turn an example of virile perfection into something that was description defying. While the younger man she'd known had been as gorgeous as she'd thought humanly possible, possessing an equal, if totally different, brand of beauty from his twin and a diametrically opposite effect, too, the mature Jalal had become a juggernaut out of an Arabian Nights fable.

"Even if you scratch my eyes out for it, you have to hear it, to know it. *Kamm awhashtini, ya sudeequtti al habibah*." How I missed you, my beloved friend.

And *God*, how she'd missed him, too.

She grabbed his hand, removed it from her face, tugged him

by it. He let her lead him, offering no resistance even when it became clear she was taking him to the elevators.

In seconds, an elevator swished silently open. She gestured for him to enter. With one last pained, resigned look, he complied. And she made up her mind.

She dragged him back out, led him to her apartment.

She let him close the door, walked ahead to her spacious home office, threw herself down on the L-shaped cream leather couch/recliner, looked up at him as he came to stand before her.

She made a hurry-up gesture. "Go ahead. Grovel. Just try to make it interesting."

His expression turned whimsical. "That will be hard. Will you accept pathetic?"

"I'm sure it will be that."

He sighed, nodded. "But I want to make sure of something first. That day—you arrived before you made your presence known, right? You overheard me and Haidar talking about our bet?"

He was only half right about how it had happened. She wasn't about to volunteer more insights. "What do you think?"

"I think it's the only explanation for what you said and did. Even if you were angry with Haidar for his overbearing tactics, even if you'd told the truth about the limit of your involvement with him, you had no reason to cut me off, too. Except if you heard. And misinterpreted what you heard."

Heat rose as she relived the humiliation and heartbreak all over

again. “Don’t even try the misinterpretation card. What I heard was the truth, and I acted accordingly to get rid of both of you competition-sick bastards. End of story.”

Her insults had no effect on him. Just as they hadn’t on Haidar.

But while Haidar had been bedeviling and goading, Jalal was accepting and forbearing. He’d let her beat him to a pulp if it would make her feel better.

“You of all people know there are too many sides to any situation for one to be the whole truth.”

But she *didn’t* want to hear more sides to this mess. Hope was more damaging than resignation. She’d built her stability around accepting the worst, dealing with the pain and moving on.

But … hadn’t she spent years wishing there *were* more sides? Ones that might prove that not everything they’d shared had been a means to a “pathetic” end, so she could free a measure of her memories from the pall of bitterness and resentment?

His wolf’s eyes felt as if they were probing her mind, following her every thought. Which they probably were. They’d always been on the same wavelength.

Just as the scales teetered toward foolish hope, his gaze grew relieved. He *was* reading her like a hundred-foot billboard.

“Will I get socked if I sit down beside you?”

She flung him an ill-tempered gesture. “Take your chances like the colossal man that you are.”

He sat down inches away with controlled strength and poise, cocooning her in warmth and power and a nostalgia so

encompassing her throat closed.

She took refuge in sarcasm. “This couch is so low most people flop down on it. Still doing thousands of squats per day?”

“Takes one exercise junkie to know another. You’re looking fitter than ever, Roxy.” Before she hissed that he’d lost the right to call her that, he silenced her with something totally unexpected. “I need to explain something I should have long ago. My relationship with Haidar.”

Her heart blipped in distress at Haidar’s name. At the way Jalal said it. At the bleakness in his eyes.

She attempted a nonchalant shrug. “While neither of you ever talked about the other, I gathered the relevant facts myself. You live to compete with each other.”

“Aren’t you at all curious to know how we got that way?”

“Standard sibling rivalry, how else? As you said, pathetic. But most of all, boring.”

“How I wish it was. Maddening, unsolvable, heart-wrenching more like.” He wiped a hand down his face in a weary gesture. “You’ve seen how radically different we are, and we were born that way. But we were inseparable in spite of that. Maybe because of it. Until it all started going wrong. I can trace the beginning of the friction, the rivalry, to one incident. Our tenth birthday party.”

Here was her first misconception destroyed. She’d always assumed their rivalry started at birth.

“I almost burned down the palace, and Haidar volunteered

to take the blame. Instead of stepping forward, I … let him take the punishment meant for me. Things were never the same afterward."

Their conflict had an origin, one in which Haidar was the wronged party? That *was* surprising. Disturbing.

"He began to treat me with a reserve I wasn't used to, put distance between us. Once I became certain it wasn't a passing thing, I was furious, then anxious, then lost. I needed my twin back. I tried to force the closeness I depended on, dogging his every move, demanding to share everything he did, for him to share everything I did, like we used to. When that only resulted in more distance, I became desperate. I started to do anything that would provoke an emotional reaction from him. He retaliated by demonstrating in ingenious ways that I couldn't get to him. Then he learned a new trick, wielded a new weapon—he started showing me, and everyone else, that he was better than me. In just about everything. And it was so easy for him.

"He got the highest grades without trying, while I had to struggle to keep up. He was a favorite with our elders for being so methodical and achieving. He was a sweeping success with girls for being so good-looking, yet so cool and detached. The only thing I could trounce him in was sports, and he came close to equaling me even in those by mere cunning."

He gave a deprecating laugh. "And of course, all through, our mother was praising the hell out of his every breath. As a boy who then idolized his mother, I grew frantic for equal appreciation,

and when I despaired of that, for any at all. She did show me some on occasion, but it always felt like the crumbs that were left over from Haidar's feast. It took me years to outgrow the need for her validation, to be resigned to who she was, and the kind of relationship I had with her. But I could never become resigned to my and Haidar's relationship.

"It was a paradox. I wanted to be with him the most of anyone in the world, yet no one could drive me out of my cool, collected mind but him … at least, no one *then* …" A dark, distracted look settled in his eyes. Before she could ask who else had later done the same to him, he shook his head slightly as if to rid himself of disturbing memories, resumed his focus. "He seemed to want my company as much, in his own contradictory way, showing me moments of emotional closeness before shutting me out again."

You, too? she almost scoffed. Haidar had subjected her to the same dizzying, confusing, addicting pattern.

Jalal sat back, fists braced on his knees, eyes seeming to gaze into his own past. "As we got older, we showed the world a unified front, for the sake of the rest of our family, politics and business. But when we were alone, we butted heads like two stupid rams on steroids. And I think we both were addicted to the conflict. I believed that was who we were, the only relationship we could have, and I had to accept it."

Roxanne gaped at his grim profile. She'd never thought things were that complex and complicated between them. It was fascinating in the most terrible way to learn how these two twins

who had everything they needed to forge an unparalleled bond had been driven apart. Needing to reach out to each other yet held back by something inescapable.

And *why* was she including them both in that assessment? She'd bet Haidar felt no equal anguish for the state of affairs with his twin. She'd bet Haidar didn't feel at all.

But where Jalal was concerned, so much now made sense. The wistfulness and guardedness that had come over him when Haidar was mentioned, the snarkiness that took over when his twin was around.

No matter if this snowball had started with an incident in which Jalal was the culprit—that Haidar had set out to punish his twin for it for the rest of their lives proved what a twisted, vindictive bastard he was. He'd even been proud of the fact that he made one hell of an unforgiving enemy.

Jalal threw his head back on the couch. "But accepting it didn't mean I could handle it. Being unreasonable isn't part of my makeup, but I became that with Haidar. And I no longer knew how much of our rivalry was due to what had turned him against me early on, or to my self-defeating tactics in trying to get him back, our mother's divisive influence, or who we are, our choices, actions and reactions. Then we met you at that royal ball."

Her heart did its best to flip over inside her rib cage.

How she remembered that night.

It had been in her first month in Azmahar. She'd thanked the fates for the job that had gotten her mother and herself here.

When they were invited to that ball, she'd felt like a Disney heroine entering a world of wonders way beyond her wildest dreams. The impression had grown stronger when she'd met Jalal.

Then she'd seen Haidar.

Just the sight of him, an apparition of aloof, distant grandeur, had kicked to life every contradictory emotion inside her. She'd bristled with defensiveness, burned with challenge and melted with desire.

Jalal turned to her now, taking his account from the profoundly personal to the shared past. "I saw your instant attraction to him, and out of habit, I challenged him for you. We both know how far he took that challenge. But I swear to you, I forgot that silly bet in minutes. Everything you and I shared was real. You were the friend I could share everything with, the sister I never had."

And he'd been her confidant, champion and the brother she'd always longed for.

Still afraid of reopening her heart and letting him seal the hole losing him had blown in it, she narrowed her eyes. "So why did you wait six years to approach me? And even then, give up after just one phone call?"

"Because after you walked out and didn't call me, I assumed you'd overheard us and included me in your hostility. My first impulse was to run to you, tell you what I just told you now. But as I was heading out to your house the next morning, I learned

that your mother had been … dishonorably discharged. I held back then because I believed further contact with me might cause you more … damage."

She blinked her surprise. "Why did you think that?"

"Didn't you ever suspect why your mother was fired?"

"Sure I did. I suspected Haidar."

It was his turn to be shocked. "You thought he was punishing you for walking out on him through her?"

"You find that far-fetched?"

He clearly did, found her suspicion very disturbing. "I prefer to think there are some lines he wouldn't cross."

"You think seducing me for a bet was an okay line to cross, but destroying my mother's career to get back at me wasn't?"

"I …" He drove his fingers into his sable mane in agitation. "I guess it's not impossible, considering he must have been enraged at the time, but it just doesn't … feel like him."

"So if it wasn't Haidar you were worried would harm us more if you maintained a relationship with me, who were you afraid of?"

"My mother." He grimaced when her jaw dropped. "I don't have proof, but I felt her hand in this. She employed similar tactics to drive those she didn't approve of away from Haidar and me. Again, I never found proof, but I just *knew* she was behind all those incidents. That's why I ventured to contact you only when she was exiled. Until then, there was no telling how far she'd go if she learned you were still in my life."

She gaped at him. This was a scenario she hadn't considered. Not because she didn't have the worst possible opinion of former queen Sondoss. But she'd thought the queen had already been done with her, had no more reason to go after her or her own.

Then again, knowing that woman, why not?

Could it be? All these years she'd been so busy demonizing Haidar, she'd missed the mother of all demons at work?

Feeling her entrenched convictions being uprooted, leaving her in a free fall of new confusion, she released a tremulous breath. "You've got yourself one effed-up family, Jalal."

"Tell me about it."

She teetered on the verge of throwing herself into his arms and hugging the despondency out of him.

One more thing first. "So why didn't you persist, after your mother was out of the picture and I was no longer in her range?"

His look of self-blame almost made her stop him from answering. "Because I was going through some … heavy stuff, with Haidar, with … other people, and I acutely felt the kind of anger and hurt that could fuel your hanging up on me after six years. I thought I'd be a reminder of your worst memories after you'd moved on. I was also not in any shape to take more emotional upheavals at that time."

Her hands fisted on the urge to reach out. "What's changed?"

"You did." His golden eyes blazed with pride and fondness so powerful and pure, hers started burning. "You came back. It proved to me you're ready to face your demons, to snatch

what you deserve from their fangs. I now think having me back in your life won't resurrect painful memories—you're ready to remember the good ones and form new and better ones. And I have also changed. I'm removed enough from my 'effed-up' family that I can be your haven again. *And* the big gun in your camp."

The tears she'd been holding back for eight years cascaded down her cheeks. He reached for her as she did him, took her into his long-missed affection and protection.

He kissed the top of her head. "Does this mean you believe me?"

She raised a face trembling with mirth and emotion. "What else could it mean, you big, wonderful wolf?"

"That you're too softhearted, that you forgive me even if you still believe I befriended you to seduce you away from Haidar."

She smirked, poked her finger into that dimple in his left cheek. "As if you could have seduced me. Or even wanted to."

His smile was relief itself. "*Aih*, I would have found Haidar's accusations hilarious, if I hadn't been so incensed with him. You felt like my real twin from the first time we met, *ya azeezati*."

A sob escaped her at hearing him call her "my dearest" again. "You don't know how much I missed you … *ya azeezi*."

"That's it?" he mock reprimanded her. "You're taking me back into your heart? And I'd hoped you'd grown as diamond-hard as the exterior you project. You still have a gooey center."

She knew what he was doing. He was taking this away from

acute emotions, even if the positive, wonderful variety. “Takes one mushy core to know another.” She jumped to her feet, dragged him up with both hands. “I didn’t have breakfast yet. Share it?”

His grin lit up the whole world. “Sure will. I haven’t eaten a thing since yesterday, dreading this confrontation.”

“Says the man who once went swimming with sharks.”

“*Azeezati*, first, that was for a zillion dollars in donations for your list of causes. Second, your possible rejection—and worse, my inability to heal your pain—were far scarier propositions than being gnawed on by sharks.”

She kissed him soundly on the cheek for that.

For the next hour, they talked and laughed and shared news and opinions as if they’d never stopped. It felt like being in the past, when she’d raced through her work so she could run to her squash date whenever he was in the kingdom.

They were sipping mint tea when he said, “Apart from being my friend and sister again, I need your professional services.”

One eyebrow rose. “Uh-oh. This *was* too good to be true.”

“You think all this—” he gestured to their cozy companionship “—was me leading up to this request?”

It took her a moment to make up her mind. “I might be a colossal fool with syrup for blood, but no. I trust you too much.”

“You didn’t trust me at all till a couple of hours ago.”

She shook her head. “That’s not true. Even if I didn’t hear you defending me to Haidar, I would have believed that however

things started, the feelings you developed for me were genuine. It was because I thought you cut me from your life that I developed a grudge against you. I missed your friendship sometimes more than I missed the illusion of my love for Haidar."

He dragged her into his arms for a convulsive hug. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, how angry I am for the heartache my family caused you and forced me to be party to inflicting on you." He set her away, held her by the shoulders. "But I will never let anyone hurt you again." She nodded, a tear slipping down her face. He wiped it away gently. "This means you'll consider my request?"

She mock shoved him. "Without knowing specifics, I have to remind you that friends and business are never a good mix."

"Usually not, but not *never*. When it's the right people, the right friendship, results can be spectacular. And lifelong."

"There *have* been recorded incidents." She faced him, folding her legs on the couch. "Okay. What do you propose?"

He mirrored her position. "With your connections, you must have heard I was approached by four of Azmahar's major clans to be their candidate for the throne."

"I *was* asked to weigh in on candidates. You, Rashid Aal Munsoori and … Haidar are the ones who made it to the final round."

He couldn't have missed her hesitation over Haidar's name, but made no comment. "I want you to be my consultant, my all-round adviser. I am ambivalent about this whole thing, and I need the guidance of someone I trust implicitly, someone neutral, who

knows all the goings-on of the political and economic scene. Is there anyone else on the planet you know who fits the bill?"

"With those criteria, no." She chewed her lip. "Though I must qualify your 'neutral' assertion."

His head shake was adamant. "What you lack in neutrality, you'll make up for in professionalism."

"Vote of confidence appreciated and all, but …" She took a deep breath, admitted, "This will put me in contact with … him."

"If that's your objection, then my quest is done. Haidar and I will probably not be in each other's vicinity in this lifetime."

Her heart missed a beat. "It's that bad?"

"I haven't talked to him in two years."

That *was* bad. But … "You were always 'not talking to each other.' Then you'd end up drawn back together like magnets."

"I thought so, too. I left him that day eight years ago with the agreement that we were getting the hell out of each other's lives. But we were drawn back together, over and over. During the crisis in Zohayd, it seemed we were back to being as close as we were as children. Then—" a spasm contorted his noble features "—we clashed again. The last time we met, he renounced our very blood tie."

Her heart quivered, her lungs burned. If their bond had been truly severed this time, Jalal must be bleeding internally.

As for Haidar, his reptilian genes no doubt protected him from injury. The man who'd goaded, manipulated and almost seduced her out of her mind hadn't been suffering from anything.

She drew in a ragged inhalation. “Okay, I’ll do it. But I’ll make sure that there is no conflict of interest with my job, and I won’t divulge anything that would provide you with any unfair advantage, just sort your own findings and add my own insights. And of course I would be helping you on a strictly informal, personal basis, not officially.”

She didn’t know if he was more relieved that she’d accepted, or that she’d made that stipulation. Seemed he, too, was still considering Haidar and his reactions in everything he did.

That was a reason unto itself to see Jalal to the throne.

She’d be saving a whole kingdom from having Haidar as king.

Four

"How far are you willing to go for her?"

Haidar blinked, unable to turn his gaze from the second most magnificent sight he'd ever seen.

It was downright … magical. The undulating shore hugging pristine, placid aquamarine that in turn tugged at its unique red-gold edge in a tranquil, laced-in-delicate-froth dance. The bay that sent a tendril of land to almost touch the island teeming with palm trees just half a mile away. The canopy of crisp azure adorned in brushstrokes of incandescent white. Every wisp of breeze, every whiff of fragrance, every ray of light … breathtaking.

And he'd thought nothing could take his breath away anymore.

Seemed instead of becoming harder as he grew older, he was getting softer. A tiny, barefoot woman in a bathrobe had done just that last night. Taken it away, and held it at bay with her every move. And this place felt like an echo of …

"Her?"

He repeated the word as his eyes fell on his much smaller, middle-aged companion. He kept forgetting he was there.

The man, overdressed for the time and climate, beamed. "The estate. In the real estate business, everyone refers to it as 'her.' Comes from dozens of men going to lengths to acquire it that are normally reserved for bewitching and out-of-reach women."

He could see how. He'd gone driving last night after he'd left Roxanne, and he'd registered nothing until he'd happened by this place.

He'd parked at the top of the dune that overlooked it, watched it transition through the grandeur of a starlit canvas to the glory of a majestic dawn to that of a sun-drenched morning. That he could appreciate any of it while he wrestled with his need to tear his way back to Roxanne proved this place was phenomenal indeed.

But as he'd sat there suffering, it had become clear to him.

He wanted her. And he would have her. Here.

He'd called Khaleel with his GPS coordinates, told him he would buy this place. In less than an hour the real estate agent had arrived, drooling at the prospect of a record-breaking deal.

They were standing at the ground-level terrace surveying the house that looked like a cross between a huge tent and a sail ship.

"… as you've seen, apart from the unique location and natural assets of this place, the house itself is a miracle of design. All bedrooms suites, sitting areas, upper and lower kitchens, formal and informal dining rooms have a sea view. Everything is arranged in an exquisite amalgam of Ottoman and Andalusian summer courtyard style, with waterways and gardens nestled within the interior—"

"As I have seen." Haidar interrupted the slick Elwan Al-Shami's sales pitch. He'd let him take him through the place, even though he'd already seen it as he'd waited for his arrival. The estate's caretakers had fallen over themselves to show him

around as soon as they'd recognized him. "Let's close the deal."

The man's eyes brimmed with eagerness, yet Haidar could see he wasn't ready to do so yet. He was programmed to keep driving a client's acquisition need to fever pitch before he sprang the killing price. Even now that Haidar had made his efforts redundant, he couldn't stop before his program had run through.

"When the owner heard it was you, he named a too-exorbitant figure. That's why I asked how far you're willing to go."

Haidar swept his gaze around the place that answered any visions of heaven he'd ever had. "Shrewd man. He knows it would sell no matter how high he goes."

"And he demands cash. That's why those who bought it before fell behind in paying the installments of the huge loans they took, had to relinquish it to the indebting banks. The owner was always there to buy it back and make a profit."

"He won't be buying it back this time."

"As long as you're sure—"

"*B'Ellahi ya rejjal*. Name your price."

The man blinked at Haidar's growl. Then licking his lips nervously, he did.

Haidar whistled. No wonder many men had been broken by their desire to acquire this place.

Just as the man started to look worried, Haidar gestured to the distance. "Throw in those dunes and the land up to the road and you have a deal. Send me the contract and payment details. I want this finalized by tomorrow morning."

Before the man could express his elation at this once-in-a-lifetime deal, Haidar waved goodbye and headed to his car.

As he drove away, he took one more turn around the area to soak in the sight of the place that would be his in hours. It already felt as if it had always belonged to him.

He could have gotten it at half the asking price.

But this haven of solace and seclusion was worth the expense. It hadn't felt right to haggle for something he appreciated this much.

And then, he had to save bargaining powers for what lay ahead.

The war of reacquiring Roxanne.

Haidar's body now officially hated "Cherie."

If it sustained lasting damage from the blow of deprivation her sudden appearance had dealt it, it would remember her as his worst enemy.

Nothing was working to mitigate the gnawing need for Roxanne. Not even bringing himself to release twice while mentally reenacting their plummet into sensual delirium, this time to an explosive end.

He'd continue to ache until he slaked his hunger in her body. At least three times a day. For a month. To start.

He rested his forehead against the wet marble as he let the barrage of cold, needle-sharp water pelt his flesh, attempt to put out the inferno she'd relit inside him.

And to think he'd sought her out to prove that he'd blown her

effect on him out of proportion. That he'd find the older edition of the woman who'd dealt him his life's harshest humiliation and disillusion hard and off-putting. And that gaping hole in his psyche would be sealed once and for all.

Then he'd seen her. Talked to her. Dueled with her. Touched her. Fast-forward to his current agony.

Way to exorcise the memory of her, you idiot.

Instead, he'd only managed to resurrect it to full raging life. Worse. He'd managed to create a new breed of monster. An insatiable one that nothing would appease except total and repeated satisfaction of its every craving.

He had to give it everything it hungered for.

Not that she'd make it easy. Not that he'd want her to.

Sure, she'd melted at his touch, would have let him take everything he wanted, taken everything he gave. But he had no illusions. That surrender wouldn't be repeated. For some reason, she was averse to letting him back into her bed. Perhaps the career woman she was wanted her men safe and convenient, when he was anything but. Or she feared indulging her lust would compromise her career. Whatever it was, the element of surprise had been expended. All he had now was post-almost-sex upheaval.

He had to strike again while the iron was white-hot.

He exited the shower cubicle, didn't bother drying anything but his hands, strode across the hotel suite to his cell phone.

He dialed her number, gritted his teeth as he waited for her

to pick up.

She would. Because she wouldn't recognize his number.

"Hello?"

He squeezed his eyes. *Aih*. It hadn't been temporary insanity. If one breathy hello could have him fully hard all over again, she now operated his hormonal controls.

His lips twitched in self-deprecation at his weakness, in satisfaction at intending to give in to it thoroughly.

"Is Cherie gone?"

The silence that greeted his question indicated that it had stopped her breathing. Good. He shouldn't be the only one having trouble breathing over this thing between them.

"I can come over if she is." He marveled at the humorous, sensual goading that came so naturally when he talked to her. "Better still, you come to me. I'm at Burj Al Samaa."

"Your turf is a hotel room?" she finally said. "And what would your terms be? Something from the room-service menu?"

A laugh rumbled from his gut. *Ya Ullah*, but this was new. He'd never enjoyed her wit this much before. But then, he hadn't known she was witty. Now that he thought about it, they'd talked last night more than they'd talked in a month back then. Their limited, stolen times together had been consumed mostly by hot and heavy sex. Back then, all the talking she'd done had been with Jalal. He'd felt left out, and he hadn't even known how much he'd missed.

He wouldn't miss a thing now. He'd have it all. All the fire

and friction and fun of her.

"But I'm proposing a continuation of our first round, not a second one. *That* will be on my turf and terms."

"You're …" He could tell she muffled the phone with her hand. He could still decipher what she said. "I'll only be a moment. Sure, I'll take another cup of tea."

His smile froze. She … sounded totally different. Easygoing and eager. She'd never sounded like that with him. Not even when she'd been claiming to love him.

Then he heard the voice that answered her. Distant and muted. But definitely male.

Something hot and harsh spread like an intravenous shot of lava in his veins. Something he'd only ever felt on her account. Jealousy …

Jealousy? Now, *that* was idiotic. There was no application for anything like that in their situation. He shouldn't … *didn't* care what she did or who she did it with.

Even if he was stupid enough to care, she was probably at work, and that was a colleague or an assistant and he was again blowing things out of proportion …

"Listen, you exasperating lout. I spent this morning trying to resolve the mess you left behind, and the only thing I'll do if I come to your temporary turf is kick you where it counts. So it would be potency-preserving for you to get off my case."

Her threats still tickled him. But he couldn't laugh this time. Not after he'd heard her talking to that man. Hearing the

difference in her voice now doused his enjoyment.

He still attempted a rejoinder. “Tut-tut, is that any way to talk to your probable new king?”

“First, I’m American if you’ve forgotten, so at best, the king of Azmahar would be my boss. Second, cows will skate before you become king. So stop wasting everyone’s time and fly back to whatever vultures’ aerie you swooped down from.”

It was no use. Even with the tightness in his chest, which he wouldn’t even try to analyze, every word that pelted out of her mouth seemed to find a receptor in his humor centers.

His lips spread. “The only time I’ll swoop down will be to carry you away, my luscious lamb.”

“Then too late in midair, you’ll find out I’m no such thing.”

“*Aih*. Thankfully. But the feline you really are is why you found me irresistible.”

She used to say he was aptly named, a human lion. He’d called her his wildcat, his lioness, among other things.

“Nowadays, the world doesn’t give a fig about your irresistibility, like I don’t. But unlike you, who clearly aren’t here to take part in resolving the crisis but to indulge in obnoxious score-settling, I have work to do. You had your fun last night, so be a good evil mogul and let me get on with it.”

He lay back on the bed, hard as rock again. “How counterproductive can you get? You’ve just said the magic words that will assure that you won’t see the last of me. Not before I make you eat those words, of course. Out of my hand. Again.”

She didn't answer for a long moment. His breath shortened, his every muscle quivered with arousal and anticipation. What was that unpredictable storm of fire and femininity up to now?

"Satisfied your last-word syndrome? Just like you did your have-your-way disorder last night?"

And he laughed, deep and delighted. "I knew you had to be brilliant to be where you are today. But that's a truly novel way to have the last word, *ya naari*. I concede. This round goes to you."

"Oh, joy. You mean I can go now?"

"You mean you can't hang up on me?"

She did.

He laughed again, long and loud, as he hadn't done in … probably ever. Certainly never when he'd been alone.

Then he headed to the shower again.

He came out half an hour later, made a few phone calls.

He got the lay of the land, the schedule of relevant events for the next week. The most important function was next evening at the royal palace. A gathering of all political and economic figures engaging in the dance of trying to figure out how not to end up at the bottom of the food chain.

Roxanne was going to mediate the rituals.

Although she'd known because of her sensitive position, he was sure his candidacy wasn't public knowledge yet. Sure, he must have invaded the gossip circles and social media with his stunt at her door by now, but people probably thought he was just passing through, that she was the focus of his visit. He could still

resume the secrecy of his purpose in Azmahar.

But she wanted him gone. Better. She'd hurled the gauntlet in his face. That settled it.

To hell with flying under the radar.

Time to prove to her he could get cows to skate.

Time to make an official swoop on Azmahar's vacant court.

The last rays of a blazing sunset were giving way to the dominion of a velvety evening as Haidar arrived at the edifice he'd been recruited to take over.

He pulled his rented Mercedes to a stop in the wide-as-a-four-lane-highway driveway and gazed up at it through the windshield. Twilight conspired with shadow-enhancing, detail-popping lighting to make it look like some colossal creature from a Dungeons & Dragons fantasy.

He exhaled, slammed out of the car. Qusr Al Majd— literally Palace of Glory—must have seemed like a good idea to Faisal Aal Munsoori, its builder and the founder of Azmahar's now ex–royal family—the regrettable half of his genes. Back in the sixteenth century, overwhelming demonstrations of power, wealth and invulnerability were all the rage, after all.

And though the man's descendants had managed to destroy his legacy, impoverish his kingdom and squander his throne, Al Majd remained one of the world's architectural wonders. Or so it was touted by those who swooned at ostentatious constructions. It certainly gave the overhyped Taj Mahal a run for its money.

But the Taj was doing something useful besides look pretty.

He'd certainly have tourists crawling all over *this* place if he ever became king. It should at least earn its keep.

As for him, should the dreaded day come, he'd frequent it only to keep up appearances and conduct power games. But to live, his—as of this morning—house had it beat by light-years.

He handed his keys to a gaping valet, took the hundred and one imperial white granite steps up to the entrance in twos. In moments he was striding through thirty-foot-high, elaborately carved and gilded doors, then crossing the suffocatingly ornate foyer, making a mental note to simplify and modernize the damn place if he ever became its keeper. And to do something about its patrons' sense of style, too.

He swept a coalescing gaze over the loitering crowd, grim humor twisting his lips. Considering that most looked as if they'd stepped out of an Addams-Family-cum-Aladdin masquerade, they had a nerve, gaping at him.

Seemed his presence here really was unexpected. Most probably unwelcome. He might be right, after all, and his recruiters knew nothing about what the people of Azmahar wanted or would accept. That, or the openmouthed gawkers had heard of his escapade at Roxanne's and were trying to imagine him spread-eagle on her bed begging to be used.

Not that either explanation mattered in the least.

He'd taken Roxanne's challenge and would see this game to the end. And if this kingless kingdom needed his leadership, it was damn well getting it.

Without slowing, he headed to his destination. He hadn't been here for over eight years, but he remembered well where all pompous, mostly pointless gatherings took place. In the Qobba ballroom, literally Dome, since it resided under a hundred-foot one at the heart of the palace's main building.

Good thing he also knew the place well enough to have learned its secret shortcuts. He made a set of memorized turns leading to a deserted corridor. Once in its blessed peace and subdued lighting, he breathed in relief to be rid of the bustle and invasive eyes.

Suddenly, footsteps joined his in the muted silence.

They came from behind. Sure, steady. Single. In an alternating rhythm to his footfalls. No attempt to catch up to him, just keeping pace.

A chill crackled through his every nerve.

It wasn't fury that someone was following him. Or even worry at the possibility of an attack.

It was a … presence that had engulfed him.

Immense. Potent. Ominous.

He stopped. So did the steps behind him. He turned slowly, felt the icy menace of that manifestation swirling around, hindering him like a straitjacket of chains. By midturn every instinct was shouting at him, *Don't look back! Just walk away!*

It took all he had to overcome the unreasoning aversion, mostly out of burning curiosity.

Next moment, it was his turn to gape.

Twenty paces away, a man stood so still he might have stopped time in its tracks, so dark he seemed to absorb shadows, snuffing out light. Tall, taller than even him, as broad, in an *abaya* that opened over shirt and pants, falling to the ground like a shroud of night. He projected something far larger than his physical size, emitted a force Haidar had never felt from another human being. His stance was deceptively relaxed, arms passive by his sides, face slightly lowered, dark eyes leveled on him from beneath dense, winged eyebrows, transmitting a message, a knowledge. That it would be at his whim that he walked away from this confrontation. And it looked like …

Rashid?

Every muscle in his body went slack with shock.

But … *no*. It couldn't be. The dimness was playing tricks on his vision, his imagination. He had been thinking of Rashid a lot lately, must be superimposing his memory on this man who resembled him—

"I heard you were pimping yourself out."

A sickening sensation jolted through him. That voice …

It shared elements with the one he'd last heard over the phone. After they'd become enemies. It had been cold and dark then, nothing like the lively, expressive baritone of the man who'd once been his best friend, sometimes closer to him than his own twin. He'd thought the ugly conflict had been coloring it.

It was far worse now. Fathomless with terrible mysteries.

It *was* Rashid. Changed almost beyond recognition, yet

undoubtedly him. Then he moved. With every step closer, it became clearer. The orphaned distant cousin who, through what he'd once thought a twist of magnanimous fate, had become the biggest part of his and Jalal's life, had not merely changed.

He'd metamorphosed.

One of the most apparent facets of radical change was his hair. Rashid had always kept it long, to his guardian's distress. It had once reached the middle of his back. Even when he'd joined the army, he hadn't gotten the usual military crop.

It was now almost shaved.

But it was worse than that. As he came to a stop a few feet away, in the light from a brass sconce, he could see it. A bloodcurdling scar slashing its way from the corner of Rashid's left eye down to the corner of his jaw, slithering down his neck, then lower …

"So tell me, Haidar, how long have you been hiding this burning desire to be tied, gagged and abused?"

That new voice, that predatory rumble, revved inside his chest with an oppressive sorrow. For the two-decade friendship that had ended and taken another chunk of his humanity with it.

But regret served no purpose. And his humanity, according to the best of authorities, hadn't existed to start with.

Tilting his head, conceding that there would be no quarter given on either side, his huff was the very sound of bitter amusement. "Dominated. Abused is a whole different subcategory."

"Just goes to show you can never claim to know anyone."

The bile of confusion at how vicious Rashid had become in his enmity rose again. "So true."

Those black-as-an-abyss eyes poured icy goading and burning scorn over him. "Word is you exiled yourself from Zohayd after your mother tried to roast half the region and serve it to you on a platter. I wonder how much effort you put into fabricating that 'fact.'"

Rashid was one of the trio who could ever smash through his defenses, melt the layers of ice at his core. Boil his blood.

But a heated defense was exactly what Rashid wanted.

He'd long been done giving anyone what they wanted from him.

"You know me, Rashid. Such things come to me effortlessly. I leave it to … lesser men to exert themselves."

Seemingly satisfied he *had* gotten the reaction he'd wanted after all, Rashid said, "So now that Zohayd has wised up and kicked you out on your ear, you've come to blight Azmahar with your presence. But if *you* knew anything about me, you'd know people leave it to me to … deal with discord and its sowers."

Without the tinge of sarcasm in his tone, he would have thought Rashid was deadly serious. Deadly, period. This was the face of someone who would kill without mercy.

As he had before.

Not that it worried him in the least. Two more things he'd been born without were fear and the ability to back down.

He raised Rashid double his provocation. “I just thought I’d come see what I can do to save Azmahar from the dire fate of having to settle for someone with your … fundamental deficiencies. You know how charitable I can be.”

Something lethal slithered through the depths of Rashid’s eyes —not exactly an emotion, but a reaction. Haidar didn’t know why, but it forced his focus back to the scar.

Ya Ullah, how had that happened? When? Not during his army years. He knew that. What he didn’t know was why he’d never heard of Rashid having it, or how he’d gotten it. Did anyone know?

He had a feeling no one did. No one but Rashid himself.

“How much did you pay those clans to ‘choose’ you as their candidate?”

Rashid’s voice, harsher now, brought his eyes back to his. He didn’t want his scar scrutinized. Especially by him.

Haidar exhaled. “How much did you?”

“I was actually offered whatever I could ask for. A lot of people will do anything to stop you, or your asymmetrical half, from taking the throne.”

Suddenly he was fed up. He hated this. Hated that they had to keep stabbing at each other, deepening the wounds, widening the rift. He’d never wanted any of this. Now he wanted it all to stop.

It wouldn’t be a concession of defeat if he reached out to Rashid. It would be an olive branch to an injured adversary. Who should have never become one.

He inhaled. “A throne is something I never thought about or wanted, Rashid.”

“That’s a famous tactic.” Rashid shrugged. “The sour-grapes maneuver. You were the Prince of Two Kingdoms who could never be in line for the throne of, either. What else can you do but pretend you aren’t interested?”

“No pretense. After a lifetime of watching what kind of pain in the neck, heart and butt being king is from the woeful example of my father, I wouldn’t wish it even on you.”

“I’m so touched that you consider me your worst enemy.”

Wanting to kick himself for the terribly timed joke, when it was certain Rashid had taken it literally, he started to clarify.

Rashid overrode him. “But don’t I now share that status with your pointedly absent semi-demon twin?”

Haidar waited for the mention of Jalal to finish turning the skewer embedded in his gut.

Rashid only stabbed him harder. “I came after you only to tell you how entertaining it will be, watching you two campaign for the throne, adding your arrogance to your uncle’s ineptness, your cousins’ excesses and your mother’s all-round villainy.”

Having inflicted all the injuries he’d wanted to, Rashid turned.

He’d walk away, and any chance to heal their severed bond would be lost.

Haidar lunged after him, grabbed his arm.

Rashid’s gaze lowered to the fingers digging into his *abaya*-wrapped flesh. Haidar could swear his hand burned.

He didn't care if Rashid possessed heat vision for real and would burn off his hand. He had to know.

"What happened to you, Rashid?"

After a chilling moment, Rashid calmly removed his hand from his arm, stepped away as if Haidar's nearness soiled him.

His gaze was opaque. "You were always a self-involved son of a major bitch, Haidar."

He wasn't up to contesting the accuracy of that summation, wasn't sure how it applied here. "I'm trying to get involved now."

"A bit too late for that. Years too late."

"*B'haggej' jaheem*. Stop being cryptic. How did you get this way?"

"You mean the scar? You should have seen it before the corrective surgery."

Haidar thought his head would burst with frustration. "I mean everything. The visible and … otherwise."

For a long moment it appeared Rashid wouldn't bother answering.

Then he said, "I dropped my guard." His glare could have pulverized a rock. "Trusted the wrong people."

Haidar staggered back a step. "Are you saying I somehow had a hand in this?"

"It's so heartwarming to see how you've mastered self-deception, not to mention self-absolution, Haidar."

Now his brain was threatening to liquefy with incomprehension. "That's insane, Rashid. I know we've had our

differences in the past years—"

"You mean we've been trying to destroy each other."

"I've been trying to stop *you* from destroying *me*. And whatever I did in retaliation for your actions, it was only business."

"This …" Rashid tilted his head, giving him an eyeful, slid a lazy finger down the ridge of disfigurement to the base of his neck. Haidar was certain it snaked lower onto his back. It seemed to have forged all the way to the recesses of his soul. "… was only business, too."

Haidar stared at him, helplessness and confusion sinking their claws into his gut. "You're making no sense."

"Neither are you, if you think you can reinstate any personal interaction between us again. And if you think I'd ever be party to making you feel better about yourself in this lifetime, you have me confused with the wrong Rashid Aal Munsoori. One who ceased to exist long ago."

Haidar grabbed his arm again as he started to turn. "Rashid, you at least owe me—"

Rashid rounded on him, snarling. "I don't owe you, or Jalal, or any member of your family a damn thing—"

He stopped, his eyes burning black holes into Haidar's soul.

Then his lips spread in a sinister parody of a smile, his teeth gleaming eerily against his darkened skin.

Haidar barely suppressed a shiver.

What the hell *had* Rashid metamorphosed into?

“I beg your pardon, Haidar.” What? “I was inaccurate when I said I don’t owe you and your family a thing. I do owe you. A lot of pain and damage. I always pay my debts.”

This time when he turned away, Haidar let him go.

Before he exited the corridor, Rashid turned with a serene-as-the-grave glance. “Sit tight, Haidar, and wait for your share of my payback.”

Five

I haven't gotten my share of your payback yet?

What were the past two years all about then?

Haidar struggled not to pursue Rashid, tackle him to the ground in front of everyone and force him to explain.

One thing stopped him. Knowing Rashid wouldn't explain, not even if he beat him to a pulp. Not that he could. Not without being pulped back. Which wasn't a bad idea. They could just rip each other to shreds, get the bitterness exorcised and get it over with. Maybe even get back to the way they'd once been.

According to Rashid, that would require a time machine.

But for the present, the opening round was over. Rashid had pulled back to his corner, expecting Haidar to crush his peace offering underfoot as he stomped to his. Instead, he would get informed. He needed knowledge to convince Rashid to call off the fight. Now that he knew Rashid believed he had somehow been party to whatever had happened to him, he would pay any price to learn the truth.

Until then, he had other struggles to handle.

Roxanne. Jalal. Azmahar and its empty throne. Business conflicts with Rashid at their core … *ya Ullah*, Rashid …

He hadn't thought anything could be worse than what had happened with Roxanne. Or Jalal. Or their mother. This was. This won the category of heart-wrenching developments, hands

down.

He found himself entering the ballroom. Seemed he'd continued his path on Auto. The expansive space, decked like an Arabian Nights bazaar, only peripherally registered in his awareness.

Then something sharpened his focus. A decrease in the overlapping voices and clinking utensils, the cessation of melancholy Azmaharian music. He zeroed in on the cause.

Roxanne.

She was walking up the stage. Straight, brisk, no shadow of hesitation or self-consciousness, no hint of a sway or curves to distract from her purpose or undermine her efficiency. She was dressed sedately, the flame of her hair subdued in a twist at her nape, her face made up in neutral colors that downplayed her vivacious coloring and the sensuality of her features. How different from the mass of passionate fire he'd lost his mind over eight years ago. Or the bathrobe-decked firebrand he'd done the same with a couple of days ago. This facet of her still aroused the hell out of him.

Seemed she dialed the password to his libido no matter what.

It was incredible for someone of her youth and looks to be taken this seriously in a patriarchal society where chauvinistic tendencies survived to this day. Here it remained accepted that certain roles were male exclusive or dominated, with women like Roxanne being exceptions.

And what an exceptional rarity she was. He luxuriated in her

every nuance as she took the podium, addressed the now pin-dropping-silent crowd, cordial, confident, in control. Something thrilled inside his chest. Admiration, pride …

He gritted his teeth. He didn't have to like or appreciate her to give in to his hunger for her. Those sentiments could actually dampen his lust, hamper his plans to satisfy it. This insidious softening had to be curbed. Starting right this second.

He moved out of the shadows. Instead of keeping to the periphery, he cut right through the tables. Might as well get all the staring and exclamations out of the way en masse.

Sure enough, his passage caused a wildfire of buzzing and bustling to sweep through the ballroom.

His progress was unimpeded until he passed by a table populated by his recruiters. Elation replaced their surprise too soon. They pounced on him, eager to show everyone that he was on their coalition's side. He answered them by insisting he was here to perform *independent* research, impatience rising as opposing brands of passion and compulsion burned into him. Rashid's from the entrance, Roxanne's at the podium.

People rushed to make a place for him at the table closest to her, flipping rabid curiosity between them as if watching an unfolding candid-camera show. She waited in seeming calmness for the disturbance to die down and for him to take his seat. But he sensed her fury.

He would have relished it if he wasn't too raw to enjoy more hostility, even one fueled by a hunger as vast as his.

He had to deal with it. Just as she had to with his presence.

She did, glossed over the disruption he'd caused, resumed her opening address before turning over the mic to the first speaker.

He watched her descend the stage, walk to the end of the ballroom. She took a seat aligned with his view of Rashid, who stood alone at the entrance like a demon guarding the mouth of hell. Very symbolic.

He cast each a look, was hurled back a hail of antipathy.

All he needed now was for Jalal to walk in, and the triad of wrath and rejection would be complete.

He exhaled, tried to focus on the proceedings. Though what he hoped to achieve here, he no longer knew.

The people who had mattered most to him hated his guts. He didn't think his transgressions against each warranted that level of acrimony. Seemed just being himself was enough to earn it.

And he thought a whole nation would want him?

Another major point was they—even Rashid with his scars and transformation—were prospering with him gone from their lives.

Maybe that should tell him something. That there was no escaping his mother's legacy. That all he could ever be was a malignant influence. That redemption was out of the question and the best thing he could do for Azmahar was stay the hell away.

He turned one last time to the two who thought that was a given. At the confirmation in their eyes, a conviction took root.

He turned around, giving them his back, one thing settled.

He'd prove them and everyone, starting with himself, wrong.

Three hours of moderating the self-important, conflicting, anachronistically tribal so-called elite would have been enough. But to do it while being subjected to Haidar's burning focus had shot Roxanne's nerves.

She and her team had worked hard to get all major movers and shakers in the kingdom together, find out their positions and see how they'd mix. She was supposed to come out with a firm idea of who could be part of the solution, and who'd better be sidelined.

Then Rashid Aal Munsoori had walked in.

She'd thought the introduction of that superpower this early would disrupt a balance that hadn't yet been found. The man seemed like such a force of … darkness; he'd swayed people just by showing up. And scared them. She'd thought he was the worst thing that could have happened. Then, enter Haidar.

It had been his presence that had polarized reactions, incited passions and generally disturbed everything.

Seemed his effect on people was universally consistent. And *that* when he'd only sat there silently watching.

She'd barely stopped the situation from devolving into a mess.

Avoiding eye contact with anyone, she strode to get out before people could corner her with questions she couldn't or wouldn't satisfy. Before Rashid could cut his way through his detainers to her. Most important, before …

"So the question is—what *was* the point of all that?"

And she'd almost made it!

She just stopped herself from stomping her foot and screeching a chagrined *no*. From running the hell out of there. Right after taking off her high heels and hurling them at Haidar.

Unable to give their audience any indication of how much she'd like his head on a stick, she slowly turned. And almost toppled over.

He'd looked stunning from afar. It was far worse up close. If possible, he looked better than he had two days ago. In a steel-gray suit the exact color of his eyes that worshipped his every inch and flaunted his proportions, he looked like a sun god. Eyes gleaming in the soft-toned ambience, skin glowing like heated copper, hair shimmering like a black panther's coat.

All in all, a divine masterpiece of masculinity. *And* born to exist in backdrops of such opulence, created to justify their extravagance, which showcased his grandeur.

To make it worse, that voice of darkest wine and velvet cascaded over her again. "Was that a drive for the up-for-grabs court? There *are* enough wannabes to turn the strongest stomach."

Her teeth ground together as he left barely enough distance between them for public decorum, his scent and virility cocooning her senses, triggering desire and distress.

Somehow she found enough discipline to pretend an impersonal smile for their now-avid audience. "A king doesn't a

royal system make. It was agreed that we have to fill the lower slots in the hierarchy before the top is filled."

"So you want the new king to come to a ready-made government. All I can say is, good luck getting Jalal or Rashid to return your calls once you reveal your figurehead intentions."

If she made him think that was what was on offer, it would send him out of Azmahar within the hour.

Too damn bad she was too professional. "It will be a transitional government until a king sits on the throne."

"Then said king will be free to toss whatever pieces he doesn't approve of back in the box?"

"I don't think such unilateral decisions would be welcome anymore in Azmahar."

"You think any of the candidates will even consider such a deficient position? Such limitation of power? Such an upside-down process? You think *I* would?"

"We're just trying to learn from the mistakes of the past."

"Even in democracies, presidents pick their deputies. You expect a king in our region not to pick his trusted people?"

"As long as they are picked through merit, not nepotism."

"That isn't even an issue in my case, or Jalal's or Rashid's, for that matter. We were headhunted because we proved in the big bad world of business and politics that we know who to pick to help us run our multibillion-dollar enterprises. We're not about to become tribal, blood-blinded throwbacks if we sit on a throne."

His eyes were all *gotcha* when she had no ready answer.

Before she could regain ground, he changed direction. “So I understand why my uncle’s slew of successors was bypassed for the king’s position. Any reason they are now for all other positions?”

That she had an answer for. “For the same reasons you say you understand. Just as the clans’ council that formed after the king’s abdication refused to let his sons and brothers succeed him, they wouldn’t let them assume any significant roles. It was agreed the sons are too inexperienced and the brothers too same-school, and all are guided by the same entourage that damaged Azmahar.”

“And you think the bozos present here today are any better?”

“They’re here today so we can weed out the bozos.”

His lips spread. “It would be far easier to leave those in, and pick out the non-bozo types. Want my advice on how to do it?”

“No. But you’re going to blight me with it, anyway.”

His grin grew wider. “Play back the evening’s taped hoopla. Eliminate anyone who spoke out of turn or lost his temper. You’ll be left with five out of five hundred. I counted. Those are the only people *I’d* have in my cabinet.”

That was exactly what she’d thought, too. Damn him.

She wasn’t about to tell him that. “You’re founding a new kingdom and recruiting ministers for it?”

“Cute. But if you don’t heed my advice, just have a raffle. Anyone but those five would be equally disastrous, after all.”

“Thanks for the gems of wisdom. But we won’t do anything until we’re in possession of enough data.”

"And what else are 'we' going to do?"

"*We* won't do anything. While *I* have to go."

"Good. I'll tag along."

Yeah. Right. She'd sooner have a lion in tow. One just released after a month of captive starvation.

"Why don't you stay and complete the chaos?"

His eyebrows shot up in what must be simulated surprise. "Chaos?"

Her genial expression didn't waver even as her hiss attempted to disembowel him. "I planned this to be a relaxed event, even a bit festive—"

"*That* explains it. I thought you were trying to start a new tradition—Azmaharian Halloween."

She sharpened her tone. "I wanted to put the attendees in the most cooperative frame of mind, to alleviate the mood of doom and gloom that permeates the kingdom. So thanks so much for spoiling everything."

"Me? What did I do?" Those mile-long lashes swept up and down.

She almost felt their swoosh, certainly felt it fan her fire. "You have the superpower of discord sowing. And you have it on constantly, exercise it at will, actively or passively."

She waited for him to volley back something inflammatory and incontrovertible. Lightness only drained, leaving his face bleak.

Then it got worse. Agony flitted through his eyes as they

tore away. She followed their trajectory to the most disturbing presence around. Rashid.

As if feeling his gaze, Rashid half turned. And if looks could dismember, Haidar would have been in pieces.

She shuddered at the force that blasted between the two men. Surprisingly, the viciousness felt one-way. What emanated from Haidar was as intense, but different in texture. Something she'd never thought to feel from him. Despondency.

Haidar returned his gaze to her. "Rejoice, Roxanne. I'm taking my disruptive presence away from inhabited areas."

Then he turned and strode out of the ballroom.

Roxanne stared at Haidar's receding back for the second time in as many days. Then she found herself rushing after him.

She had to pour on speed to catch up with him. In a deserted corridor that seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

It was only when she caught him back that her actions sank in.

What the *hell* was she doing?

He turned to her, something like … hurt filling his eyes, and she blurted out, "What's wrong?"

She almost kicked herself. What did she care if anything—if *everything*—was wrong with Haidar Aal Shalaan?

It seemed he wouldn't answer. Then he exhaled. "A lot, evidently. Probably everything."

She should say something borderline civil, get the hell away.

Instead she asked, "So what did I say that triggered your sudden retreat?" At his surprise, she rushed to add, "I'm asking

only so I can replicate my success in the future."

She expected him to slam her with something bedeviling. He didn't.

"You … confirmed something Rashid said to me earlier. It wasn't the only time I've noted your corresponding opinions of me."

"We have more in common where you're concerned. I heard you were friends once. Now you're relentless enemies."

She expected him to say *they* weren't enemies, just no longer lovers. A state of affairs he had no problem reinstating.

Again, he thwarted her expectations, nodded, his eyes returning to the deadness, the defeat, that so disturbed her. "I somehow thought our enmity wasn't such common knowledge."

"Are you kidding? Even if my job didn't revolve around keeping track of the honchos of economy, it would have been kinda hard to miss the two most meteorically rising players in the tech world butting heads. You've been giving *Clash of the Titans* a run for its money for the past two years."

"It might be hard for you to believe, but I didn't start it."

"I believe you."

He frowned. "You do?"

"You never 'start' anything. You drive people to the point where they want to take you apart. When they try, you retaliate, viciously, and to the world it seems it's only legitimate for you to do so."

His laugh was bitter. "Of course, *that's* what you believe. And

you might even be right. But not in Rashid's case."

"He *is* too powerful for even you to decimate and assimilate."

"I meant I didn't drive him to it. And since you asked, that's what's wrong—being unsure what did. *And* the … conversation we had."

"It shed light on his motivations?"

"More like caused an avalanche that buried them totally."

She hated feeling dismayed on his behalf, glared at him. "It's not possible you don't know."

"I *thought* I knew. That it was another escalating, self-perpetuating train accident of a mess, which the sweeping majority of my relationships have turned into."

Good thing to be reminded of *that* salient point.

He might be unable to connect his actions to the mess he made of people's lives. Didn't make him innocent of the crime.

Hackles rising, she smirked. "Why wonder if it's your M.O.?"

"Because once I saw him again, it ripped me out of the depersonalized war we've been waging on each other and back to the realm of the personal. And none of it made sense anymore."

A knot formed in her throat at his disconsolate tone. "Did you retrace incidents to what could have started this?"

His gaze clouded, as if he had plunged into his memories, before he said, "We were twenty, he was twenty-one." Her chest tightened more when he said *we*, as if he and Jalal were one indivisible unit. "Rashid and I were taking the same courses, already starting up our tech-development projects. Then his

guardian died. He hadn't truly needed a guardian beyond early childhood—he'd been earning his own living since his early teens. But his guardian left a mess of debts. And Rashid took it upon himself to repay them. *That* was our first fight.

"I was angry that he'd take on the debts of someone who hadn't taken him in willingly to start with. A man whose sons were living in the luxury their father's debts had provided them with. It was they who should repay that money, not Rashid, whom they'd never treated like family and would have mistreated if not for his closeness to us. But Rashid would sit there and take my anger, and after I exhausted every argument, he would just say the same thing again. His honor demanded it."

"But what did he think he could do? At twenty-one, without a college degree or capital, I can understand he could support himself, but pay off massive debts …?"

He grimaced in remembered exasperation. "He had it all figured out. An American military base was being erected in Azmahar, and the Azmaharian army was having a recruitment drive, promising top recruits incredible financial and educational advancements. He was confident he'd be among those, calculated he'd pay off the debts in five years while doing something he'd always admired and gaining an education he could have never afforded on his own."

"That does sound like a solid plan."

"Not to us. Not to *me*. It was a shock that he'd chosen his university not because it was close to his girlfriend but because it

was what he could afford. We were determined to help him, said we'd get the money from our father or older brothers, or make them find a way to get the debts dropped. But the pride-poisoned idiot refused. *He* would honor his guardian at whatever cost."

"I still don't understand why you so objected to his plans."

"Because the cost might have been his *life*."

"Uh … come again?"

"At the time, due to some major stupidities by my uncle and clan, an armed conflict between Azmahar and Damhoor seemed certain. We took turns telling him what a self-destructive fool he'd be to join the army just in time to be sent to war. *Ya Ullah* … how I never throttled him, I'll never know."

Haidar mimed the violent gesture, his whole body bunching, his face contorting with relived frustration and desperation.

It was fascinating, *shattering*, this glimpse into his past. Another reminder that she hadn't known him at all, more proof of how unimportant she'd been that he hadn't shared this with her, clearly a major incident in his life.

But it was worse than that. She'd believed he'd been born without the capacity for emotional involvement. That had mitigated her heartache and humiliation.

But his emotions did exist. And they could be powerful, pure. Seemed it took something profound to unearth them, such as what he'd shared with Rashid. Nothing so trivial as what he'd had with her.

The discovery had the knife that had long stopped turning in

her heart stabbing it all over again.

Which was beyond ridiculous. This was ancient history.

What was important here was the history in the making. This was an unrepeatable opportunity to learn vital information about two of the candidates for the throne. It could be crucial to the critical role she was here to play.

Swallowing the stupid personal pain, she forced out the steady words of the negotiator she was. "It sounds like he should have loved you more for caring so much about his well-being and safety."

"Then you don't know much about how young men can be with each other. Our response to fear, for him, of losing him, wasn't pretty. I especially … got carried away." He wiped a palm over his eyes wearily. "We were drawn to Rashid as children when we recognized that he had big problems, too. We had our share, growing up in Zohayd when our non-Zohaydan half belonged to a family everyone despised and a queen everyone hated. But we had a family. Rashid had only us. And we used that. Jalal pressured him through his loyalty to us. But I knew him better, knew pressuring him wouldn't work, knew how to push his buttons. I played as dirty as I thought I had to."

Another reminder what a prince Haidar could be. How he considered any means justifiable to get his end.

"And you failed?" He nodded dejectedly. "So he still left, only with your creative cruelty as his last memory of you."

"*Aih*." His eyes let her see into a time of personal hell. "Then

war broke out. Zohayd and Judar intervened, but not before thousands died on both sides. Rashid was among the missing. We went insane searching for him for weeks. Then he returned, exhausted but unharmed, leading his platoon across the desert."

Wow. Colorful past that Rashid Aal Munsoori had. And undocumented. Beyond basic data, he seemed to have popped fully formed into the business world two years ago.

Haidar went on. "He was decorated a war hero, paid off his guardian's debts, accumulated graduate degrees and promotions at supersonic speed, and took part in two more armed conflicts by the time he was twenty-eight. We were still speaking then."

Which meant it was around the time she'd left Haidar that his breakup with Rashid had also occurred. "So whatever you did before he joined the army wasn't what caused the rift?"

"It caused *a* rift. He'd answer one call out of five, and when he came back on leave, our relationship was never the same. He wasn't. He rarely went out with us, together or one on one, and when he did, he was subdued, weighing every word. It made me so resentful, so damn worried, I think I …" He gave an exasperated wave.

"Overcompensated?" she put in.

His lips twisted in agreement. "Then one day he told me he'd been offered a major promotion, wouldn't say what it was, but that he'd be traveling all the time and off the grid for most of it. I sensed he was telling me not to expect to hear from him again. And again I …"

"Made it sound as if it wouldn't matter to you either way."

"Will you stop retro-predicting what I did?" He drove his hands into his hair, every move loaded with self-recrimination. "But *aih*. Though it didn't happen quite so … peacefully."

She could fill in the spaces with the worst she could imagine.

"He dropped off the face of the earth. Then three years ago, he suddenly called me. He sounded as if he was drunk or high. I was stunned, since the Rashid I knew was a health and sobriety freak. But what did I know about what he'd become in the years since I last saw him? He said he needed help, gave me an address then hung up. I rushed there, found nothing."

"You didn't find him?"

"I found *literally* nothing. No such place existed. I kept calling him, but the number he'd called from was out of range. Days later, he texted me, saying he'd been drinking, and to please forget it. I texted back, begged to see him. He never answered me. Frustrated with his on-off behavior, I did my best to forget it. And him. A year later, right after the mess in Zohayd was resolved, he came back into my life. As enemy number one.

"I thought he was giving me a hard time to get payback, and to prove that he was 'a year older and a light-year better.' So I called him, offered him a partnership, the one we'd dreamed of as boys. He responded that the only and last time he'd put his hand in mine again would be after I'd signed everything I had over to him, and to never contact him again. I was so frustrated with him and his grudge-holding that I never spoke to him again.

Until today."

He was telling her things she already knew—how he couldn't see beyond what *he* wanted and felt. He'd done the same with her. With Jalal. She shouldn't sympathize. But she did.

Maybe because he was explaining the motives behind his actions for the first time …? It changed him from a callous brute to someone who'd never learned how not to appear so. It painted him in grays instead of blacks.

But it still made no difference to those he'd injured.

He looked at her as if he needed her to tell him he wasn't crazy. "But none of that explains his enmity, does it? It was all just … words. And he had to know I didn't mean them."

"So he's a mind reader, too, among his other talents?"

He grimaced. "I mean he *should* have put what I said in context. Even if he bought every word I said, that still wasn't a good enough reason to want to bury me alive."

"Depends on what you said."

Admission blared in his eyes. "Unforgivable things."

Another shock to hear him admit that.

"And at first I felt so guilty, I let him tear into me. But soon his actions made me so mad, I threw myself into what escalated into a war. I was resigned I was responsible for our conflict, deserved his enmity and could do nothing but continue our battles. But seeing him in person again today jolted through me like a thousand volts."

She had to nod. "Quite understandable. He's one scary dude."

"But that's the problem. That's not the 'dude' I knew. And that *scar … Ya Ullah*."

She frowned. "Scar?"

He looked at her as if *she* was crazy. "How can you miss it? How isn't it common knowledge?"

"I haven't seen him up close. And according to my sources, Rashid's first appearance in Azmahar in the past seven years was today. Seems no one has seen him before to spread the news."

He nodded slowly. "That makes sense."

Not to her. "That's what shook you so much? The change in his appearance?"

"It's not only that. He's become someone totally different."

"Being a soldier can change you. Being in armed conflicts certainly will."

He shook his head. "I thought that, too, but it's more. Something happened to him. Something terrible."

"More terrible than being in a war?"

"Yes. And he believes I had a hand in it."

Her heart kicked her ribs, hard. "Is he right?"

His whole being stiffened, as if she'd kicked him in the gut. "What do you think?"

Haidar was many things. A criminal wasn't one of them. And he would be worse, a monster, if he'd had a hand in his former friend's physical and psychological disfigurement.

She bit her lip. "What will you do to prove him wrong?"

Tension seeped from him—something like … thankfulness?

—staining his gaze as he acknowledged her exoneration. “I need to investigate before I can formulate a plan. It’ll be harder because I can’t have anyone finding out anything I discover when Rashid has gone to such lengths to cover it up.”

“Let me know what I can do to help.”

This time when his eyes bored into hers, there was no mistaking it. He was grateful. More. Moved.

Tears suddenly stung her eyes. “Haidar …”

Before she could utter another word, she found herself pressed against the wall with two hundred–plus pounds of hard maleness and demand pressing into her every inch. Her gasp of shock was swallowed by his openmouthed possession. His tongue breached her, thrust into her, driving, claiming, conquering.

The taste of him, the heat and feel of him, what he was doing to her, the way his hands sought all her secrets, sparked her ever-simmering insanities. She writhed against him, nothing left inside her but the need for his long-yearned-for assuagement.

He bent, bit her nipples through her blouse, rose to receive her sharp confessions of pleasure. He resumed devouring her as his big, rough hands slid up her thighs, bunching her skirt, pushing beneath her soaked panties, cupping her buttocks with strength and greed, lifting her, spreading her for his domination.

Falling into an abyss of mindlessness, she clung around him, delighting in his bulk and power as he filled the cradle of her thighs, the one thing left to hang on to in her world.

A storm raged through her, rising from the core his hardness

thrust and thrust against. Moans spilled from her with his every wrenching kiss as he escalated the rhythm simulating possession into a fever. She opened wider for him, mouth and legs, to do whatever he wanted to her, to give her everything she needed.

"Haidar …"

The coil of tension in her core suddenly snapped. She cried out into his mouth as the pulse of pleasure tore through her. He had no mercy, his every grind against her bucking body continuing to feed it, unwind it, until she was a lax mass of stunned satisfaction in his arms.

He slowed then stopped his thrusts. Then, still hard and pressed against her quivering flesh, his lips relinquishing hers in one last clinging kiss, he raised his head, looked down at her with eyes raging with arousal, heavy with promise.

"I know what you can do to help me, *ya naari*. Let me pleasure you properly, repeatedly, for the rest of the night."

Six

"Come home with me, Roxanne."

Haidar heard his voice, thick, ravenous. Agonized.

His body would implode if she said no now.

But she wouldn't. Every fabulous inch of her voluptuousness was pliant against him with surrender, her eyes stunned with the explosiveness of this encounter, heavy with wanting more.

At least it had been explosive for her. It made him want to thump his chest that he'd made her come, so quickly, so powerfully, without even taking her. It was beyond gratifying to know he could still have her out of her mind with a touch. But his arousal was far past the red zone.

He could have so easily joined her. Her release had almost driven him over the brink. He'd held back with all he had. He would take his pleasure only inside her.

He'd waited too long to have it any other way.

"Say yes, Roxanne." His fingers pressed into the delight of her flesh, his body roaring from the feel of her and the scent of her satisfaction.

Her breasts still shuddered, her chaotic breathing pressing them against his burning chest. Her full lips, red and swollen with the savagery of his hunger, trembled. Receding pleasure and resurging arousal weighed down her lids, ignited her eyes with an emerald fever.

She would say yes. And he'd spend the rest of the night possessing and pleasuring her in every corner of the house he'd bought just for—

Something tugged at the edge of his clouded awareness. A sound. The unhurried, powerful rhythm of footsteps …

She stiffened. Then she exploded, pushing him away as if she'd found herself wrapped around a slimy monster.

Unable to think, to move, he stood frozen as she struggled to pull down her skirt. Then, without looking back, she ran away.

"I am really curious, Haidar."

Rashid.

He turned, his body clamped in a vise of agony.

Rashid was approaching from the direction of the ballroom this time, his progress slow, steady, his face impassive. Haidar answered his empty stare with a glare reflecting the storm that still raged inside him. Rashid would no doubt add to the havoc.

"Tell me, Haidar, how did you manage to reach any level of success, let alone your admittedly impressive one? Men who can't keep it in their pants aren't known for the discipline and acumen needed to attain, let alone maintain, success."

Haidar gritted his teeth against the urge to blacken Rashid's darker-than-sin eyes even more. "After payback already, Rashid?"

"Actually, I'm doing you a favor. A juvenile demonstration at the door of the kingdom's foremost politico-economic consultant is one thing. Especially since reports confirm you stayed at her

place only long enough to get your face slapped. And she made the rounds next day like a mother apologizing for her delinquent teenager's antics. But to … sexually harass her in the middle of a public and vital function she organized, in a corridor, against a wall? I really had to break that up."

"And you're calling this a favor … how? Saving my image? Aren't you supposed to be pulverizing it?"

The scorn in Rashid's eyes could have frozen him, if he wasn't seething. "I'm not using the handicap of your sexual adolescence to beat you, Haidar. Not when there is such an array of far more relevant vices to discredit you with."

"Best of luck with that, Rashid. And just so we're clear, with the way your … favor might have crippled me for life, I think I now hate you as much as you evidently hate me."

"Then my work is done. For today." Rashid gave him a mock bow, slowed down a fraction as he passed him. "And Haidar, this woman—she's good."

Blood shot in his head as he grabbed Rashid's arm. "Don't you ever *dare*—"

Rashid cut his rising fury short, serenely removing his hand. "She is *very* good. I watched her tonight, watched others as they responded to her, questioned them extensively afterward. She's putting together what looks like Azmahar's only chance for stability until our little pissing contest is concluded. Don't sabotage her credibility and effectiveness."

With that, he continued on his way, his *abaya* and that aura of

inhumanity billowing around him like a malevolent force field.

He didn't look back.

Haidar was getting used to everyone doing that.

But he had to concede that Rashid was right about one thing.

He was in danger of destroying everything he'd ever achieved. He'd been making uncharacteristic mistakes for the past two years. He'd managed to rectify each so far. But his inability to predict consequences had been coming faster since he'd returned here. Since he'd seen Roxanne again.

He'd come here thinking he'd fulfill his objectives. Nudge Roxanne toward the bed he had prepared for her, and perform a preliminary feasibility study of his candidacy.

But not only had he crashed headfirst into Rashid's unexpected reappearance and uberhostility and disrupted the proceedings he'd intended to learn from, he'd ended up pouring out his bewilderment to Roxanne before losing control and nearly consuming her whole. Against a *wall*.

So, a roundup of the evening? Rashid had had the first and last word. Roxanne had eluded him again. He'd learned zip. And his mind and manhood had been dealt near-crippling blows.

Not waiting for the pain to subside, since it probably wouldn't tonight, he exited the corridor of chaos. He plowed through the masses of people who now tried to swarm him, and for the first time since he'd come to Azmahar, wished his bodyguards were around. He'd ordered Khaleel to keep them away, to Khaleel's anxious chagrin, not wanting them around to witness

his encounters with Roxanne. Without them running interference for him, it took him longer to extricate himself from the throngs. It was an endless ten minutes before he was on his way back to his hotel.

He couldn't go to his new house. His fantasies of continuing the night there with Roxanne were so vivid, they might cause him permanent damage if he went alone.

But … maybe he didn't have to go alone.

Fully hard again with anticipation, he dialed her number.

His call was rejected. By the third time, he got the message. The insanity had lifted and her unclouded mind was screaming at her—and probably at him—in outrage for what the gross indiscretion he'd dragged her into might have cost her. She might even think it *had* cost her everything. She hadn't looked back, hadn't seen who'd walked in on them.

He parked in the first off-road shoulder, texted her. It was only Rashid.

It was after he'd resumed driving that it hit him.

Only Rashid? What was wrong with him?

She must now be going ballistic, thinking she'd exposed herself as terminally ditzy and in *his* power to the man whose opinion mattered more than the rest of the kingdom combined.

Swearing at himself, he parked again, texted again. It's purely on me in Rashid's opinion. He thinks you're good. Very good. His words. Absolutely no harm done.

Hoping this was enough to alleviate her anxiety, he resumed

his drive. He would give her time to go home, then show up at her door.

No, he couldn't. He never repeated himself.

He needed a new strategy. He'd been going about his pursuit all wrong. He'd been too impatient, too hungry, hadn't been listening to her properly. He now realized the only reason she'd been resisting him was her dread of compromising her position.

In the past, she'd initially held him off to protect her mother's and her own reputation in Azmahar's conservative society. He'd gone to great lengths to arrange for their relationship to remain a secret to free her from that fear. Of course, that had served his purposes, too.

But she was now more serious than ever about her image. So if he stopped his impulsive incursions, assured her of privacy and secrecy, he'd bet she'd beat him to that bed. Just as she had in those months of stolen passion.

Rashid, damn it, had been right about this, too. He couldn't compromise her. For every reason there was.

He needed to locate some restraint. And he'd thought he had nothing but. Seemed that was only because there'd been no temptations.

But seeing this matured Roxanne, discovering this new ability to talk to her, the even more intense sexual affinity … now, *that* was temptation.

It was merciful he posed as overwhelming a temptation to her.

Now to make it safe for her to give in to it, to him, fully.

Absolutely no harm done.

Roxanne stared at Haidar's text message for what must have been the thousandth time in the past week.

There'd been dozens more since. But this was the one she kept scrolling back to. And every time she read it, she wished he were in front of her. So she could break his jaw.

She'd been burning with mortification since that day. She'd seriously considered running out of the royal palace and out of Azmahar. She'd been certain her job had been ruined, that she'd be the laughingstock of the kingdom within hours. Maybe the world, if her viral video prediction to Haidar came to pass.

Haidar had played her like the merciless pro that he was. Softening her with one unexpected reaction after another before slamming her with that sob story, the glimpse into the vulnerability she hadn't believed existed. As his coup de grâce, he'd trained stirred and shaken eyes on her, and she'd melted in his arms. Literally. Anyone could have walked in on them and seen her wrapped around him and in the throes of orgasm.

Rashid Aal Munsoori had.

And Haidar had *dared* to say absolutely no harm done!

It didn't matter that he *had* been trying to reassure her that the incident wouldn't cost her her reputation and position. It didn't matter that she had seen Rashid twice since then, and he'd treated her with utmost respect and decorum, without a trace of knowing in his eyes. It didn't matter that there *did* seem to be no harm done whatsoever.

She still wanted to do Haidar some serious harm.

He'd probably encourage her to. And love every second.

Well, she'd get the chance to oblige him in an hour's time.

She was heading to his house. His turf. And on his terms.

He had managed to make it an official summons, too.

But at least she was one of many. A whole delegation had been summoned to said turf to discuss what she regretfully admitted were relevant and pressing matters.

He *had* been laying much-needed groundwork in the past week, dealing with so much. And to her surprise, he was working, if indirectly, with both Rashid and Jalal to manage the oil spill. The three of them, each with his specific powers and strategies, and with their considerable connections, had surrounded the problem from all sides and were well on the way to resolving it.

She'd joked to her team this morning that the plan to save Azmahar should have three kings playing musical thrones.

He'd summoned the five men that he referred to as his "cabinet" to discuss some of the other serious economic and diplomatic problems. She was to act as analytical statistician of the meeting with Sheikh Al-Qadi. Her job, really.

Not that that made her feel any less … violent toward Haidar. In fact, it inflamed her more that he was having her walk into his lair under a pretext to which she could have no valid objection.

She exhaled, cursed the heavy, liquid throb of arousal that was her perpetual state now. That he managed to keep her in it by remote control was the height of injustice.

Why couldn't she feel this way about someone … human?

Resigned that he had her hormonal number, she turned her eyes to the scenery rushing by the window of the limo he'd insisted on sending her.

Suddenly, the terrain changed, from flat desert to a stunning system of dunes that undulated down to an incredible stretch of red-gold shore. It curved into a bay ending in an arm of land that almost touched an oasis of an island. Between the dunes and the shore lay an estate spread with palm and olive trees. Nestled in its heart was a house.

As the car descended on a winding path from the main road, the house came into clearer and clearer detail. It was … amazing. As pliant as a tent that would billow in the warm, dry winds. As fluid as a ship that would sail down the pier that extended from its enfolding terrace, sail away into the sea. It lay like a graceful hybrid among the sublimely landscaped and the divinely natural, adorned with a mile of emerald and aquamarine liquid.

She sat up, heart hammering, mouth drying.

The sheer beauty of it all, enhanced by the perfection of a golden sunset, soaked into her senses, wrenched at every one with a power that left her gasping with its force, its … futility.

So this was Haidar's home in Azmahar. A home he'd one day share with the woman he'd choose. The family he'd make.

This was also the home he'd asked her to come to last week. In her case, "home" had been only a figure of speech.

She'd always known that. Even when she'd been deluded that

he'd felt something genuine for her, *Haidar* and *home* had been two words she'd known would never belong together.

They'd always met on impersonal ground, arrived separately, left the same way. How ironic was it that this time, he'd invited her to a personal place for impersonal business?

She blinked back the pointless disappointments as the car passed through electronic, twenty-foot, wrought-iron gates, wound up a cobblestone driveway and approached the architectural work of art from the back. The grounds were so extensive that it took almost ten minutes to come to a stop by the thirty-foot-wide stone steps that led to the entrance patio.

She thanked the driver, got out of the car before he could open the door for her, stiffened her back and resolve as she climbed the stairs. She wasn't waiting for anyone, starting with Haidar, to receive her or wait on her. She was here for business, would conclude it and leave.

She tried not to notice more about the place. She might have achieved that—had she been carried in unconscious. As it was, she absorbed every detail as she reached a wraparound terrace from which every aspect of the magnificent property could be seen.

The double doors of the house were open. No one was around. Seemed Haidar still didn't believe in having people around.

She stepped into the house, and air squeezed out of her lungs.

Like the exterior, the interior married the unexpected in a seamless blend, old Arabia concepts with innovative themes,

producing something unprecedented. Everything had been chosen with an eye for the comfort of both body and soul, blending sweeping lines and spaces with bold wall colors and honey-colored ceilings. Curved windows and doorways coalesced with sand-colored marble floors accentuated by vivid mosaic. Furniture both functional and artistic offset wide-open seascapes. A place of contrasts, from the sublimely relaxing to the vibrant and exotic, an oasis of the best nature and man had been able to produce.

And that was just what she could see of the foyer and sitting area. She didn't want to know what … other rooms looked like.

"I named this placed Al Saherah."

His voice hit her dead center in her heart.

Al Saherah. The Bewitching. The Sorceress.

She turned, found him filling an archway leading to another part of the house. All in white, a fallen angel masquerading as one of the good guys. Big, vital, painfully beautiful.

It was he who was *saher*.

She swallowed the ache the sight of him always struck in her heart. "This place *is* magical."

He walked toward her, as majestic and potentially lethal as the feline he'd been named for. "But I'm thinking of adjusting the name to Al Naar Al Saherah. Or Al Saherah Al Nareyah. To describe its flesh-and-blood personification."

Bewitching Fire. Or the Fiery Sorceress.

Her hand rose involuntarily to her hair. When had he learned

to talk like that? Wasn't it enough that he drove anyone with double-X chromosomes insane with lust just by existing? He'd picked up the deadly power of verbal seduction, too? Talk about overkill.

Declining to comment on this salvo of mind-messing flirtation, she cleared her throat. "So where is everyone convened?"

"We met in this awesome inside garden that has the most amazing aqueduct system running through it. Let me show you." He grabbed her hand, tugged her behind him, his grin gleeful like a boy unable to wait to show off a discovery.

She hurried to keep up with him, blinking at his enthusiasm, at the adjectives and intensifiers.

Strange. She'd thought he was too jaded to appreciate material beauty. Or at least that he would be so used to this place, he wouldn't even see its wonders anymore.

As they passed another sitting area, he turned to her. "I fell for this place at first sight."

So. He fell for places. Felt for friends. That made sense. After all, this place *was* unique. And Rashid certainly was one of a kind. But when it came to women, Haidar was indifferent. She'd bet the only reason he wanted her now was the challenge she represented.

She'd better not stimulate his feline tendencies anymore. If she played dead, he'd get bored and go chase some other prey. But—

She stopped so suddenly that she wrenched her hand from the

glove of his. He turned to her, eyes questioning.

"You said you *met*." Incomprehension rose in his eyes. She whacked his arm as hard as she could. "They're no longer here, are they?" His admission was a nonchalant shrug. She hit him harder, her hand stinging from the force of the smack. "You tricked me!"

He rubbed his arm, his eyes flaring, his lips filling. "I didn't. You insisted on coming late."

"There was no need for me to attend lunch, and I wanted you to have time alone with the others. My presence would have only been needed while you wrapped up the meeting."

"And we had to conclude it earlier than expected. Businessmen don't have their time under control. They had to leave."

"You could have told me not to bother coming."

"But I wanted you to come."

His voice, his eyes as he said that …

Images exploded in her mind, sensations in her body. Of every time he'd demanded she come for him, of the last time she had …

She pressed her head between her fists, trying to stop the surge of madness, fury and frustration almost as fierce. "I get that no one walks out on you. Hell, no one is allowed free will around you, and you want to punish me for both transgressions. You headed to my place fresh off the plane with that in mind. So what will it take to satisfy you? Is ruining my career a must?"

"That's the last thing I want, Roxanne."

She staggered back two steps for the one he took closer. "Excuse me as I believe the proof of your actions instead."

His gaze became serious, soothing. "Whatever I did that compromised you, or could have, I didn't plan any of it."

She huffed incredulously. "I wonder how that would hold up in front of a judge. 'I didn't plan to run the lady over, Your Honor.'"

His lips twisted. "*Zain*. I deserve that. And I have no defense. Premeditation isn't better than negligence from the victim's point of view. But I swear to you, I never meant you harm. And I will never compromise you again."

She stared at him. "You mean you'll leave me alone?"

"I mean I'll be the essence of discretion as I do no such thing." He reached for her as he spoke.

This time, she didn't move away. This train *would* hit her. Why pretend outrunning it was an option?

"Roxanne …" He groaned as he enfolded her into his large body.

As if feeling her surrender, he crushed her to his hardness, making no attempt to temper the carnality of his response, of his intentions.

He wanted sex. Raw and raunchy. Dominant and devastating. No pretense of gentleness or emotion. He'd exploit her body and take his pleasure in every way he pleased, plumb her flesh for all the ecstasy she could withstand.

She wanted all that. She was disintegrating with needing it.

She pushed out of his arms.

It took all of Haidar's restraint not to yank Roxanne back and down on any horizontal surface and caress her until he'd aroused her out of resistance.

Not that her reticence was physical. Her arousal cloaked him in echoes of their pleasure-drenched nights, slashed him down to the beast at his core. It had him an inch away from devouring her, riding her hard, shattering her with pleasure, so she'd never again contest his ownership of her flesh, of her every response.

"Roxanne …"

Her raised hand stopped him. What was she …?

Then both hands rose up to her hair, took the pins out. It cascaded in waves of flames down to her shoulders.

Before another neuron could fire a thought, a response in his brain, she was pushing her jacket off her shoulders, then unbuttoning her blouse, revealing the creamy globes of her breasts. *Ya Ullah*, she was … was …

She was stripping for him.

His lungs burned. His hardness passed the point of pain.

He heard himself choking on "While this might be a delight after I've taken you ten times or so, right now it's agony not being the one undressing you."

He reached for her again, expecting her to sweep him away, to continue punishing him with her striptease torture. Again she did something that shocked him into another detonation of arousal.

She grabbed him, climbed onto him, wrapped her legs around his buttocks, digging her high heels into his flesh as she bunched

her hands in his hair and brought his lips crashing down on hers.

"Roxanne." His growl was that of a predator at the end of his tether. She pushed against him, making him stagger back and sit down on a couch with her on top. Before he could drag in another breath, she was tearing open his shirt, sinking her teeth into his chest and sucking his flesh.

He bucked beneath her, the pleasure of each nip and suckle acute distress. "Roxanne, let me …"

She slipped from his hold, ended up on her knees between his splayed thighs, her hands as feverish as her lips on the buttons of his jeans.

He watched her, his brain, every inch of him overheating from the sight of her beautiful hands dragging down his pants, dipping into his briefs to greedily surround his erection.

His mind hazed, his body hurtled beyond his control with the first touch of her lips on the oversensitized head.

How he'd missed her touch, her mouth, her breath on him. How he'd hungered for her answering hunger, for her delight in him, in all the liberties he gave her with his body.

But this was spiraling out of control. He had to … needed to slow down, savor it, stop her …

Her hot, moist mouth engulfed almost half of him, the tip hitting the back of her throat.

"Ya Ullah, kaif betsawwi hada?" he raved, mindless now, his hands frenzied in her silken hair. "How do you do that? Make every touch ecstasy?"

She gazed up at him, let him see how she took him, loved it, how her lips and hands milked his hardness. A hot tide surged upward from his loins, outward to his every skin cell. His buttocks and thighs tightened with holding it back. He pulled at her, needing to have this completion within her, *with* her.

She moaned her refusal to let go, the vibration an electrocuting surge of stimulation from every inch she devoured to his every nerve ending.

He collapsed back, surrendered to her demand, liquid fire flooding from the depths of his loins. He froze in the intensity of the moment, trapped in the excruciating pleasure that had him on the verge of splintering into a million pieces.

Just before he exploded, he tried to wrench himself out. She held on, her lips and hands making insistent sweeps, inciting him to madness. And he lost the struggle.

He shouted her name, threw his head back, dug his hands in the depths of her silk fire and spilled his seed on her tongue.

She held his eyes as he bucked again and again into her hold, as she drained him to the last drop.

A long, long moment passed before she let him slip from her reddened, swollen lips. He lay there, gulping air, staring into the depths of her magical eyes and instead of satisfaction, passion roared again, consuming his body in a fiercer fire. Hers. She'd always been what ignited him. What satisfied him.

He tried to pull her up, bring her over him. She pushed his hands away. Before he could move, she stood up, her eyes

smoldering down at him, her voice husky.

"I owed you one. Now we're even."

Then she turned and walked away.

Seven

Haidar's paralysis lasted only seconds. Then he was on his feet, shoving himself back into his pants and bounding after her.

She was buttoning her blouse as she strode away, then finger-combing her tousled hair. He knew she heard him coming. She clearly had no intention of stopping, or letting him stop her.

He did. By taking away her means of walking.

He swept her off her feet, smiled down at her. "Though that was almost literally mind-blowing, who says we're even? You owe me eight years' worth of pleasure."

"Eight minutes' worth is all you get from this gal. Now put me down before I give your perfect nose some crooked character."

He gathered her hands in one of his. "You have to regain the use of your hands first."

He strode to the bedroom suite he'd picked as theirs, expected her to struggle, make good on her threat. She just looked up at him, her normally communicative eyes empty of expression.

How he wanted her. The pleasure she'd just given him had only intensified his need for her. His need to pleasure her in return was also reaching critical levels. He wanted her naked and hot and writhing beneath his hands, his lips, bucking under his body, convulsing around him, her release wrenching his from his depths.

He reached the bed he'd bought just for her, huge and firm

and covered in sheets a darker shade of her eyes. He hadn't thought she'd be here this soon. Someone out there must believe he deserved something fantastic for a change.

Laying her down, he descended on top of her, groaning at the feel of her cushioning him, the only flesh he'd ever felt a part of his own. His lips sought hers. She turned her face away.

He trailed his lips down her face, neck, down to the swell of her breasts. "Do you know how many nights I lay awake, craving to feel you like this? Hearing your moans, your sighs and cries, the memory of your body enfolding mine echoing in my cells until I felt they'd burst?"

Her answer was tight-lipped. "How many? Two?"

A spasm twisted inside his chest. "More like two thousand."

"And did you feel that way on those nights, before or after you had sex with another woman? Or three?"

He rose on both arms, frowned down at her. "We're not going there. What we did or didn't do in the past eight years isn't relevant. We're going to enjoy each other now, as we are today." His lips spread again at the sight of her beneath him, ripe and trying not to arch into him. "And from today onward, I am all for any kind of game you want to indulge in."

She pushed at him. "The only game I want to try is hide-and-seek, where you hide, and I don't seek you ever again."

His frown returned. "You're … angry?"

Her eyes spat emerald daggers at him. "Give the man a medal."

"I thought it was part of this sensual game you started. You were always all for those, too."

"Are you high on something? Like insensitivity and arrogance?"

He rolled to his side and watched in confusion as she scrambled away from him. "But I apologized and promised our liaison will never compromise you again."

She rounded on him as she rose from the bed. "And as a first step in assuring this, you had your driver leave me with you in an empty house. The news will be all over Azmahar by now."

"I flew Haleem in from Zohayd. He's fully Zohaydan and wouldn't reveal anything about you at gunpoint. It's why I insisted you come alone. I told my visitors I had informed you they had to leave, so you 'wouldn't bother coming.'"

She tore her gaze away, looked around the spacious room as if noticing it for the first time. He tensed as he waited for her reaction. He'd spent most of last week preparing it.

It was he who felt rewarded. A wave of pleasure washed over him as she stood bathed in the gold-tinged lights he'd carefully installed to showcase her, framed by the color scheme of fire and emerald he'd meant to reflect hers. Gauzy curtains billowed at the balcony doors behind her like swirls of magic, and her hair stirred in the evening sea breeze like tongues of dark flame.

His fiery goddess in all her glory. At least, in her still exasperatingly clothed one. Soon he'd have all that voluptuousness displayed for his pleasure, his worship.

Thankfully, the sensual ambience he'd tailored for her had an as-clear effect on her.

She was more flushed, less steady as she turned to him. "You put a lot of thought and effort into this, didn't you?"

If only she knew how much. Even he was still smarting from parting with that much cash. "Anything to help you relinquish your worries and inhibitions. And after what you just did to me while still suffering from both, I don't know if I'll survive when you let them go completely."

Her face hardened. "This new discretion is for yourself."

He exhaled, perplexed by her continued resistance. "It *is* also for me, since I get to have you. But—"

She cut him off. "You recognized you were being a self-defeating idiot. I bet it took seeing Rashid to make you realize that, and that the throne isn't in your pocket no matter what scandals you cause. You have to clean up your act if you're to have a prayer against him. Now you'll play the committed, conservative contender and shove me back into the dirty-secret slot."

He found himself on his feet, facing her across the bed, memories unraveling with a sick charge along his every nerve.

"What's this? Anyone would think it's you who have a grievance against me, that I'm the one who walked out on you. May I remind you that you are the one who left when I outraged your sense of independence, sinned in believing I was more than an 'exotic fling' to you? And are you pretending that keeping

our relationship secret wasn't exactly what you wanted, then and now? I'm giving you what you always wanted. No demands on my side, no obligations on yours, only no-consequences indulgence. What more do you want?"

Why? How?

She'd long known that he felt nothing for her. So why and how did getting confirmation of that tear her apart all over again?

He came around the bed, raven hair raining down his forehead, the shirt she'd torn hanging open to reveal the magnificent sculpture of his torso, which she'd barely had a chance to worship.

He stopped less than a foot away, bearing down on her with his overwhelming beauty and rising exasperation. "What kind of game are you playing now? What's with the indignant act? According to you, we had only a sexual liaison, and you ended it. Now that it would be feasible and pleasurable for both of us to resurrect it, why are you behaving as if I once betrayed you? As if I'm degrading you and trying to take advantage of you?"

"Because you did. And you are."

He stared at her as if she'd grown a third eye.

And everything she'd spent years holding back came flooding out.

"Being honest about how you'll take what you want and give nothing in return doesn't make you honorable. And it sure as hell doesn't make you the wronged party here. It only makes you an unfeeling bastard who cares only about getting what you want,

who would use anyone in the most horrible way for your own purposes, even the trivial one of telling someone 'I told you so.'"

Every word fell on him with the visible effect of a slap. "*B' haggej' jaheem*, what the *hell* are you talking about?"

And she shouted, *"I'm talking about your bet*."

He stumbled back, his face going slack with shock, reactions rioting across his eyes.

Then he finally rasped, "You know."

It was a statement. An admission. At last.

She'd thought it would bring her relief. It didn't.

Feeling hers eyes tearing, she tore her gaze away, looked feverishly around for her sandals.

She shoved her feet into them, tried to regain her shaky balance. "Thank you for not insulting me more by pretending you don't know what I'm talking about."

"You heard me and Jalal that night."

The same conclusion Jalal had come to. She hadn't refined his deduction.

She did Haidar's. "That was only how I made sure."

He blocked her path as she tried to head for the door. "How did you find out in the first place?"

"I don't owe you anything, least of all an explanation. And if you want someone to play sexual games with, I can recommend dozens for you to pick from. I'm sure you have your own waiting list."

He spread his arms, stopping her from circumventing him, his

face gripped in urgency and frustration. "*B'Ellahi*, Roxanne, just tell me!"

Her chest heaved with the remembered humiliation, her eyes threatening to pour long-dried tears. "How do you think?"

Realization detonated in his eyes. Certainty. He dropped his arms, staggered away. "My mother."

She let the entrenched fury in her eyes confirm.

"How did *she* know?" he groaned.

She shrugged. "She said she knows everything about you and Jalal. But especially you."

Agitation receded in his eyes, determination filtering into its place. "I need to know everything she said."

"I'll tell you what *my* mother said. When you approached me at that ball expecting me to fall at your feet."

Heated recollection overlapped agitation in his eyes. "Your words were cool but your eyes were incendiary. I could think of nothing but erasing your reluctance, making you admit that your desire was as instant and as powerful as mine."

She backed away as if from the memories. "The jury will remain out on *that* similarity. But my mother saw you for what you are. She also saw that you had me blinded and realized that to stop me from falling for your seduction, she had to tell me a secret."

"What secret could she have told you? I have none."

"Of course you don't. You keep your vices and transgressions proudly out in the open."

That silenced him. His steel eyes, so like his mother's, turned black. As if her opinion hurt.

She ignored the spasm of guilt at what she had to admit was a gross exaggeration. "It was a secret of hers. During her first stint in Azmahar. She was beginning her career, and she fell madly in love with a royal. She discovered his illegal activities, yet still couldn't walk away. But he fabricated evidence against her, preempting her in case she attempted to expose him, forcing her to leave the kingdom in silence or she would have been publicly disgraced and prosecuted."

His eyes narrowed. "Was that man your father?"

It was the first time he had asked her about her parentage. "No. My father was a one-night stand she had when she returned home from Azmahar heartbroken. But years later, that royal found himself in need of her support and got her an even better post in Azmahar. She was in no position to say no. That was when we came here. He tried to weasel himself back into her good opinion and bed, but she told him where he could put his lies and platitudes."

He said nothing, waiting for the punch line.

She delivered it. "Moral of the story—don't get involved with a royal. He will use you for his whims and abuse you for his benefit. And when I didn't listen, worse happened to me."

His frown turned spectacular. "What do you mean, worse?"

"You didn't even notice that my life was being messed up and my future destroyed. The one thing that mattered to you was that

I showed up for your scheduled sex sessions."

"Are you talking about the setbacks you had in your studies?"

Her heart lurched. "So you knew. And you didn't ask me about it, or even offer a word of concern or encouragement."

His already black frown darkened. "Jalal informed me you'd started out so far at the top of your class, you were in one of your own. He made it sound as if I was the reason you were falling behind. I … didn't know what to say. Or do."

"You thought our liaison and the hoops you made me jump through to maintain its secrecy were taking their toll on me, but tough for me, right? You had your pleasure and your convenience, and to hell with me and my future."

He grimaced again. "All I saw at the time was that you'd told Jalal, but not me."

"And we're back to the one thing that matters to you. Your rivalry with Jalal."

"It wasn't like that. This was about you."

"Sure. It was so about me you didn't care that my academic progress was in jeopardy, even when you believed you were the reason for the deterioration. You knew me so little you believed I'd let an affair stop me from excelling in my work."

"But … if I wasn't the reason, then …" He stopped, shock blossoming in his gaze all over again.

"And he sees the light. Yep, your mother again. She had more influence in Azmahar than the rest of the royal family put together. Your efforts at secrecy worked on my mother and the

rest of the kingdom, but your mother knew everything about us and decided to rectify the situation. I found out how when I was protesting my inexplicable grades to my favorite professor. She confessed she and the rest of the staff had instructions to increase pressure until I had to leave to save what I could of my future. She said I would harm her if I didn't keep it a secret and advised me to stop whatever I was doing to be on your mother's bad side. *You* were the only thing I was … doing."

"And you never told me."

"I didn't know if I could. You always seemed to be … hers." His face became stone, his eyes flint. She didn't care if that affronted him. It was the truth. "But I *was* guilty of romanticizing you, believing I mattered to you, against all proof to the contrary. I ended up deciding to tell you, thought you might intervene, stop her from destroying my education. Uncanny woman that she is, she seemed to smell my intention and preempted me. She had me brought to her. It was quite an eye-opener, meeting her in the flesh. I understood so much about you, then.

"She prefaced her venom by saying she'd tried to be merciful, tried to let me leave with my pride intact. But since I was so foolish as to invite a confrontation, she had to destroy it. She informed me of your bet with Jalal. She was very proud of your talent for manipulation, which you inherited from her and honed with your rivalry with Jalal. I might not have seen it that way then, but I do now. I owe her a ton of gratitude."

His nonexpression, which she'd once thought indicated he felt

nothing, cracked, and bewilderment flooded in.

She explained. “Though she was—and no doubt still is—a vile snob, it was her wish to get rid of me sooner rather than later that stopped me from being the unwitting pawn in your power games with Jalal any longer. She read my disbelief, told me to go demand the truth from your own mouth.

“Before I could, you called me and ordered me to drop everything and go to you. I was stupid enough to hope you’d say it wasn’t true, or at least have some excuse to mitigate the sheer petty evil of it all. I was so anxious to clear everything up, I arrived at the apartment before you did.”

His eyes closed for a moment, opened. “You were there all along. You heard everything Jalal and I said.”

Hot needles pushed behind her eyes. “It was only then that I realized the depth of your resemblance to her. And I decided I wouldn’t give either of you that last triumph over me. You wouldn’t see me humiliated and heartbroken, and she wouldn’t see me running off with my tail between my legs. Your mother raised you to use everyone in your power games—mine raised me to never relinquish equal ground.”

Time stretched after she’d said her last word.

It seemed an eternity later when he finally spoke. “So everything you said, every word that has been echoing in my mind ever since, was just you maintaining said equal ground.”

Her nod was terse. She was giving him validation in retrospect. Any denigrating thing she’d said had just been a desperate

attempt to walk out of that battlefield in one piece.

She didn't care. Let him have his triumph.

"What about the things you said before that day, Roxanne?"

He wanted more. A full admission. He might as well have it.

"That I loved you? I meant it, wholeheartedly." She looked away, unable to bear the terrible loss mushrooming inside her all over again. "Not that I ever blamed you for that. You made it clear you had nothing to give me, were true to yourself, to your principles. As you pointed out the first night you came back, love isn't something your species values or tolerates. If I was stupid enough to give it to you, it was unasked for, unwanted, and I had no right to complain when my heart was trodden on."

Another heart-shredding moment of silence passed.

Then he whispered, "I didn't initiate that bet, Roxanne."

"I know. Jalal told me he did."

He stiffened.

Of course. Jalal. The one thing sure to provoke a profound reaction in him. "Don't tell me you forgot about it in minutes, too."

Tension deflated out of him on a heavy exhalation. "I won't tell you that. I can't. I never forgot the bet."

Was there no limit to the hurt this man could inflict on her?

She let out a choppy breath. "Thanks for not wasting either of our time on insincerities."

Something bruised filled his eyes. "I remembered it constantly because I was jealous. Of Jalal. He was coming close to you in

ways I was unable to. I didn't know how to get you to talk to me, laugh with me as he did. All I had was your physical hunger. So I took all I could of it, aroused it as fiercely and frequently as I could, hoping it would be enough. It never was."

She hadn't expected him to bother explaining. She didn't want him to explain. She'd long been resigned that she knew all the answers. She didn't want him to threaten that security.

Before she could tell him to let the past lie in its grave, he went on. "At one of the functions you attended with your mother, where you avoided me per our agreement, you were so … at ease with Jalal. You both seemed so delighted with each other. And my mother—*ya Ullah*, my mother again—she commented on how much you had in common. My unease started to turn to dread then." Her heart scrambled its rhythm, her eyes burning as he held them in a vise of bleakness. "One moment, I'd think it was my fault you couldn't be that natural with me, the next I resented you for not granting me the same openness you gave Jalal. All the time I was seething with the need to bring it up. But what would I have said? I want you to *like* me not just love me? I need you to crave my company and companionship, outside of bed? What if all I managed was make you realize I didn't appeal to you in any way but sexually?"

Her heart lurched to another level of agitation. She'd never suspected he could have felt anything like this …

"Then I found out you were faltering in your studies. The fact that I didn't learn about it from you made me so … angry. I

considered only what that meant to me, said about us, rather than how the problem itself impacted you."

That's more like it.

Her teeth ground together. "Another example of what made you the icon for self-absorbed sons of bitches everywhere."

He continued to stare at her with that still, searing intensity. "Jalal believed it was due to my … disruptive influence. I didn't know how to stop being disruptive without giving you up, or at least moving back to Zohayd and seeing you sporadically. I thought if he was right, you'd eventually come to the same conclusion. And if you did, you would be forced to make a choice between your progress and me. I feared it wouldn't be me you'd choose. I knew it shouldn't be. That's why I kept putting off bringing it up."

Everything froze inside her as if to stop the influx of new information that threatened to pulverize her long-held beliefs.

"It's also why I remembered the damn bet every single second I was with you. Not because I was afraid of losing to Jalal. Because I was afraid of losing you."

The stillness inside her trembled on the verge of shattering.

But wait—*wait!* Her view of him, of the past, was too well entrenched. It couldn't be changed with a few words …

But were they only words? Or reality? She'd already conceded Haidar hadn't been guilty of feeling nothing in Rashid's case, but feeling too much to be able to show it.

Had he been the same with her?

What if this was his problem across the board? Not that he'd inherited his mother's heartlessness and twisted, obsessive affection for the two people she considered extensions of herself, but only simulated it by his inability to expose his heart?

It would still make any involvement with him impossible, but it *would* rewrite his character, their whole history.

But … he was exposing his heart now, had been *communicating* with her, as she'd never thought he could. What if he'd matured into overcoming his emotional limitations?

As if reading her mind, he said, "Not that never sharing my fears or insecurities with you did any good. I lost you anyway."

If this was the truth, then what she'd said to him, how she'd walked out on him, must have pulverized his pride, his heart. As she'd thought he'd done hers.

Could she— *Dared* she believe?

But what else could she do? There was no reason he'd have said any of that if it weren't true.

Pain crashed over her.

God … what she'd cost them both.

Dejection receded, leaving his face blank. "I had it all planned from that first time I—pardon my presumption—claimed you. I intended us to be together while I worked to establish my success, while you did yours. The logistics of being in Azmahar when my base of operations was ideally Zohayd, of keeping our intimacies secret while being under the microscope of fame and notoriety, drove me to distraction. But I knew we needed to deepen our

bond, protect it from intrusions, before we faced what the world would throw at us. With my mother, and your mother's position, with my mixed bag of problems, I knew it would be a lot."

She wanted to scream for him to stop.

He went on. "It was a mess, but I thought the passion we shared made up for the drawbacks. I thought you thought that, too. And though I didn't believe in my ability to make anyone happy, when you claimed to love me, you gave me hope that you saw in me what I didn't. I thought you'd give me the time I needed to trust myself with the new feelings, the unknown needs, the terrible vulnerability. But you didn't."

"Haidar …"

Her plaintive objection faltered. He was right. She hadn't. It suddenly no longer mattered why she hadn't. The fact remained.

The flow of his bitterness continued. "All these years, I rationalized your parting words, excused them. Excused you. I told myself that you lashed out when you saw me out of control emotionally for the first time and feared I'd turn morbidly possessive and controlling. I told myself you had every reason to worry with the gross imbalance of power between us. I kept thinking I must have scared you, made you say what you did to ensure I wouldn't come after you, never stopped imagining how it could have been if I hadn't. I never accepted that the woman I loved considered me a banal adventure. I never believed, not in my heart, that you never loved me at all."

Before she could cry that his heart had seen what had been

in hers, he went on, “Now I have to accept that you never did. At the first test, you proved it. What you heard me say could have been interpreted in different ways. You chose the worst one. You’d already condemned me based on the word of your declared enemy. You didn’t think me worth the chance to defend myself. All you thought of was how to protect your pride, how to avenge yourself. As if I’d been your enemy all along, not the man you claimed to love.”

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