



ROYALS

A Dutiful Princess

Susan
STEPHENS

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**Royals: A Dutiful Princess:
His Forbidden Diamond /
Expectant Princess, Unexpected
Affair / Royal Holiday Baby**

«HarperCollins»

Celmer M.

Royals: A Dutiful Princess: His Forbidden Diamond / Expectant Princess, Unexpected Affair / Royal Holiday Baby / M. Celmer — «HarperCollins»,

His Forbidden Diamond Former soldier Tyr Skavanga, haunted by the terrors of war, has cut himself off and hardened his heart. Now one person has managed to defy his defences – innocent, exotic Princess Jasmina of Kareshi. She's strictly off limits but denying their electrifying connection could be the toughest challenge he's ever had to face... Expectant Princess, Unexpected Affair He'd danced with her on a dare, but Samuel Baldwin had seduced Princess Anne to quench his own desire. Chipping away at Anne's icy façade had been pure pleasure. . . until he learned their passion-filled night had left him responsible for one pregnant princess. Royal Holiday Baby Valentina Deveraux was in shock. She had always been the good girl, the model princess – not the one getting mixed up in tabloid scandals. But one carefree night with charming Texan Zachary Logan had changed everything. Now her main responsibility was not to the throne, but to her unborn child...and its father!

ROYALS

A Dutiful Princess

ROYALS

COLLECTION

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Claimed by the Prince

December 2017

ROYALS

A Dutiful Princess

January 2018

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Wed to the Prince

February 2018

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For Their Royal Heir

March 2018

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April 2018

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His Hidden Secret

May 2018

Royals: A Dutiful Princess
His Forbidden Diamond
Susan Stephens
Expectant Princess, Unexpected Affair
Michelle Celmer
Royal Holiday Baby
Leanne Banks



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[His Forbidden Diamond](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Expectant Princess, Unexpected Affair](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Royal Holiday Baby](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Copyright](#)

[His Forbidden Diamond](#)

Susan Stephens

SUSAN STEPHENS was a professional singer before meeting her husband on the Mediterranean island of Malta. In true Modern Romance style they met on Monday, became engaged on Friday and married three months later. Susan enjoys entertaining, travel and going to the theatre. To relax she reads, cooks and plays the piano, and when she's had enough of relaxing she throws herself off mountains on skis, or gallops through the countryside singing loudly.

For Laurie, who, like all the best heroines, is smart and fun, with an unshakeable determination to get the very best out of me.

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

TYR SKAVANGA IS HOME!

THE HEADLINE BLARED at him. His sister Britt had placed the newspaper on her desk, where she knew he couldn't fail to see it. Britt was trying to tell him in her usual no-nonsense way how much he'd been missed, and how words could never express his three sisters' happiness now he'd returned. The photograph beneath the headline showed Britt, Eva and Leila, hugging each other, their faces wreathed in smiles of joy.

Because of him.

Turning, he went to stare out of Britt's office window, where snow drifted from a black sky like frozen sighs. Everything outside the building was pristine white and unspoiled, while inside, reflected in the window, was a killer's face, his face, and he couldn't hide from that.

He had no wish to, Tyr thought grimly. He was back in Skavanga, the small mining town that bore his family's name, to reboot himself amongst people he loved. He'd stayed away for too long after leaving the army, to protect his sisters and friends from a man who was vastly changed. Britt, his eldest sister, had never given up on him, never ceased trying to contact him whether he replied to her messages or not. Not being the usual response from him. Britt was one of the few people who could reach him through her husband, Sheikh Sharif. Sharif was one of Tyr's closest friends and had

remained loyal throughout, refusing to reveal Tyr's whereabouts, or what he was doing while he was away, even to his wife, Britt.

In the end it was a child who had pricked his conscience and brought him back. He had carried the little girl from the war zone to reunite her with her family in a refugee camp, and when the tears of joy subsided she had turned to him to ask, with all the concern a child of seven who'd seen too much could muster:

'Don't you have a family, Mr Tyr?'

The little girl's question had shamed him, shattered him. It had broken through his armour, forcing him to think about those he'd left behind. Yes, he had a family and he loved them very much, he had explained to her. No one in the girl's family had commented when his eyes filled with tears. They'd seen everything. They were reunited. They were alive. That was all they asked for. When he'd left the camp to return to the desert to begin rebuilding, he'd worked until his strength gave out, and all the time he was there the little girl's comment about his family nagged at him, made him realise how lucky he was to have people who loved him. He knew then he had to go home, though he had dreaded confronting his sisters, who would see through the shell in an instant to this new and much changed man.

He had been of inestimable value to Special Forces, a senior officer had told him as he pinned a medal on Tyr's chest, but that wasn't something Tyr wanted carved on his tombstone. He wanted to be remembered for what he'd built, and not for what he'd destroyed. He'd encountered three types of soldier in battle: those who enjoyed their job, those who went about their duty with unflinching courage and loyalty to comrades and country, and those who would never recover from what they'd seen, physically, mentally, or both. He had no excuse. He was strong. He had the love of a good family, and somehow he had managed, not just to stay alive, but to remain relatively unharmed, at least outwardly. And now it was up to him to complete the healing process so he could be of some use to those less fortunate than himself.

'Tyr!'

'Britt.' He swung round just in time for his beautiful sister to throw herself into his arms. Britt's face was ecstatic, but she was full of questions. Flight good? Journey good?

'You look great, Tyr.'

His mouth quirked. 'Liar.'

His eldest sister took a step back to take a proper look at him. 'Okay, so your clothes look great.'

'Better,' he said dryly as they shared a laugh. 'I stopped off in Milan, knowing if I was coming to a party hosted by my glamorous sisters, I had better look the part.'

Britt's face grew concerned. 'You know, you don't have to do anything you don't want to, Tyr.'

'But I want to be here. I wanted to come home and see you.'

'So, you're ready to face the music?' Britt enquired, glancing across the road to the town's smartest hotel, where she had arranged a welcome home party for him.

'I am if you are.'

'I only wish we had longer to talk, but you've never been one to ease yourself into a situation by degrees, have you, Tyr?'

'Full immersion,' he confirmed, determined to keep the tone upbeat. 'It's the only way I know.'

Britt gave a disbelieving hum. 'If you say so.'

'I do say so.' He gestured towards the hotel, where they could see cars arriving. 'And thank you for going to all this trouble for me.'

She laughed. 'It's nice to have the chance. And if I can't welcome the town's hero home...'

'Just welcome your brother home. That's all I want.'

'I'd go to the ends of the earth for you, Tyr—and almost had to,' Britt reminded him wryly.

'Those emails kept coming,' he agreed.

'And you kept ignoring them.'

‘But I saved you a trip in the end,’ he pointed out.

‘Tyr, you never change.’ Britt was laughing but her eyes were sad behind the fixed smile because they both knew that was a lie. He’d changed a whole lot.

‘This quiet time in my office has been good for you, though, hasn’t it, Tyr?’

‘This quiet time has been perfect. Thank you, Britt.’

Aside from shopping for some essentials, which meant ditching the desert boots and safari shirts in favour of city clothes, Tyr hadn’t suffered any human contact since leaving the sandbox. After the silence of the desert even street noise was deafening. But when could Britt not face anything that came her way? he reflected as he gazed into the eyes of a most admirable woman. Even if she hadn’t been his sister, he would have placed Britt on a pedestal a mile high.

‘Well, you’ve had your moment,’ she told him briskly. ‘I want a few words alone with you, and then we’ll go.’

He frowned. ‘This sounds serious.’

‘There’s a lot to tell you, Tyr. You’ve been away for such a long time. Leila’s had twins—’

‘This I know—you already told me.’

‘I told you when they were born,’ Britt agreed. ‘They’re practically school age now, yet you still haven’t seen them.’

He acknowledged this with a regretful dip of his head.

‘And Leila’s pregnant again—’

‘What?’ This was news to him. ‘Raffa doesn’t waste any time.’

‘Stop with the dinosaur spiel. Those two adore each other. They want a football team, according to Leila. And if you will go off radar the world isn’t going to stand still until you decide to come back.’

Where he’d been there was no communication with the outside world—not until he set that communication up and moved on, leaving others to go about the business of contacting loved ones. For a long time he’d been too beat up inside to even think about inflicting himself on his sisters.

‘You’re not going to tell me where you were, are you, Tyr?’

‘Need-to-know basis only.’ He made light of it and shrugged. His work was important to him. It was the only way he knew to make reparation. He didn’t want to talk about that work to anyone, not even to Britt. He didn’t want praise for putting right the wrong he’d done. He just wanted to get on with the job.

Britt shook her head at him. ‘Well, I give up. But just wait until you see Leila. She looks—’

‘Huge?’ he suggested, ducking as Britt aimed a swipe at him.

And just like that they were back to the happy days, the carefree days. ‘So, what else is going on I should know about?’

‘Jazz is here.’

Electricity coursed through him. ‘Jazz. I haven’t seen Jazz for years.’ Just the mention of Sharif’s younger sister’s name took him back to wild school holidays, when he could ride himself into the ground and swim until his arms ached, and think of nothing more but the next harmless adventure with his two friends from Kareshi. But beneath Britt’s matter-of-fact tone, he sensed something more. ‘So?’ He shrugged. ‘What’s happening with Jazz?’ He was fairly confident Sharif would have told him if anything serious had happened to his Jazz—Princess Jasmina of Kareshi, as Jazz was better known to the world. ‘Jazz is okay, isn’t she?’

‘Of course she is.’

‘But?’ He played it down, but his heart had stopped at the thought of harm coming to Jazz. They’d known each other since Sharif had first invited Tyr to spend his school holidays in Kareshi, where Jazz teased him unmercifully for his lack of desert lore. He’d shrugged the irritating kid sister off, but surprised himself by always being pleased to see her. A type of camaraderie had grown between them, and the thought of Jazz sick, or injured— His stomach churned. He’d seen too much of that.

‘But nothing, Tyr,’ Britt insisted. ‘I’d tell you if there was anything wrong.’

He searched Britt’s eyes, knowing that wasn’t the whole story.

‘She’s coming tonight, Tyr.’

‘Great.’ It would be good to see Jazz, though Sharif’s sister could see through everyone, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

‘She’s changed, Tyr,’ Britt said quietly.

He looked up.

‘Like the rest of us, Tyr, Jazz has grown up.’

What was his sister trying to tell him? He shrugged, picturing Jazz with braces and pigtails. How much could one person change? He glanced at his reflection in the window, where he got his answer to that.

‘What’s wrong, Tyr?’

He slanted a smile. ‘Nothing. Absolutely nothing’s wrong.’

‘We’ve all changed,’ Britt said, reading him easily, ‘but at least you’re smiling now. Thinking of Jazz?’

He hummed and shrugged Britt’s question off, but he was thinking about Jazz, who, all those years back, had used to refer to him as the guy from the frozen north with the funny name. Sharif, Jazz and he had been an oddball team. Jazz started out the most unwanted member of that team, but she was also the most determined, and could ride him and Sharif into the ground. And she knew the shifting patterns of the desert like the back of her hand. There had been no getting away from Jazz Kareshi, so in the end they’d given up.

‘Don’t look so worried, Britt. I can handle Jazz,’ he said with confidence.

‘Just don’t tease her, Tyr.’

‘Don’t tease Jazz?’ He frowned. Jazz had always been the butt of their humour, and Jazz had always given back as good as she got.

‘Jazz has only agreed to come tonight because this is such a big family occasion. And I’m here to chaperone her,’ Britt added with a meaningful look. ‘Me and Sharif, that is.’

He frowned. ‘This is all sounding terribly formal and not a bit like Jazz.’

‘Like I said, Tyr, Jazz is all grown up, and unmarried sisters of the ruling sheikh in Kareshi don’t share our freedoms.’

‘Is Sharif penning her in?’

‘Don’t be silly. You know Sharif is a big advocate for progress. This is Jazz’s decision, and we have to respect her for her beliefs. It shows a quiet strength and lots of courage, in my opinion. Jazz has stood by Sharif’s side throughout as he’s coaxed Kareshi into the twenty-first century, and now she doesn’t want to do anything to rock the boat, let alone give the traditionalists in Kareshi an excuse to criticise Sharif for implementing progress too quickly.’

‘So Jazz sacrifices herself?’ he demanded, outraged. ‘Jazz shuts herself away?’

‘Not exactly, but Jazz has become quite conservative, so for her sake, Tyr, just tone it down when you see her, okay?’

‘What do you think I’m going to do? We’ve been friends for most of our lives, Britt. I’m hardly going to leap on her.’

‘Just cool the friendship, and stay clear of Jazz, except for the most perfunctory greeting. Okay?’

He raked his hair. ‘I can’t believe you’re serious. Is anyone allowed to approach the royal presence?’

‘Don’t mock her, Tyr. Of course they are.’ Britt fired a warning glance across his bows for making light of something that was obviously a great concern to her. ‘Jazz lives a near normal life in Kareshi. Sharif broke all the traditionalists’ rules by giving Jazz a job at his racing stables, where she’s excelled in management, but, more importantly, this has opened the floodgates for all the women of Kareshi to work, if they choose to do so.’

‘But?’ he prompted, homing in on Britt’s brief hesitation.

‘But it’s made Jazz more determined than ever to uphold tradition in other areas of her life, so that no one can find fault with Sharif’s decision to allow her to work.’

‘What does “upholding tradition” mean exactly?’

‘It means that Jazz believes Kareshi can only take one small step at a time, and if by staying in the shadows it means every woman in Kareshi has the right to work, she’s prepared to do that. We should admire her for that sacrifice.’

‘Her sacrifice?’

‘Kareshi has to be coaxed, not bullied, Tyr. Jazz understands this as I do. Freedom for women to work is the first big step. Freedom for unmarried women to mix openly with men without being shunned by society is the next. Kareshi will take that step, but Jazz is devoted to her people, and I think we can safely trust Jazz to know what’s best in this instance.’

‘To know what’s best for her, or for Kareshi?’

‘Don’t get so heated, Tyr. For both, of course. And please don’t scowl at me like that.’

‘You’re right, and I apologise.’ Britt had done too much for him for him to sound off at her like that. ‘I’m still trying to get my head around the feisty girl I knew becoming some sort of reclusive woman.’

‘So you didn’t shut yourself away from those who loved you?’

Trust Britt to point that out. He forced a smile over his concern for Jazz. ‘Point taken.’

‘Be happy for her, Tyr. Jazz is a wonderful young woman with the strongest sense of duty where Kareshi is concerned, something I know you can relate to. It makes sense that she doesn’t want to cause ripples on the pond.’

‘It makes sense to you maybe,’ he agreed, ‘but Jazz is my friend, and I’m going to see a lot of friends tonight and I’m going to treat them all the same.’

‘Then there’s nothing to worry about, is there?’ Taking his face between her hands, Britt stood on tiptoes to kiss him on both cheeks. ‘Now, there are some people outside that door who have waited a long time to give you a big, sloppy welcome without the rest of the world looking on.’

His spirits soared with expectation. ‘Eva and Leila are here?’

‘With their husbands—I didn’t think you’d mind, seeing as Roman and Raffa are your closest friends?’

‘I don’t mind at all.’ He was looking forward to it, and his cynical self reassured him that if he kept it light they wouldn’t see anything in his eyes except the happiness a reunion like this would bring.

His middle sister, Eva, was the first into the room, changing the dynamics completely. Eva lived up to her bright red hair with the sharpest tongue this side of a scalpel, and the long space of time since they’d seen each other hadn’t dulled Eva’s approach. Standing back, she weighed him up. ‘You look every bit as formidable as I remember, warrior-boy.’

‘I could crush you with one finger, squirt.’

Fists raised, they squared up for a mock fight, and then, bursting into tears, Eva launched herself at him. Pummelling him with her tiny fists, she raged in a shaking voice, ‘Don’t you ever do that to me again. Do you hear me, Tyr?’ Pulling back, she stared at him with furious eyes. ‘Don’t you ever disappear out of my life again without at least having the courtesy to leave me the keys to your muscle car.’

Laughing, he embraced her. ‘Promise,’ he murmured softly as he kissed the top of her head.

Eyes softened with tears, Eva pulled back to stare at him. ‘You’ve no idea how we’ve missed you, Tyr.’

‘I’ve missed you too.’ How much, they’d never know. ‘I can’t imagine how I survived all that time without the three of you nagging me.’

As Eva roared with pretended fury, Britt walked to the door and swung it wide. 'Leila!' He was ready to catch his youngest sister and swing her round. Thankfully he stopped in time. 'Wow. You are pregnant.'

'Bowling-ball pregnant,' Leila confirmed, laughing and crying all at the same time as they embraced.

'But you look as beautiful as Britt warned me you would.'

Leila huffed a laugh as she stood back. 'If you like waddling hippos, I'm your gal.' She stared at him intently for a moment. 'I can't believe you've come back to us.' His sister's eyes filled with love and concern. 'But life's taken a bite out of you.'

'Enough.' He straightened his jacket. 'We're going to a party, aren't we?'

'We mustn't keep our guests waiting,' Britt agreed, exchanging a look with him as she held the door.

Linking arms with his two younger sisters, he urged them out of the room.

* * *

For the first time Jazz could remember, Sharif hadn't shown impatience with her when she wasn't ready to leave for the party at the same time as him and Britt. 'No hurry,' he'd soothed with a smile. 'Just call me when you're ready and I'll come back for you.'

At the time she'd been flapping over what to wear. This might seem like a storm in a teacup to the average bystander, but, when you chose not to socialise in mixed company, it was hard to know what high society in a bustling mining town like Skavanga would expect of a very conservative princess of Kareshi.

'Your smile,' Britt had told Jazz in her usual down-to-earth way, insisting Jazz must show her face on this occasion. 'You don't have to take the traditions of Kareshi to the nth degree when you're staying with us in the frozen north.'

'But if I were photographed—'

'The people of Kareshi could only be proud of their princess. Seeing you with your brother, surrounded by a family who loves you both so much, how could they not be proud of you, Jazz?'

Britt was always hard to argue with, and on that occasion impossible, though Jazz had had to wrestle with her inner demons before she could agree to showing her face in public. Her parents had abused their privilege and neglected their people, leaving Sharif and Jazz in the care of a succession of nannies while their mother had flaunted her beauty on a world stage. Sharif and Jazz had grown up sensitive to the rumblings of discontent in their country, so that when the time came for Sharif to inherit the throne he had moved as quickly as he could to turn the super-tanker round and establish a fair rule so he could make their country safe. Sharif was good and strong and kind and wise, but their troubled childhood in a land of absentee rulers and rampant corruption had left Jazz determined not to cause any more upset, so, however free her spirit, in appearance she was always careful not to offend.

'You should get out of Kareshi more,' Britt had insisted when they had discussed what Jazz would wear for the party. 'It would be good for your people, and good for you.'

Jazz agreed, but Kareshi was steeped in millennia of tradition. Sharif had already given her a job at his racing stables, which had opened the floodgates for every woman in Kareshi to work, should they choose to do so, and Jazz wasn't about to risk their freedom by pushing the traditionalists too far. And it was much easier hiding behind a veil than facing up to a night like this. Staring into the mirror, she wished her heart would stop pounding. Her brother had already left with Britt, so Britt could enjoy a private reunion with her sisters and their long-lost brother, Tyr, at the Skavanga Mining company offices.

Tyr.

Jazz's throat dried. She had always been excited to see the big Viking.

But things were different now, Jazz told herself firmly. She was an adult with responsibilities, not a child who had plagued the life out of her brother's closest friend. She had to guard her feelings.

But Tyr was someone she could always depend on.

Or he had been, until he'd disappeared.

How she'd worried about him—wondered about him—prayed for him to be safe.

And now he was back.

What would he think of her? She was so changed, so solemn and so silent. She wouldn't be playing any tricks on him today.

And she wouldn't be going to the party if she didn't calm down.

Taking a few steady breaths, she closed her eyes and tried her hardest not to think about Tyr Skavanga. After a few moments, she gave up.

* * *

Tyr paused at the entrance to the hotel ballroom and smiled. 'This is beautiful, Britt.'

'No welcome banners,' Eva complained, staring around.

'No. It's all very Britt,' Leila commented approvingly, echoing his own thoughts. 'It's a really classy setting.'

'For a warrior's return,' Eva said proudly, putting her hand on his arm.

'For a homecoming,' he argued gently.

There was no doubt Britt had gone to a lot of trouble. The flowers in the tall vases flanking the easel to one side of the grand double doors were classic and white. The photograph of him Britt had chosen to prop up on the easel showed him laughing and relaxed before he'd entered the theatre of war, where his life had changed completely.

'You look about twenty years older in real life,' Eva informed him helpfully to a chorus of disapproval from their sisters.

'Watch it, shrimp,' he warned playfully, feeling his spirits lift to the point where he thought he might actually enjoy the evening. 'Roman's out of earshot, so you could be heading for a soaking in the chocolate fountain.'

Eva gave a theatrical sigh. 'Death by chocolate suits me.'

'Come on, you two, stop squabbling,' Britt insisted, pulling the big-sister card on both of them.

He walked ahead of his sisters into the lavishly decorated ballroom with its Gothic curlicues and massive, glittering chandeliers, and the first thing he saw when he entered the room was Jazz.

CHAPTER TWO

HOLY CRAP!

Tyr's heart banged in his chest when Jazz turned to look at him. It was as if some invisible electrical cord connected them. What was it he'd said so confidently to Britt only minutes before? I'm going to see a lot of friends tonight and I'm going to treat them all the same.

Seriously?

No one else stood a chance of top billing with Princess Jasmina of Kareshi in the room. Britt had been derelict in her description of this new version of the tomboy Jazz, who hadn't just grown up, but who had blossomed like an exotic flower into the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Jazz's new air of serenity intrigued him. It was as if she had created a role for herself that she was determined to play out to the full.

He dismissed the new role Jazz had slotted herself into with a disapproving huff. She was avoiding the truth.

A bit like him, then?

Not a bit like him!

Swiping his hair back, he turned his mind to the flash of fire he'd seen in her eyes when Jazz had first spotted him entering the ballroom. It reminded him of the days when Her Royal Cheekiness had used to goad him on every possible occasion. Level calm had returned to her eyes now that Jazz was concentrating on the group of women surrounding her.

'Tyr?'

He turned to look at Britt.

‘She’s beautiful, isn’t she?’

There was always more to Britt’s questions than at first appeared, so he replied with caution. ‘I guess.’ His world was private. He’d lived alone for too long to share his personal feelings with anyone, even Britt. He should have known his sister didn’t need any conversational pointers to read him.

‘Don’t shake her up, Tyr,’ Britt implored. ‘Be mild-mannered around her. Don’t pull the marauding Viking act. Jazz is trying her hardest to play the conservative card, so that traditionalists aren’t rattled when Sharif makes sweeping changes for good in Kareshi.’ Britt shook her head for emphasis. ‘This evening is really hard for her, Tyr. Being out in mixed company, I mean. But Jazz needs this. She has such a free spirit—but you know that.’ Britt frowned. ‘She’s sacrificed more than we know for Kareshi.’

‘Her freedom?’ he cut in.

‘Tyr, please. Don’t make it any harder for her,’ Britt begged him with a restraining hand on his arm. ‘You, of all people, can surely appreciate the value of sacrifice. So just say hello, be polite and then back off. All right?’

‘Thanks for writing the script for me, sis.’ He raised an amused brow.

‘Just don’t mess with Jazz. She’s got enough to contend with.’

‘I’ve no intention of messing with Jazz, as you put it, but I’d have to be wood from the neck up not to respond to such a beautiful woman.’

‘Just keep your feelings under wraps, Tyr. Spare Jazz the heartache. She’s always been half in love with you. And you’ve been alone a long time, remember.’

‘Relax, Britt. I’m not that desperate. I haven’t exactly been a saint while I’ve been away.’

‘You can find love in all sorts of unexpected places,’ Britt agreed, ‘but I don’t think Jazz is looking for the type of love you’re offering.’

He gave his sister an amused look. ‘I hope she isn’t looking for love at all.’

‘Why, Tyr?’ Britt’s stare pierced him. ‘Would you be jealous?’

‘Of Jazz’s suitors?’ He laughed that off. Offering Britt his arm, he led his sister deeper into the crowded room.

‘There are too many alphas in this room,’ Britt commented wryly as his sisters’ husbands Raffa and Roman waylaid him for a brisk man hug. ‘I may drown in testosterone.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll save you,’ Tyr offered as the men broke away to claim their wives.

‘That’s what I’m afraid of,’ Britt murmured.

When they drew closer to Jazz, Britt gave him a warning look and he squeezed her arm to reassure her. ‘I remember what you said. I respect Jazz. Always have, always will.’

He didn’t hear Britt’s reply. The hubbub of excited guests rolled over him like white noise as he kept his gaze fixed on Jazz. Bathed in light beneath a huge chandelier, she was chatting animatedly to an admiring group of women.

‘No, Tyr.’

He paused mid-stride with Britt at his elbow.

‘Don’t you remember what I said? Jazz is going to be heavily chaperoned tonight, and I won’t thank you for interfering.’

The corner of his mouth kicked up. ‘You still think I’m going to leap on her?’

‘I know that look in your eyes. When Jazz marries she’s stated her intention to be pure.’

He frowned. ‘What are you suggesting?’

‘You don’t put her in a compromising position. Go easy on her, Tyr. Jazz has barely left Kareshi since the day she was born. Coming to Skavanga is a big adventure for her.’

‘I’ve got no intention of spoiling anything for Jazz. If she has chosen to live her life according to the traditions of Kareshi, then I respect that.’

‘Good, because you might be the brother I adore, but if you hurt Jazz—’

‘You don’t have to say it, Britt.’

‘Don’t I?’ Britt followed his stare straight ahead to the slim, straight-backed girl wearing the long, concealing robes of Kareshi.

* * *

So much for her intention to live a chaste and pure life! Jazz’s intentions hadn’t changed, but her body was rebelling like you wouldn’t believe. Hyper-arousal was an involuntary reaction to a threat, and one glimpse of Tyr Skavanga was all it took to give her all the symptoms. Her muscles were primed for action, while she was tense and ready. Her heart was racing, and her breathing was hectic as adrenalin raced through her system, putting every nerve ending she possessed in super-receptive mode. The flight-or-fight mechanism common to all human beings, whether they were autocratic sheikhs, powerful Scandinavian warriors like Tyr or the highly protected sister of the ruling Sheikh Sharif of Kareshi, could not be controlled by force of will.

But it must be controlled, Jazz determined, glancing at her brother to make sure Sharif had not noticed her response to Tyr.

It wasn’t fear of Tyr Skavanga raising Jazz’s heartbeat as she continued to chat with the group of women surrounding her, but the excitement of rekindling a lifelong friendship with him that was as close to love as it could get. But they weren’t children any longer, and Jazz was an unmarried princess of Kareshi, which meant that to love a man outside the family, however innocent that love might be, was absolutely forbidden by the traditionalists in Kareshi. Sharif was a progressive ruler, but Jazz believed that things could only move so fast in a country mired in tradition, and only the fact that tonight was an unmissable family event had ensured her attendance at this party.

She had spent so many years thinking about Tyr, however, that it was impossible to put him out of her mind now he was practically within touching distance. No one knew where Tyr had been for all these years, except perhaps for Sharif, who had been his closest friend since school, and who was as annoyingly silent as the Sphinx on the subject of Tyr Skavanga. They had both attended an elite military college, that much she knew, and then they had both joined Special Forces, where Tyr had been decorated for his courage, but then he’d disappeared. ‘Into the desert,’ Sharif had told her vaguely. Sharif would never betray a friend’s confidence, but had explained that Tyr was working on rebuilding and repairing infrastructure that had been damaged during the years of conflict before Sharif ascended the throne.

Tyr’s life experiences had changed him, Jazz realised as she stared at him. There were shadows behind his eyes and deep lines furrowing Tyr’s strong face. Whatever her pledge regarding friendships with men outside the family, her heart went out to him.

And bounced when Tyr glanced at her.

It was as if he could feel her interest.

Her cheeks burned as she turned away. Surely Sharif had explained to Tyr that she might be working, and have all the outward appearance of being an independent woman, but she was bound by her duty to Kareshi, and was only marking time until her brother could arrange an advantageous marriage for her—advantageous for Kareshi, that was.

‘Skavanga is so glamorous these days, isn’t it?’

Thankful to be distracted, she turned to smile at the elderly woman standing next to her. ‘This is my first time in Skavanga,’ she admitted, ‘so I only know what my brother has told me about a place he’s come to love.’

‘Before diamonds were discovered in the family mine,’ the same woman continued, ‘Skavanga was just a tiny mining town beyond the Arctic Circle, scratching a living as best it could, but now our town glitters as brightly as the precious stones your brother mines. We have Sheikh Sharif to thank for playing a major role in the consortium that saved us.’

‘You’re very kind, but my sister-in-law, Britt, Sharif’s wife, has always been the driving force behind the Skavanga mining company.’

The older woman stared at Jazz approvingly as she stood on tiptoe to confide, 'I'm surprised those three powerful men didn't run Britt Skavanga out of town.'

Jazz laughed with all the other women at this reference to the three ambitious men who had formed the consortium that saved the mine. 'I hardly think my brother would run his wife out of town. He adores Britt. And though it's true the consortium provided the funds to mine the diamonds—without Britt?' Jazz shrugged.

'Britt Skavanga has always been a brilliant businesswoman,' another woman confirmed, smiling at Jazz.

'And now the brand Skavanga Diamonds is an international household name,' the first woman supplied with admiration in her voice.

'How can you all bear to talk business when Tyr Skavanga's home?'

Jazz stared at the pretty young woman who had just spoken up, and couldn't help noticing that the girl was staring at Tyr.

'You must be as excited as I am,' the girl said as she glanced around their group. 'The marriage market has really opened up again. Don't you agree, Princess Jasmina? Have you had chance to speak to Tyr Skavanga yet? I know your brother, His Majesty, and Tyr used to be close friends.'

'They're still friends.' Jazz confirmed this pleasantly, knowing that it shouldn't grate to such an extent to hear Tyr discussed so openly when he was such a private man. Why couldn't she accept the interest of these women and agree with them?

'Is that him over by the door?' another younger woman who had just joined the group demanded.

'How can you mistake him?' the first one exclaimed with affront. 'Tyr Skavanga is easily the best-looking man in this room.'

The latecomer frowned. 'But I thought he was working rough in the desert?'

'I think he might have had a shower since then,' the old lady commented to general amusement.

Jazz couldn't blame the women for being bowled over by Tyr's compelling appearance. Dark and tall, he looked untouchable, yet commanding. Who wouldn't want to know the secrets of a man like that?

'He looks good for someone who's been living like a nomad for so long,' one woman commented.

'Tyr has been working in the desert with the nomadic people,' Jazz felt bound to explain. 'The nomads have a very sophisticated society.'

The same woman feigned a swoon. 'How romantic...billowing Bedouin tents, and long desert nights with a Viking warrior.'

By this time Jazz was tied up in a knot inside. 'Tyr was in the desert building schools and looking for clean water sources.'

When everyone went quiet she could have bitten off her tongue. She hadn't meant to sound preachy and spoil the fun, but to hear people talking about Tyr when they didn't even know him, let alone the valuable work he was doing...

Tyr glanced at her and the world fell away. He would hate to think people were gossiping about him. And she had joined in, Jazz accepted as Tyr's dark stare held hers briefly across the blurring faces of the crowd.

Sharif, who was as sharp as the ceremonial khanjar, the curved blade he wore suspended from the jeweled scabbard on his belt, missed nothing, and was instantly at her side. 'Don't you feel well, Jasmina?'

Touching her fingertips to her brow, she used Sharif's reading of the situation to her advantage. 'It is quite noisy, don't you think? Perhaps I won't stay long.'

She wanted to go almost as much as she wanted to stay. She didn't know what she wanted to do.

She should do what was best, which meant staying for as long as politeness dictated and then leaving without drawing attention to herself in any way.

‘Just let me know when you’re ready to leave, Jasmina,’ Sharif said, reading her.

‘I will. Thank you.’ Gazing up, she touched his sleeve. Beneath his steely exterior Sharif was the kindest and most considerate man she knew.

‘And if you’re uncomfortable meeting Tyr, just let me know that too.’

‘I’m not uncomfortable. We were childhood friends.’

She hated deceiving Sharif, even in her thoughts, and had to take a few deep, steadying breaths. Had she really thought she could handle this?

Sharif’s hawk-like gaze flashed from Tyr to her. ‘Just so long as you’re all right with this, Jasmina?’

‘I am. Of course I am.’ But her lips felt as stiff as a ventriloquist’s doll. She had to face the truth. She couldn’t trust her feelings where Tyr Skavanga was concerned.

‘Tyr’s on his way.’

Sharif’s terse warning flashed through her, though she could feel Tyr’s approach without needing to turn and look. And then he was in front of them, just inches away.

Jazz remained frozen and stiff as the two men exchanged their customary bunched-fist greeting, then her brother stepped back and she was face-to-face with Tyr Skavanga. For a moment all she could do was study his face and log all the terrible changes, and then she remembered to breathe.

CHAPTER THREE

‘HOW WONDERFUL TO see you again, Tyr.’

‘And you, Jasmina.’

Wonderful? How inadequate words could be. Her world had been empty and now it was full. The strapping Viking was as fatally compelling as she remembered, but the changes in him were painful to see. Tyr had experienced a lot. Too much, Jazz sensed, and his eyes reflected this. He seemed harder and more cynical, though he was staring down at her with something close to humour in his clear, sharp gaze.

‘You’ve changed, Jazz.’

‘So have you.’ She said this lightly, but Tyr’s essence had changed—frighteningly. The days of teasing him were long gone.

‘How are you, Jazz?’

Tyr’s sharp gaze pierced her and clearly asked her: How are you really? Tell me the truth.

‘I’m very well, thank you. And you?’

Her stilted tone brought another flash of amusement to Tyr’s dark eyes. ‘You look well,’ he said.

Heat pooled inside her as he continued to stare down, making a nonsense of her decision to remain aloof from men. And how could she have forgotten the effect of his voice? Tyr’s deep, husky tone embraced her like a welcome memory from the past, even as it rang warning bells in her head.

‘We must find time to catch up, Jazz.’

She actually gasped at this suggestion. Did Tyr have any idea what he was suggesting? ‘Catching up’ implied an intimate one-to-one conversation, which was absolutely forbidden. Private time with a man apart from her brother, Sharif, could never happen, but as Sharif was called away to greet some of their other guests she found herself alone with Tyr. Jazz’s cheeks flamed red with embarrassment. The connection between them hadn’t been lost. If anything, the passage of time had only made it stronger.

Britt saved her. Having organised the event, Britt was easily the busiest woman in the room, but still she had spotted Jazz, who was marooned on her own personal desert island with Tyr, and quickly came across to offer a life raft.

‘Jazz, there are some people I think you’d like to meet. Excuse us, please, Tyr.’ Smiling briefly at her brother, she whisked Jazz away.

Jazz exhaled shakily as they crossed the ballroom. ‘Thank you for rescuing me.’

‘From those two dinosaurs?’ Britt laughed. ‘I could see Sharif’s tension a mile off, and when Tyr came over to speak to you I knew it was time to launch a rescue mission.’

Jazz glanced round to find Tyr was still watching her.

‘Come on.’ Britt squeezed her arm. ‘There are lots of great people for you to meet.’

Jazz counted herself lucky to have a sister-in-law like Britt on her side. Britt acted as a sounding board, and, with no other female relatives to confide in, it was reassuring to know she could always talk to Britt. Jazz really valued her growing friendship with the three Skavanga sisters, though doubted they understood her point of view where her chosen lifestyle was concerned, as they came from such a different world.

‘I’m going to introduce you to a really nice crowd,’ Britt promised, linking arms with Jazz. ‘We’ll leave the men to brood.’

Jazz blushed. She could feel Tyr’s stare on her back, halfway across the room.

‘Are you all right?’ Britt whispered discreetly during a lull in the conversation with the crowd they’d joined. ‘I saw the way you looked at Tyr.’

Britt’s eyes were full of compassion. Had everyone noticed? ‘I’m fine.’ She smiled to reassure Britt. ‘I can handle Tyr.’

Britt smiled back, but nothing about that smile convinced Jazz that Britt believed her as they both glanced around at Tyr. ‘He cares about you, Jazz. We all do.’

Impulsively, Jazz gave Britt a hug. Britt was the closest thing she had to a sister, but, however much she thought of Britt, nothing could derail Jazz’s determination to live a life beyond reproach in service to her country.

* * *

Jazz Kareshi was all grown up. Tyr’s mouth tugged fractionally at the irony of doing everything in his power to avoid finding his best friend’s sister attractive and failing miserably. Jazz had grown into a beautiful woman and he could look at nothing else. He should be grateful to Britt for whisking Jazz away before his interest became more obvious. The fact that Sharif had stood between him and Jazz until Sharif was called away had irritated the hell out of him. He’d known Jazz since she wore pigtails and braces; couldn’t they even talk to each other now? They were both powerful men, and used to having their own way, but it seemed there were some things Sharif would like to deny Tyr, like catch-up time with Jazz.

‘Jazz seems happy tonight,’ he commented when Sharif joined him, determined to find out everything there was to know about Jazz.

‘My sister is always happy. Why would she not be?’

‘No reason, Sharif.’ He returned Sharif’s suspicious glance with a level stare. ‘Are you trying to keep her away from me? Relax,’ he said as Sharif stiffened with affront. ‘Jazz is your sister and I respect that. I wouldn’t do anything to cause either of you embarrassment.’

‘Jasmina has chosen to distance herself from the modern world for her own reasons, not because anyone, least of all me, has tried to confine her.’

He stared into the eyes of a man he’d known and trusted most of his life, and knew instantly that Sharif was telling him the truth.

‘Jasmina believes that while I implement change for the better, she must reassure the more conservative groups in our country by remaining a very traditional princess. We will both do anything we can to avoid the chaos of our parents’ rule.’

‘I understand that, and I respect it,’ Tyr assured his friend, following Sharif’s stare across the room to where Jazz was standing. Both Sharif and Jazz were determined to do everything they could for their people, even if that meant sacrificing their own happiness.

‘Jasmina is finding the party a little overwhelming, I think,’ Sharif remarked as if reading his mind.

‘It must be a conflict for her—coming out into mixed company, I mean.’

They shared a smile as he remembered the tomboy who had been at the forefront of every adventure, while Sharif had always had to consider his dignity and look forward to what was best for Kareshi.

‘And you, Tyr?’ Sharif looked at him with concern. ‘How are you enjoying the party?’

‘Like Jazz. Mixing with so many people at once is something of an ordeal.’ His lips pressed down at this rueful admission, but both he and Jazz had chosen the solitary life, if for very different reasons. ‘But I’m grateful to Britt for arranging this party. Britt is right—I need to be back amongst people I love.’

This was true, but there were too many people here and far too much noise. Five minutes alone with Jazz, someone he didn’t have to explain every little thing to because they had that long history of friendship behind them, would have been more than enough for him, but he couldn’t share that opinion with Sharif.

‘Tyr—’

‘Over here—’

Another friend. Another photograph.

He should be more gracious. He would try, but the flare of candlelight on crystal was like a barrage of spotlights directed on his face. Everyone wanted to know where he’d been, what he’d done, what he’d seen. Only Jazz shone like a beacon in the midst of all the uproar. She was an oasis in the desert of his life, and his gaze sought her out hungrily.

‘I’m guessing you’d rather be back in the desert, Tyr?’

Jolted out of his reverie, he turned to lock stares with Sharif. ‘You guessed right.’

It was the silence of the desert that had first imprinted itself on his heart, and Sharif and Jazz were an integral part of the land he loved. He loved their harsh country and the hostile terrain. He loved them. The hardship of his work in the desert soothed him. It distracted him from other things, ugly things in his past. Up to tonight he’d had no wish to rekindle gentle feelings that seemed to have died inside him, but now?

‘I wish you the very best of evenings, Tyr.’

He refocused on Sharif.

‘But stay away from my sister.’

It took him a moment to realise that he’d been staring at Jazz the whole time they’d been talking.

‘Don’t make Jazz’s life even harder than she makes it for herself, Tyr.’

‘I wouldn’t do anything to hurt either of you,’ he assured his friend.

As he spoke, a group of guests chose that moment to draw Sharif away, leaving Tyr free to gaze at Jazz uninterrupted. Strange to think the happy, carefree girl he remembered would never be truly free again and that the best thing he could do for Jazz was to butt out of her life altogether.

He tried to ignore her. He chatted to some guests, but while Jazz was in the same room as him he couldn’t concentrate. Were they supposed to ignore each other for the rest of the night? He was so tense that his expression was fierce as he whirled around when someone touched his arm. He was shocked to see an old lady staring up at him. ‘I’m so sorry.’ His expression softened instantly. ‘Please forgive me.’

‘There’s no need to apologise,’ she said with a smile. ‘I just wanted to tell you how good it is to see the Skavanga family reunited. And I think it’s especially significant to see Sheikh Sharif’s sister here. I understand why Princess Jasmina has chosen to live her life the way she has. I was talking to her earlier. It must have been a big step for her to take, and an even bigger one for her to be here tonight. She’s obviously courageous. And what a beautiful girl she is. She is so lucky to have a brother who clearly adores her.’

Tyr made polite noises as the charming old lady chatted on, but what he really appreciated was the excuse to stare openly at Jazz. He’d been a prisoner of war for a time, and understood that

captivity could be as much a condition of the mind as the body, and his heart went out to Jazz. He would not exchange one moment of his life now for Jazz's confined existence, but he couldn't blame her for her choices when Jazz was as much a servant to duty as he.

As if sensing his interest, Jazz turned to look at him, and for the briefest moment her expression held all the warmth and mischief of the past.

'Well, I mustn't take up all your time.'

Realising he'd been ignoring the old lady, he quickly turned to her. 'You must once more forgive me. I was distracted.'

'By Princess Jasmina?' The old lady smiled up at him. 'I'm not surprised.'

He shrugged with amusement at being caught out. These were good people, all keen to welcome him back, and he should show them more respect. He would. Tonight would go smoothly from now on, if he just could stick to one simple rule: Jazz Kareshi was off-limits.

But within moments a group had formed around him and all they wanted to talk about were his exotic friends from Kareshi. One of the women pointed to Sharif, who even Tyr had to admit looked striking in his flowing robes.

'The sheikh is exactly what I think of when I imagine a desert warrior,' she enthused. 'Tell me, Tyr,' she added with a smile, 'did they hand out handsome pills at your school?'

'No. Cold showers and the birch,' he murmured distractedly, wondering what the crowd of young women around Jazz could have said to make her face light up. Leaving the women around him still exclaiming with outrage on his behalf at his comments about his old school, he made his way towards her. There was only one woman in this room who held his attention and only one woman in the world who could provoke any sort of response in him. He'd clamped down on feelings in order to survive, and had thought he'd lost the knack of feeling anything, until tonight.

Britt was in the same group as Jazz, and smiled as he walked up to them. Sharif's hooded stare followed him across the crowded room. He glanced back to reassure his friend, and to tell him at the same time that they might be as close as brothers, but no one told Tyr how to live his life. But could he risk infecting a bright spirit like Jazz with his darkness? Hadn't Jazz heaped enough pain on herself without him interfering? Freedom was a gift he had always taken for granted, but Jazz was a glaring example that life wasn't always so straightforward. Jazz's boundaries hadn't expanded. When she grew up they had shrunk.

There was another quick look from Jazz that took him right back to the tricks they used to play on each other when they were younger: burrs beneath the saddle, itching powder in their riding boots. Innocent times before the shadows crept in. He'd have a short, polite conversation with her and then move on, he decided. What could be more innocent than that? He'd ask her about the riding stables. Britt had told him how much Jazz enjoyed working there. He wouldn't make a single comment about the remote racing stable being yet another way for Jazz to shut herself off from the world. And he certainly wouldn't tell her about the arousal that lanced through him each time their glances met and held. They were good friends. They would remain good friends. They had always been able to ease their way back into an easy friendship, even after months apart.

That was then and this is now, and now everything has changed.

True, the past could not be recaptured, and the future was not his to command, but seizing the moment was his particular skill and this chance to talk to Jazz was up for grabs.

CHAPTER FOUR

JUST AS TYR came within earshot, Britt whisked Jazz away, explaining that she had arranged the place cards on their table so that Jazz wouldn't have to sit anywhere near Tyr, or any other single man. As Britt smiled reassurance into her eyes, Jazz was reminded again how much she valued their friendship.

'I'm so glad you're here to share Tyr's homecoming. It wouldn't have been the same without you, Jazz.'

‘I’m sorry if I seem tense to you.’

‘You feel awkward around men?’ Britt shrugged. ‘That’s hardly surprising. You should get out of Kareshi more. I’m going to speak to your brother about it.’

‘Please don’t give Sharif anything more to worry about. I’m happy in Kareshi. You know how much I love my work, and—’

‘And how you live under your own self-imposed guard while you’re there? Yes. I know all about that, Jazz—only allowing yourself this briefest of trips outside the country?’

‘I know you find the way I live hard to understand, but please believe me, Britt. This is the right thing to do for my country.’

Britt shook her head. ‘Locking yourself away can never be the right thing to do. It would benefit your people and you if you travelled more.’

‘I can never forget that I’m a princess of Kareshi,’ Jazz argued, trying her hardest not to glance at Tyr. ‘Or that with that title comes duty and responsibility.’

‘But not a ball and chain, surely?’

Britt’s expression made Jazz laugh. ‘Now you’re exaggerating. Anyone would think I was my own jailer.’

‘But aren’t you?’ Britt turned serious. ‘Beware of squashing your spirit completely, Jazz. Don’t turn yourself into something you’re not.’

Jazz’s eyes sparkled. ‘Like an embittered old shrew, do you mean?’

‘There’s no chance of that.’ Britt laughed. ‘And now we’ve got my brother to contend with.’ With a sigh she stood aside as the crowds parted to allow the handsome Viking through.

‘Don’t look so worried. I can handle Tyr.’

Jazz could only hope her heart was listening.

* * *

Tyr paused for a moment to check Sharif was still talking to the ambassador and his wife, before approaching the family table for dinner. He didn’t want to cause Jazz a moment’s discomfort, but, as if sensing his approach, Sharif called his sister over.

Britt walked over. ‘You’re looking thoughtful, Tyr.’

‘I am thoughtful.’

‘But you’ll stay and see the evening through?’

‘Of course I will. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.’

‘But you would have preferred something a little more low-key.’

‘No, in this you’re right,’ he admitted. ‘Better to see everyone at once.’

Britt cocked her head. ‘Get it over with?’

He looked at his sister with amusement. ‘I couldn’t possibly comment.’

And then the ever-changing pattern of friends reshaped again, leaving Jazz all alone in a halo of light.

Jazz made her way to the family table, only to find Tyr there ahead of her. Relaxing back on one of the gilt chairs, he was surveying the party with his cool dark gaze. She was about to turn around, to go and find Britt, or her brother, but Tyr was already on his feet, holding out a chair. ‘Jazz.’

No man should smile at her like that—so openly—so invitingly.

There was a belief in Kareshi that members of the opposite sex could never stare directly into each other’s eyes without there being some form of sexual implication.

‘Tyr.’ Had she always felt so awkward around him?

She knew the answer to that question. They had never been awkward with each other in the past, but a new tension had entered their relationship and that seemed set to stay. Neither of them was the same person they’d been ten years ago. Britt was right in saying a lot of water had passed under the bridge since then.

It was only when she sat down that Jazz realised Tyr had ignored Britt's carefully arranged place cards completely. Britt had assured her she wasn't going to be sitting anywhere near Tyr, so he must have moved the cards around.

So what was she going to do about it? Make some excuse and move halfway round the table? Wouldn't that seem rude? Wouldn't that be ridiculous, considering they were the only people at the table? Her heart thundered as Tyr's mouth slanted in a smile.

'So, what have you been doing with yourself while I've been away, Jazz?'

She stared into a pair of eyes that had always been able to devastate her nervous system. 'Where to start?' She gave a shaky laugh.

'Jazz?'

Tyr's voice sounded as if it were coming to her from a long way away, down an echoing tunnel. She should not be here. She should not be talking to a man. And this was not just any man, but Tyr Skavanga, a man who demanded every woman's attention, especially Jazz's, and to the point where, having stared into his eyes, she couldn't look away. 'It's been a long time, Tyr.'

Tyr's mouth curved with wry amusement at this comment. And no wonder, when that was probably the lamest thing she could have said. They'd been friends for years and she couldn't think of a single question to ask him? Not even when she was so hungry to know every detail of Tyr's missing life.

Sharing none of her reserve, Tyr continued to study her face as if he would like to record every tiny detail. This made her deeply uncomfortable, though thankfully, Britt was heading towards them at speed. And then out of the blue her courage returned, and, holding Tyr's gaze, she accepted the connection, as she told him with her eyes that things could never be the same between them again, and that he mustn't tease her and flirt with her as if she were still ten years old.

'Tyr?' Britt's voice sounded brittle as she hovered over them. 'Have you changed my place cards around?'

'Would I?' Resting back in his chair, Tyr cast a lazy glance up at his sister, which made Britt huff impatiently, but it was too late for Britt to change them round again as some important guests had arrived and were waiting to be seated.

Neither Sharif nor Tyr could ever be said to have forgotten their manners. They were both round the table in an instant, holding chairs out for their visitors. Sharif even put a restraining hand on Britt's arm when she would have changed places with Jazz. 'The ambassador,' he murmured discreetly.

Damned by etiquette, Jazz thought as Tyr sat down at her side. The ambassador and his wife were Britt's guests of honour tonight, and as Britt and Sharif were hosting the party it was unthinkable that the ambassador would sit next to anyone but Britt.

When everyone was seated and chatting happily, Britt managed a discreet word while Tyr was talking to the ambassador. 'Are you sure you're all right sitting here next to Tyr, Jazz?'

Smiling, Jazz confirmed, 'Of course I am.'

What else could she say?

* * *

Was she the only one to feel the tension building around the table? Jazz wondered. She was doing everything she could to ignore Tyr, but he was sitting so close, her whole body was tingling with awareness. How could she remain insensible to his heat, or to the compelling presence of the big Viking at her side? She had forbidden herself every sensual delight reality could offer, and exploring the forbidden in her mind had become a favourite pastime. But not tonight. She must not allow her thoughts to wander tonight. Gathering her robe a little closer, she forced the direction of her thoughts away from the devastating man at her side.

For around five seconds.

'Would you like some water, Jazz?'

Staring into Tyr's eyes made her heart race. 'Yes, please.' She sounded so formal and distant. Which was good, she reminded herself, even if it was directly opposed to what was happening inside her.

'Will you be staying in Skavanga long, Princess Jasmina?'

She turned with relief to the woman sitting on her other side, but even that didn't help, because her mind had taken a photograph of Tyr that meant she could chat intelligently enough, while studying every detail of Tyr in her mind. His hair was thick and tawny, and sun-bleached around his face where it hung in rebel tousles no matter how many times he swept it back. His stubble was sharp and black, and thick, though he must have shaved before he came to the party...and she could smell his cologne. Everything about him spelled danger. Everything about Tyr Skavanga was what she had vowed to avoid. He was wearing black on black tonight, when every other man at the table, apart from Sharif in his ceremonial robes, was dressed in a conventional dinner suit, with a conventional shirt and a conventional tie. Tyr had always bucked the trend, she remembered.

'More water, Princess?' Tyr's gravelly voice shook her round. 'Or something else, perhaps?'

'No, thank you.' How prim she sounded. But those wicked eyes— How dared he look at her like that? Storm-grey and darkening, Tyr's eyes were lit with a disturbing understanding of her inner turmoil. He had always been able to read her mind. It was a skill that had made her mad when she was younger, and which now made her uncomfortably aware. And that firm mouth that she had all too often imagined kissing her.

She must forget that now.

She must!

'Are you sure? No more water?' he prompted.

Her cheeks flamed red. 'Yes, I'm sure.' Frowning, she looked at him with what Jazz realised was the type of black look she would have given him when they were both younger, which was far too intimate a reminder of how close they'd once been.

'Your napkin, Jazz?'

She dragged in a sharp breath as Tyr leaned towards her. Shaking out her napkin, he moved to lay it on her lap. His face was so close to hers, her cheeks were burning. The brush of starched linen against her skin sent shivers of arousal streaking through her. The whisper of its touch against her thigh shocked her to think that she could be so easily seduced. Tyr was a force of nature, Jazz reassured herself. Anyone would feel as she did. She should leave now and have nothing more to do with him.

'You look beautiful tonight, Jazz.'

You can't say that!

But how she wanted to hear it.

Tyr's eyes were warm and amused when she didn't reply. Didn't he know how dangerous this was? Didn't he care?

Eva saved the day, taking control of the conversation around the table. Smiling at her brother proudly, Eva proceeded to tell everyone that Tyr had been born with a map and compass in his hand, and when everyone laughed, Jazz was able to relax as the spotlight swung away from her.

But not for long.

'How do you feel about wanderlust, Jazz?'

Why did Tyr have to ask her that question? Why did he have to speak to her at all? She stared into his eyes. This was her opportunity to make her position clear to him. 'I've always believed there's no place like home, and so far I've had no reason to change my mind.' Unless a marriage organised by Sharif took her to a new country, and a new family, where Jazz had no doubt she would be treasured like one of the hard, blue-white diamonds her brother and Tyr mined. She experienced a chill of apprehension at that thought. And then with everything inside her warning her to leave it, she turned back to Tyr. 'I have never felt your desire to keep moving and searching.'

‘Maybe because you’ve never given yourself that chance,’ Tyr cut in, resting his chin on his hand as he stared at her with amusement.

‘Tyr’s dangerous to know and even more dangerous to love,’ Eva confided across the table, laughing as everyone else laughed with her.

Jazz laughed too, thankful to Eva for diluting the tension with a joke. Joining in with the laughter seemed safest, and she thanked her lucky stars she would never be in a position to find out just how dangerous Tyr Skavanga could be.

‘We never know when Tyr’s going to disappear again,’ Eva continued, capturing everyone’s attention again. ‘He might not be there if I blink.’

More laughter followed this, but Jazz felt a pang of loss as if Tyr had already left them.

‘Don’t worry. I’m sticking around,’ he confided, but why couldn’t he say that to the whole table, instead of just to her?

He pretty much kept his promise to leave Jazz alone right up to the moment when Britt mounted the rostrum to deliver her speech of welcome and the lights dimmed. This left Britt alone in the spotlight and the rest of the room in shadow. Sharif had turned his chair around to listen to his wife, encouraging everyone else at the table to do the same.

‘What?’ Jazz murmured when she felt his interest switch to her. ‘Will you please stop staring at me, Tyr?’

‘No.’

Jazz’s voice was a fierce whisper, his was a lazy drawl, and her little growl of anger could have come straight from the old days, and that made him smile. Then she must have decided that if he was going to provoke her, she was going to lob back some polite and wholly innocuous conversation, and as he continued to study Jazz at his leisure, he was so engrossed he barely heard her question.

When he’d computed it, he frowned. ‘Did I manage to bring water to that village?’ he repeated. ‘Yes, I did. How do you know about that?’

‘Don’t worry. Sharif didn’t betray you. I happened to see the invoice for aqua-cleaning machinery come in, and I knew Sharif didn’t have any current projects running, so I put two and two together.’

‘And came up with me?’

‘I do have some original thoughts that aren’t stamped approved by my brother.’

‘I’m sure you do. And was that a hint of amusement in your voice I detected, Princess?’

She raised a brow. ‘Am I so dull?’

He paused. ‘You’ve changed.’

‘Don’t mock me, Tyr. I’m not sixteen any longer.’

‘This I can see for myself.’

‘Then you shouldn’t be looking.’

They were silent for some time after that.

The speeches ended and the prizes had all been handed out. The lights went up and Britt returned to their table to be congratulated by Sharif. His friend was a different character when he was with Britt, Tyr noted. Britt was a soothing hand on the warrior brow—something Tyr badly needed.

Anything that could distract him from his feelings for Jazz—feelings that clawed at his senses—would be good.

‘You’re like a seething volcano of pent-up energy,’ Eva commented, picking up on his tension. ‘Thor minus the hammer, unless you’re keeping that under the table?’

He hummed with amusement as he settled back. Eva knew him too well. She could sense his hunting instinct. He was the wolf. Jazz was the petal in danger of being trampled underfoot. Watching Britt persuade Sharif to dance, he felt his hunting instinct sharpen as one by one the other couples at the table joined them, leaving just one elderly man and woman to chaperone him and Jazz. And as the elderly couple were currently engrossed in their own conversation...

‘So, Princess Jasmina.’

Taking a deep breath, Jazz turned to stare at him. ‘Can the Sunday title, Tyr. You don’t need to pretend with me. You’ve called me Jazz from the first time we met, and I’m still Jazz to you.’

Mentally, he reeled back with surprise, then rebuked himself for forgetting that Jazz might have changed outwardly, but inwardly she was the same girl. He searched her eyes, but she turned away, then tensed when a group passed by and bowed to her in respect for her rank. ‘You can’t blame people,’ he pointed out as Jazz chewed her lip unhappily. ‘You’re not the tomboy to them you always were to me. You’re a princess.’

‘But that’s just it, Tyr. I can’t buy into the title when I haven’t done anything to deserve it.’

‘But you will,’ he said confidently, relieved that at least they were talking.

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ Jazz admitted with a sigh. ‘But I don’t feel any different from anyone else. Except...’

‘Except?’ he prompted, angling his chin to stare into her eyes.

‘Except I think you should bow to me.’

She said this with all the old humour and, sitting back, Tyr laughed with relief to think the girl he used to know was still in there somewhere. ‘Now, why should I bow to you, Princess?’

‘Viking warlords need to be put in their place by a princess of the desert.’

‘And what place is that?’

Jazz’s cheeks flushed attractively with heat. ‘A dungeon, preferably,’ she said as if realising that this conversation had already gone too far.

‘But I didn’t think you were frightened of anything?’

She fixed him with an unwavering gaze. ‘You’re right. I’m not.’

‘So if there’s any little service I can offer you, at that time and that time only, I will be sure to bow.’

For once in his life he broke eye contact first. If any other woman had looked at him the way Jazz had so briefly looked at him, he would have anticipated a very different outcome to this evening. High time for a reminder that when it came to the mating game, Jazz was so innocent she didn’t know the rules.

But he couldn’t ignore her for long. ‘You look good, Jazz. Life is obviously treating you well.’

‘Very well, thank you,’ she said primly. ‘You look good too.’

He huffed with amusement. ‘There’s no need for you to be polite with me.’

As Jazz’s eyes clouded with concern, he warned, ‘Don’t get into it. This is a party, remember?’

‘A party in your honour, Tyr, so I’m afraid you have to accept that people care about you. I don’t suppose anyone knows how to behave around you when you’ve been away for so long.’

He sat back. He liked this new Jazz. She was as much of a challenge beneath that prim exterior as she had ever been, but he liked the wild child from the past better. This new version of Jazz was a tightly strung instrument that only played to Jazz’s self-imposed restrictive tune.

‘It might help if you talked about things that matter to you, Tyr, like the ideals you were fighting for.’

‘Like what?’ He tensed. She had hit a nerve. It was Jazz that had the problem, not him.

‘Like freedom, Tyr,’ Jazz said calmly.

‘Freedom?’ He laughed incredulously as he stared at her. ‘And what do you know about that?’

‘What do you mean?’ she protested. ‘I’m free.’

‘Are you, Jazz?’

She couldn’t meet his eyes, and then she whispered, ‘You always represented freedom to me, Tyr.’

‘I did?’ An invisible hand grabbed his heart. Years of feeling nothing had hit the buffers tonight, he realised, and all thanks to Jazz Kareshi.

‘You’ve always done what you wanted, Tyr,’ she explained. ‘You could go where you wanted, do what you wanted to do, when you wanted to.’

‘You can too,’ he insisted, staring hard into Jazz’s eyes. ‘This is the twenty-first century.’

‘Not in Kareshi.’ Jazz smiled. ‘And we should stop talking like this before someone takes a photograph of us having this conversation.’

‘Britt wouldn’t allow the paparazzi within a hundred miles of here,’ he reassured her as Jazz flashed an anxious gaze around.

‘Please don’t tease me, Tyr.’ There was real concern in her voice. ‘You’ve got no idea what it’s like for Sharif in Kareshi. He’s doing everything he can to help our people, but a strident minority still continues to rail against progress. I’m doing all I can to reassure that section of our society.’

‘Public opinion will do that,’ he argued. ‘Sacrificing yourself will hardly be noticed in the grand scheme of things, but your life will have been ruined—and all by you.’

‘And if I want to do this?’

When he remained silent, Jazz shook her head. ‘I should have known you wouldn’t understand. You’re too like Sharif. He says I’m going too far.’

‘Well, aren’t you?’ he cut in.

‘The two of you are as close as brothers,’ Jazz said, ignoring his comment. ‘You can both do as you like, when you like, and you take that right for granted, but life isn’t like that for me, Tyr. I’m a royal princess of Kareshi and I have a duty to uphold certain standards.’

‘And what does that entail?’ His heart was sinking even as he asked the question, because he knew Jazz’s answer would involve more sacrifice, more confinement, more restrictions. Basically a smaller life for Jazz, and, knowing her as he did, that felt like a tragic waste of life to him.

‘I’ll just have to see what the future holds,’ she said. ‘Sharif has been approached by the Emir of Qadar.’

He had no idea what that meant, but it didn’t sound good.

‘It would be a great match for me, Tyr. Our two countries share a boundary.’

‘A match?’ He looked at her disbelievingly. ‘As in marriage?’

Jazz blushed. ‘This is only the start of negotiations.’

He raised a brow. ‘So you’re a bargaining counter now?’

‘Of course not. Sharif would never marry me off to someone I couldn’t get along with.’

‘Get along with?’ He spat out the words like something nasty in his mouth. ‘Aren’t you supposed to love the person you marry?’

‘Love?’ Briefly, Jazz seemed bewildered by the concept. ‘I don’t even know him.’

‘Do you think this is wise?’

‘I’ve seen him.’

‘You’ve seen him?’ he repeated. ‘Oh, well, that’s all right, then.’

‘Don’t mock me, Tyr. This is our way in Kareshi.’

‘Freedom to love should be everyone’s way in every country of the world.’

‘But Sharif has already broken with tradition by allowing me to pursue a career, and sometimes you have to be content. I agree that by staying in Kareshi I could achieve a lot, but if by marrying the emir I can take some of the burden off Sharif’s shoulders—’

‘Sharif’s a grown man,’ he cut in, having heard enough. ‘Sharif is a proven ruler. What about your life, Jazz? What about you?’

‘Me?’

He didn’t know which of them was surprised more by his passionate outburst.

‘Kareshi is my life,’ Jazz insisted. ‘Anything I can do to help my country I’ll do gladly.’

‘You’re repeating yourself, Jazz,’ he said. ‘And if you really want to help your country, why not stay in Kareshi and work?’

‘But the emir... I agreed Sharif could meet with him.’

‘And you can stop him doing that in a few words.’ He fixed Jazz with a stare, which she avoided. Heaving a sigh, she glanced around, presumably to see if anyone had noticed this heated discussion. ‘I don’t want to stop him,’ she admitted, leaning close. ‘If my marriage to the emir will benefit Kareshi, then that’s good enough for me.’

‘What you’ve just suggested is outrageous.’ He sat back. Subject closed.

‘Fine words, Tyr, but you weren’t born into the royal family of Kareshi. You’re free to do anything you want and I’m not. It’s that simple.’

‘Nothing is ever that simple.’ As he should know.

Grinding his jaw with frustration, he had to remind himself that this was a party, and that it was better for them both to calm down. At least for now.

CHAPTER FIVE

THERE WAS NO more chance to speak as Britt and Sharif had returned to sit at the table. In spite of his lifelong friendship with Sharif, he couldn’t believe his friend was going along with Jazz’s crazy idea, or that neither of them could talk Jazz out of the narrow path she had chosen to follow.

‘Stop seething, Tyr.’

The sound of Jazz’s voice, low and urgent, made him turn to look at her.

‘You’re making me uncomfortable,’ she explained in an undertone, ‘and people will notice.’

‘You’re making me uncomfortable with all this talk of an arranged marriage to a man you don’t even know,’ he countered. ‘What makes you think you’ve changed that much, Jazz? When you were younger you would have laughed an idea like that out of court.’

‘Exactly. We’re both older now, and I’m in a position to do something to help my country by making at least one of our borders secure.’

Shaking his head to shut her up, he hit Jazz with a cynical look.

‘Allying our two countries will be good for Kareshi,’ she insisted.

‘But Kareshi is rich, since Sharif took over, and your brother is a wise ruler. Why the hell would he agree to sacrificing his sister for nothing more than political expediency?’

‘If he thinks it makes me happy—’

‘Ha! I can’t believe Sharif goes along with that.’

‘Tyr, please keep your voice down.’

‘Whatever you say, Princess, but I don’t think you’ve thought this through.’

‘I’m not going to argue with you. I’m saying this is how it’s going to be.’

‘What happened to the girl I used to know?’

Jazz threw him an accusatory look, but there was something in her eyes that suggested deep down she agreed with him. It was sad to think her stubbornness wouldn’t allow Jazz to admit she was wrong so she could put a stop to these crazy marriage plans.

Sensing something was going on between them, Sharif glanced round. Tyr exchanged a brief look with his friend, lips pressed down to express regret at the fact that this was one time when he couldn’t help Sharif out. Sharif shrugged. Jazz had always been stubborn. Once she got an idea into her head, they both knew she ran with it until Jazz, or the concept, ran out of steam.

After feeling nothing for so long, Tyr felt this urge to help Jazz overwhelming him. He would like to get very close indeed to Jazz Kareshi.

All the more reason to sit back and ignore her.

This was turning into one hell of an evening.

And it was about to get worse.

As he released a sigh of frustration, Jazz looked at him with something in her eyes that made his senses go into free fall. ‘Don’t play games with me, Jazz,’ he mouthed in an undertone.

‘I’m not playing games with you.’

So her eyes were playing games with him—her lips too. And flushed cheeks betrayed her more than any excuses she could give. The laws of attraction took no prisoners. Nor did they show concern

for a self-contained warrior who'd had his armour split wide open tonight, or a conservative princess who had just rediscovered her wings.

'Tyr.'

He glanced up with relief to see his sister Britt. Putting one hand on the back of his chair and the other on the back of Jazz's chair, his sister bound them briefly. 'How are you two enjoying the evening so far?'

You two? Should he tell her the truth and ruin Britt's evening after all her hard work on his behalf? He was tense beyond belief, and Jazz was—Jazz. 'I'm having a wonderful time. It's been a great chance to catch up.'

'Do you mean that?' Jazz murmured when his sister had left them to rejoin Sharif.

'I've learned a lot.' Like Jazz's freedom shouldn't depend on some misguided idea of how she could best help her country.

'Why are you staring at me like that, Tyr?'

'Am I staring at you?' He guessed Jazz would have to be contained in a hermetically sealed suit for him not to stare. In a traditional, slim-fitting ankle-length gown in a rich shade of midnight-blue, edged with subtle bronze thread, she was dressed perfectly to suit her character; that was to say, demure with a touch of fire. He'd like to see that spark inside her ignite. What would it take? he wondered. With her waist-length inky-black hair covered with a filmy veil, she looked stunning.

'Tyr,' she warned, staring down at her hands, 'will you please stop staring at me?'

'You can't blame me for looking at the most interesting thing in the room.'

'But I do blame you. I'm not a child, any longer. You can't tease and flirt with me as you used to do.' Jazz shook her head, making her filmy veil shiver. 'Don't you understand anything? Or are you intent on making my life more difficult?'

'That's the last thing I want, Princess, but it is usual to hold a conversation with the person sitting next to you at the dinner table.'

'You're impossible.'

Jazz whipped her head away so fast her veil slipped back. Before she could rearrange it, the soft nape of her neck was revealed as her hair swung to one side. The wave of disappointment that hit him when she quickly pulled the veil forward and that delicate sliver of naked flesh disappeared was a real eye-opener. He really did have it bad. And then Jazz proved his suspicion that the grit was still there when she stood to propose a toast. Raising her glass of juice, she turned to face Britt.

'I would like to propose a toast of thanks to a wonderful woman and a dear friend: my brother's wife, Britt. I want to thank you on behalf of everyone here for the work you've put in to make tonight such a wonderful success. I couldn't love you more if you were my own sister.' Emotion made Jazz pause for a moment as murmurs of approval rose around her. 'The charity we're supporting tonight means a lot to all of us seated round this table, and tonight is also an opportunity for us to welcome Tyr home.'

Tyr tensed as Jazz stared straight at him. This evening would be over soon, but something told him the repercussions from tonight would spread out like ripples on a pond and touch them all.

* * *

Even after a few days, it still felt strange being at home with his sisters after so long away. All four of them together at one time like this was practically unique, but Britt, Eva and Leila had put their husbands out to graze for the day so they could spend time with him—and with Jazz. At least, that was what they'd told him, but for the past half-hour they'd cut him out and talked exclusively to Jazz. And in ever-diminishing whispers that left him super-alert and ultra-suspicious.

'You're not supposed to be listening,' Eva complained when he glanced up. 'Get back to watching sport.'

Yes. He was the token man, allowed to remain in the same room as his sisters and Jazz, providing he took the lid off the nuts and poured the sodas for them. With his feet crossed on the coffee table and a bottle of beer in his hand, he'd been invisible up to this point.

'Could you speak up?' he requested dryly. 'I'm having trouble hearing you.'

'If you must know,' Eva fired at him from her position at the head of the table, 'Jazz is in a fix.'

'A fix? What does that mean?' He swung round to stare at Jazz.

'It's nothing.' Jazz tried to brush this off with an airy sweep of her hand.

'You've started, so you might as well finish,' he observed dryly, noting her cheeks had turned bright red.

'If you must know,' Eva cut in, 'Jazz has today received a formal offer from the Emir of Qadar.'

He groaned inwardly. Time had run out. In the interest of learning more, he acted dumb. 'What kind of offer?'

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' Eva exclaimed, glancing round the table. 'I know you're a man, but you must have some idea?'

He shrugged. 'I'm sure you'll enlighten me.'

Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, Eva—as he had hoped she would—hurried to fill in the details. 'An offer of marriage, dummkopf. And soon.'

Soon? He didn't want to hear another word. He knew his face must be as black as thunder as he appeared to consider this bombshell.

'The Emir of Qadar?' he said at last, lips pressing down as he nodded his head, acting impressed. 'Big country. Important title. That's quite a compliment for Jazz, isn't it?'

Britt put a restraining hand on Eva's arm when she sucked in a breath.

'Well, isn't it?' he said mildly.

Eva scowled, while Leila bit her lip, and Britt looked troubled. Jazz avoided his stare altogether.

'Is anyone going to explain?' he requested mildly, seething inside.

Eva took the bait. 'May I?' she said, looking at Jazz with concern.

Jazz shrugged and appeared resigned. 'Go right ahead. It will soon be public knowledge, so, why not?'

Taking a deep breath, Eva stared into his eyes. She was sending him a strong message of sympathy for Jazz, along with an entreaty for him to do something the heck about it. 'You might not think it such a compliment when I tell you that the emir has insisted on Jazz being a virgin when they marry.'

He exploded out of his seat, then remembered he was supposed to be acting out the concerned friend, rather than overheated would-be lover. Making a calming gesture with his hands, intended for himself as much as anyone, he turned to Jazz. 'Forgive me, Jazz. This is none of my business, but I didn't know men still made that type of demand on a woman. This must be hard for you, impossible to talk about with me around...' He turned for the door, desperate to kick it in, or smash a fist into a block of wood.

'No, stay,' Jazz said quietly. 'You might as well know everything.'

Too right. He leaned back against the door. 'OK.' He remained outwardly calm, while a firestorm of concern for Jazz kicked off inside him. What kind of Neanderthal was she planning to marry? And when had this been settled? Last he'd heard, talks between the emir and Sharif were just getting started.

'Jazz must do what's right for her,' his peacemaking sister Leila insisted. 'None of us has any idea what it takes to be a princess of Kareshi.' Turning to Jazz, she added, 'And we'll support you in whatever you decide to do.'

Jazz stood up too. 'I know you will.' She was clearly moved by their concern. 'Will you all excuse me for a moment?'

'Of course.' The chorus of Skavangas was unanimous.

Tyr stood aside to let Jazz go, but he didn't give his sisters a chance to reinforce the message the three of them were so urgently firing at him. He was going to do something about this, and was on it before Jazz had closed the door.

He closed it for her—with them both on the same side.

'What are you doing?' Jazz gasped, staring up at him in alarm as he shut the door behind them. He came straight to the point. 'Have you thought this through?'

Jazz stared down at his hands on her arm, and for a very dangerous moment passions ran as high between them as they had way back when. Anything might have happened in those few, potent seconds, but then Jazz drew in a shaky breath and the torment in her eyes made him let her go. As his hands dropped to his side, she whispered, 'Leila's right. I know you don't understand this, but I have to at least consider the emir's offer, because of all the benefits it could bring to Kareshi.'

'Nonsense! I told you before, this isn't right for you, and you know it, Jazz. I can see it on your face.'

'I knew I should have come veiled,' she murmured dryly, the old Jazz peeping through. Somehow that flash of spirit made it all the harder to come to terms with this.

'Don't joke, Jazz. This is your life we're talking about.'

'Exactly, Tyr.' Her chin tipped up. Steel entered her voice. 'This is my life. Now, will you please let me go?'

She stared past him to the bathroom and he stood aside. Grinding his jaw, he watched her go, wondering how he was going to live with himself if he did as Jazz asked—stood back and did nothing.

* * *

Jazz left them soon after that, kissing and hugging his sisters goodbye, but barely acknowledging Tyr. She had somewhere to be quite urgently, he gathered. The rest of the afternoon was spent in stormy silence. He turned up the volume on the match, while his sisters talked in undertones at the table. He had no more interest in their conversation. He knew what they were talking about. He knew how he felt about it. And he was damned if was going to share those feelings with anyone.

He didn't move until his mobile phone rang and then he took the call in the other room.

'Sharif? There's nothing wrong, is there?' The line was bad. He was instantly concerned.

'Yes and no. I need you out in Kareshi, Tyr.'

His thought processes raced. Kareshi? Jazz. Yes. Yes had to be his answer to Sharif's request.

'Sorry to rush you back there, Tyr—no, there's nothing wrong,' Sharif confirmed to his relief. 'Had to leave unexpectedly. No problem. Just some business to attend to.'

'I understand.' He relaxed. Sharif was obviously travelling where a good line wasn't always a given.

'The Wadi villagers have called for help in getting their Internet connection established, and they need someone to show them how to use it. I wouldn't ask you to go back right away, but I can't send anyone they don't know. They've been so isolated up to now and they trust you.'

He frowned as he remembered his promise to return to Wadi village as soon as he had made his peace with his sisters. 'I won't let them down.'

'Soon?' Sharif asked cryptically.

'Tomorrow soon enough for you?'

'Tomorrow is perfect.'

Britt's face was rigid when he returned to the sitting room. 'Leave it, Tyr.'

'Leave what?' His thoughts were racing with plans for his return to Kareshi, and the chance to see Jazz again, on her home ground, where they could continue this discussion. When Jazz had talked about freedom, she had envisaged the type of freedom everyone in this room took for granted. He couldn't just sit here. He had to do something.

‘Leave this business with Jazz alone,’ Britt insisted when he stonewalled her with a look. ‘And don’t tell me you’re not thinking about her. I know that look. You seem to think Jazz was forced into making this decision.’

‘A decision she hasn’t seen through yet,’ he pointed out, ‘so there’s still time for her to change her mind, and if I see her in Kareshi I will certainly say something.’

‘Are you suggesting Sharif would force Jazz into doing something she doesn’t want to?’ Britt demanded.

As passions between them grew heated, Leila stepped in. ‘No, of course Tyr isn’t saying that, Britt.’ And gradually, like a pan of boiling milk taken off the heat, everyone calmed down again.

Until Eva chipped in with, ‘You should tell him, Britt.’

He spun round. ‘Tell me what?’

‘I know you just spoke to Sharif,’ Britt began, haltingly for her, he thought. ‘Sharif told me he was going to ring you—’

‘And?’ he flashed.

‘Calm down, Tyr. Give me chance to explain.’ Britt’s face was white with tension. Nothing about this situation was easy for her. ‘Jazz won’t be in Kareshi when you get back,’ she explained, ‘and you’ll probably have left the country before she arrives. And, before you ask, she isn’t in Skavanga, either.’

‘She was here earlier,’ he protested.

‘And now she’s gone,’ Britt confirmed.

‘Gone? Gone where?’

‘Jazz has left Skavanga with Sharif.’

His mind reeled. Just when he thought he might get the chance to talk some sense into Jazz, she had left Skavanga for some destination unknown.

Unless—

‘Tell me she hasn’t gone to Qadar.’ His muscles tensed as he waited for one of his sisters to answer.

‘No,’ Britt reassured him. ‘And before you get angry, I think this might be my fault. Sharif and I talked about getting Jazz out of Kareshi so she can get a fresh perspective on life, so instead of leaving Skavanga for Kareshi as Jazz had planned, Sharif has laid on a treat for her. He’s not happy with Jazz falling meekly into line with the traditionalists in Kareshi, either. He doesn’t see Jazz as a docile princess. He never has.’

‘Jazz—docile?’ He grimaced at the thought. ‘So where’s he taken her?’

‘To the fashion shows in Milan.’

‘To the fashion shows?’ He laughed out loud. No wonder Britt couldn’t look at him. ‘To the fashion shows?’ he repeated. ‘Does Sharif know anything about his sister?’

Ignoring Britt’s protests, he made an angry gesture. ‘Since when has Jazz been a front-row fashionista? Jazz is happiest out in the desert, riding free.’

‘Tyr.’ Leila followed him to the door. ‘Don’t do anything hasty. It won’t help Jazz. Sharif was looking for something to take Jazz’s mind off the emir and his proposal. It will at least give her a chance to think things through calmly before she agrees to something she might regret for the rest of her life.’

‘But I haven’t had a chance to say goodbye to her.’

‘You sound so lost,’ Leila observed, touching his arm.

And angry, he thought, ashamed he’d sounded off as he stared down at his heavily pregnant sister. ‘I’m acting like a bear with a sore head. I just can’t get my head around Jazz’s crazy life choices. You know I’m never angry with you, Leila.’

‘I know that.’ Leila smiled in sympathy, then exclaimed, ‘Where are you going?’ as he moved past her towards the door.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ he said honestly. ‘But I promise to keep in touch this time, okay?’

He had not expected Leila to stand in his way. Drawing her into a reassuring hug, he kissed the top of her head. He hated leaving his sisters like this, but they had husbands to take care of them and Jazz had no one.

No one apart from an army of heavily armed bodyguards sent by Sharif to watch her every move, he guessed. Once again, Jazz would be shielded from reality, and from life itself, so what chance did she stand of making an informed choice about her future?

CHAPTER SIX

SHE'D HAD THIS crazy idea that if she stayed out of the way until the links with Qadar were safely established and the final arrangements for her wedding to the emir were in place, it would be too late for her to do anything about it. The decision would be taken out of her hands. All good for Kareshi. Borders secured for all time through her marriage to the emir.

But when you put three Skavanga sisters into the mix, with Britt's business brain calling foul on the suggested arrangement between a very wealthy Kareshi and a less well-off Qadar, and Eva ranting that no one in their right minds could possibly want to spend the rest of their lives with a man they hadn't even been to bed with, backed up by a chorus of concern from Leila, you were left, not with a melodious chorus of agreement and support for her decision, but with a rowdy chorus of dissent.

And then there was Tyr.

And Sharif.

And the fact that, far from being happy on her tiny gilt chair squashed in between all the heavy hitters and fashion press in the front row of every show in town, Jazz was thoroughly fed up. If she had to watch another unlined, asymmetric rag passing itself off as a work of art, she might have to resort to wearing a hemp sack for her wedding.

Her wedding.

It was definitely time to go back to Kareshi before she lost her nerve to go ahead with what she still stubbornly believed was the best thing she could do for her country. Wedding negotiations between Kareshi and Qadar must be close to complete by now, surely? And even that sounded wrong. How could two countries get married?

She was planning to marry a country?

Heaving a sigh so loud it made Jazz's neighbours on the gilt chairs turn to look at her with surprise, she confronted the marriage plans she'd thought made such sense and realised they were full of holes. How could she help her country if she was stuck away in Qadar? She needed to get away from the flashing lights and loud music to the quiet of the desert, where she could rethink her plans for the future. Bringing out her phone, she was just about to start making travel plans when a message from Eva flashed up.

Tyr is working at Wadi village.

And?

And good morning to you, Princess Prim.

Eva? What do you want me to say???

Is sexual frustration hindering your ability to think straight? If so, please call this helpline now—

EVA!

Just thought you'd like to know. Fashion shows treating you well?

Zzzzzzzzzzz

Why are you still there?

My thoughts exactly.

Jazz paused a moment before asking the question drumming at her mind.

What's Tyr doing in Kareshi?

Not looking for a patsy to perform the dance of the seven veils for him in his harem like the Evil Emu of Qadar, that's for sure.

EVA!!

What good are you to Kareshi if you're trussed up in feather handcuffs?

Not sure the emir would go for that.

Are you prepared to take that chance?

There was a long pause while Jazz digested this and squirmed uncomfortably on her chair.

OK, I give in. *big sigh* Tyr's setting up an Internet connection at Wadi village, so if you hurry...

What's that got to do with me?

He needs fizzers and gum to keep him sane. You can take them with you.

But I'm not going to Wadi village.

Yes, you are.

There was a very long pause and then Jazz tapped in a message.

Miss you, Eva.

Miss you too, brown eyes. See you in Kareshi?

Never say never to a billowing Bedouin tent J xx

She could be part of Eva's world, and part of the new world Sharif was working so hard to build in Kareshi, or she could become Princess Prim—embittered old spinster, twisting around in her own web of gloom, Jazz concluded as she put her phone back in her bag. The alternative was marriage to a man she didn't know. And if the emir did decide to shut her away in his harem, Eva was right: What use would she be to Kareshi then?

The least Eva had done was make her think. Excusing herself politely before the lights went up on the second half of the show, Jazz picked up the hem of her flowing silk robe to brave the hazard of big bags and small feet as she made her escape from fashion fantasy island to the reality she had been avoiding for far too long.

* * *

Jazz knew she had made the right decision in coming back to Kareshi the moment the royal helicopter lifted her high above the rolling plain of verdant green immediately surrounding Sharif's principal palace smack bang in the middle of the desert. 'A garden in the desert' was how the world's press described this area, and that was all thanks to her brother's vision.

Sharif was her idol. Her brother was Kareshi's idol, and one day she hoped to equal his achievements.

And she wouldn't do that in Qadar.

But she still had that niggling sense of guilt, because she had always chosen duty over self-indulgence every time, and coming back here to Kareshi seemed like the biggest self-indulgence of all when there was nowhere else on earth she would rather be. But if, by staying in Kareshi as the unmarried sister of the sheikh, she became a burden to Sharif, she would never forgive herself. So, wouldn't it be easier to go along with the emir's plan?

Easy was not an option for Jazz Kareshi, or for her brother, Jazz reminded herself. When Sharif took the throne there had been endless conflict until he proved himself a worthy leader. Their dream was for all the people of Kareshi to live together in harmony, and now Jazz wondered if perhaps she had taken her personal crusade a step too far. Sharif had never asked her to appease the traditionalists by marrying the ultra-conservative Emir of Qadar. When had that idea seemed the only sensible

solution? Now she was back in Kareshi, the answer seemed clear. She had to stay here, to work here; this was where she belonged.

As she rested back in her seat to consider this change of plan, the royal helicopter soared high over Wadi village, where Eva had said Tyr was staying.

Tyr.

Tyr had a special affinity with the desert that had brought them together when they were young. Staring down through the always disturbingly see-through Perspex floor beneath her feet, she wondered what he was doing and if he was alone. Tyr shouldn't be alone. The shadows behind his eyes called for friendship and support to remove them. She had to thank Eva for rattling her out of going down the wrong path and bringing her back here. There were people who needed her far more than the Emir of Qadar. People like Tyr, whose soul was wounded, and who had returned to find peace in the vastness of the desert and real purpose in his work. She would like to help him, but would he let her?

Shifting position, Jazz knew she had to stop dreaming about Tyr Skavanga and what he meant to her. They had both moved on, and Tyr had made it clear at the party that he didn't want or need her company. She couldn't save the world—not even her own small part of it, let alone get to the bottom of those shadows behind Tyr's eyes.

But that wouldn't stop her trying, and it wouldn't stop her dreaming, either. And dreams had to be big, or what was the point in having them? If Tyr Skavanga was working at Wadi village, she was bound to see him. She often rode out that way.

As the helicopter came in to land, she accepted that it might be necessary to trim her dreams to fit reality. Even if he were interested, Tyr would want more from a woman than a shrinking virgin, and Jazz dreaded the reality of sex. Somehow marriage to a man she didn't know had held far less fear than any physical association with someone she did know, perhaps because marriage to the emir had always had an air of unreality about it.

While Tyr Skavanga in all his randy, delicious state was all too real.

That evening with Tyr at the party had sent her primal senses rocketing off the scale, because even she could sense that Tyr was a highly sexed hunter in the prime of his life, while she was a virgin who knew nothing about sex, except in theory. And what she'd heard was hardly enticing—except when Eva got started, but then Eva had always liked to shock, so it was never possible to be sure if what Eva said was absolutely true.

'You can take your safety belt off now, Princess Jasmina.'

The pilot's voice sounded shrill and metallic in her headphones as he switched off the engine, and she bit back a smile at the thought of how lucky she was that he couldn't read her thoughts. She'd keep her safety belt well and truly fastened until the day she got married, thank you very much.

* * *

Tyr was coated in sand from head to foot after trekking for hours over rugged terrain. There had been a shift in the pattern of the sand dunes since the last storm, meaning the four-wheel drive couldn't take him any closer to the village. He'd radioed to make sure the vehicle could be collected before the next storm closed in, and then he set out on foot. It was a relief to know Jazz was half a world away with this bad storm closing in.

Pausing to shift his backpack into a more comfortable position, he thought back to his schooldays, when Sharif had taken pity on him during the holidays because Tyr had three sisters. But when Tyr had arrived in the desert he had discovered that his troubles had only just begun, because Sharif's one sister had been more aggravation than his three put together. At first he'd thought it would be an easy matter to shake Jazz off when she tagged along, but they hadn't had a horse fast enough to get away from her. They'd devised all sorts of cunning plans, but Jazz had always outrun them. They'd be relaxing beside the oasis while their horses drank their fill when she'd appear round a palm tree to taunt them, until finally they gave in, and their exclusive gang of two became three.

Cresting the dune overlooking Wadi village, he stared down as if he expected to see Jazz waiting for him. Of course she wasn't there. She was in Milan, pretending to be a fashionista. And even if she had been waiting for him, they could never recapture those innocent days. Time had changed them both too much for that. Squinting his eyes against the low-lying rays of a dying sun, he set out on the last leg of his journey.

* * *

Had she ever been so happy to tug on riding gear?

Nope, Jazz concluded, not even bothering to check her appearance in the mirror. The sun was up and the grey light of dawn was slowly giving way to a warm buttery glow. It promised to be a fabulous day for riding, if she got out before the sun rose too high, turning everything from comfortably warm into the fiery pit of hell. With her hair tied neatly back, and her close-fitting breeches covered by one of the long, concealing shirts she wore for riding, she only had to pick up her hard hat at the door and she was ready to trial her new stallion. Spear was said to be impossible to ride. She'd see about that. Kindness combined with firmness always won the day with a difficult stallion, and Spear was such a beautiful beast.

Now, why should Tyr Skavanga flash into her mind?

Where beautiful beasts were concerned, Tyr was a prime example, that was why.

Maybe she'd catch sight of Tyr if she rode by Wadi village.

She was a princess with responsibilities—she had to remember that.

Okay, so she wouldn't go that way, not unless the wind blew from the east, in which case she didn't want the sand in her face, and so then she would have no option but to turn in the direction of Wadi village.

Leaving her bedroom, Jazz raced down the stairs and minutes later she was in the stable yard. Crossing to the half-open door, she whispered to Spear and caressed his ears, for which she received a whinnying reply and a good nuzzle as the horse set about searching her pockets for mints. Resting her cheek against his warm, firm muscular neck, she revelled in the stallion's tightly contained strength, and her thoughts flew back to Tyr. What was he doing now? Would he be thinking about her?

Don't be ridiculous!

But there was a chance Tyr might be preparing to ride out. Dawn and dusk had always been his favourite times to ride too, because dawn was so beautifully still and silent, while dusk was cool.

Talking quietly to her horse, Jazz led her magnificent stallion into the yard. 'You are a bad boy,' Jazz breathed as the stallion threw back his head, resisting her attempts to calm him, 'but you're very handsome,' she soothed as she sprang lightly into the saddle. The stallion was impatient for his morning run and skittered sideways until she brought him back under control. Shifting her weight, she coaxed him forward at a controlled canter, rather than the flat-out gallop Spear was aiming for.

Having passed beneath the stone archway that divided the safe, controlled environment of Sharif's racing stables from the desert beyond, they entered the wild, unpredictable frontier, as Jazz always thought of her desert home, and, drawing in a deep breath of joyful anticipation, she lightened her grip and gave Spear his head.

The wind ripped her veil off as she galloped across the dunes. She was at one with the powerful beast as he surged forward, and that was the best sensation in the world. Spear had exceeded all her expectations and anyone who said she couldn't ride him because he was too strong for her was so wrong. She could do anything if she put her mind to it, and Spear was perfection. It was just a pity about the wind. Blowing from the east, it gave her only one option, which was to head in the direction of Wadi village.

She decided to take a short cut. It was a riskier route than going round the dunes, but much quicker. The climb up the final dune was the most testing, but when she reached the top she could see the oasis where she had used to swim with Tyr, and Wadi village, spread out like a twinkling toy city in front of her.

* * *

The cold water of the oasis hitting his heated skin was a pleasure Tyr had anticipated since the moment he woke up. There was nowhere else on earth like this; nowhere that assaulted his senses quite so comprehensively with such contrasts of hot and cold, shade and light, and sheer vastness. Everything was extreme in the desert. That was why he liked it. There were no grey areas. There was just constant challenge and danger. Easing his shoulders, he prepared to dive in.

And was stopped by a shriek.

Swinging round, he saw the stallion's legs buckle beneath it as it started the long slide down the dune. It was a relief to see the rider instinctively kick away the stirrups and leap off its back to avoid being crushed beneath half a ton of horse. Recognising the rider, he grabbed a towel and began to run.

'Jazz!'

He powered up the bank of the oasis. The next few seconds passed in a disorientating blur of sand and spinning horse as Jazz and her stallion rocketed down the slope. He jumped clear as the horse skidded past him with its legs pounding uselessly at the air. Jazz took a little longer to arrive, before landing at his feet in an untidy sprawl. Hunkering down, he made a quick assessment. She was winded. She was shocked. She couldn't speak. Apart from that, her colour was good and she was breathing, always a plus.

'Tyr?'

Letting go of her hand, he sat back on his heels.

'My horse?' she gasped out.

'Unharm'd.' He glanced at the banks of the oasis, where he could see Jazz's horse sucking in water. 'Are you okay?' He sounded gruff and guessed he was probably more shocked than Jazz. 'Aren't you supposed to be swanning around in Italy, buying next year's thrift-shop donations?'

'Sorry?' She gave him a look that came straight from the old days. 'Did I get off at the wrong stop?'

Hiding a smile, he stared sternly down at her. 'This could have been a really serious accident, and we still don't know if you've been hurt.'

'Only my pride,' she admitted, struggling to get up.

He pressed her down. 'You're not going anywhere until I check you over for injury. And, apologies in advance, but I will have to touch you.'

'No, you won't,' Jazz flashed, doing her best to roll out of reach.

'For purely medical reasons,' he said, patiently bringing her back again. 'Believe me, I have no wish to do this.'

Much. His fingers were on fire at the thought.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JAZZ BRACED HERSELF as she prepared for Tyr to conduct his examination. Closing her eyes, she turned her head away, as if to show him that if she must endure this personal invasion, she would do so while distanced from him in both thought and response. This was something new for him, and he wasn't sure whether to be offended or amused by a woman who didn't want him to touch her. He made the exam swift, gentling his big hands as much as he could, but Jazz felt so good beneath his touch, he found it almost impossible to remain clinically objective.

'Is this really necessary?' she demanded at one point when his fingertips scraped her breast.

'Bruised ribs,' he said tersely, consciously steadying his breathing. 'I'm checking they're not broken.'

'What about the new medical facility in the village? Can't I get checked over there?'

The new medical facility he had only recently installed? Now, why hadn't he thought of that? 'I'm just making sure it's safe to move you first.'

'It's safe.' Jazz's eyes flashed fire. 'And as soon as I've had chance to catch my breath, I'm standing up.'

‘And I’ll help you,’ he said calmly. Straightening her shirt, he hunkered back on his heels to wait.

This was not the way she’d planned it. This was supposed to be an innocent morning ride. And, okay, if it had turned into a scouting mission, she hadn’t expected such immediate and intimate contact with her target. Having Tyr loom over her while she was lying prone on the ground was having all sorts of odd effects on her body, none of them welcome.

‘If that snake hadn’t slithered in front of my horse...’

‘You’d still be up there, spying on me swimming naked in the oasis?’

‘Certainly not!’ She tried to get up, but Tyr pushed her down again. ‘I didn’t even know you were there,’ she defended, studiously ignoring his towel-clad frame. She absolutely refused to notice his biceps, or his formidable torso, or any other part of him that was currently brazenly on show. ‘I was taking my horse for a drink, and that’s all.’

‘You certainly picked a safe way down,’ Tyr remarked, his voice dripping with irony.

‘Past a snake,’ she reminded him acidly.

‘End result? You’re lying in a heap at my feet.’

‘A heap? I’ll have you know, I’m still in shock.’

‘Of course you are.’

‘And don’t you dare look at me like that.’

‘Like what?’ Tyr demanded as he unfolded his massive frame.

‘As if I’m today’s entertainment. And don’t stand over me, either.’

‘You’re right. I’ll have to carry you back to the village.’

‘What? You can’t do that.’ Scrambling to her feet, she promptly fell down again.

Luckily, Tyr caught her before she hit the ground. He propped her against the sturdy trunk of a palm and stood back. ‘Stay there while I put some clothes on.’

Shivers of awareness raced through her as she closed her eyes.

A pair of snug-fitting jeans, some desert boots and a black top later, Tyr returned. ‘Here’s what’s going to happen, Princess. You may or may not have concussion, so you’re not walking back to the village.’ He held up his hand when she began to protest. ‘You can do what the hell you want once the doctors have checked you over, but until then you’re under orders—my orders.’

Her jaw dropped with astonishment. Her body might have other ideas, but she wasn’t completely mad. ‘I forbid you to touch me.’

‘You forbid me?’ Tyr laughed. Then he swung her into his arms.

At some point she realised that the more she struggled, the more her body approved as it rubbed against Tyr’s, so she made herself as stiff as a plank. But this was no longer a game, and the implications of arriving in a conservative village in the arms of a man didn’t bear thinking about. ‘Tyr. Please. You can’t carry me into Wadi village.’

‘Watch me.’

‘You don’t understand. Some of the most conservative people in Kareshi live in Wadi village.’

‘I understand everything, Jazz. You forget, I’ve been working in the village for quite some time.’

‘Then please put me down.’

‘I won’t take that risk with your safety.’ Ignoring her increasingly strident protests, Tyr continued on along the bank of the oasis, where he only paused to gather up her horse’s reins before turning in the direction of the village.

She made one final attempt to make him change his mind. ‘Please, Tyr. Put me down. I can ride back.’

‘You’re in no fit state to ride back. Look at you. You’re shaking.’ Halting mid-stride, Tyr blazed a stare into her face, his expression fixed and determined. ‘What am I supposed to do? Leave you here to fry?’

‘That might be better.’ But then she glanced up at the sky, which was rapidly changing from cloudless blue to sun-bleached white. Death was better than disgrace, right? she reasoned frantically—which made her wonder briefly if she did indeed have concussion.

‘How would it look to the people of Wadi village if I leave you in the desert to die?’ Tyr demanded, distracting her. ‘Let me tell you,’ he said before she had chance to reply. ‘It would look as if the man who has been working with them, the same man the villagers have grown to trust, is nothing but a barbarian who holds life cheap, and who shows total disrespect for their royal family. You’ve had a fall. We don’t know if you’re injured yet. At the very least, you’ve sustained a shock. In the absence of an ambulance rumbling over the dunes, I’m carrying you back to the medical centre, where you can be checked out and treated. Anyone on earth would understand that.’

‘My people won’t.’

‘Your people would rather have you dead?’ Tyr shook his head. ‘You don’t know them, Jazz. They love you. They talk about you and Sharif constantly. Together you’ve brought stability to Kareshi. You must never take a chance like that again. What if I hadn’t planned to swim in the oasis? What if you’d broken your leg and were stranded out here? What if your horse had run away? Are you carrying a satellite phone or a tracking device?’

In her rush to see Tyr, she had remembered none of these things, Jazz realised, but that wasn’t something she was about to share with him. ‘They must have been lost during the fall.’

‘Yeah, right.’ He strode on.

Her heart sank. They had almost reached the outskirts of the village, and people were already coming out of their houses to take a look. Smiling grimly as he reassured people in broken Kareshi, Tyr continued on through the crowd. He either didn’t know or didn’t care that touching her was practically a criminal offence. And she couldn’t blame the villagers for their concern. Before Tyr had arrived on the scene, installing the Internet and bringing fresh water to the village, they hadn’t met a stranger for goodness knew how long. They led remote, sheltered lives, shielded from the world, with traditions that had remained unchanged for centuries. How long before news of her unconventional arrival flashed around Kareshi? She smiled in an attempt to reassure the veiled women, whose eyes were wide with concern for her, and nodded briefly at the men, who turned away. She was shamed in their eyes, and no excuse could possibly explain her outlandish behaviour.

Pausing only to hand over the reins of her horse to one of the young boys who had been following them, Tyr carried her inside the clinic, where he handed her over to the orderlies like a parcel he was glad to be rid of. There was nothing wrong with his manner towards her. There was nothing but pure concern in his eyes, though Jazz doubted the traditionalists would see it that way.

‘I’m going to check on your horse,’ he called back as he left the building.

‘Thank you.’ She was uncomfortably aware of the increasing clamour of the crowd outside the clinic as the people waited for news of their princess.

‘I must go to them and explain,’ she told the nurse, struggling into a sitting position.

The nurse gently pushed her down again. ‘We can do that for you,’ she said firmly. ‘Forgive me, Princess Jasmina, but you’re not going anywhere until the doctor’s had chance to take a look at you. You might as well rest back. There’s nothing for you to worry about. His Majesty has already been informed.’

Great! Jazz’s breath left her body in a shuddering sigh. She could imagine Sharif’s reaction. Having had her beg him to arrange a marriage for her, he now discovered she was here with Tyr.

Needless to say, by the time the nurse took her blood pressure, it was sky-high. The nurse peered at her over her spectacles. ‘Even if the doctor gives his okay, I’m going to insist that you stay here and rest. This equipment tells me you’ve been badly shaken up.’

And not just by the fall from her horse, Jazz thought.

Tyr needed space from Jazz and time to think. He still hadn’t got over the shock of finding her here in Kareshi, and now there was the sensation he’d caused to deal with on top of that. He wouldn’t

risk losing the people's trust. Nor did he want to damage his friendship with Sharif. Taking some of the elders aside, he decided to sort it out.

Their reaction threw him.

'No, no, no,' he said, smiling as he shook his head to make his position clear. 'We're not planning to get married.'

'But you must,' the headman said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Tyr was still smiling, still convinced that this couldn't be a serious suggestion on the part of the headman, but his laughing gaze was met by an unwavering stare. 'All right.' Taking it in good part, he clapped the old man on the back. 'We'll sort this out—'

'Apparently not,' Tyr murmured as the old man walked away. 'Later,' he called after him.

The headman raised his hand, but only in acknowledgement that he'd heard Tyr, and nothing more.

He got a really bad feeling. That encounter with the headman of the village had suggested that nothing would yield to good humour in this situation. And in truth, fudging an issue wasn't his style. He was straight down the line. So far he'd done nothing to let these people down and he wasn't about to start now.

He placed a call to Sharif, but couldn't get through. Leading his horse out of its stable, he sprang onto its back and headed out of the village. This was a mess that should never have happened. Jazz Kareshi, innocent princess, and the ruthless killing machine? If her people knew his history, would they be so keen to make a match between them? He couldn't do that to Jazz, so the only thing he could do was to leave Kareshi.

And how was he going to do that, when he was tied by his love for the people? His work here wasn't done.

As each insoluble point jabbed at his mind, he spurred his horse on until they were racing at a flat-out gallop. He only reined in when he spotted a Bedouin encampment in the shadow of the dunes. Changing his balance, he slowed the horse. For a while he just let the reins hang loose as he watched the people going about their daily lives. The Bedouin were purposeful and contented. He had always envied the nomadic lifestyle, and it was only recently that he'd lost the urge to move on. He loved the desert, and he wouldn't abandon Jazz, not when he was responsible for the situation she was in. He would stay and see this out, and when everything had settled down again—

He'd turn his back on Jazz and leave?

That was the safest thing to do. Safest for Jazz.

Turning his horse, he headed back to the village. The only thing he could be sure about was that he wasn't going anywhere until this mess was sorted out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS SOON AS the doctor said she could go and the nurse released her, Jazz called the palace to arrange for the helicopter to pick her up and for her wilful, snake-shy stallion to be collected. She could have ridden him back if the nurse hadn't mentioned a storm closing in. She wouldn't risk her horse, so it was down to hoping the weather would hold long enough for the helicopter to fly in, and then back again to the palace.

And now she was grateful to the women of the village for being so kind to her. After standing vigil outside the medical facility, they insisted on taking Jazz to the unmarried women's quarters, where they said she'd be safe until the helicopter came to take her home. Having grown up with her brother in the palace, she found it a fascinating experience to be drawn into village life. Everyone was so friendly, and it made her think again how much she had missed female companionship, and how her life could change for the better if she only allowed it to. She'd had the warmth and friendship of the Skavanga sisters since Britt married Sharif, and she could have the friendship of these people too, if she stayed in Kareshi.

Once inside the women's pavilion, it surprised Jazz to see that, along with the more traditional trappings she might have expected, like silken cushions and low brass tables bearing platters of fruit and jugs of freshly squeezed juice, a large space had been allocated to a bank of computer screens faced by no-nonsense office chairs.

'Our benefactor is Tyr Skavanga,' one of the women explained, her sloe eyes warm with admiration behind the traditional veil. 'He bought all the equipment and installed it for us. It's like a miracle. The world comes to us. We can even Internet shop.'

As the women started to laugh, Jazz joined in the fun, but it did make her wonder if she was the only one being left behind where progress was concerned.

'Distance learning,' the same woman explained, jolting Jazz back to the present.

They joined a group of women clustered around a screen. 'We all want to be able to work like you, Princess Jasmina,' a young girl exclaimed, springing up.

'Please, won't you sit down again?' Jazz insisted. 'I'm here to learn all I can from you.'

Reassured, the girl continued, 'Thanks to this link with the outside world, set up by Tyr Skavanga, we can learn to become the teachers of the future.'

Tyr Skavanga...Tyr Skavanga...

And there was so much to do here—so much enthusiasm for progress surrounding her. What was she thinking? Leave Kareshi? Was she mad? What was she so afraid of? Tyr at the party flashed into her head; Tyr rescuing her after the fall from her horse; Tyr—

Just Tyr, Jazz realised, because Tyr represented a time that was lost, and everything she feared about the future. It wasn't Tyr's fault he was so brutally masculine, but, though she was bold in every other area of her life, Jazz had always had a fear of men and sex—Tyr and sex—because all she knew about sex was colourful and sometimes terrifying rumour.

As the women continued to chat easily to her, Jazz knew exactly what she had to do—and it didn't include the Emir of Qadar. Sharif would be mad with her for wasting his time and she couldn't blame him. There would be diplomatic repercussions, but this was where she belonged. She could be of some real help to her brother here.

And then the bombshell dropped.

Another, bolder girl asked Jazz how she had dared to love an outsider.

All the women went quiet as they waited for her answer.

'An outsider?' Jazz queried cautiously.

'Tyr Skavanga,' the women prompted in a laughing chorus, as if this were obvious to everyone except Jazz.

Jazz laughed too. 'I don't love Tyr like that,' she protested, maybe a little too heartily. 'We've been friends since childhood. And, yes, I admire Tyr, but that's as far as it goes.'

The women seemed unconvinced. No wonder, when her cheeks burned red. They were determined to believe she was involved in a runaway romance like the films they'd been able to watch on the Internet, thanks to their benefactor, Tyr Skavanga.

And then one of the older women took her aside. 'Just think of it,' she said. 'You have already proved your worth to your brother, His Majesty, by improving the management of his racing stables. Imagine what you could do for us in Kareshi with Tyr Skavanga organising the various building programmes, while you recruit and manage the staff?'

'What? I—? Oh, no.' But it was a seductive thought, though what Tyr would make of it, she didn't like to think.

* * *

Things couldn't get any worse. Tyr was still miles from the village with a sandstorm coming. All flights were grounded. No one would be flying in or out of Wadi village any time soon to rescue Princess Jasmina. All communication links were down, and no one could predict how long the storm would last. Sensing danger approaching, his horse had started to play up, which was why he was on

foot. Having tied his bandana over the animal's eyes, he was coaxing it forward inch by torturous inch, his muscles bulging at the strain of persuading the horse to lift its hooves out of the treacherously shifting sand. He could only hope Jazz was safely housed in the village by now. He was impatient to get back and make sure of it.

The sky was an ominous greenish-yellow by the time he made it back to the village. Having fed and watered his horse, he went to find Jazz. It was his duty to do so, he told himself firmly. He found her in the village hall, where she was taking note of people's concerns. Typical Jazz—no time like the present, even with a sandstorm brewing. She was fully veiled in deference to the traditionalists, but, even with only her expressive eyes on show, he could see enough to want her in a way he was more than certain the elders of the village would not approve of. And then she saw him and her eyes crinkled slightly. The tightening in his groin was immediate, and it was almost a relief when she turned away.

Watching Jazz amongst her people only reinforced his opinion that Jazz was needed right here in Kareshi, not in Qadar. Jazz Kareshi was one of the most valuable resources Kareshi possessed. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind that Jazz belonged with her people.

How much more they could accomplish if they worked together.

Thoughts like that led nowhere. If they saw each other on a regular basis and he infected an innocent young girl like Jazz with his darkness, what then?

As it happened, Jazz took the decision out of his hands by approaching him, and, in spite of all his self-imposed warning, his heart warmed when Jazz stared up at him.

'You're back.'

For a few potent moments she stared into his eyes.

'If you need me, Jazz, you only have to ask.'

'As it happens...'

He followed her gaze to the bank of computers he'd installed, which were currently standing idle.

'While I take a note of everyone's concerns, you could show those who don't know how to use the computers,' she suggested.

'You want me to teach school?'

'Why not?' She gave him a look. 'That's if you're up to it.'

He held her gaze. 'I think I can handle it. Though I'm pretty sure the Internet's down.'

'No excuses, Tyr. You can still show people plenty without it.'

'Whatever you say, Princess.'

Did Tyr have to lower his voice and stare quite so intently into her eyes? Jazz glanced around to make sure no one had noticed.

'There's no point sitting around doing nothing as we wait for the storm to pass,' she pointed out. 'The children are bored, and this is a great opportunity for those who want to benefit from your expertise.'

Her heart raced as Tyr raised a mocking brow. 'Would you like to benefit from my expertise too, Princess? Or are you already a computer expert?'

She let a shaking breath out with relief, and then noticed Tyr's eyes were warm and teasing, as they had used to be when they were kids. 'Just pretend you know what you're doing,' she suggested.

'Oh, I know what I'm doing, Princess.'

There was something in Tyr's tone that made her suck in a fast breath. She pushed it aside by raising her voice so everyone could hear.

'Tyr has offered to help anyone interested in learning more about computers.'

The stampede made him smile. He'd been leaning against the wall with all his attention fixed on Jazz, but she'd stitched him up good and tight. She didn't know how good she was, he reflected as he watched her settling people down in front of the screens. And her spirit had definitely returned in Wadi village. The people loved her, but, more importantly, Jazz was gaining in confidence all the

time. The people trusted Jazz, and responded to her. They confided things they would never dream of confiding to a court official, let alone Jazz's brother, Sharif. This was where Jazz belonged, and he could only be thankful that she was beginning to see that for herself.

And how about his pledge to stay away from her?

He glanced outside at the whirling sand. How was he supposed to predict they'd be sharing an enclosed space like this?

'They like you,' Jazz remarked to him when they broke for refreshments.

'Don't sound so surprised. I have been working here in the village for quite some time now.'

'But I am surprised. You're really good at this, Tyr. And here was me, thinking you were a confirmed loner.'

'I am, but we're trapped by the storm,' he pointed out.

Jazz was so enthused, she wasn't even listening. 'What we need is a new school and more teachers. I put that in my last mail to Sharif, so I hope we get an answer from him as soon as this storm eases up a bit. Everyone's so eager to learn.'

He smiled as he listened to Jazz spelling out her plan. His thoughts were somewhat less innocent. There was only one woman in this room he wanted to teach, and those lessons would have nothing to do with computer skills.

He glanced outside at the rapidly darkening sky. 'I'm going to call a halt soon, Jazz,' he said, breaking her off. 'I want everyone safely under cover before this storm gets any worse. It's going to be bad, so I'll see the elderly home, and then come back for you.'

She bridled at that suggestion. 'I'm quite capable of looking after myself, Tyr.'

'Are you? Would that be the same way you looked after yourself when you were out riding?'

Feeling her bristle, he drew the back of his hand down her arm to lighten the atmosphere. He could not have anticipated Jazz's response. To say she recoiled in horror was putting it mildly.

'Haven't you heard a word I've said, Tyr? You must not touch me.'

The skin around Jazz's eyes had paled to ivory, but her eyes were almost solid black. He'd seen that same reaction before in a woman, but never in a situation like this. Passions were certainly roused. No one was looking, but anyone would think he had cupped Jazz's breast, or worse. How innocent was she, exactly? Utterly innocent of all things sexual, he concluded as Jazz continued to glare at him.

'I'll see the children home,' she said sharply, and with a swish of her veil she was gone from his side, but before she could round up her flock, the headman called the meeting to order.

Tyr shrugged and threw Jazz a rueful smile when she was forced back into his company.

'No hope of the helicopter arriving to save me from you, I suppose?' she gritted out during a lull in the proceedings.

He held her gaze and saw her eyes grow black. 'Not a chance. The forecast is grim. Nothing's coming in or out of here today.'

Including us, Jazz's worried eyes seemed to say. 'Did you manage to speak to Sharif?' she asked.

'No. Did you get hold of him?'

Jazz shook her head. 'Everything's down. Does anyone know how long this storm will last?'

'If I could get the Internet up, maybe I could tell you. Best guess?' He shrugged. 'It's set in for a while. I shot off an email to Sharif earlier on today to let him know you took a tumble, no harm done. I also reassured him that the women of the village are taking good care of you. I just can't be sure the mail got through before the connection went down.'

'So we're stranded?'

'Looks like it. Nothing's changed for me, Jazz. I work here.'

But everything had changed for Jazz, her eyes behind the veil told him.

Then, remembering who she was and where her duty lay, and that she should not be holding his stare like this, she looked away as the headman began to speak.

'Don't worry, Jazz,' Tyr murmured discreetly. 'I won't let any harm come to you.'

‘I can look after myself, Tyr,’ she murmured back. ‘Storms in the desert are nothing new to me.’ Something told him Jazz wasn’t referring to the weather conditions.

By the time things got under way, the searing heat of afternoon had faded to a comfortable warmth, while the sand flurries outside the windows had bathed everything inside the hall in a deceptively muted glow. Tyr gradually edged his way to the back of the crowd, where he could observe without being observed. As expected, there were speeches from several of the village elders, but then a group of old men ushered him forward until he found himself standing next to Jazz at the foot of an improvised stage.

‘This won’t last long,’ Jazz reassured him, knowing his dislike of being in the spotlight. ‘Just a formal vote of thanks for helping out, I think, and then you can leave.’

He hummed, wishing he felt as confident as Jazz. There was an air of anticipation surrounding them that he couldn’t account for, and when he glanced around, people smiled back at him as if they were sharing a great piece of news. The villagers’ initial shock at Jazz’s unconventional arrival at the village in his arms must have faded, he guessed, but was that it?

‘I told you things would soon return to normal,’ Jazz said confidently.

‘I hope you’re right,’ he replied with less enthusiasm, remembering his bizarre conversation with the headman.

‘I am right,’ Jazz assured him as the speeches continued on.

He was soon distracted by some alluring scent she was wearing and the seductive rustle of her robe. Jazz was certainly playing the traditional card now, and had dressed for this session in the village hall in a plain black robe with only her expressive eyes on show. Eyes and tiny feet, he noted, telling himself not to be so ridiculous as to be affected by the sight of a set of shell-pink toenails.

‘Excuse me.’

Careful not to touch him, she moved past him to stand with the elders who had invited Jazz to join them on the stage. Gesturing for quiet, she began to speak. He couldn’t understand every word in Kareshi, but he knew enough to raise his hands in a signal that he had done no more than his job when Jazz praised him and everyone turned to face him and applaud. Then the headman beckoned for him to join Jazz on the stage and the smiling crowd parted for him.

‘The headman’s just explained that we’ll be working together as a team,’ Jazz translated, leaning forward as the headman took up his position between them.

Blood rushed to his temples as the headman began to speak, but good manners forced him to remain silent until the old man had finished. He didn’t need an interpreter to judge the mood of the crowd. They were jubilant. Some of the men started clapping him on the back. He turned to Jazz, who said something in Kareshi, and the cheers grew louder.

‘What did you say?’ he demanded, but the headman distracted her and she turned away.

‘What did you say?’ he repeated when Jazz started waving to the crowd.

Jazz was like a fire burning too bright, in danger of consuming everything around her, including him. What was she keeping from him? It wasn’t enough for her to smile and nod her head in his direction, when not once had she held his gaze.

And now the headman stepped forward to speak again.

‘If there’s something I should know, you’d better tell me now, Jazz,’ he warned in an urgent undertone.

Putting a finger over her mouth beneath the veil, Jazz shook her head as the headman cleared his throat and began to speak. He was brandishing a sheet of paper, which Tyr guessed must be an email that had arrived when the Internet was still up. Who could possibly evoke this level of response simply by sending an email? Only one name sprang to mind, and that was his friend Sharif. ‘What the hell is going on, Jazz?’

‘I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. The headman says it’s very good news.’

For whom? he wondered.

‘I’m hoping it’s a reply to the mail I sent to Sharif, requesting more funding for the school,’ Jazz explained.

‘So what is he saying now?’ he demanded as the headman waved his arms and called for silence. A cold blade of dread sliced through him as Jazz paled and swayed. She looked as if she was about to faint. ‘What is it, Jazz? What is he saying?’

‘We’ve got the money for the school.’

‘Aren’t you happy about that?’

‘Of course I am. And the headman has just explained that we will both be staying on to supervise the setting up of the school.’

‘Both?’ He frowned.

‘Tyr—I don’t know what to say— Everything’s out of control— This is all going too fast—’

‘What is?’ he demanded.

‘The headman just confirmed that Sharif has also agreed to his request that when I do get married it will be here in the village.’

A storm of emotion hit him as cheers rose around them. ‘Not to the emir, I hope?’

‘Not to the emir,’ Jazz confirmed to his relief, but the tears in her eyes did nothing to reassure him.

‘Then to whom?’ he demanded, the punch in his gut delivering the answer before Jazz had chance to speak.

‘The headman’s somehow got the idea that I’ll be marrying you,’ Jazz told him faintly above the roar of the crowd.

CHAPTER NINE

‘WE NEED TO TALK, JAZZ.’

‘We certainly do,’ she agreed, all business now, ‘but not here and not now. These people deserve everything we can do for them, but the one thing they don’t need is our problems on their shoulders.’

The meeting was breaking up. ‘We’ve got work to do. You go and round up the children, while I make sure everyone gets home safely.’

‘And then we’ll talk,’ Jazz assured him tensely.

‘You bet we will. I’ll come and find you.’

‘Tell me you’re not thinking of coming round to check out my accommodation?’

‘The headman’s little speech has changed nothing, Jazz. I still owe it to your brother to keep you safe, so, however much of a pain in the backside you are, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.’

‘I’ve lived in the desert all my life, Tyr.’

‘In a palace, Jazz.’

‘Have you forgotten our camp-outs when we were younger?’

How could he ever forget? Worms in his bed? Stones in his boots?

‘Back off, Tyr. Just leave me to work this out, will you?’

‘I’d love to,’ he assured her, ‘but something tells me it’s going to take a concerted effort to solve this one. And right now, I have bigger concerns, like making sure you’re safe. One thing I do know is that Sharif would never forgive me if any harm came to you. More importantly, I would never forgive myself.’

Straightening up, Jazz pulled the regal card. ‘My people will make sure I’m safe. And now, if you will excuse me?’

He almost bowed mockingly, but he was all out of humour and confined himself to watching from the door as Jazz shepherded the children home through swirls of sand until finally she was lost to sight.

* * *

By the time he’d delivered the last older person safely home, the storm had the village in its vicious grip. The roar of sand driven at speed by gale-force winds was deafening and his only concern

now was for Jazz. Fighting against the power of the wind with one arm over his face and his bandana tied over his nose and mouth, he finally reached the large guest pavilion nestling against the cliff. His feelings lurched from concern to relief when he spotted the hurricane ropes connected to the cliff face, which Jazz had already secured across the entrance.

‘Jazz?’ Shaking the brass bell, he yelled her name again. He wanted to check the struts holding the pavilion before the wind really got up.

‘I’m coming in.’

‘Don’t let me stop you,’ she yelled from somewhere deep inside the tent.

‘You should have stayed in the hall until I came back with you to check everything was safe.’

‘How many times, Tyr?’ Jazz demanded as he closed the roar of the storm out behind him. ‘There’s no need for you to come and check up on me. Why risk your life for no reason?’

‘Maybe I disagree with you about there being no reason for me being here?’

He went about doing the job he’d come for, shaking poles and checking roof beams. ‘Move aside, Jazz. I need to make sure this structure’s safe.’

She stalked round after him. ‘Do you really think the Wadi people don’t know how to build a structure that can weather a storm?’

‘Like your brother, Jazz, I have only survived this long because I never take anything for granted.’

‘Are you satisfied now?’ she demanded, when he stood back to take one last long look around.

‘Not nearly,’ he said. ‘How long do you think you might be confined here? Do you have enough water? Enough to eat?’

‘Look around, Tyr.’

He dragged his gaze reluctantly from Jazz to take in the platters set out on low brass tables. They were laden with sweetmeats and fruit. ‘Jazz.’

‘And don’t Jazz me. I’m not a child,’ she snapped. ‘Well? Are you satisfied now? Oh, and there’s an underground stream running through the back of the tent, should I start to get thirsty.’

He glared back at her.

‘So, what are you going to do now, Tyr? Stroll back to your place in the village—get knocked off your feet and killed?’

‘Hopefully not.’ Jazz sounded belligerent, but her expression was both wounded and touchingly concerned for him. This had to be embarrassing for Jazz. According to the headman, they were destined to be married, though not a word of romance had passed between them. Jazz didn’t know how to handle it, and for once he had no advice to offer her. ‘I’m satisfied you’re safe in here,’ he said to break the tension.

‘The pavilion is well insulated, thanks to its outer skin of camel hide,’ Jazz confirmed with a dry throat, clearly relieved to seize the distraction lifeline he’d offered her.

‘And you’re right, saying no one is safe outside in a storm like this,’ he agreed for the sake of encouraging Jazz to use her sensible head, rather than the turbulent emotion he could sense bubbling so close to the surface. ‘Not even me.’

‘Well, that’s something, I suppose.’ And then she fell silent. ‘You should never have come here,’ she said at last in a strained voice.

‘I’m supposed to pretend nothing happened back there?’ He jerked his head in the general direction of the village hall.

‘Can’t you see how bad you’re making things look by coming here, Tyr?’

‘Your safety comes first. And considering you weren’t supposed to be here when I arrived, that’s rich, coming from you. But we are where we are, Jazz, and it’s no use looking back.’

‘If you’d left me on that dune as I asked you to, this wouldn’t have happened.’

‘If I’d left you on that dune, you’d be dead. And if one of my sisters was stranded in the middle of a sandstorm when Sharif was close by, I would expect him to do exactly what I’m doing for you.’

‘But this is different, Tyr.’

‘Why? Because you’re a princess of Kareshi? You’re also a human being, aren’t you?’

‘I’m alone with a man.’

‘Who is here to make sure you’re safe, and for no other reason, Jasmina.’

‘You can’t even call me Jazz now?’

‘You’re a princess,’ he reminded her coldly.

But there was more to it than that. Jazz was the woman he wanted to take to bed, while Princess Jasmina was the innocent sister of his closest friend, and therefore untouchable. Princess Jasmina had nothing to worry about where Tyr Skavanga was concerned. Another tense silence hung between them. And just like the old days, neither one of them was prepared to back down first.

‘Well, I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb,’ Jazz said finally. ‘You’re here, and, as you say, we’re in this situation, so I might as well offer you a drink.’

He slanted a wry smile at her. ‘Charmed, I’m sure.’

‘Juice?’

‘Thank you.’

While Jazz was arranging things, he took the chance to stare around at all the rich hangings and the jewel-coloured rugs. The Wadi people had really pushed out the boat to show their love for Jazz by offering her the best of everything they had. The smell of precious incense rose from brass burners, while a honeyed light shone from intricately pierced brass lanterns, which were almost certainly centuries old. And there were enough sumptuous throws and hand-sewn silk cushions to make up ten beds.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ she commented, seeing his interest and perhaps relieved for another chance to move onto safer ground. ‘Though you forgot to secure the storm sheet when you came in.’

Surprised, he glanced around.

‘You were too busy lecturing me,’ Jazz observed dryly as he corrected his mistake.

As he returned and tugged off his jacket, he noticed Jazz staring at him. It occurred to him that in Jazz’s ultra-protected world even the flash of a naked biceps would be disturbing. She was staring now at the tattoo that wound around his arm, which was a brutal reminder of his proud Viking heritage and another warning of the many differences between them.

What on earth had persuaded her to allow Tyr Skavanga inside the pavilion? When he’d touched her lightly on the arm with his hand at the meeting, it had felt as if the voltage of the entire national grid had shot through her body. And now she was in lock-down with him? She couldn’t allow him to risk his life outside. That was the only reason this was happening, Jazz told herself firmly. But Tyr filled the tent. His aura of power and command surrounded her. He was so brazenly male and so frighteningly virile.

No one could be this close to Tyr and feel nothing, Jazz reasoned sensibly. The ferocity of the storm had unsettled her, but that wasn’t an excuse for her imagination to run riot. They were stuck here. They hadn’t chosen to be here.

But to be alone with Tyr, when she was never alone with any man apart from her brother? She didn’t know where to look, how to act, where to sit.

Look anywhere except at this man mountain, Jazz concluded. Don’t stare at Tyr’s hard muscled body covered in scars, and wonder how he came by them. Just accept Tyr for who he is, and what he was when you were both younger and could call him a good friend. Don’t stare into Tyr’s shadowed eyes and ache to know his past. Don’t even begin to think of how it felt when he touched you. Concentrate on practical matters instead, like locking down the pavilion together in preparation for the storm, and everything else will sort itself out. She hoped.

It was a relief to have something practical to concentrate on, Jazz reflected as she started to move anything breakable out of danger as the wind battered the sides of the pavilion. She was an observer, and a fantasist who had dreamed about Tyr constantly since she was a teen.

But having him here, brutally male and frighteningly close—

‘Would you mind if I have a piece of fruit to go with my drink, Jazz?’

Well, that sounded like a threat—not. ‘Of course I don’t mind. Help yourself.’

Just because Tyr was worldly and she wasn’t, it didn’t mean he expected anything from her. She’d known him half her life, and Tyr had never done anyone any harm.

Until he became a trained soldier.

Under orders, Jazz reminded herself as she refilled Tyr’s goblet and handed it back to him. She blinked when he reached for the dagger at his belt. She remembered exactly when Sharif had given him the dagger. It was the same deadly curving khanjar her brother wore hanging from his belt. Sharif had said the gift of a dagger bound Tyr and he as close as brothers, and there was no one in the world he trusted more. As if hypnotised, she watched Tyr slice the fruit into slim pieces with that same lethal blade and put some on a plate to tempt her.

‘We could be here for hours, Jazz. You should eat something.’

Hours? One crucial word broke through. How was she going to remain calm and sensible for hours alone with Tyr when her heart was already going crazy?

Jazz accepting the plate of fruit was a turning point. It was a small but significant step towards her relaxing around him. If she couldn’t do that, this was going to be a long night for both of them.

‘Good?’ he prompted as she lifted a sliver of fruit to her lips.

‘Thank you.’

She was so prim, so tense, so frightened of him. This was a new Jazz indeed, though her black eyes and perfectly sculpted features had never seemed more beautiful to him.

‘Why are you staring at me?’ she demanded suspiciously.

‘Am I staring?’

‘You know you are.’

She blushed and turned away, then moved at the same moment he did for a second piece of fruit. As their arms brushed, she took in a swift gulp of air. The jolt to his own senses stunned him. This was crazy. Sheltering from the storm had become an exercise in restraint he hadn’t expected.

Only when Jazz had put half a pavilion’s distance between them did she start talking to him again. ‘I’m glad you’re back, Tyr.’

He stabbed another piece of fruit. ‘Glad I’m back from my travels?’ he enquired, biting the succulent fruit from the tip of the knife. ‘Or glad I’m here?’

‘Both,’ Jazz admitted frankly, hugging herself tight as the wind threatened to tear the roof off the pavilion.

‘So, what do you suggest we do now?’

‘What do you mean?’ Her eyes widened as she stared at him.

He gave a short laugh, but there was no humour in it. ‘Do you tell the emir we spent the night together, or do I?’

‘Do you mind if we talk about something else?’

He shrugged as he refilled his goblet with juice. ‘Whatever you like.’

He began to pace. Inactivity didn’t suit him, but wherever his strides took him in this confined space, it could never be far enough away from Jazz. Wanting her was like a slow burn eating him up inside. ‘Why don’t we start with your plans for the future?’ he suggested.

‘My plans?’

He was instantly alert at the touch of steel in Jazz’s voice. ‘I’m going to continue working at my brother’s racing stables, and I’m going to extend my work with our people. My brother has always wanted me to work for Kareshi. Don’t look at me like that, Tyr. Sharif has always known where my future lay. It just took me a little longer to see the light.’

‘And now you have it all worked out.’

‘Men make plans. Women improve them.’

‘Was I part of your plan?’

‘No,’ she exclaimed, sounding genuinely shocked. ‘And if you think for one moment that I manufactured this insane wedding idea, you’re completely wrong.’

‘All right,’ he placated her. ‘So we know the people of Kareshi love and respect you, and you are right in saying this is where you belong. I’m just not sure that I do long-term, Jazz.’

She was silent for a moment. ‘Do you believe in fate, Tyr?’

He shrugged. ‘Where the hell is this leading us, Jazz?’

‘Bear with me for a moment, Tyr. It’s quite simple. Do you think things happen for a reason? You must do,’ Jazz argued before he could say a word. ‘Look at the evidence. The fall brought me to Wadi village. The storm kept me here. And now—’

‘And now?’ he prompted.

‘And now, apart from the fact that the events of the past couple of days have woken me up so I can see clearly where my future lies, it’s also given me chance to talk to you.’

‘What about?’ He was in no mood for an inquisition, and barriers had snapped around him before he had even finished asking Jazz the question.

‘We’re stuck here, Tyr. You’ve been away a long time. We have lots to talk about.’

Nothing could ever keep Jazz down for long, he remembered. Jazz Kareshi was as complicated as the politics of her country. She had grown up surrounded by intrigue and danger. Forced to negotiate pitfalls and double-dealing since she’d been a very small child, she knew how to survive pretty much anything; even a surprise wedding announcement, it turned out.

‘All right, I’ll start,’ she said. ‘I’m going to live here in Wadi village. At least for the time being.’

‘You’re going to live here?’

‘Why not? I can commute to the stables.’

‘What about your home at the palace?’

‘What’s the point of living in a palace distanced from my people, when I can be here where I can see their problems for myself?’

He couldn’t argue with that. ‘I don’t think Sharif will have any trouble accepting that decision. You know as well as I do that as far as Sharif is concerned, all the pomp and ceremony surrounding his position is just a necessary part of the job. It’s the people of Kareshi that matter most to both of you.’

‘And I can be quite determined when I put my mind to something.’

‘You don’t say,’ he murmured dryly.

‘Where are you going?’ Jazz asked as he turned to go.

‘Back to my own place. And don’t look so worried. I’ll make it safely.’

‘I’m not worried, but it’s your turn now. This is an opportunity for us to catch up, Tyr.’

‘I’ve been here long enough, Jazz. Your reputation is already in tatters.’

‘My reputation is shot,’ she argued. ‘You couldn’t have caused more of a sensation if you kissed me in public.’

He paused with his hand on storm cloth over the entrance. ‘Now, why didn’t I think of that?’

‘Tyr.’

‘Next time I’ll leave you where I find you,’ he vowed before Jazz could get started.

‘No. You’d never do that. You always were the white knight, Tyr.’

Their eyes met and held a dangerous beat too long. ‘Not many people would call me that.’

‘No,’ she agreed, ‘they’d call you a hero.’

‘Leave it, Jazz—’

‘No. I won’t leave it.’ Her voice was every bit as loud and angry as his. Standing up, all five feet two of her bristling with pent-up frustration, she stood between him and the only way out. ‘One day you will tell me why you always avoid talking about the past.’

‘My past is none of your business.’

‘It is my business,’ Jazz said fiercely, ‘because, like my brother, I care for you, and I refuse to watch you suffer on your own.’

‘Maybe I want to be on my own,’ he fired back. ‘Believe me, Jazz, you don’t want to go where I’ve been, and you certainly don’t want to see what I’ve seen—not even in your head.’

CHAPTER TEN

IT WAS HIS turn to tense up when Jazz put her hand in his. ‘That’s where you’re wrong,’ she said. ‘You underestimate me, Tyr. You can tell me anything. Anything,’ she stressed.

‘Some things are best left unsaid, Jazz.’

‘I don’t agree.’ She shook her head and walked away a little distance. ‘If you keep all those ugly thoughts inside you they’ll just fester until they make you ill. Everything has to be faced at some point, Tyr. Look at me. I’ve made a mess of things, and now I’ve got to put them right. I haven’t a clue where I’m going to begin with this marriage nonsense, but I’ll sort it somehow.’ She sighed, but her compassion was all for him. ‘I can’t pretend to understand the enormity of the memories you’re avoiding.’

He said nothing.

‘And I can’t imagine what you’ve seen.’

Thank God for that.

Jazz’s gaze was unswerving. ‘I’m not going to stand by and see a friend in trouble without trying to help.’

‘I’m not in trouble.’ And he wasn’t into spilling the past as Jazz had suggested he should, but as she continued on he had a great sense of the girl he used to know returning, and that was the only news that mattered to him. The strong, practical, sometimes crazy, always feisty, dangerously impulsive girl he used to know was back, while the prim contrivance Jazz had turned herself into in the hope of reassuring one small sector of Kareshi’s population that not everything in their country was changing at breakneck speed had been forced to take a back seat. Great.

‘And as for that...’ She paused and bit her lip.

‘Marriage nonsense?’ he suggested.

‘You might not want to hear this, Tyr, but physical contact between a man and a woman in Kareshi can only mean one thing.’

He refocused on Jazz’s concerned face. ‘But there’s nothing going on between us, so everyone’s wrong.’

Jazz shook her head. ‘We can’t sort this out as easily as that. Whatever we know to be the case, those who would seize on anything in order to destabilise Sharif’s peaceful rule will refuse to be convinced. It doesn’t suit them. Can’t you see that?’

‘So, what are you suggesting?’

Taking a deep breath, Jazz braced herself. ‘It’s too late to save my reputation and I won’t risk either of us losing the trust of my people.’

‘We know that.’

‘So, it’s simple,’ she said. ‘We’ll get married, just like the headman said.’

He almost laughed. ‘That’s insane.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Jazz argued. ‘It’s a practical solution. And don’t look so horrified. We won’t be living as man and wife. There’ll be no passion involved. And we can still be friends.’

While he was still absorbing this ill-advised plan, Jazz came up to him and, standing on tiptoe, she brushed her lips against his cheek. ‘Friends?’ she whispered.

Her touch scorched him. Taking hold of her arms, he moved her back. ‘Don’t,’ he warned.

Needless to say, Jazz refused to be put off. ‘I promise I won’t tie you down, Tyr. You can leave Kareshi any time you want, and we’ll get divorced quietly at some point in the future when all the fuss has died down.’

‘Love’s young dream?’ He shook his head disbelievingly. ‘Jazz, you’ve come up with some madcap plans in the past, but this one is heading for the history books.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ she argued firmly. ‘We both trust each other to do what’s right, so this is the perfect solution. Don’t look at me like that. I have to do something, and this is the best I can come up with. The best for both of us. You don’t want to lose the people’s trust any more than I do. No one needs to know how we live out our private lives, and this way we can still live in Kareshi and work together.’

Holding up his hands, he stopped her. ‘I can’t believe you’re serious about this.’

‘I’ve never been more serious in my life. Can you think of a better solution?’

‘You bet I can. I leave now. And you leave the moment the storm passes over and the helicopter can get here to take you home. You get on with your life, and I get on with mine. Separately.’

‘I’m not leaving my people. And as far as we’re concerned, in their eyes the damage is already done.’

‘All I can see is you panicking, and proposing to go ahead with some mockery of a ceremony that’s supposed to convince your brother, my sisters and your people into believing you and I are intending to spend the rest of our lives together. I’ve backed some of your crazy ideas in the past, Jazz, but this is way beyond reasonable.’

‘Tyr. Come back here! Please, listen to me.’

He stared down at Jazz’s hand on his arm and she quickly removed it.

‘What do you suggest?’ Her voice was quiet, but her eyes were direct and unflinching.

He pulled away. ‘I don’t have to suggest anything. Nothing’s changed, as far as I’m concerned. The people of Wadi village accept me for who I am. They always have.’ Which was one of the reasons he’d stayed so long. No one asked him any questions.

‘But that will change now,’ Jazz assured him tensely. ‘You will never be able to work here again, because if you don’t marry me after spending so much time alone with me, the people you care so much about will shun you.’

‘Why would they do that, Jazz?’

‘Because in their eyes you will have disgraced their princess.’

With a laugh, he shook his head. ‘You make a great case, but I’m not going for it.’

She went rigid. ‘A great case? I hope you’re not sticking with the idea that I’m trying to trick you into marriage, because nothing could be further from the truth.’

‘I just know this crazy idea of yours is going no further. I will explain to the people of Wadi village that our relationship is nothing more than a friendship of long standing, and Sharif will understand.’

‘If we were in Skavanga, I might agree with you, but this is Kareshi and you have no idea how wrong you are.’

Firming his jaw, he turned away from her. ‘This conversation is over, Jazz.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ she warned with all the old spirit. ‘Don’t you dare mistake me for some spineless pawn who accepts whatever scrap you care to throw at me. I’m trying to do the best I can to repair the damage I’ve done. And, yes, I can stand up for myself and I don’t need your help, but you’re involved in this whether you like it or not and you can’t just walk away. These are my people and you’re in danger of offending them, and no one loves these people more than I do. Yes, they’re flawed, but so am I. We all are. We’re human, Tyr, and flaws come with that territory. No one understands the people of Kareshi better than me. All I’m asking is the chance to continue working with them. I can see now that my idea to marry the emir to strengthen our borders and appease the traditionalists was a terrible mistake, but I’m not going to allow a second terrible mistake to ruin my chances of helping my people.’

‘Jazz, you need to sit down and think through things calmly,’ he advised, but even he knew it was too late for that.

‘I shouldn’t have been up there on the dune,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘If only I’d ridden a different way, none of this would have happened.’

‘So don’t pile another mistake on top of that one.’

‘How fortunate you are to be exempt from the shortcomings that afflict the rest of the human race,’ she called after him as he started to unbuckle the storm cloth.

The wind howled in and nearly knocked her over. He reached out to save her and Jazz grabbed hold of his arm. She was pulling at him with all her strength to keep him in the tent, and yelling at him above the ear-splitting howl of the storm. ‘Are you mad? You’ll be killed out there.’

‘So, what do you want me to do, Jazz? Spend the night with the forbidden princess? Will that help your cause? Well?’ he demanded, shouting in her face.

Jazz’s tears shocked him rigid. He’d done so many things that haunted him, and in the process had changed, or so he had believed, into another, callous and more dangerous person. He was a trained killer, a dangerous man, but right now he was only aware of a pressing need to reach out and help Jazz in every way he could.

‘Please don’t leave me, Tyr.’

Jazz’s voice was small and made the impulse to drag her close unendurable. Her quiet strength reached out to touch some hidden part of him. Relaxing his grip so the cover fell back into place, he secured it firmly, then, taking her hand as if Jazz were a child again, and he the youth who had always looked out for her, he led her back into the heart of the pavilion.

‘We will find a solution to this marriage problem,’ he promised, wondering for the first time in his life if he could keep his promise to Jazz. He had never let her down before, but this time maybe he would. She’d gone without so much in her young life, compared to the camaraderie he’d enjoyed with his sisters, and then, to all intents and purposes, he’d come along and stolen her brother away. ‘I owe you,’ he murmured, thinking back.

‘More juice?’ she suggested, her lips slanting in a small smile.

Her hands were shaking, he noticed, but she clasped them tightly round the goblet in the hope he wouldn’t see. He watched her gather herself in a way Jazz used to do as a child. She had always had a backbone of steel.

‘I owe you an apology, Tyr,’ she stated levelly, not disappointing him. Raising her head, she looked straight at him. ‘I got us into this mess and I couldn’t regret it more. I just get so frustrated sometimes, and I know I come up with some wild ideas—’

‘Wild?’ He relaxed. ‘You can’t go round kissing men and proposing to them.’

Jazz’s cheeks flamed red. ‘Yes, I know. I feel embarrassed about that. If I’d had my choice you’d have been a long way down the queue.’

He laughed, relieved to see her relaxing at least a little. ‘You’re a beautiful woman, Jazz. You don’t need to do any of that. And I’m not just talking about what the world sees. You’re beautiful inside, and you deserve better.’

‘Than you?’

‘Much better than me. And better than some emir you don’t even know. You’ll fall in love one day, and when that day comes you won’t want baggage. Believe me, I know all about that.’

‘You’re not married, are you?’ Her smile vanished.

‘Me? No. The women I meet have got more sense.’

‘I think you’d be a good catch,’ Jazz argued.

‘Do you?’ Once again they were staring at each other and all sorts of wicked thoughts were flying through his head, but best of all was the fact that maybe their friendship could move on now.

‘Why don’t you tell me about the baggage, Tyr?’

It had always been a mistake to relax around Jazz.

She stared at him in silence for a moment. ‘It’s another of those things you don’t want to talk about, isn’t it, Tyr?’

He shrugged. 'You've known me most of your life, Jazz, but people change over time.'

'So I'll get to know you all over again.' She met his stare steadily. 'I don't see anything different, Tyr. I just see you. And I'm not afraid of anything you have to tell me, but I think you are.'

'Where are we going with this?'

'If you point-blank refuse to tell me about your past, then all that's left to talk about is you agreeing to marry me.'

She said this lightly as he raked his hair with frustration. 'I thought you'd agreed we would forget that.'

'You're not making this easy for me, Tyr.'

'Easy?' He laughed. 'Nothing about this situation is easy, Jazz.'

She huffed a smile. 'Bet marriage was the last thing on your mind when you heaved me out of that sand drift.'

He slanted her an amused glance. 'You could say.'

'And now if you don't marry me, I will be known to one and all as the disgraced princess of Kareshi. My people will never forgive you for that,' she said, growing serious, 'and neither will Sharif. He might be a forward-thinking leader, but he would never do anything to risk losing the hard-won trust of our people. I'm sorry, Tyr, but there really is no alternative—for either of us.'

'Do you know how mad that sounds?'

'Not mad,' Jazz said sadly, 'realistic. The emir won't have me now, and neither would any other man in our world. I could run away and live somewhere else, I suppose, but I wouldn't be much use to my people.'

For once he was lost for words. Finally, he said tensely, 'Can you hear that?'

Jazz frowned. 'Hear what, Tyr?'

'Exactly.' The wind had dropped. 'The storm has passed over. People will be on their way round to check up on you very soon and you don't want me here when that happens.'

'It's too late to worry about that, Tyr,' Jazz assured him with a rueful smile.

Freeing the storm sheet, he stepped outside. Unfortunately, Jazz was right. He stopped short on the threshold of the pavilion as a group of villagers came up to him, wanting to know their princess was safe. He saw the exchange of glances when he tried to reassure them, then realised they assumed Jazz was safe because he had been with her throughout the storm. How could he betray these good people? He couldn't indulge his wanderlust any more than Jazz could run away. He was definitely going to stay and see this out.

As he walked away, he could feel the villagers' stares on his back. They weren't hostile—quite the contrary. They seemed delighted by the developing relationship between him and Jazz. There was just one thing wrong with that. He didn't want a wife, and the last person on earth he'd risk sweeping into his dark world was Jazz, though he could still feel the brush of her lips against his cheek, and the softness of her body beneath his hands. He would never forget how she'd trembled when he'd barely touched her, or her delicious scent that wound round his senses. He wanted Jazz in every way that a man could want a woman, but would he be forced into marrying her? That was too crazy to contemplate, and it wasn't going to happen. There had to be a way out of this for both of them. And whatever that way was, he would find it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HE SPENT A restless night and was out before dawn the next day. He had to get out and think. He had to drive himself hard until the right idea came to him. The chill of night was still in the air he rode into the echoing canyon. An underground stream surfaced and ran from here to feed the oasis. It deepened into a small lake or wadi, from which the nearby village took its name. This was where he usually stopped to let his horse drink.

Easing back in the saddle, he allowed his mount to pick out a safe path down the steep embankment to the water, where he dismounted. Stretching, he turned to run up his stirrups and

make the horse comfortable. Loosening its girth, he secured the reins and gave it an encouraging slap on the neck, though after their fast gallop here his horse needed no encouragement to drink. Stripping off his shirt and jeans, he dived into the icy water. It cleared his mind and soothed him as he worked out where to go from here.

He needed space from Jazz to figure out how to leave without ruining her. It was too late to regret what had happened. He had to find a solution that would work for both of them. Jazz had led a sheltered life, but that hadn't stopped her dreams being big. He could relate to that. Now she was old enough, she was putting those dreams to good use on behalf of her people. He could relate to that too. The sister of his closest friend, a woman he found dangerously attractive, should have been the perfect match for him—would have been perfect, if he hadn't had so many ghosts dogging his footsteps.

He took out his frustration in a powerful freestyle stroke that took him within sight of the dunes at the far end of the wadi. Swimming back, he waded out and shook the water off himself like a wolf. Reaching for his jeans, he tugged them on and shut his eyes, as if that would close out the image of Jazz.

Then his horse whinnied, and, shading his eyes, he saw her riding flat out. He would have known her anywhere. No other woman rode with Jazz's grace and elegance, or with such confidence. Silhouetted against the pale sapphire sky of dawn, with her hair flying loose like a banner, she was leaning low over her horse's neck. He followed her progress with admiration, and then she spotted him. Goodness knew how she knew exactly where he was standing travelling at that speed, but she reined in and rode directly towards him. Something twisted inside him as she approached. Jazz belonged here, just as he did. She was in her element riding free in the desert, but as a deserted wife she would never be free again in Kareshi, at least not free as he understood the term.

He barely had chance to turn around and act nonchalant as she came clattering towards him across the stony ground. Sitting back in the saddle, she smiled at him as she slapped her stallion's neck. 'So I found you.' Kicking her feet out of the stirrups, she jumped down. Having drawn the reins over her stallion's head, she turned to give him one of her slant-mouthed smiles.

'I'll take him,' he offered as her stallion pranced impatiently on the spot.

'No need,' she insisted.

'There is need,' he argued. 'Sometimes even you have to accept help, Jazz.' He took charge of the horse and led both their mounts down to the shallows to drink.

As she battled to rule her veil and put it back in place after her hectic ride, Jazz realised she had hoped she would find Tyr at the wadi. She'd been thinking about him all night. Thinking about his past, and everything Sharif had told her about Tyr's time in the army, which wasn't nearly enough. Sharif had been discreet in the extreme, she suspected, filling in only a few of the gaps for her. Tyr had stayed behind after the conflict to rebuild where he could, but what had happened to him before that? This was her chance to ask him, but somehow as she stared at Tyr's strong back when he took their horses down to the water, the right words refused to form. Perhaps she was afraid of being stonewalled again, because that would be just one more sign of how far they'd grown apart, but she had to set some things straight.

'You would never leave Kareshi because of what's happened, would you, Tyr? Not when the village needs you.'

'The longer I stay at Wadi village, the more people will talk. If I don't leave, then you should, Jazz.'

'Why should I leave when the damage is already done?'

Catching hold of her arms, Tyr brought her in front of him. 'Will you stop arguing for once?' he demanded, staring fiercely into her eyes.

She was ready for anything, but not that. The touch of Tyr's hands on her body was electrifying. But Tyr felt nothing, Jazz concluded as his stern gaze drilled into hers.

'I'm thinking of you, Jazz. The villagers are getting used to seeing us together and if we stay on they will get carried away by this idea of a marriage between us. If that happens I will have ruined you. As you say, you'll never be able to marry.'

'Do you seriously think I'd want to after this?' She confronted Tyr's stormy gaze with amusement. 'How do you expect me to feel, Tyr? I don't like this any more than you do.'

So the thought of marrying Tyr has never occurred to you?

'I'm still trying to find you a way out of it, Jazz.'

'There is no way out of this.' She stared out across the water. 'Shall we swim the horses while we're here?'

'If you like.'

She exhaled with relief. They had used to swim the horses in the wadi when they were kids. It was a great way to ease tension, and there had never been a better time to reinstate that tradition.

Their horses plunged forward, heading in the direction of a sandbank where they could find solid ground. Once they were safely out of the water, Jazz turned her face to the brightening sky and smiled as she dragged in a lungful of air. Just this one last time, she wanted to escape reality and feast on the innocent pleasures of Kareshi. 'Can you smell the desert, Tyr?'

'Camel dung and heat?'

'You're such a savage. That's Arabian jasmine and desert lavender. The scent is so intense, because our horses' hooves have crushed the flowers.'

'If you say so.'

Romance was clearly the last thing on Tyr's mind this morning. She could hardly blame him, Jazz thought as he sprang down. Preparing to dismount, she held out her hand so Tyr could steady her on the slippery bank, but he bypassed her hand and gripped her round the waist to lower her gently to the ground. The touch of his hands was everything she had ever dreamed of, but the instant her feet were firmly planted, he stepped away. Shading his eyes, he stared across the tranquil water.

'I should be getting back, Jazz.'

'But this is our chance to talk about you. You got away with it last time, but I won't let you get away with it twice.'

He turned to look at her. 'So what do you want to know about me?'

'Everything,' she said softly.

'A princess of Kareshi might be entitled to many things, but those privileges don't extend to me, Jazz.'

'So I'm not allowed to know anything about the man who used to be my friend. And still is my friend, I hope?'

'I don't know what you want me to say.'

Jazz shrank inside. There was nothing in Tyr's voice for her, nothing at all. She'd tried to reach him and she'd failed. The tiny amount of progress they'd made while they were swimming their horses and relaxing in each other's company had vanished. Closing her eyes, she knew with certainty she didn't want to travel another yard with a man who didn't want her, but she also knew she would never stop trying to reach Tyr, if there was even the smallest chance she could help him.

'Come on, Jazz. Make a decision,' he prompted. 'I've got to get back.'

'I had intended to take a quick look at the caves.'

'Why?'

Because this was her last-ditch attempt to re-establish contact with him. There were prehistoric paintings in the caves, to which, on one memorable occasion, Jazz had added her own childish daub. Sharif had been furious and had ordered her painting removed. Tyr had defended her, insisting Sharif needn't worry as the rainy season would soon see to that. And it had, washing away Jazz's painting, leaving the art of prehistory untouched. They had explored the caves endlessly when they were younger. Maybe revisiting them would light that spark again, she hoped.

‘What are you playing at, Jazz?’ Tyr called after her as she set off.

‘Nothing.’ She shrugged as she quickened her stride. ‘Just progressing our catch-up plan.’

‘Your catch-up plan.’

Jazz looked so appealing in pale, figure-hugging riding britches, with the long, concealing shirt she wore over them rippling in the breeze. A flowing dark veil completed the picture, and, whether this was sensible or not, Jazz was the best thing he’d seen since he last saw her the previous night.

‘I’m going to ask Sharif if we can open the caves to the public,’ she explained, slowing to view the cliff path ahead of them. ‘We should share the history of Kareshi. All we’d need to do is to build a proper path with handrails up this cliff and train some guides.’

We, we, we. As Jazz continued to ride her enthusiasm, he wondered if he was guilty of overreacting, or if Jazz still imagined they could live together here? Surely she’d had time to think about it, and had realised what a bad match they were?

It seemed not, and as Jazz started up the cliff, he brushed away a twist of unease and followed her.

‘Be careful when you come up here, Tyr. This scree is treacherous.’

‘Jazz!’

His heart stopped as she wobbled precariously on the edge of a narrow ledge. Bounding up, he dragged her to safety, and for a few intense moments they just stared at each other, and then, conscious he was still holding on to her, he lifted his hands away.

‘Don’t make such a fuss, Tyr.’ Jazz was straightening her shirt as she spoke. ‘I know this terrain like the back of my hand.’

‘Terrain changes over time, and just as sand can slip away beneath your horse’s hooves, these small loose stones are deadly underfoot. You could have gone over the edge.’

‘But I trust you to save me.’

He flinched as she touched his arm. ‘Then you’re mad.’ He turned away before the urge to unloop Jazz’s veil and kiss the life out of her overwhelmed him.

And that was all they had time for before Jazz’s riding boot hit a patch of loose stones and she started to slide away from him. Yanking her back, he stared into the face of a woman he wanted, a woman who, judging by the look on her face, badly wanted to be kissed. He didn’t need any encouragement. Removing her veil, he looped it around her neck and drew her close. Her breathing quickened and her lips parted. ‘What are you doing?’ she whispered.

His answer was to dip his head and brush his lips against hers. Jazz responded as he’d hoped she would, melting against him as she reached up to link her hands behind his neck. He pulled away, cursing himself for the loss of control when he felt her trembling. ‘And now we really should be getting back.’

‘You’re right,’ she agreed, swallowing deep. ‘Do you mind if I take hold of your hand for the rest of the way down?’

‘Be my guest.’

By the time they reached level ground, reason had thankfully re-entered his thinking. ‘You’re going to ride into the village ahead of me.’

A frisson of concern tore through Jazz. The tone of Tyr’s voice had changed so completely. He’d kissed her. Tyr had kissed her. But in the short time it had taken them to walk down the cliff path together, he had grown distant again. The fact that Tyr could cut himself off so completely, and in so short a space of time, frightened her. There was so much she didn’t know about him, and it distressed her to think things were so messed up between them she was in real danger of losing the friendship of a man she had loved since she was a child.

As they mounted up in silence, Jazz reflected that if the past few weeks had taught her anything, it was that she couldn’t write the script for a perfect life, because everyone had different aspirations. Tyr’s dream was to rebuild, then move on to the next project, while hers was to stay and develop

what she started. His kiss had been a fleeting reminder of what might have been, but Tyr obviously thought the kiss was a mistake. The time she'd spent with him had been an unexpected gift, but it was over now. Urging her mount into a brisk trot, she watched Tyr turn his horse around and head in the opposite direction as he took the long way back to the village.

* * *

Disbelief racked Tyr. He'd kissed Jazz? What the hell was he thinking? He'd been back at the village for just under an hour when she came to tell him the news. She found him at the village hall, where he was fine-tuning the Internet connection, which he'd managed to get back up.

'I thought you should know,' she said.

'That's putting it mildly. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me everything in Sharif's mail.'

'You know what email's like. You write one thing and the person at the other end reads something else. I mailed Sharif to explain that we can sort this mix-up out between us, but what I didn't know was that the headman had already mailed Sharif to tell him how happy everyone is at the prospect of us staying on here, once we are married. Please don't be angry, Tyr. This is just a terrible misunderstanding.'

'This is like a sandstorm from hell,' he argued.

Closing down the computer, he steered Jazz outside. The time for worrying what people thought when they saw them together was long past, but Jazz was right in saying it was too late for recriminations. 'When is this ridiculous ceremony supposed to take place?'

'Tomorrow.'

'What?'

'I'm sorry, Tyr, but there's no such thing as a long engagement here.'

His face turned thunderous. 'No kidding.'

Tyr had every right to be angry, Jazz conceded as he marched her down the dusty village street towards her pavilion. He left her at the door without a backward glance. He was mad and she didn't blame him. There was no way out of this now, for either of them, unless Tyr was prepared to risk his friendship with Sharif, and she doubted he would ever risk that. She had hoped for enough time to plan a way forward together, but there was no time, and now they were further apart than they had ever been, which meant she was faced by the bitter prospect of a loveless marriage to a friend she'd lost for ever.

No! No! No! His mind was splintering into a thousand pieces, all of them emblazoned with the same word: No. Did he want this sham marriage? Did he want to deceive the people he'd come to care for in Kareshi? Did he want to subject Jazz to a farce on a grand scale? No again. Jazz was innocent, and the people of Wadi village were only guilty of wanting to share their princess's happiness. Having a princess of Kareshi marry in their village was a dream come true for them. How could he walk away from that? And now he'd spoken to Sharif he had confirmation that if he walked away from this, Jazz would never be able to lift her head in Kareshi again. He had to give Sharif credit for remaining strictly neutral throughout a very difficult conversation: 'You're my friend and Jazz is my sister,' Sharif had said. 'I trust you to work this out between you.'

He didn't sleep that night. How could he sleep with Jazz lying half naked in a bed close by? Jazz with her storm cloud of jet-black hair drifting round her shoulders and that sweet mouth begging to be kissed.

He should never have kissed her. He should have stayed away from her.

It was too late to worry about that now. Staring into the darkness, he thought about the irony of Sharif finishing their conversation by begging him to be kind to Jazz when he didn't know any other way to be with her. But Sharif had only seen him at his most brutal recently, Tyr reflected. They might call him a hero and pin a medal on his chest, but he could never imagine bringing new life into such a violent world, and Jazz deserved children.

Swinging out of bed, he paced the floor. Who was he to ruin Jazz's life? He had asked Sharif this same question, only to have Sharif insist that marriage to Jazz might turn out to be the best thing that had ever happened to him, if Tyr would give it only half a chance. But he couldn't bear to see the hurt in her eyes when Jazz finally understood how easy it was for him to close off from all human emotion. And if he were ever selfish enough to wrap his arms around her, he would never let her go. Right now he'd settled for the easy friendship they used to share, though it seemed to him that any type of relationship with Jazz beyond a formal contract of marriage had finally slipped out of his grasp.

* * *

In spite of all her misgivings, Jazz couldn't help but be touched by the amount of effort the villagers were putting into making her wedding day special. She was hyperventilating most of the time at the thought of becoming Tyr's bride. It was amazing how she could cut out all the bits about this being a forced wedding and just think about being married to Tyr. Not that this fantasy version of events was something she could share with him. Fortunately, she didn't have to, as Tyr was careful to keep his distance. There wasn't much time before Sharif arrived to give his blessing, so everyone was rushing to put everything in place.

There was just one spoiler. As she toyed with a veil of the finest Chantilly lace, Jazz shivered as she thought about her wedding night with Tyr.

And Tyr? How must he be feeling?

Probably repulsed at the thought of sleeping with her?

She would almost prefer that, Jazz realised. It would lift her most pressing concern away: the wedding night. Perhaps they could come to some sort of mutual arrangement. Separate beds? Sleeping with a friend was totally weird by any standards. Surely Tyr would agree with that? She had a total blind spot when it came to sex. She didn't have a clue, except for what she'd read or overheard. Vowing to remain chaste until marriage hadn't been too big a sacrifice when she only had hair-raising gossip about the wedding night to go on. She'd always been chaste and had had no plans to change the status quo.

Until now.

Putting the veil aside before she ruined it, she took a deep breath. Calm down! If she carried on like this she would be a gibbering wreck by the time she stood beside Tyr at the ceremony.

Would he even turn up?

The thought that he might not chilled her. The thought that he would led immediately back to their wedding night. She had to try to concentrate on the fact that Sharif and Tyr's sisters and their husbands would be arriving soon, or she would never be able to go through with this. Sharif had delivered his itinerary in one of his customarily brusque texts:

Prepare for full contingent of family members arriving to celebrate with Wadi villagers tomorrow night.

Sharif hadn't mentioned celebrating with his sister. Jazz gathered that Sharif had nothing to say to her of a celebratory nature. And who could blame him? She'd pressed for marriage negotiations with the Emir of Qadar and then she'd changed her mind, only to hit him with the bombshell that she was going to marry Tyr Skavanga. All in all, Sharif was being quite restrained.

For now.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JAZZ WAS OUT of bed at dawn and pacing restlessly. Her wedding day. Her marriage to Tyr! She couldn't believe it. She wasn't sure she wanted to believe it. Britt had texted to confirm the Skavanga sisters were on their way, so that was a relief at least. Having the Skavanga sisters onsite

equalled having the best support team ever in her corner. She had nothing to worry about, Jazz told herself firmly.

Except her wedding night tonight with Tyr.

Tonight was a long way off.

And Sharif?

She wasn't going to think about her brother now.

And if Tyr didn't turn up?

What if he left her to stew with all the wedding arrangements made and her family arriving? How many people would she let down then? And her heart would break. She loved Tyr. She had always loved Tyr, and even if this wedding was a sham, she was as excited at the prospect as any bride. She could weave a thousand fantasies about marrying Tyr Skavanga, but nothing could compare with the real thing, just so long as she didn't think too much about the future. But would he turn up? Tyr was an adventurer by nature, always seeking the next horizon. Maybe he'd already left Kareshi. Tyr was loyal to her brother, but he was his own man—and, as Tyr had said, did she really know him now? The days of reading him easily were long gone.

The women of the village distracted her from her mixed-up thoughts. She could hear them gathering outside the pavilion, waiting impatiently for the moment when she invited them in so they could prepare her for her wedding day. It was hard not to be swept away by their enthusiasm as they crowded into the pavilion.

She could do this! So long as she stuck to her original plan to ask nothing of Tyr.

But what would he ask of her?

Apprehension fluttered through Jazz at the thought that whatever Tyr expected on their wedding night, she could only disappoint him. But when she tried to imagine Tyr touching her, Tyr's hands on her body, Tyr, the master of pleasure...

Something of this excitement must have shown on her flushed face. The women had started giggling behind their hands, as if they knew what she was thinking. It was a relief to submit to the beauty treatments they had prepared for her and hope they would soon drop the subject, but it wasn't long before they returned to their favourite topic.

'But it won't be a proper wedding night,' Jazz was horrified to hear herself blurt out.

'Who says it won't be a proper wedding night?'

'Britt!'

Leaping off the cushions, she threw her arms around all three Skavanga sisters as they moved in for a group hug. Now she felt better. And worse. Better because three women she was coming to love had arrived, and worse because she hated deceiving them.

'Why are you crying?' Eva demanded in her no-nonsense way. 'Do you want red, puffy eyes? This is supposed to be a happy time.' This was followed by a big sigh and worried glances Eva exchanged with her sisters.

If her eyes weren't puffy before, they were now. Jazz bit back a laugh as Eva mopped her face vigorously with the sleeve of her rough cambric shirt.

'Enough!' Leila winked at Jazz. 'We're not here to administer exfoliation. We're here to act as cheerleaders for the bride.'

Having nudged Eva out of the way, Leila put her arm around Jazz's shoulders. 'Everyone gets emotional on their wedding day, and we couldn't be happier that you are taking our brother off our hands. So don't worry about it, because we're all here to help.'

But nothing got past Tyr's oldest sister. Britt was staring at Jazz with concern, having sensed in a nanosecond that all was not well with the blushing bride, though to her credit, Britt kept those thoughts to herself.

The sun was already blazing like a merciless brand in a cloudless blue sky as they got down to some serious wedding preparations. Why did time pass so quickly when you wanted it to drag? She

wanted this. She didn't want this. She was far too tense to enjoy the moment. She longed to confess everything to Tyr's sisters and seek advice, but she could hardly do that. She couldn't even be certain that she hadn't driven Tyr away again. And how would his sisters feel about that, when they'd only just got him back?

They would never forgive her, and she would never forgive herself.

'So, you're nervous about the wedding night?'

'Eva, do you have to be so blunt?' Leila reprimanded her.

'Yes, I think I do,' Eva insisted, circling Jazz like a mother hen.

Jazz blenched at the thought of revealing her ignorance where matters between a man and a woman were concerned to the three Skavanga sisters, but the women of the village had left the tent to bring Jazz the precious wedding jewels they wanted her to wear, so there was nothing to stop Eva continuing her interrogation.

'It's a simple question.' Eva paused. 'I take it from your public announcement that you're still a virgin, Jazz?'

'And what a question.' Leila showed her outrage on Jazz's behalf. 'Jazz, you don't have to answer that.'

Jazz forced a confident smile. 'Don't worry. I'm not going to.' She added a laugh. But Eva was right. She was scared out of her skin. She didn't have any sexual experience, and, with only old wives' tales to go on, her expectations were hardly encouraging. So here was her dilemma: if Tyr did turn up, she would be afraid of the thought of their wedding night. If he didn't turn up, it would be an unmitigated disaster all round, as well as a tragedy for his sisters, who had only just got used to having him around again. And she would be the cause of that disaster.

'Well, she either is a virgin or she isn't,' Eva insisted stubbornly, without the slightest hint of remorse as she helped herself to a giant-sized lump of honeyed halva. 'There is no in-between. And if the answer's yes, then all I'm saying is that I'm prepared to offer a few useful tips.'

Britt responded calmly. 'Thank you for that insightful comment, Eva, but I really don't think this is the moment for a session of your helpful hints.'

'Eva, can't you remember how you begged us for peace and quiet on your wedding day?' Leila asked. 'Don't you remember how hard it is to remain calm while everyone's adding their own piece of advice? If you must pace up and down the tent munching and scowling, why don't you at least make yourself useful? You could go and find the henna lady to find out how long she's going to be.'

Eva's face fell and she stopped pacing immediately. 'Jazz, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.'

Leaping up, Jazz gave Eva a hug. How she longed to ask Eva for some much-needed help so she could get through the ordeal of the marriage night ahead of her, but how could she admit to being a virgin, let alone explain that she was likely to remain a virgin long after tonight?

'I'll go with Eva to help find the henna lady,' Leila offered tactfully, sensing Britt would like some time alone with Jazz.

The moment the cover was over the entrance, Britt asked Jazz the one question she'd been dreading. 'What's wrong, Jazz? Can you tell me?'

Jazz heaved a long sigh. It was so tempting to tell Britt everything. She had often longed for a sister to confide in, but Britt ran a company and had Sharif to consider. Did Britt need anything else to worry about? 'It's nothing. Just pre-wedding nerves.'

'Well, they're understandable,' Britt agreed, and then she smiled. 'I saw the connection between you two at the party, so I'm not really surprised. But I have to admit I didn't see this coming. Not so fast, anyway.'

No wonder! 'Neither did I,' Jazz admitted truthfully, feeling ten times worse at having to hold things back from Britt.

'I hate to think of you having an accident, but if that tumble from your horse got you two together, it certainly saved a lot of time.' Britt laughed, and then grew serious again. 'If anyone can

get my brother to stay in one place, it's you, Jazz. So thank you. I really mean that. And, if it helps, I think you two were made for each other.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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