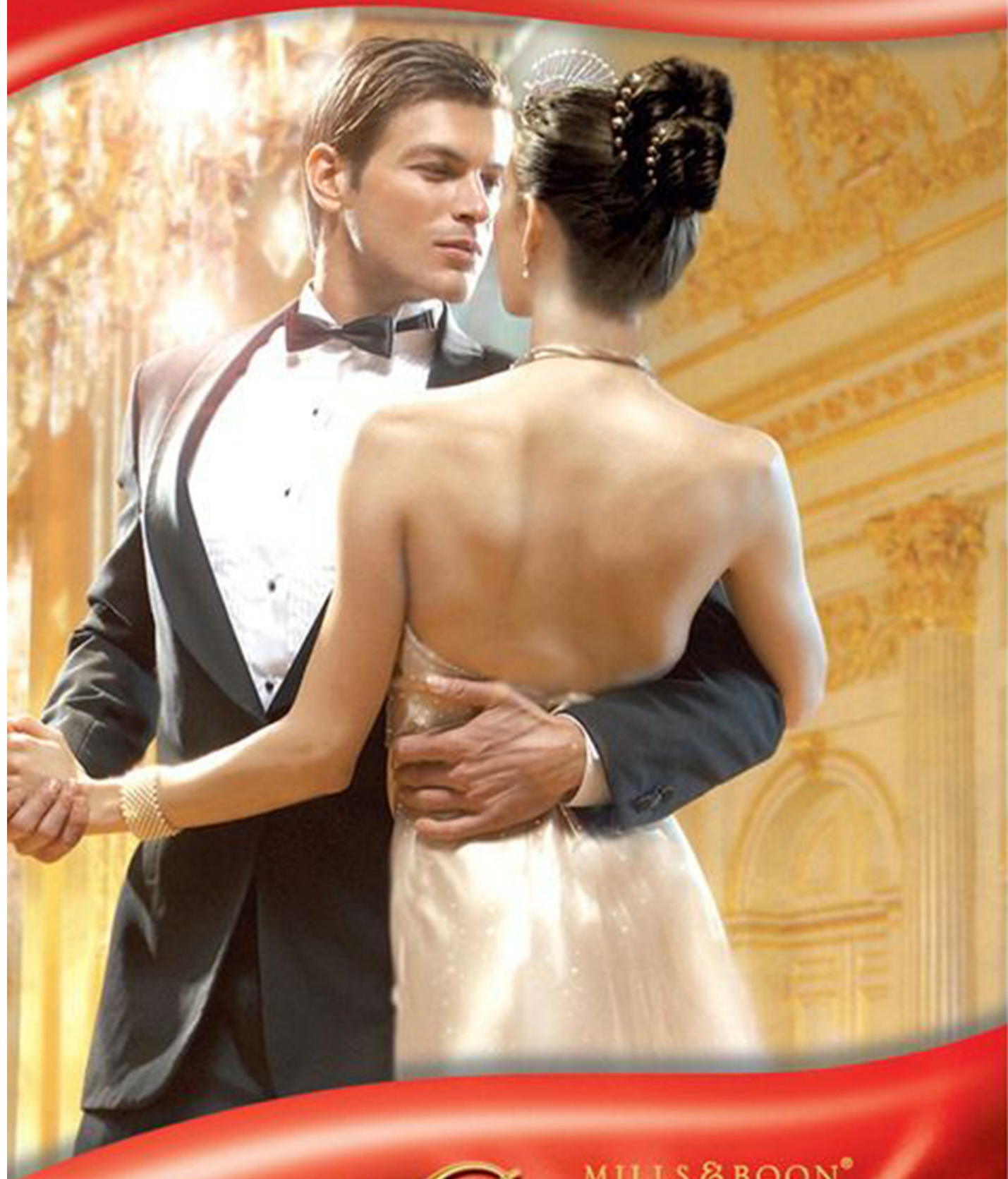


*The Desert King*  
*Olivia Gates*  
*An Affair with the Princess*  
*Michelle Celmer*



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Olivia Gates

**The Desert King / An  
Affair with the Princess**

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## **Gates O.**

The Desert King / An Affair with the Princess / O. Gates —  
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The Desert King Olivia Gates Their marriage will save his kingdom. And in return for an heir, Kamal Aal Masood will give his new wife Aliyah anything ; except the trust and intimacy she desperately wants. When Kamal abruptly ended their blistering affair years ago, he vowed Aliyah would never ensnare him again! An Affair with the Princess Michelle Celmer Wealthy architect Alexander Rafferty hadn't returned to the kingdom just to build a luxury hotel. He'd come back to take revenge on Princess Sophie, the girl who'd played with his heart years before. He meant to seduce her, then walk away without a backward glance. But the unforgettable heat still flared between them. . .

# Содержание

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| THE DESERT KING                   | 6  |
| OLIVIA GATES                      | 7  |
| MICHELLE CELMER                   | 8  |
| MILLS & BOON                      | 9  |
| Prologue                          | 10 |
| One                               | 13 |
| Two                               | 20 |
| Three                             | 28 |
| Four                              | 35 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 43 |

**The Desert King by Olivia Gates**

**What was she doing, coming here? Answering his summons like one of his subjects?**

Aliyah made up her mind to leave in a heartbeat, and spun around to face the guards who'd escorted her to Kamal's mansion. "On second thoughts, tell your boss...or prince...or king...or whatever he is that I won't see him, since I know what's good for me."

They gaped at her as if she'd grown another head and remained standing there like a barricade when she tried to go back through the door.

"OK, if you know what's good for *you*, move out of my way." At her growl, they exchanged anxious glances, then rushed away.

Suddenly that ominous sense of oppression expanded. It seemed to impale her between the shoulder blades just before a deep, rough-velvet caress of a voice did the same.

"It seems you've forgotten how things work. You can go only when I tell you to."

**An Affair with the Princess by Michelle Celmer**

**"You're every bit as beautiful as you were ten years ago..." Alexander murmured. "I remember..."**

She wondered if he was remembering the way they'd stood here on the balcony, talking for hours. The first time he'd drawn her to him and kissed her.

The first time they'd made love.

"I remember this," he said, gazing around at the palace gardens. "You know what else I remember?"

"What?"

He turned to her, reached out to touch her arm. "This..."

It happened so quickly that she barely had a chance to think. One second she was standing beside Alex. The next, his lips were on hers and she was in his arms, the only place in the world where she'd ever truly felt she belonged...

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&

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# **THE DESERT KING**

**BY**

**OLIVIA GATES**  
**AN AFFAIR WITH THE PRINCESS**

**BY**

## MICHELLE CELMER



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## THE DESERT KING

**Olivia Gates** has always pursued creative passions – painting, singing and many handicrafts. She still does, but only one of her passions grew gratifying enough, consuming enough, to become an ongoing career. Writing.

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

When she's not writing, she is a doctor, a wife to her own alpha male and a mother to one brilliant girl and one demanding angora cat. Visit Olivia at [www.oliviagates.com](http://www.oliviagates.com).

Dear Reader,

When the throne of a phenomenally prosperous desert kingdom is at stake, what will its heirs do to secure it? Anything, of course! In *The Desert King*, Kamal has to secure the throne by marrying the lover he'd scorned years ago – a woman who seems to despise him as much as he does her. But duty soon transforms into intense pleasure, and passion reawakens love and the need to resolve the heartache of the past...

*The Desert King* wraps up THRONE OF JUDAR, my first mini-series for the Desire™ line, where I feel at home writing what I love best – irresistible heroes who meet their destinies in passionate heroines, experiencing tempestuous journeys of pleasure and heartache until they reach their gloriously satisfying happy ending.

I would love to hear from you, so please visit me at <http://www.oliviagates.com>.

*Olivia*

At the end of my first-ever mini-series,

I again dedicate it all to the two ladies  
who helped me bring it into existence.

My phenomenal editor Natashya Wilson  
and wonderful senior editor, Melissa Jeglinski.

Thanks, ladies, for the incredible experience.

## Prologue

*Seven years ago*

“Did you think I could just let you walk away, Kamal?”

Kamal froze. It was either that or stagger with the impact of that voice, that challenge. That presence.

Aliyah. Here. From the direction of her voice, on his bed.

So this was why his agitation had spiked the moment he’d stepped into his mansion. He’d felt her, even when logic had kept telling him it was the one place she couldn’t ambush him.

But she’d done so already everywhere else. Why had he thought anywhere beyond her reach, her persistence? Her invasion?

He kept his unseeing eyes cast downward. It was only because they’d been focused there, crowded with inner visions of her, that he hadn’t seen her in the flesh as soon as he’d entered his bedroom.

It was no use. He didn’t have to see her for her to work her black magic. To turn him from the twenty-eight-year-old man who daily managed thousands of people, defeated moguls twice his age and assimilated their achievements on his ascent to global power into the idiot she’d enslaved the moment he’d laid eyes on her...

*Ya Ullah*, how *had* she gained entry here?

Did he need to wonder? She must have conned his men. Maybe even seduced them. What else could have made them risk his wrath?

More visions assailed him, images of Aliyah slithering over other men before she ran back to him, threw herself in his arms reiterating her longing and love, draining him of coherence with the force of her hunger. Her insatiable, indiscriminating hunger.

And she was here, gambling on the force of his own hunger, on his inevitable surrender to it, against all reason and pride.

“Don’t you know I can’t let you go? I *can’t*, *ya habibi*.”

The endearment, *my love*, gasped in a hot, entreating tremolo, broke him. He gave in. Looked at her. He knew he shouldn’t have.

She was spread on his bed, encased in lingerie designed to turn men into testosterone-driven dolts, her honeyed mahogany silk hair fanned around her thin shoulders, her endless legs arranged in a demure pose calculated to make him want to charge her, spread them, guide them high over his back and plunge into what they so maddeningly pretended to guard: the scorching center of her femininity.

This was how he’d dreamed of her, dreams that paled in comparison to reality. A reality she must have saved to use as an overpowering weapon during hardball bargaining, like now.

She’d never shared his bed or let him share hers. They’d met on neutral ground, made love—had *sex* on strange beds. She’d never arrived before him to prepare such a scene. And no matter how deep into the night they’d lost themselves in each other, or how spent they’d been afterward, she’d always left. And she’d always left first. She’d never slept in his arms.

Now her arms were stretched out, her hands trembling as if with emotions too brutal for her thin frame to hide or withstand. Emotions he knew she didn’t feel. Didn’t have. Now her voice broke, as if she had nothing *but* emotions, raw and driving. “Stop tormenting me, *ya habibi*. Talk to me. Come to me. You know you want to.”

*Aih*, he wanted nothing more. To silence all caution, to tear his clothes off, flesh rebelling against the crush of silk and cashmere, screaming to feel her beneath him, to thrust inside her, to expend his anguish in the tempest of her being, to wrench his pleasure from hers and be at peace.

But he'd never be at peace. The only woman he'd ever invited into *his* being, had allowed to extend her dominion over his mind, occupy his priorities and dreams, had been an illusion. He would have to learn to exist with the loss of her festering inside him, eating through him.

*Just one last time.*

The temptation, the weakness, hacked into him, like a saw slicing through soggy wood. She felt it, augmented it.

"You have to talk to me, Kamal, tell me what went wrong. You owe it to me, to us. I refuse to let you just walk away. I can't stop loving you. And I know you can't stop loving me, either. I *know* you haven't."

She knew him too well, and he hadn't known her at all. But he did now. He knew all about the perversions that polluted her mind and body and ran thick in her blood. The moment he'd gotten proof, he'd made his decision. He'd never succumb again, never seek exoneration for her. It was over.

Not that she'd let it be over. She'd pursued him, pretending bafflement and pain at his abrupt breakup, shameless in her efforts to get him to recant his decision to walk away from his six-month-long addiction to her.

And she'd succeeded in cornering him. Tonight of all nights. He wondered how she knew that his hunger had accumulated to such levels, he'd probably risk anything for one more taste of her.

Enough. He couldn't let her cheat on him anymore, couldn't even rant accusations at her. He couldn't bear to listen to the lies addicts like her were superlative at coming up with.

But her eyes—those seas of old-gold and sincerity—were roiling with the liquid silver of distress, beseeching his mercy, dictating his surrender. And against his roaring will, he obeyed, her beauty intensifying as distance evaporated, the scent of her arousal tugging at his guts, his loins.

Then, as his lips neared hers, preparing to sink into the trap of her surrender, he saw it. The relief. The triumph.

He jackknifed up, a geyser of rage and disgust—at himself—threatening to blow him apart.

*Ya Ullah*, he'd almost fallen for her again. He *still* wanted to let go and lose himself in the magnificence of her abandon.

But he'd be doing just that. Losing himself. He'd already lost enough of himself to her. And *b'Ellahi*, he was putting an end to the damage here and now.

"You want me to talk?" he snarled. "Tell you what went wrong? I tried to spare you, but since you've invaded my home and come begging for it in this pathetic way, I'll tell you."

Shock at his aggression rippled over her face, jolted through her, sent her scrambling up, gasping, "God, Kamal, don't—"

"No. You went to lengths I didn't think any female with the least brains or dignity would go to, to hear this. So hear it. I ended it because you sicken me."

She spilled off the bed, groped for her clothes. "Please, stop..."

He plowed on, scraping his throat raw. "You'll hear this to the end, the truth about yourself, what you thought you could get me too addicted to you to notice. The busiest whore in L.A. is more honest than women like you, sluts born in conservative cultures who drown in vices once they experience 'free' societies. You want to know why you are the bottom of the barrel? Because to you, vice is an indulgence, not a necessity."

She sobbed now. "Please...I—I'll go...just stop...s-stop..."

He grabbed her arm as she stumbled past him. "I thought you had the intelligence to understand what you were to me. A convenient lay while I had some idle hours during my time here. That's all."

She convulsed as if he'd shot her, tried to wrench away. He struggled with the urge to drag her to him, beg her forgiveness for the cruelties, his fingers tightening on her fragile arm, the tremors that racked her sending electricity arcing through him.

Then it all welled up inside him, like blood through a reopened wound. Every word, every sigh, every *lie*, every step as he'd watched her rush to another man's bed. One of many, he'd learned...

*Let her go...now.*

He somehow did, released her arm as if it were something fetid and slimy. “*Now* you can go.”

She staggered away, and something splashed on his hand, seemed to eat through his flesh to the bone. Tears. *Her* tears.

The blast of agony, of fury, almost shattered his sanity.

She was at the door when he bellowed, “*Aliyah.*”

She turned like a broken marionette yanked by a string. But through the performance of devastation, it was still there. Hope that he’d succumb at the last minute. Or at least leave the door ajar for another incursion. He went mad.

He stalked toward her, for the first time in his life not in control, not knowing what he’d do once he reached her. *She’d* done this to him. He’d loved her so much. He hated her more now.

He stopped with a restraint he’d thought she’d destroyed. Then he heard a rumble. Alien, crazy. His. “If you know what’s good for you, you won’t let me see you or hear from you again.”

She seemed to crumble then, as if around the hope he’d pulverized. With a tearing sob, she stumbled out of his bedroom. Out of his life.

Where he had to make sure she’d stay.

## One

Kamal ben Hareth ben Essam Ed-Deen Aal Masood's fist smashed into his inert opponent with a bone-crunching crack.

The bag swung away in a wide arc before hurtling right back at him like a battering ram.

Snarling, imagining it one of the people who had put him in this predicament, this *disaster*, he met it with a barrage that would have left anything living a mass of broken bones and mangled flesh.

A full thirty minutes into his rampage, his punching bag seemed to grin back at him, pristine and unimpressed with either his strength or his punishment. Leave it to something inanimate to point out the futility of his fury.

He caught it on its last rebound, leaned his face on its cool surface on a harsh exhalation of exertion and resignation.

It was no good. He was still mad as hell. Madder. The edge hadn't even dulled. Would the rage ever lessen? Would the shock?

The king of Judar was dead. Long live the king. *Him*.

Blood surged in his head again. His fingers dug into the bag.

The bag should have been his brothers. He'd bet they would have stood there and taken whatever he dished out.

And why not? After all, they'd gotten what they'd wanted. First Farooq, followed by Shehab, his in-total-control brothers had done the unthinkable—forsaken the world for love and dumped the succession to Judar's throne in his lap. Then, two days before he'd gone through the succession transfer ritual, the king's long-expected death had come to pass.

Now he would participate in a ceremony of a different kind. An ascension—or rather, as it was known in Judar, a *joloos*—a sitting down on the throne. Farooq and Shehab had become the crown prince and the spare, and they kept patting him on the back for taking the throne off their hands so they could live in a perpetual haze of domestic lust and breed princesses for Judar at light speed.

How he wanted to batter sense into them, to bellow that the women for whom they'd forsaken the throne would end up tearing out their hearts and treading on them. He *had* made his augury unadorned and brutal. He'd gotten identical answers from the brothers he'd once thought the most discerning men he knew. Serene glances and pitying voices telling him time would show him how wrong he was.

*Malahees*.

Muttering his verdict—that his brothers had had their minds licked away by the honeyed tongues of two sirens—he tore his soaked sweatshirt over his head, balled it up and slammed it against the wall on his way into the shower/sauna/dressing area.

If all Farooq and Shehab had done was set themselves up for destruction, he would have kept trying to save them. And as victims of witchcraft, they could have had his forgiveness if all they'd done was shove him onto the throne.

But now he had to marry the woman who came with it.

He still might have accepted this fate worse than life imprisonment had it been any other woman.

Any woman but Aliyah Morgan.

*Ya Ullah*, when would he lurch awake to find all this another nightmare featuring the woman he'd been struggling to forget for the past seven years?

But it wasn't a nightmare. It was far worse. It was real.

And in this nightmare of a reality, by a macabre twist of fate, Aliyah had become the woman the future king of Judar had to marry, to fulfill the terms of the peace settlement that would secure the throne and restore balance to the whole region.

He should refuse his brothers' abdication, insist one of them take back the throne. Then one of them would be forced to marry Aliyah, even though he had another wife...

He stopped in midstride, stared through the flawless Plexiglas wall into the marble and stainless-steel shower compartment, a fist balling in his gut, images deluging him.

Aliyah...marrying Farooq or Shehab, in either of their beds, writhing beneath them, driving them wild...

The fist tightened, wrenched, forcing a groan from his lips.

*B'Ellahi*, had he lost his reason again? How could he still feel the least possessive over a woman he'd never possessed in truth, who wasn't worth possessing?

He entered the shower, turned the heat up to rival his internal seething, hissed his pain-laden relief as needles of scalding water bombarded his flesh and steam billowed around him, engulfing him in its suffocating embrace.

Damn his power of flawless recall. It gave him an edge that made him rise in every field he'd decided to enter, to conquer. It was also a curse. He never forgot. Anything.

He had only to close his eyes to feel it all again. Every sensation and thought since the moment he'd laid eyes on *her*.

Until that moment, to him, women had been either beloved family, cherished friends, potential-mate material, or self-acknowledged huntresses who understood that he had no needs, only fancies to be roused with utmost effort and appeased, swiftly, irrevocably. He had yet to meet a woman who hadn't fallen into one of those categories.

Then he'd felt her gaze on him, and all his preconceptions had been blasted away. He'd approached her at once, and her cutting intelligence and crackling energy, her exhilarating openness about his equally powerful effect on her, had deepened her impact on him by the second.

Fearing his unprecedented involvement, his aides had cautioned him. Aliyah wasn't using her modeling profession to insinuate herself into the highest tiers of society, hunting for sponsors—she was doing far worse. Not only was she exploiting her unconventional beauty, but also her status as a princess of Zohayd, violating the rules of her culture and rank to catapult herself to stardom through scandal and controversy.

But Kamal, for once out of his controlled, focused mind with hunger, had rejected the cautioning. To him she'd been a miracle, something he'd thought he'd never find. A woman created for him. One who lived in the West but had her roots in his culture, an equal who "got" him and mirrored him on every level—the duality of his nature, the struggle between the magnate who abided no rules with the prince who knew nothing but. He'd thought it was fate.

And it had been. Fate at its cruelest, setting him up for the biggest fall of his life.

The ugliness of the discoveries, of that last confrontation, still lashed him. But only with anger at himself, for blinding himself that much, that long, for still being so weak he'd counted on others to make it impossible for her to reach him again.

Now it was others who'd given her access to him for life.

The accursed Carmen and Farah, who'd ensnared his brothers. His idiotic brothers, who'd succumbed to their wives' influence. The damned Aal Shalaans, who'd demanded this marriage on threat of civil war. And the miserable Aal Masoods, who'd considered the marriage a peaceful solution. But it was originally the king of Zohayd's fault.

King Atef was the one who'd fathered Aliyah then refused to acknowledge her. Then her American mother had given her up for adoption, and King Atef's own sister had adopted her...No, they were *all* to blame.

The mess of mistakes would have remained a secret if King Atef hadn't sought out his ex-lover and assumed the daughter she'd raised was his. But his ex-lover had adopted Farah only when remorse over giving up Aliyah had overwhelmed her. It had ended well for Farah. She was now the wife whom Shehab, the fool, worshipped.

But it hadn't ended well for *him*. It had come full circle, throwing him together with Aliyah, now permanently. Aliyah, the half-blood princess whom everyone in formal society pretended didn't exist, but whose debauched life in the States provided constant fodder for malicious gossip in the region's royal social circles.

It enraged him that an accident of birth could make kingdoms steeped in tradition and conservative values consider such a woman queen material and an instrument of peace.

To heap insults on injuries, she was pretending outrage herself. She'd more or less told her father, her *king*, to go to hell, that she'd rather die than marry Kamal.

He was certain she'd known the declaration would hurl its way to him, a challenge designed to goad him to rise to it.

And he would. He was damned if he didn't make her eat her words. But not for any personal reasons, he told himself.

This was for the throne of Judar.

He stepped out of the shower, every nerve stinging from the combined punishment of overexertion and physical and mental overheating. He tore a towel off the nearest rack and, without bothering to do more than tie it around his waist, he stalked out of his workout area and made his way to his offices.

The bodyguards who'd proliferated in number and intensified in vigilance since he'd risen to the rank of king-to-be faded into the background so as not to encroach on his privacy or purpose.

As if anything could. He'd lived with all kinds of infringement all his life, had learned early on to thoroughly tune them out. Right now, it would take an attacking army to distract him from his intentions.

He strode to his computer station in measured steps, came to a stop before the central screen, clicked the mouse, accessed his e-mail program. Two clicks brought up the e-mail address he'd acquired hours ago. He clicked open a new message.

He paused for a long moment, rivulets coursing down his chest and back from his still-soaked hair, his mind a blank.

What could he say to the woman he'd parted from on the worst terms a lifetime ago? The woman who would now become his enforced wife, his queen, the mother of his heirs?

Nothing, that was what. He'd *say* nothing to her. He'd give her an order. The first of many.

Inhaling a deep breath, his fingers flew over the keys. Two terse sentences flowed onto the screen.

He stared at them for minutes before his gaze gravitated to the name in the address bar. Aliyah...

How could it still wield such influence, strike such disturbance in a composure he'd thought unshakable?

It had to be echoes of the weakness he'd once had for her. Echoes of an illusion. As unreal as everything they'd ever shared.

He ground his teeth and hit Send.

The phone slipped from Aliyah's fingers, hit her lap.

She leaned forward, fighting down a fresh wave of nausea.

She'd almost forgotten how that malignant turmoil used to seize her, contort her emotions and reactions. She'd fought too long, too hard for control, and feeling it ebbing away again...

She should cling to one thing. This time, her upheaval wasn't being generated inside a chemically imbalanced mind. She had major-with-a-skyscraper-high-M reasons to thank for her current state. This was no overreaction brought on by drug residues, or worse, a resurrection of her old volatility, as had been implied.

Oh, no. This *wasn't* a pathological reaction. She'd bet every cent she'd ever made—and she'd made heaps—that no one would react differently if, after twenty-seven years of a turbulent enough

existence on this planet they discovered that everything they'd thought they knew about their life was one convoluted lie.

And what a lie. It had been perpetuated by the very people who'd been the pillars of her existence, who'd now brought it all down around her ears.

Could she accept it all one day? That Randall Morgan wasn't her father but rather her adoptive one, that Bahiyah Aal Shalaan wasn't her mother but her paternal aunt, that King Atef wasn't her uncle but her biological father, and her biological mother was some American woman she'd never met in her life?

Yet everyone begrudged her her shock. They'd dropped the bomb on her and had expected her to gasp in surprise then shrug and carry on as if nothing had changed. They'd implied that her distress lasting for more than a couple of days indicated a return of her instability. They made her feel unreasonable for demanding time to grapple with the revelations, for resisting being shoved into this new persona and accepting her fate with a smile. That last call from her uncle/father/whoever-he-was had made her feel cruel for not rushing back to Zohayd to meet the woman who'd given her up for adoption, starting the chain reaction that had led to this point. This mess.

Well, she was *entitled* to her freak-out time. As she was entitled *not* to see said woman, or any of them. Not just yet.

And no, it wasn't only because they'd managed to twist the course of her life, past and future. She would eventually come to terms with the rewriting of her history and her identity. What she couldn't *bear* hearing or thinking about was the main disaster they were railroading her toward...

A sharp *ping* startled her. She set her teeth as she sat up. She had to change that irritating "new e-mail" alert. But to what? All available alerts were equally aggravating.

Sighing, she clicked the track pad and the laptop's screen woke up. Her e-mail program window swam into view.

It took three beats for her heart to stop.

Just when she thought it wouldn't restart, all the missed beats converged in a detonation that almost blasted the organ out of her ribs.

She choked as the name rippled across her vision, passed through the barrier of shock, sank into her brain, into the brand it had long seared there.

Kamal Aal Masood.

She collapsed back, lungs burning, stomach churning.

An e-mail. From him. The man she despised above all, the man who'd taken all the love and passion and dreams of her too-stupid-to-live twenty-year-old self and ripped them to shreds.

The man everyone was insane enough to say she had to marry.

Every muscle twitched with the enervation that followed the blow as her vision wavered over the screen again. There was nothing in the subject line. Just his name in the "from" area.

Figured. What could the subject line be, from the man who'd thrown her out of his life like so much garbage? To Clinging Idiot? Re: Sickening Slut? Parting Threat Renewal Notice?

There was nothing to say. He'd said it all then.

So what had he sent her? More abuse? She'd welcome that now. It would be written proof of the ludicrousness of the political marriage everyone was talking about as *fait accompli*.

Her hand trembled over the track pad. The cursor shook across the screen, missed its target. Hissing, she squeezed her hand to steady it, returned it to the track pad, clicked the e-mail open.

She stared at the words for what could have been an hour.

*We will have dinner to discuss the situation. You will be picked up at 7:00 p.m.*

That was all. No closing. No signature.

*We will have dinner. You will be picked up.* Picked up...

Yeah, like he'd picked her up that night they'd first met.

She'd been so deluded she'd thought him the embodiment of the best of her dominant half's culture, a knight of the desert, with chivalry and nobility running in his blood. She'd thought him her counterpart, her soul mate, a man burdened with inherited status, struggling with its shackles, its distorting effect on people, overcoming its limitations while making no use of its privileges to become his own person and a phenomenal success. She'd done the same, even if her success had been nowhere as phenomenal.

She'd thought he'd seen through her hyper surface to the vulnerable soul inside, struggling to conquer her weaknesses, the one man who wanted more than friendship from her, who'd valued her as a person, didn't consider her as a means to access status and wealth or a pawn in royal games of pretense. She'd thought he'd never get enough of her. Then he had, had walked away without a word.

She'd gone up in flames of desperation, begging for an explanation, a reconciliation. He'd walked away time and again, as if she'd ceased to exist to him.

His dismissal had driven her over the edge. And she'd gotten what she deserved for disregarding all survival instincts. Kamal had smeared her face in the ugly truth. What she'd thought a powerful love affair with her perfect match had been nothing but the sick game of a twisted hypocrite who'd exploited her and reviled her for falling for it.

And here he was, reinvading her life. Relegating her to being picked up like a pile of dirty laundry he didn't deem to touch himself.

That royal bastard. Literally royal. Regal even, in a matter of days, thanks to the weird game of musical chairs the heirs of Judar had played, leaving him the one poised to sit on the throne. Not that he needed a throne to be ruthless. He'd always swept through life like a scythe, cutting down anyone who didn't make way for his advance. And she'd been pathetic enough to consider his cruelty a strength, one she'd been desperate to be close to, to absorb a measure of.

And she was supposed to marry that bulldozer.

Or so decreed some archaic tribal stupidity. Thanks to everything her two sets of parents had done before she'd been born, she was suddenly the main piece in that political game, her only purpose to make one move. Marry the crown prince of Judar—its king in a few days' time—and produce heirs to the throne with Aal Shalaan blood in them.

To that she said, *like hell*.

And it seemed she'd get to say it to his face.

She looked in fascination at her hand. It was no longer trembling. And that was only the outward manifestation of the stillness that had spread inside her.

It was as if after two weeks of feeling like she was struggling to get free of an octopus, she'd figured out how to escape. Why keep beating away the octopus's tentacles when she could bash it on the head?

Especially when said head was six foot six of despicable male heartlessness and chauvinism.

She rose to steady feet and walked to her dressing room.

She started to undo her buttons, then met her own gaze in the mirror.

He'd invited her to discuss the "situation," as he'd put it. He hadn't even deemed her worth picking up the phone to deliver the invitation. Not that it was an invitation. It was an order. One he fully expected her to rush to obey.

No. She wouldn't bash the head.

She'd chop it off.

At the strike of seven, they'd arrived. Kamal's men.

Or rather, the men of his new status. The king's men. Dressed in black, deferential yet daunting. Two had come up to her condo and escorted her down to a three-stretch-limo cavalcade where half a dozen clones had been waiting. They'd turned every head on the busy street, some in alarm, the band of Middle Eastern not-so-secret service guys flitting around her as if she were their king himself, not just his summoned guest.

It had surprised her, this show of power. The bustle of pomp and ceremony. Kamal hadn't had an entourage in the past, had rejected the fuss, the servitude, the imposition. Being royalty herself, she'd known that, as a prince of one of the most powerful oil states in the world, he'd had bodyguards following him. But she'd never felt them, let alone seen them. It had been another thing that she'd loved about him. Fool that she'd been.

Beyond lack of an entourage, he'd also never flaunted his inherited status or acquired power. Yet even people who didn't know him had always responded to his innate authority and had launched themselves at his feet. She'd been a victim of that influence herself. And he'd found their—and her—fawning abhorrent. He'd told her so.

Seemed he'd changed his mind.

That must be just one of many things that had changed about him. All for the worse, no doubt. If there could be worse than what he'd been. Whatever worse was, she was sure he'd managed it.

God help Judar and its entire surrounding region.

As for her, she'd help herself, just as she'd learned to do, thank you very much.

She inhaled on renewed purpose and stared at Los Angeles rushing by through the smoky, bulletproof window. She recognized their route. She'd taken it many times before. To his mansion by the ocean.

He'd always world-hopped, he'd told her, never staying in one place outside his kingdom long, never bothering with more than rented, serviced lodgings. Then he'd bought that mansion a week after they'd met. He'd given her the impression that he'd bought it for her. He'd implied he'd leave only when necessary, would always come back. He'd given her every indication that he'd been thinking long-term.

Now she guessed that a thirty-million-dollar mansion had been the equivalent of a thirty-thousand-dollar car to her. Too affordable to indicate commitment. And to a playboy of his caliber, six months must have been his definition of eternity.

Even though that mansion had been a beacon of hope to her, she'd never risked staying there overnight. She'd never stayed the night with him at all. She'd been terrified that during the intimacy of nights under the same roof, he'd see more manifestations of the imbalance she'd been battling, that he might have despised her for it.

She shouldn't have worried. He'd despised her anyway.

Suddenly it was there, at the end of the palm-lined road that sloped up the hillside to overlook the breathtaking panorama of the Pacific. The mansion that had dominated her stupid dreams just as it did the parklike gardens it nestled amongst.

She'd been there only in passing but knew that it boasted over thirty thousand feet of living space—not counting the porches, terraces and interior patios—and spread over two hectares. He'd told her it was perfect for all purposes—entertaining, accommodating guests, nurturing a large family.

She'd weaved a whole tangled web of fantasies around those last words, which he'd tossed in without meaning a thing. She'd thought this mansion the most beautiful place she'd ever seen.

It wasn't really. Being born of the royal family of Zohayd, she'd seen and lived in some mind-boggling places. Nothing in the States had ever come close to their sheer opulence and artistic extravagance. But this modern, pragmatic mansion had sheltered Kamal and her dreams of a future with him there, and so had surpassed perfection in her eyes. No wonder he'd thought her sickeningly pathetic.

The cavalcade stopped in the driveway. She exhaled a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding, rolled her shoulders as if in preparation for a wrestling match and stepped out of the car.

The two men who'd escorted her from her condo rushed ahead of her up the dozen stone steps leading to the columned patio. Two others followed, while two more materialized out of nowhere to open the main oak double door for her.

The moment she stepped inside, she felt enveloped by a presence. His. Could it be she remembered it still?

Seemed she did. She felt it in the austerity and grimness of the open spaces, the minimalist furnishings, the neutral color scheme and ingenious, indirect lighting. Strange. The decor had been exactly the same before, but then it had felt warm, welcoming.

Those impressions must have been all in her lust-hazed mind. Now she was seeing the place for what it was—a sterile space infected by the black soul of its owner.

They approached a ten-foot-high paneled double door. She didn't know what kind of room lay beyond it. Probably some waiting room for her to stew in while their lord was fashionably late.

She reached out to the handle and both men almost fell over her to open it for her.

She sighed. She'd lived in the States the last ten years, had almost forgotten how it felt to be part of a royal family, guarded and served and smothered 24/7. Not that she thought this rising sense of oppression had anything to do with them. It had to be all about laying eyes again on the man she'd once worshipped and who'd almost destroyed her...She stopped just before she crossed the threshold.

What the *hell* was she doing, coming here? Answering said man's summons like one of his almost-subjects?

She made up her mind within a heartbeat, spun around. "On second thought, tell your boss... or prince...or king...or whatever he is to you, that I won't see him, since I *do* know what's good for me. Thanks for the ride. It was nice. I'll find my way back home."

They gaped at her as if she'd grown another head, remained standing there like a barricade when she started back toward the main door.

"Okay, if you know what's good for *you*, move out of my way."

At her growl they exchanged anxious glances then rushed away, disappearing outside the mansion in the space of two blinks.

Whoa. What was that all about? She wasn't that scary.

Suddenly that sense of oppression seemed to expand, and the influence that she now realized had sent those men running sharpened. It impaled her between the shoulder blades, just before a deep, deep drawl did the same.

"It seems you've forgotten how things work. You can go only when I tell you to."

## Two

Aliyah froze.

That voice. The rough-velvet caress, the hypnotic spell that had once sent her spiraling into a realm of extremes.

It was coming from behind her. From the room she'd decided not to enter. Tranquil, indolent. A laser drilling into her from back to front, passing dead-center through her heart.

Somehow, her heart kept beating. More like rattling like a half-empty piggy bank in her chest. Her nerves kept discharging. Not that having a heartbeat and nervous transmission meant she could move. She couldn't.

The split second she could, she'd continue on her way out, show that overbearing lout how things worked. Surely not his way.

The spike of outrage thawed the grip of paralysis, freeing her legs, fueling three long strides on her charted path out of his trap. On the fourth she faltered.

What was she doing, walking away? She was here to see about one overripe head. She should go harvest it.

She turned around, walked back. The hardwood floor beneath her feet felt like soggy sand, and her legs felt powered by someone else's will.

As long as it wasn't his, she was fine with it.

She crossed the threshold this time, scanned the dimly lit room. For the first dozen heartbeats, she saw nothing.

Then he seemed to materialize out of nowhere, registering on her retinas, facing her in a high-backed black leather armchair at the far end of the room, framed by French windows that opened to the terrace leading down to the gardens. His body was relaxed, silhouetted in the golden light of a side lamp. His face was in darkness.

Her heart jangled into a higher gear. He was so still, looked so...sinister crouching there like a supernatural creature, half here, half in another realm, his face, his intentions obscured...

What a load of spectacular stupidity. There was nothing supernatural about Kamal. Except his supernatural ability to piss her off, playing all mysterious and lordly and...bored.

She moved, one foot in front of the other, each one a triumph of steadiness, advancing into the field of light cast by another tall lamp, her eyes fixed where his eyes should be, trying to discern whether he was looking at her, or if, as in the past, he was pretending she didn't exist.

One thing she did know—he was baiting her.

Expecting her to lose her cool? Or her nerve, as she had done so dependably in the past? Well, he was in for a surprise.

Meet the new Aliyah Morgan, buster. Or as it had turned out, Aliyah Aal Shalaan.

He was moving now, sitting forward as if her every step nearer was tugging at him, light creeping across his face like the sun at dawn.

She almost squeezed her eyes shut, dreading the moment his eyes would be illuminated. Then they were, striking a flare that knocked the breath from her lungs as he'd once knocked sanity from her mind.

It was his expression that jogged sanity back into place now.

Stunned? How could he be, when he'd been ready for her? When he had no human components to stun?

Now he was getting up, slowly, eyes narrowing to slits below the intimidating brows, a dark, towering force inundating her with emanations she felt would knock her off her feet if she didn't watch it.

Had he always been this way? Or had she forgotten?

With her photographic memory, was that even a question? While it had helped her forge a career for herself as an artist, the inability to forget had always been her curse.

She'd forgotten nothing. Not an inch, not a hair. He *had* changed. And infuriatingly, not for the worse as she'd been hoping on the way here. The twenty-eight-year-old sleek panther of a man who'd ruled her emotions for six months then abandoned her to the most chaotic, traumatic time of her life had been upgraded. And how.

But one thing was the same. His clothes. He was dressed the same way he had been the night she'd first laid eyes on him.

Had he done that on purpose? Could he even remember what he'd worn then? He'd once told her that he, too, forgot nothing.

But if he had remembered, had done it on purpose, *why*? To mock her? To goad her? To rewind to the beginning and start over?

Heh. Sure. As if.

He could start over in hell, where he belonged.

Still, it was the sameness of the sans-tie, formal charcoal suit with its unbuttoned silk shirt that echoed the color of his whiskey eyes that made the change so obvious, that detailed how the leanly muscled, broad-shouldered six-foot-six frame she regretfully remembered in distressing detail had bulked up with premium maturity to reach a new zenith of virility.

Problem was, the upgrade didn't stop there. The same magic had taken a chisel to his incredible face, turning his singular features from arresting to overwhelming. Worse still, the jet-black satin that was his hair and that he'd always cropped close to his awesome head now lay in luxurious layers down to his collar.

Worst of all was the addition of a trimmed beard and mustache. Those betrayed his true nature, showed him for what he really was. One of nature's most menacing entities. Not to mention one of its grossest examples of injustice.

No two ways about it. The years had been criminally kind to him. Seemed infinite wealth and power agreed with him. He'd no doubt improve exponentially the longer he had them, the older he got. And judging by his notorious reputation as a womanizer—the double-standard pig had dared call *her* depraved—every female with a brainwave agreed. And wanted a part of him.

And they could have him, could pick his bones clean, preferably. He no longer affected her...*Liar*.

*Fine*. So she'd be dead and buried before a male of this caliber didn't access her hormonal controls. What did it matter that he was the most magnificent male to walk the earth, a species of one? It changed nothing. Out of the few billion men alive, he was the one who she knew from mutilating personal experience was a soulless bastard. She wouldn't come near him with a ten-foot pole. Unless it was to poke out his eyes with it.

But none of that mattered now. Now she hoped only that she hadn't gawked at him too long. Not with her mouth hanging open, at least. What mattered now was that she regained the composure he always seemed to rob her of just by training those eyes on her. For once she needed to stand with him on equal ground.

She inhaled, cocked her head, forced her gaze to sweep him, down then back up to his eyes, smearing him with disdain.

"These sure are desperate times we live in."

For a moment she was stunned to hear her own voice.

So it was a husky wisp of sound, but at least she got it to work. Encouraged, enraged further by the way he remained staring at her as if at an unsavory species, she elaborated.

"They have to be, if your countrymen are scraping the bottom of the barrel to find themselves a king."

Kamal almost lurched. At the satin lash of the voice he'd just discovered had never stopped echoing in his mind. At the slap her condescension had landed on his stunned senses.

He would have if he could.

He couldn't even blink, couldn't access one voluntary action or thought. And the loss of control only spiked his outrage.

Was he doomed to react this way whenever he laid eyes on her? What was it about this woman that deactivated his rational centers? And activated his incoherent ones?

And she wasn't even the same woman. She'd changed, almost beyond recognition. Contrary to his every projection. And, *e'lal jaheem*...to hell with it, for the best.

His senses soaked in the changes, making feverish comparisons with her past self.

Gone were the wild clothes, the reed-thinness and crackling energy. In their place was a superbly dressed woman with a measured grace, a steady gaze and a body that had filled with a femininity so distressing it had everything male in him overriding all. His mind might be averse, but his body roared for its mate....

*She isn't your mate, ya moghaffal. She's anybody's.*

But his body was oblivious, was fighting all connections with his mind, bucking off its reins, struggling to break its control and claim the body that had stopped him from finding anything beyond frustration with others.

It was merciful that she contributed her own deterrent as she now made a dismissive, derisive gesture in his direction.

"That they've stooped to settling on you is the loudest possible statement that this world is going to hell in a handbasket. Judarians must be mourning not only their king's death, but their once-great nation's future."

There they came again. The insults. White-hot pokers designed to prod him into an uncalculated response.

He bit into the surge of tingling in his lower lip, into the urge to retaliate, to override.

So, that had changed, too. Her methods. Her approach. There'd clearly be no more breathless adulation spilling from those deep rose lips. Instead she seemed bent on bombarding him with condescension and contempt. And she was letting him know right off the bat, in lieu of the greeting they didn't owe each other. She had even before she'd laid eyes on him, coming all the way here only to turn around and hurl his parting words back at him, and through his men, too, just to make sure the slap landed effectively.

He'd bet she'd calculated, even counted on that to ratchet up his interest. That had remained the same, then. The masterful manipulation. In the past, her machinations had worn the guise of erratic spontaneity and had wrung the same response from him. She'd just changed her strategy to suit their tarnished status quo and the new poised creature she was now projecting.

And *b'Ellahi*—it was working. Spectacularly. When it shouldn't. When he shouldn't let it.

He could do nothing else. She'd walked in here training those fathomless eyes on him, her gaze familiar yet someone else's, throwing his own choice of cruelty back in his face and taking the wind out of his sails. Worse, she'd knocked him off course.

He'd intended to railroad her, unilaterally charting the rest of their regrettably unavoidable union. He'd summoned her here to inform her of his plans, and her role in them: to abide by them.

But she'd thrown down the gauntlet. And he could no more not pick it up than he could stop breathing.

It was beyond him not to engage her.

Shaking off the last of his paralysis, realizing he was about to hand her a measure of control, he twisted his lips, let his gaze run in enraged delight down her new ripeness.

"I agree. It did take desperate times to make me recant my decree of never laying eyes on you again."

Those strong, supple shoulders jerked with an incredulous huff, bringing thick, undulating locks of the gleaming mahogany that had grown to a waist-length waterfall splashing over breasts snug and full in her cream jacket. “Recant your *decree*? Better watch it. You’re a breath away from having a hyperpretentious crisis and falling into a pompous coma.”

He wouldn’t. He couldn’t.

But it was no good resisting. Amusement surged to his lips, tugging them into a painfully grudging smile. But it didn’t stop there, burst forth in a guffaw.

*Ya Ullah*, she was yanking at his humor, as well as his hormones. The witch was still the only one who knew what to say and how to say it to appeal to his demanding sense of the absurd.

The one thing that cooled the heat of his chagrin at his helpless response was its effect on her. Her gaze wavered, her body language losing its confrontational edge. A laugh had been the last thing she’d expected, too. So what *had* she expected?

In answer to his unvoiced question, confusion flooded her eyes, her stance, spreading something too akin to mortification in his chest. And he knew what she’d expected. What she’d been trying to initiate. A fight. Dirty and damaging.

She’d expected him to tear back into her, more vicious than she’d been, to give her *carte blanche* to go all-out in turn. She’d expected this to spiral into another confrontation echoing the savagery with which he’d severed their liaison. But she’d intended to be an equal opponent this time, had drawn first blood, had intended to leave the battleground bloody yet victorious.

He should oblige her. Should let her show him what she had. Then he would show her, once and for all, who had the upper hand, that this was no democracy, that he’d settle for nothing less than total and blind obedience and that he *would* get it. He should let her know she had no say, no choice, could only save herself the indignity of being cowed by giving in first.

What he should do, and what he wanted to, were poles apart.

Without volition, he found himself moving toward her, in what thankfully must look like measured, tranquil steps when in reality they were impeded by the upheaval she’d kicked up inside him.

Her eyes widened as he approached her, and he almost groaned as her every detail came into sharper focus, the incredible mix of her Middle Eastern and Caucasian genes conspiring to form a beauty like no other.

The heart-shaped oval of her face still boasted that masterpiece bone structure, if it looked far less chiseled now that flesh softened contours that had been more skin over bone in the past. Her nose seemed less sharp, its slightly turned-up end even more overpoweringly elegant. Her lips, which had once spread so easily in eager smiles, looked even fuller, more ripe. But it was her eyes, as always, that struck him most and held his focus. Those mesmerizing eyes of hers, fringed by an abundance of black silk, their shape unique, their color even more so, chocolate fueled by the sun. Brand names had paid fortunes to have those eyes look out at the camera in dozens of high-profile ads. But they were far more hard-hitting now that they’d lost that intense, hungry look they’d been famous for.

He wouldn’t even look below her neck. His general look from afar had caused enough damage.

He found himself two steps away from her, looking down the inches between them. In two-inch heels, she stood a glorious six feet high. A rush of pleasure filled him at not having to stoop to look into someone’s eyes, into a woman’s.

*Aih, lie to yourself. You’ve only missed this—her height, her presence, her eyes looking back at you.* Her.

It was better to acknowledge his weakness, to deal with it, rather than fight it and lose more to its dominion. This encounter wasn’t going as he’d intended, so he’d better go with it wherever it intended to go and improvise along the way.

He cocked his head at her. “Got whatever baggage you have against me off your chest? Or do you need a few more minutes of uninterrupted abuse?”

She raised her eyebrows, now dark, dense wings when once they'd been plucked to about one third of their true exquisite shape. "Baggage? Try a load of justified antipathy. And statement of fact can't be categorized as abuse."

His lips twitched again. "Watch it. You're on that slippery slope to pompous coma yourself."

Her lips twitched in answer, twisting his guts with the need to crush them beneath his. "I'm not the one who slipped and fell on a throne and had its fumes of grandeur go to his head."

His smile widened, fatalism setting in this time. There was no point resisting the inevitable. "I assume the grandeur dig is about sending royal guards to fetch you?"

"Actually it started a bit earlier than that. With a subjectless e-mail graced with another of those decrees of yours. You're one of a few living men who can literally be called a royal pain."

He huffed a chuckle. His brothers shared that opinion, but even they hadn't put it so succinctly. "You're a royal, too—and a pain among other things—even if you choose to disregard the fact. So you still object to the royal treatment?"

Her gaze ran over him again, sweeping aside another portion of his restraint. "Once upon a time I thought you did, too. But I was a space cadet back then. I would have believed anything. I've long since landed on terra firma."

He stared at her. Into her eyes. And realized what was so different about them. Their pupils. Those used to expand and constrict almost constantly, turning their every glance into a live wire that electrocuted him whenever they fell on him. He'd realized too late that had been a sign of her chemical dependencies. Those pupils were unwavering now.

Other signs of her addiction—the malnourished tinge to her complexion, the fragility of her flesh and bones, the fluctuating energy that used to emanate from her—were also gone. She was now the picture of health. And stability.

He'd first attributed the changes in her to the weight gain that had followed quitting her modeling career. But now...could it be? Had she somehow overcome her addiction?

If she had, it was a miracle. And he'd believed there were no miracles in addiction. But even if she was in rehab, she must have been clean for years. This level of stability and health wasn't reached in less than that. He knew, only too well.

So had she been trying to beat her addiction all along? And with the clear evidence that she'd succeeded, shouldn't he have stuck by her, as he'd intended to do before he'd found out about the rest of her vices?

*B'Ellahi*, he'd just answered himself, stating the irrefutable reason he'd owed no support to the faithless wretch she'd been.

No. He couldn't have acted differently in the past.

But this was the present where it was no longer personal, where everything had changed, starting with her. Fate had decreed she was no longer a disgrace but the solution to a huge mess. And she seemed to have realized how damaging her earlier excesses had been. Now she should understand the need to heed the expectations that came with her new status.

Not that she did. Seemed this new stability didn't extend to responsible behavior.

He pursed his lips on the too-welcome surge of animosity. "It doesn't seem you've landed anywhere firm. I am told you're still as erratic and as irrational as you ever were."

She gave him a bored look. "You are told? By little royal tweeties, no doubt. Erratic and irrational, huh? According to whose rulebook of stability and rationality?"

"According to the one universally accepted by our species."

"That'll be the day, when the whole species agrees on anything, let alone the rules of rationality."

"Maybe that *was* too generalized. It was doomed to be false."

Before she could revel in his concession, he moved, clamped a hand on her elbow. She jerked in surprise. And response. He knew it. That same response was jolting through him, lodging in an erection that was developing the consistency of rock. And all he'd done was touch her through her

jacket and blouse. But then, he'd been semihard just thinking of her, had been fully aroused since he'd heard her voice. He could only liken his condition now to a seizure.

Why wasn't life simpler? Why did he have to heed logic and pride and duty? Why couldn't he just drag her to the floor and feast on her, with no past, present or future considerations?

Before he was tempted to do just that, he gave her a tug in the direction of the terrace before releasing her elbow as if it burned him. "Hurl whatever insults you like at me over dinner. In my e-mail, I did promise a meal."

She darted a step away, taking her eyes into shadow. He couldn't read her reaction. Then her lips twisted. "You sure? Food will only give me more energy and make the invectives come easier."

Shaking his head at the exhilaration her every word caused to rev inside his chest, his lips widened again. "They *can* come easier? This I have to hear." Then, tamping down on the clamoring urge to snatch her into his arms, he gestured for her to precede him.

With a last considering tilt of her head, she turned and headed to the terrace. He walked behind her, devouring her every nuance and move, hormones a scalding stream in his arteries.

They stepped out onto the terrace where the waxing moon had just turned gibbous, illuminating the sky, dimming the stars and casting rippling silver over the infinity of the ocean.

She took in the view, her arms hugging her midriff. Her scent, free of artificiality, unchanged, unforgotten, the very distillation of sensuality, rode the gusts of gentle summer breeze, enveloping him. He ground his teeth on another surge of lust, bypassed her, walked to the table laid out with the meal kept hot over gentle flames. His hands tingled over the back of a chair, then with an inaudible curse, he pulled it back for her.

She arched one eyebrow at his gesture, then pointedly walked to the other chair and sat herself down.

*Aiw'Ullah*, that was what he deserved for succumbing to his moronic, chivalrous programming around her.

He sat down in the chair he'd pulled back, realized it had been a good thing she'd refused to sit in it. He had the lights coming from the room at his back. This way he'd remain in relative shadow as he wallowed in the infuriating pleasure of poring over her beauty, which was bathed in both artificial and natural light.

He watched her as she sampled what he'd ordered of appetizers, food unique to Judar. Her evident appetite and enjoyment boosted his viewing pleasure. Here was another thing about her that had changed diametrically. She used to be almost anorexic, a state he'd later realized had been induced by the drugs she'd taken for just that end, the ones she'd become dependent on.

He found himself teasing her. "Don't let consideration for your table partner stop you from wiping it clean."

She chewed on without looking at him, spoke only when her mouth was empty and she was uncovering one of the simmering dishes. "Don't worry. I don't consider you at all."

Like its predecessors, that comment flowed with the bad blood he'd established. This time he realized what the spasm that shot through him was. Regret. If only...

But he of all people had no time for if-onlys. He wasn't just a man with his own emotions and convictions at stake, he was a monarch whose actions controlled the reins of peace in a whole region.

"You don't consider anyone at all," he bit off.

"By that you mean I'm not bowing to everyone's wishes without a word, don't you? What did you all expect me to do? To feel? To say? Oh, two more parents? Cool! The old ones aren't my real ones? Bummer. They lied to me all my life? Shame. All those hunky cousins are really my half brothers? Phew. Good thing I haven't lusted after any of them. I have to give up my life to get bartered in a political game to a boor? Whatever. Can I have a latte now?"

This was no laughing matter. But the way she'd delivered her parody, her choice of words, her sheer cheekiness, was irresistible. His chuckle overpowered him.

She sighed. “Glad you see the black humor in this ‘situation.’ It is what *sharr el baleyah ma yodhek* was coined for, a plight big enough that only hysterical laughter can do it justice.”

He gave a grudging nod. “The revelations must have been a shock, I grant you that...”

She clapped in mock delight. “Ooh, can I frame your grant?”

He fisted his hands against the urge to lunge across the table and drag her over to him and willingly rose to her bait. “You can. I can even issue you a royal declaration for a more frame-worthy concession.”

“Wow. You’ve grown generous in your old age. Don’t splurge on those decrees and declarations, though. They might dry up on you.”

“Can you by any stretch of your admittedly wildly fertile imagination see that happening?”

“Nah, this here Pacific would dry up first.”

“This here Pacific has to take care of its own abundance. I have that of my decrees and declarations taken care of. As for you—” he leaned closer, his gaze sweeping resigned appreciation over her “—it’s abundantly clear your own old age has been good to you.” He raised one eyebrow. “If not to your tongue. I don’t remember it being anywhere near this...forked.”

That tongue came out to glaze those perfect lips, sending his hunger roaring to sample the moisture, drain it. “No? Are you sure your memory, once so reliable, isn’t going?”

“My memory will be the last thing that dims in me, around the time I turn a hundred and twenty.”

“You intend to deteriorate that soon?”

“Just being realistic here.”

“Heh. You probably are, too. But one word of advice. In this constant gloating state over your superiority, don’t drive while anywhere outside of Judar. You’d be apprehended for driving under the influence of a mind-altering high.”

“What and whose purpose do I serve if I don’t act on my superiority? You don’t see a lion hiding his just so that other animals won’t think him full of himself.”

“A lion, huh? You’re really stretching to fit the job description, aren’t you? Lord-of-all-you-survey galore.”

“You mean you don’t think the shoe fits?”

“You mean you think *any* shoe exists to fit your figurative foot?”

“One must never give up hope.”

“You mean you don’t give hope decrees?”

“I don’t currently have it on my subjects’ roster, no.”

“That must be why there’s still hope.”

“I’m working on acquiring its controlling shares. Enjoy wild, unregulated hope while you can...” He paused when her eyes stilled on him with a new intensity until he groaned. “What?”

“I’m watching for the moment you slip into that coma. I’m also debating seeking help or leaving you passed out on the floor.”

Another laugh took him by surprise. Just as this whole meeting had. This tug-of-war of wills and wits had dragged him into its rapids, was so fluent, so unlike anything he’d had with her, yet somehow the same. Their conversations in the past had been about mutual pleasure, not one-upping each other with witty salvos, but they’d been perfectly matched, totally on the same wavelength, kindred in tastes and views and perceptions. And how he’d missed that.

But the mind that had housed all those qualities he’d craved had also been infested by vices that had appalled him...

Her voice brought him out of his unsavory musings. “But all macabre comedy aside, that’s how you all wanted me to react, right? So you could move on with your plans without the inconvenience of pausing for a few minutes to think about how I’m grappling with my identity and past, plus your proposal to completely mess with my future?”

“I am pausing for a whole evening.”

“Yeah, sure. You want to hear about how I’m coping. Your memory isn’t going but gone if you expect me to believe that.”

He pursed his lips. “We must leave the past in the past.”

She imitated his expression. “How very convenient for you.”

“It’s convenient for both of us. For our future together.”

She jerked as if he’d slapped her, flooding his mind with the memory of her similar reaction when he’d revealed to her the ugliness of his agony and madness seven years ago.

After a long, frozen moment, she rasped, “This was all fun and reminiscent of the sordid past. But let me set one thing straight. We don’t have a future together. Our kingdoms will have to come up with another way to secure whatever they’re hatching together. I’ll never marry you, not for politics, not to save my life.”

It was his turn to stiffen as the mind-warping disillusionment of the past crashed into him, blasting away all softness and the spell she’d been weaving—that he’d *let* her weave—on him.

She’d changed, all right. Not for the better, as he’d been fooling himself up till now. But into a vindictive harpy who’d send a whole region to hell to have her revenge on him.

He sat forward in his chair slowly, slammed her with his own rage and animosity. “This was my mistake, as it was in the past—being so civil and accommodating that I give you illusions about your importance. But in reality, you always served only one purpose. The difference now is that it’s a worthwhile purpose for a change. And you *will* serve it. As for what you think or feel, it’s time you realized that your emotions and identity, your past and future, *you*, don’t matter. Not at all.”

## Three

Aliyah didn't jerk this time.

Not even when the fork clattered to her plate, fracturing the silence that had fallen in the wake of his barrage.

Time reversed like a screeching record. It came to a jolting halt at her last time in this mansion. Then it started to play. Memories of begging his valet to let her wait for him. Trembling on the way up to his bedroom. Gambling away the last of her pride. It hit Pause on his face as he'd issued his final threat. Then it all overlapped, merged with the same savage face now flaying her with his loathing.

*Fool.* Reason and self-respect lashed her, harsher than he could ever be. She'd been letting them slip away ever since she'd laid eyes on him again. They sneered at her now, at her flimsy struggle to slow down her headlong plunge under his spell. At the way she'd let him encroach on her senses, wiping her memory as he'd advanced.

After his initial shock—which she could only attribute to her changed appearance—he'd seamlessly changed tacks, scorching her with the appreciation smoldering in his eyes, the awareness in his vibes and the amusement in his expressions, his words.

He'd laughed at her barbs, volleyed them back without rancor, baring himself to her ridicule, appearing to enjoy it, had stopped trying to reciprocate the abuse that had soon ceased to be that, morphing into teasing instead. He'd lulled her into loosening her grip on her rage and memories.

Then he'd mentioned a future. Together. And reality had slapped her in the face. With the rush of recollections. With the realization that every second of this evening had been another undetectable maneuver of a master manipulator.

She'd groped for her resolve, said what she'd come here to say. And he'd decided it was more efficient to give up trying to coax her into submission and was now coercing her into it.

He leaned forward in his seat, magnifying his silhouette against the light radiating from the room, his face in the moonlight a hewn mask of inhuman beauty and coldness.

Then he spoke, his voice freezing her. "Now that I've made this clear, let me make another thing as unequivocal. This marriage is happening. That's not up for negotiation. I've only called you here to discuss our terms in the deal."

Her vision began to blotch. She inhaled a choppy stream of oxygen before it blinked out, heard her wavering whisper. "It's another hostile takeover for you, this so-called marriage, isn't it? You make no distinction between discussing one or the other."

He leaned back in his seat, relieving her of a measure of his influence so that breathing turned from a struggle to a mere effort. "For once we agree. Hostile takeover just about sums it up. You're hostile, and I am taking over."

"You've got that only half right. I sure am hostile. With the best and worst of reasons. Not that you, your imminent majesty, are the essence of friendliness. As for taking over, not in this life. In any other, you can take your 'deal' directly to whatever devil you worship, in whatever hell you'll end up in."

He sat forward again, probably to make sure she saw the glint of revulsion in his eyes before he grated, "I *am* taking my deal to the devil I have to deal with, *am* walking into the hell I have to end up in. Now stop aggravating the ugliness of the initiation rites of this hellish pact and state your terms."

She wasn't crumbling under his onslaught. She wouldn't let him shove her to the ground and walk all over her again.

Her scoff was still weak as she choked on his venom. "Have you gone deaf from the repeated injury of perpetually hearing only your own voice booming inside your head? I said in plain English there'll be no deal. You need it translated to something you understand better? *Mafee sufquh.*"

“*Lell assaf, es’sufquh mafee menha maffar*. To translate—regretfully, there’s no escaping the deal, in case *you* no longer understand more than the rudiments of your mother tongue.”

Indignation at the dig she’d heard a thousand times infused heat into her chilled bones, steadiness in her voice. “I’m as much an American as I am a Zohaydan, even if in reverse to what I thought. So don’t play the turning-my-back-on-my-roots card.”

His lips stretched on a silent snarl. “How about the turning-your-back-on-your-family card?”

“Oh, no, not that one, either. You don’t know anything about me or about how it’s been with my parents, not in the past when there were only two, and surely not now there are four of them. You have nothing to do with any of it, so don’t you *dare* even have an opinion on how we all deal with it. Keep out of it and it’ll turn out fine. The only person I’m turning my back on here is you.”

His eyes narrowed, intensifying his menace. “I know far more than you so obviously think. About you, and about what you put and are still putting your parents through. And though there’s nothing I want more than to watch you leave thinking you’ve gotten your own back, I’m not letting you walk away.”

“Aren’t you going too far into the realm of irrationality to enforce your will? To put through this ridiculous ‘deal’? *You* walked away from *me* calling me a depraved slut, if you remember. You’d make a slut your queen and the mother of your heirs?”

His gaze froze as silence stretched until it almost snapped every nerve in her body. Then he turned his face away, presenting her with the precision and power of his profile. Just when she thought he had nothing more to say, that she’d rested her case, his voice poured into the night, as deep and permeating.

“I remember one sunny day seven years ago, here in L.A. I was getting into my car when you threw yourself at me right in the middle of the street. After I pried you off me, you stalked me, did it again everywhere I went, not caring who saw your exhibitions or heard your shameless pleas, probably wanting to publicly embarrass me enough so I’d give you the chance to work on me again in private. If your memory is as intact as you claim, you surely remember what you said. Things along the lines of ‘I need you’ and ‘I’ll do anything.’ Ring a bell? You make it sound as if I was insulting you, calling you what I did. Try to put yourself in the position of an unbiased observer and tell me, how would you describe your behavior as anything other than depraved and slutty?”

Had she burned to ashes? How had she not, after he’d shriveled her up once again with the memories? Of her own condition then, her actions, his reactions?

She finally rasped, “Depraved is right. As in out of my mind. But I’m very much in it now.”

He turned back to her, his gaze the essence of ridicule. “A piece of precious advice. Drop the act. I had to tear your talons out of my flesh to make you let go. You want me with the same ferocity still.”

A surge of scalding acknowledgment had her on her feet, quaking with mortification. That he was right, that her hated hunger had never died, the weapon he’d damaged her with. That he knew. Before any defense took shape in her mind, he rose to his feet, too, slow, measured, pitiless.

“In case you’re preparing to launch into empty posturing and pretense, save it. I can feel it, coming off of you in waves. All this ‘I’d rather die than marry you’ is to goad me into giving you what you want, isn’t it? A game of pursuit? With some reluctance and dominance thrown in? Go ahead, admit it and I’ll promise to give you what you know will leave you gasping within an inch of your life with satiation, and let’s move on to something important.”

She shuddered with rage. At herself, at his unjust words and malice. Was this how people had arteries burst in their heads? She felt herself going numb, her tongue filling her mouth, swollen with the incoherent need to lash out.

Nothing came to her rescue. Nothing but, “You...*bastard*.”

His lips pressed together for a moment. Then they spread on a heart-wrenching parody of a smile. “It’s not me who is one.”

She almost doubled over.

She didn't, stood there feeling as if he'd just punched through her, stared his cruelty full in the face. After all he'd done to her, she still hadn't thought him capable of such a level of heartlessness. Her mind emptied, her heart flooded. With the acid of desperation. For something to deflect the pain with, to send it ricocheting into his black heart, to not let him have the final word. Not when it was *that*.

But what could be enough to answer a stab through the heart?

She shouldn't have walked into his trap. Should have known how this would end. Shouldn't have taken him on, shouldn't...

*Just get out of here.*

She staggered around, felt the floor turning to quicksand, struggled not to sink into it.

Suddenly something sank into her—the fingers that an hour ago had barely touched her on the elbow and disrupted her balance and wrenched a response from her, that had once stripped away whatever control she'd developed before she'd met him. She wished they were violent. They were only inexorable in intent, cruel in effect.

He aborted her momentum, kept her on her feet, turned her around to meet his wolf's eyes as they flared with antipathy. "You're not walking out on your responsibilities like you have all your life. It's time you behaved like the princess you regretfully are. You will honor your duties and for once be of use to others."

"Use?" she threw at him, hating him even more for the quaver that robbed her pain of any retaliatory effect. "That's all you think people are for, don't you? To be used. Well, as you say, I had one use to you in the past, and damned if I'm ever going to be of any use to you again. It's not dramatizing to say I'd rather die."

"You think it's any kind of life for me to be forced to make use of you? Do you think I want to marry you? The woman I found out was too depraved to be even one of my sex partners? But I *will* marry you. For the throne of Judar."

Every word lodged into her with the force of an ax in the chest. And for the millionth time, the frustration, the sheer mind-consuming confusion reverberated inside her.

Why all this revulsion? All this fluency of abuse? All she'd ever done once was lose her mind over him....

And it was there again. Like the ocean, advancing on her with its endlessness and blackness, the tide of volatility. Her vision, her emotions began to distort, to fracture, the swirling black hole she'd once been unable to exit staring at her, pulling...

No. She would *not* let him do this to her.

She wrenched herself from his hands, spat, "You and your throne and your Judar can go to hell."

He seemed to expand, his hands fisting at his side. She knew that if she'd been a man of equal size he would have pulverized her.

Finally he ground out, "What about Zohayd? And your father and king? You probably care nothing if they go to hell, too, but before you consign them there, give it some thought. Think what you'll lose, if Zohayd is dragged into civil war."

"Civil war? What are you talking about?"

"The war that will break out in both our kingdoms if our union doesn't come to pass."

She stared at him as if he'd started talking a language she barely understood, shook her head. "Don't you think you're being far-fetched here? Zohayd is rock stable. You want to convince me that if a personal deal between you and my uncle...my fa-fa...K-King Atef falls through, Zohayd will go up in flames?"

His gaze was long and considering, the flames of his own fury banking. "So I'm being far-fetched, eh? You think anything less would make me come near you again, let alone give you access to my life, this time as my wife, to carry my name, my honor, my heirs? You won't take my word,

just as you didn't take your adoptive parents' or King Atef's? When would you be convinced that our marriage is imperative? When rivers of blood run through both our kingdoms? When neighbors turn against each other, kill each other's children and blood feuds erupt to spread devastation for centuries? When our whole prosperous region turns into another war zone that breeds anger and hunger and intolerance and spreads its infection to the rest of the world? Or would you even then say, sorry, not my business? Just because you are a woman scorned, you'd send millions, entire *countries*, to hell?"

The images he painted, his conviction, suffocated her. She raised her hands as if to ward off a barrage of blows. "Please...stop. I—I—God...are you telling me the truth?"

"No, I project death and destruction for millions of people because it's fun."

"God..." She couldn't speak for a long moment, her throat feeling as if it were clogged with thorns. Then she looked at him through the film of moisture that manifested her dissolving control. "I didn't know—didn't realize the situation was anything like that. My unc—my fa...King Atef... he—he...Dammit! That medieval throwback! He said *nothing* like that. I know Zohayd and Judar are still tribal beneath their ultraadvanced veneers, but this is taking the entrenched stupidity of not including women in matters of state too far. He told me only that it was a political marriage, gave me the impression it was something personal between the two of you, as two monarchs. I...h-had no idea w-what was at stake..."

Then she could say no more.

Every muscle in Kamal's body bunched, pulled, contracted, until he felt as if his spine would snap and his skull would cave in.

Tears. Gathering in those eyes, rippling like ponds shaking from nearby explosions, magnifying the moon's beams, shooting them out in erratic flashes to blind him.

As she struggled to contain the weakness, stem the weeping, he felt her every tremor shudder through him, shaking him.

*Ya Ullah*, how could the sight of her distress disturb him this deeply, disarm him this totally, still? Had nothing changed? Was her spell unbroken? Or was it unbreakable?

*B'Ellahi*. What kind of king would he be if on his first and foremost act on behalf of his kingdom, he let his only vice, his clearly uncured addiction, take hold of him again, steer him?

He had to remember the times she'd wept for him when she'd been lying to him with every breath. The months her unbridled abandon had snared him when it—and the warnings that she was nicknamed Alley as in alley cat—should have cautioned him.

But he'd heeded nothing and no one, had thrown himself into an inferno that raged higher every day. If her mercurial nature and evasions had bothered him, she'd overwhelmed his reason with the pleasure she'd given him in every way, with her fervent protestations of love. She'd even had him agreeing that what worked—and spectacularly—was for them to keep on stealing scorching times together out of their busy and conflicting schedules.

Yes, she'd manipulated him to perfection. Until he'd showed up unannounced at her condo, unable to wait to see her and had been let in by one of the girlfriends who seemed to use Aliyah's place as theirs. And he'd discovered her stash of a drug he knew was abused for appetite suppression and as a stimulant.

It had all made sense then. Her hyperactivity, her thinness, her insistence on keeping her distance, and the hundred other details of unexplained reticence and secrecy.

But fool that he'd been, though anguished at his discovery, he'd still tried to make her confess her problem so he could offer her his strength, his support. But she'd denied drug use, ever.

Even with the blatant lie, he'd been so deeply under her spell, he'd only wanted to save her, though he knew from agonizing experience that addicts only plunged deeper into addiction until nothing of them was left, while they dragged everyone who loved them right along with them to hell. For a month he'd struggled to decide how to proceed, the indecision infecting him with reticence, too, which had made her even more eager for him—and increasingly more volatile. At last, with his

decision set—to confront her and break the vicious circle she was prisoner to by any means necessary—he'd gone to her condo again. This time, he'd found a man there.

He still couldn't believe how far in her power he'd been that he'd refused to jump to conclusions. He'd told himself she hadn't been there after all, and this man could have been one of the friends she gave free run of her place.

But the man, Shane, had introduced himself as one of her American cousins...and lovers. He'd still accused Shane of lying. Shane had scoffed. With his barbaric ways and views of women, did Kamal think that a woman like Aliyah, free and capricious like the wind, could settle for him alone? Kamal might be an all-powerful prince, but Aliyah valued her sexual freedom above all. Why did he think she never agreed to enter his gilded cage, even fleetingly?

Kamal had left before he killed the man, but sensing Shane was jealous and probably trying to drive him away, he'd called Aliyah to get her side of the story, giving her every opening to tell him about Shane without accusing her of anything. She'd said only that she was spending the night at a sick girlfriend's bedside. Almost convinced that she'd given her backstabbing cousin the use of her place for the night, he'd still waited in his car, to make sure that she didn't come back. But she had.

Everyone had been right. She'd been a promiscuous lost cause.

Then she'd walked in here today, and he'd forgotten that. Had wanted to forget. Still wanted to. As he couldn't.

He had to brace himself against her influence. He wouldn't sweep her into his arms and comfort her even if his heart was bursting from the holding back. Now he had to get on with his plan.

He inhaled. "I'll suppose what you're saying is true. But if you didn't know before, you know now."

"B-but how? Why? What could be so important about a marriage between the Aal Masoods and Aal Shalaans all of a sudden?"

He gave a bitter huff. "It's heartwarming how involved you are in your region's internal affairs. I beg your pardon, your *half* region. I bet your abundant...roomies know far more than you about the situation between Judar and Zohayd at the moment."

Those mystic eyes glittered their indignation at him. "And that's another piece of misinformation in the sea of misconceptions that form my character in your mind. I live alone as I always have. I only ever helped friends by giving them a roof over their head when they needed one. And I'm a hermit when I'm preparing for a show with most of its paintings commissioned. I haven't been following the news and as I told you, nobody chose to enlighten me. Must have been their misguided way of being kind. Rather than dropping all bombs on me at once, they decided to space out the explosions for prolonged suffering."

She sounded so convincing. But then when had she ever not?

He exhaled his frustration at how she kept snatching resolve out of reach, made him struggle to grab it back.

"I'll pretend that's a good enough excuse for your obliviousness." He paused to gather the threads of the situation that had led to this point. He hated recounting it, and to her of all people. But she'd asked. She didn't know. And she had to, as his future queen. He exhaled again. "When my father, the crown prince of Judar, died, and with our late king having no sons, leaving the succession to his nephews, the Aal Shalaans in Judar demanded their turn on the throne. They threatened an uprising if they didn't get it. An uprising that would drag Judar into civil war."

Though reddened and wounded, her eyes stained with disdain. "If you care for peace so much, why don't you just give it to them?"

"You think giving up the throne in a country that's made up seventy percent of Aal Masoods and tribes loyal to them would promote peace? Wouldn't exchange an uprising by the Aal Shalaans for one by the Aal Masoods, leading to the same end? Spare me your insights into a better solution for this catastrophe. If there'd been one, I would have gone to the ends of the earth, would have, as you

so theatrically said, laid my life down for it. But there isn't. The one thing that will maintain peace now is introducing the purest Aal Shalaan blood into the royal house of Aal Masood's lineage."

She looked everywhere but at him, as if seeking an escape, and mumbled, "And why not go for the foremost Judarian Aal Shalaan house for this blood-mixing ritual? Why is King Atef the one whose blood must provide the magic ingredient? He's Zohaydan, not Judarian, for God's sake!"

"You'll have to ask the Aal Shalaan genealogists that. They're the ones who decreed that King Atef has the purest Aal Shalaan blood in both kingdoms, from both sides of his family for as far back as possible. Since he had no daughter that we knew of back when that was determined, it became clear it was a two-sided ploy. To throw the most powerful Aal Shalaan at us, and to corner him into giving in to their demands to help the Judarian Aal Shalaans in their quest to rise to the throne, something he'd already refused to do point-blank at the risk of having an uprising in Zohayd. Then King Atef discovered he did have a daughter, and you know what happened from then on. Now the Aal Shalaans have cornered everyone, including themselves. They can't go back in their decree, and King Atef's daughter—you—is what satisfies their demands. But in case we don't marry, they're very clear they'll seek their so-called rights to the throne through less than peaceful measures, in both kingdoms, plunging both into chaos and dragging the whole region right along. Any solution other than our marriage is a lose/lose proposition. I trust you didn't forget everything about our region? You do remember how history went? How feuds start at the least provocation only to widen and engulf everything in their path?"

Silence crashed down again, as did the ocean waves as if in response to the enormity of his projections.

Her eyes remained riveted on his, as if begging for a repudiation, even a qualification. As they had seven years ago.

He'd had no idea he was that strong. To remain where he was, not to obey the clamoring instinct to crush her into his arms.

When he remained rock-still and silent, hope seemed to seep out of her. "It is that bad, isn't it?"

Everything inside him stilled. He'd thrown in her face his assertion that she craved him still. He'd been out to provoke her, to punish her for daring to remain *his* craving, his addiction. Now that dejection, that desperation in her eyes—could it be that this wasn't another manipulation?

It didn't matter. Manipulation or truth, only one thing was relevant. He told her.

"It's worse. We have a deadline."

"A deadline?"

Aliyah heard the quavering voice of the punch-drunk entity that seemed to inhabit her body.

Kamal, that forbidding stranger, only nodded. "In five days. The day of my *joloos* will also be our wedding day."

She felt as if she were going under, struggled to kick to the surface, to snatch one last breath of air. "There has to be another way, Kamal... We can't get married... we hate each other..."

He flexed his fists as he closed the gap between them. "And you'd be surprised how many kings have married queens they abhor for their kingdoms. But here comes another decree to ameliorate the horror. After you conceive a male heir, I won't touch you. After you give birth, I will divorce you."

She stared at him, *too much* blaring through her mind in a loop.

And he was going on. "The Aal Shalaans won't care after that, as you are only the instrument of securing the heir they want. Once that happens, everyone will get something out of this mess. King Atef will get Zohayd's continued peace, and I will secure Judar's throne and future. What do *you* want? State your demands, Aliyah."

"State my demands?" she panted, hysteria staining her voice, tumbling through her blood. "In return for being used like a breeding mare then discarded like a lame one? How about the royal jewels of Judar? I hear they're worth billions."

And if she could think straight, she would have feared him at that moment. His gaze boiled over with rage and aggression.

Suddenly all heat plunged into subzero reaches.

Then he only said a clipped, final, "Done."

It was then that Aliyah realized what the agony she felt at his every slashing word was.

Somehow, she'd never stopped loving him.

How had that happened? How had her emotions survived the injuries, the bitterness, the changes in her, the passage of time? *Was* she the depraved slut he believed her to be? Loving him even through the abuse? Or even because of it?

*No.* She'd fallen for him when he'd been incredible to her. So incredible, even his cruelty hadn't erased the memories. The image of the man she'd thought was her soul mate kept superimposing itself over everything that had happened afterward. Her mind and soul kept rejecting the proof of his words and actions, still looking for reasons for his change, for ways to exonerate him.

But she believed his words now, that things were as perilous as he'd described. And in a situation that big, what did her emotions and future matter?

He was right. They didn't. *She* didn't.

But no matter how insignificant she was to him, in all this, she mattered to herself. Now that she'd realized the depths of her self-deception and weakness, it was up to her to quell them. So that his disgust and disregard didn't annihilate her.

But there was one thing she couldn't quell anymore. Tears.

She let them escape, inside and out. "What if I can't...c-conceive? What if you can't father a baby? What then?"

He grimaced. "You'd still keep the jewels, don't worry. But my fertility isn't in question. If you turn out to be infertile, that would be grounds for an easy divorce, even with our culture's constrictive royal matrimonial laws. Then I'd negotiate another marriage with the daughter of the second noblest patriarch of the Aal Shalaans."

"Just like that, huh?" She hiccuped. "Throw out the defective model and look for a functioning one..."

She stopped, at breaking point. *Just get out of here...now.*

He let her go this time when she stumbled around, following her silently to the door. Just as she groped it open, he broke his silence, his words lodging into her back again.

"Tomorrow you will be taken to Judar. As is our custom, I won't see you again until our marriage ceremony, but I will supply you with the list of things to be done, the rules to be followed." Then his voice dipped into bass reaches on a growl eloquent with everything that splintered her heart. "Don't disappoint me."

## Four

“I would have given anything if only I could take it back!”

At the blurted-out declaration, Aliyah’s gaze swept again over the woman sitting across from her. Judar’s afternoon August sun was streaming through the western window of Aliyah’s guest wing in the royal palace, turning the woman’s hair into a blazing halo of undulating gold, striking turquoise beams off her eyes and drenching the perfection of elegant, chiseled features in a play of light and shadow.

Anna Beaumont was sure one beautiful lady.

It made Aliyah sheepish to acknowledge that the first thing she’d done when she’d laid eyes on her an hour ago was to marvel at their resemblance.

But there was no denying the fact that this woman could be her in blue contacts and a blond wig, with some aging makeup. Not much aging, though. Anna didn’t look twenty-seven years older than her. Aliyah wouldn’t have thought her a day above forty, a real good forty, if all that DNA evidence hadn’t confirmed that Anna was her biological mother and therefore over fifty.

She wondered how King Atef had never noticed this.

But then, seeing a resemblance between his niece and the ex-lover he’d cast out of his life over a quarter of a century ago, especially with their opposite coloring, would have been a long shot.

When Anna didn’t follow up her momentous declaration, Aliyah sat forward and poured another round of unsweetened jasmine tea from the heavily worked silver teapot into the handpainted, blown-glass cups. The artistry behind their every line—more manifestations of the extremes of taste and affluence permeating the royal palace—roused the artist in her. It also sort of distracted her from the quiet, desperate feeling that she was sinking deeper into the quicksand of her situation, of Kamal’s plans and decrees and existence.

She handed Anna the cup and held her eyes as they both drank in silence, her thoughts turning inward, going over the past two days.

Everything Kamal had said would happen had and was still happening like clockwork. She’d been delivered to her condo after their showdown, with that royal guard duet coming up to help her pack. She’d resorted to threats to make them refrain from folding her underwear and alphabetizing every item, had tossed them out only for them to ricochet back to her doorstep before the crack of dawn to accompany her to the Judarian equivalent of Air Force One.

Kamal was giving her the royal treatment all right. Imposing it on her more like. He’d sent her a clipped voice mail driving home that this was what she should expect from now on as his future queen. He’d elaborated on how she should receive her dues, mete out her responses with the poise, benevolence and grandeur befitting her impending majesty. Yes, he’d used those very words. And was evidently still conscious and in the best of health.

Finding no energy and no point in resisting his incursion she’d let herself be swept away to her so-called future kingdom and installed in so sumptuous and extravagant a guest wing that it could have housed forty princesses. Then the list of things to be done that he’d provided for her had started to roll on.

First thing this morning was to have leisurely communications with three of her parents, informing them of her acceptance of the marriage of state and assuring them she’d play her part. With utmost attention to decorum, of course. As if.

She’d never treated those three in any way that wasn’t grounded in love and respect, even when their actions had almost messed her up for good, but she was damned if she’d stand on ceremony with any of them. Kamal had to be satisfied with what she *was* letting him have—control over these countdown days.

She'd finished her conversations with her parents—who'd all been mighty relieved, she should add—and without missing a beat had headed to her dictated afternoon tea with her fourth parent.

Kamal had had Anna flown in from King Atef's court, where she must have been cause for some serious domestic disturbance. The queen—the woman who'd turned out to be Aliyah's stepmother—was a master of dissatisfaction, unreasonableness and conflict. Aliyah could only imagine her attitude now that she had real strife material on her hands.

And here they were. An hour into the long-awaited meeting. A twenty-seven-year-long wait on Anna's side, a two-week one on Aliyah's, which still felt like a lifetime. Aliyah thought she would have recognized Anna if she'd met her on the street. And it went beyond the resemblance. There was this unmistakable...connection.

She bet Anna had felt the same from the first moment, but they'd both reached an instant and unspoken agreement to test the waters first. She'd felt that Anna was agitated within an inch of her sanity at the enormity of the situation. She, on the other hand, was...comfortably numb. Too many enormous shocks could do that.

So they'd talked about Judar, Zohayd, compared royal palaces, weathers, customs, currencies, reminisced about L.A., which they'd both lived in and now seemed to have left behind permanently.

Then Anna had blurted out that fraught statement.

Seemed she was ready to wade in deeper.

Not that she was finding it easier. She let go of Aliyah's gaze, hers brimming as she stared down into her cup, choked out, "This sounds like so much exaggeration, like lip service, but I—I...I don't know what I can say that won't sound like...like..."

Aliyah put down her cup, invited Anna to look back at her with a gentle touch on her knee. "How about you say exactly what you're thinking? Feeling? It would save a lot of confusion. We've run out of small talk so I guess it's time for something big."

Anna nodded, her eyes reddening even more. Then she inhaled, whispered, "Do you resent me...too much?"

Aliyah plopped back on the couch and glided both palms over the cotton-silk pastels damask as she considered her answer.

Then she sighed. "Okay, I won't say I didn't resent this. I did. I do. But it's not you I resent. I don't presume to judge you. I can only imagine what drove you to the decisions you made, and that it couldn't have been easy or made your life better. When all is said and done, I can only say thank you."

Anna blinked. She couldn't have looked more stupefied if Aliyah had just told her she could turn into a bat at will.

Anna finally breathed. "You're thanking me? What for?"

Aliyah shrugged. "For not aborting me. It would have been the far easier, clean-cut route to go. And though my life hasn't been a bed of roses and doesn't promise to be, I'm still real fond of it. I wouldn't exchange it for oblivion. So...thanks."

Again, those blue-gem eyes surged with tears that tugged at the ones lying too close to Aliyah's surface now.

"I never dreamed...oh, God, that you would feel that way...." Anna stopped, panting, then burst out, "*Do* you really feel that way?"

Aliyah gave her a tremulous smile. "One thing you will find out about me soon enough is that I go around saying exactly what I really think and feel. A very objectionable practice, I'm perpetually told, but at least you know exactly where you stand with me."

Anna seemed to lose all tension, melted back in her armchair. "I can never tell you how...how it makes me feel, hearing you say that, that you really feel it. I've lived with the guilt, the pain for so long. Then I find out you're alive, near your father, well and loved, and that I can see you. I would have settled for seeing you from afar, for being deservedly hated by you...but you...you...You're wonderful, so full of light and life."

“Full of light and life, huh? Now that’s a new spin on things. To everyone else, I’m full of erratic energy and instability.”

Anna looked genuinely taken aback. “How can anyone think that? I can’t think of anyone who’s less erratic and unstable.”

Aliyah threw her head back on a self-deprecating laugh. “Oh, postpone your verdict until you’ve known me longer than an hour.”

“I won’t change my mind a year or ten years from now. Things like that are the first thing one feels from others. You’re energetic, vivacious and from what I’ve heard, incredibly creative, truly independent and have the strength of your convictions. And yes, you’re unpredictable, but I don’t need more than the past minutes to realize it’s in the best of ways. You clearly do what’s right rather than what’s accepted.”

Aliyah lips twitched. “Wow, that’s quite a testimony. Can I call on you next time I have to fend off accusations of irrationality? Hmm...I do what’s right rather than what’s accepted. I think that will be my new slogan, Anna...” She stopped, bit her lip. “Uh...is it okay if I call you Anna? I’d feel weird if you wanted me to call you Mom or something.”

Anna surged forward, eagerness spilling from her tremulous smile. “As long as you call me at all, I’m happy for you to call me anything that feels comfortable to you.”

Aliyah’s smile grew. “Anna feels comfortable.”

In answer, Anna’s smile faltered. Aliyah felt she could see into the older woman’s mind, that she thought she wasn’t entitled to this level of ease with the daughter she’d given up.

“Listen, Anna, as you said, time isn’t an issue here. What happened is in the past, so let’s leave it there and move on. Now. I don’t want to observe a period of appropriate awkwardness. If you want to know me, if you want to be a part of my life, then let’s start now. What do you say?”

Anna looked like she’d burst into tears before she nodded vigorously. “I do—I want all that. Oh, God...how could anyone ever think you erratic and irrational?”

Aliyah stilled. The call of blood, Anna’s willingness to do anything to atone, to know her, be there for her now that she’d found her, surged inside her. For the first time in her life, she felt she wanted to, *could* share her secret.

She took the leap. “When I was six, my teachers couldn’t interest me in anything in school, couldn’t even get me to sit down. I was always listening to voices and seeing whole worlds inside my head and telling everyone who’d listen—and even anyone who wouldn’t—about them. I was almost diagnosed as autistic, but I was too curious and could talk anyone under the table. Therapists had to label my condition so they settled on ADHD.”

Distress crept into Anna’s face. “This is my fault...you inherited those tendencies from me. I was always too hyper, too awake, too quick, too something or other. It was what drew Atef to me, and I think what ultimately put him off—apart from the fact that he had to marry for his kingdom.”

Aliyah shook her head. “I bought into the psychobabble for a long time, but I no longer do. Who’s to say what’s ‘hyper’ and what’s not? What’s ‘too much’ of anything? We’re individuals who can’t be quantified. They wanted me to conform, and when I didn’t they decided there was something wrong with me, tried to fix me and almost ruined me for life. They misdiagnosed me, put me on prescription drugs, kept increasing the dose to get the effect they were seeking until, for the next ten years, I was a zombie.”

Anna gasped. “Oh, my God...oh, Aliyah, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me, too. I feel like I missed my childhood, that it passed before me while I watched it from behind a distorted barrier.”

“Didn’t your—your parents realize that?”

“Yeah, but not for many years. At first they were so relieved when my teachers—the ones who’d started the whole thing—started saying I’d become an exemplary student, citing that as proof of their insight into my so-called condition. Later my parents kept attributing my subdued state to puberty.

By the time I was fourteen, they could no longer fool themselves and tried to wean me off the drug. I went ballistic. I don't remember what happened exactly, but I think I tried to commit suicide. They gave up, put me back on it. I didn't know what was going on. I trusted them and took my medicine like a good girl. Then when I was almost seventeen I overheard a very enlightening conversation. They'd long realized I'd been misdiagnosed, or at least that I had a severe reaction to the drug—to both taking it and trying to get off it. And I decided to take matters into my own hands, kick the habit that I realized had been controlling me all my life.”

A tear raced down Anna's cheek. “How did it go?”

“To hell. The mental and psychological version. I was an addict, and I went through every kind of withdrawal. I think I went totally insane for a while.”

Aliyah fell silent as her heart stampeded as if she were in the throes of one of those episodes again. Putting her ordeals into words was both cathartic and exhausting.

A long time later, Anna hiccuped, whispered, “But you're okay now. You have been for many years.”

The urge to comfort her surged within Aliyah, came out on a fervent “*I am.*” Then she felt compelled to be as honest about the rest. “Though I can't call getting shoved into a marriage of state to the last man on earth I ever wanted to see again ‘okay.’”

The tear trailing down Anna's cheek became a stream that splashed on the hands upturned helplessly in her lap. “Oh, my God...it's all my fault again. Everything I am, everything I did affected your life so profoundly. It's still hurting you, changing the course of your life where you don't want it to go. I kept thinking maybe I don't need to feel so guilty, since everything was turning out great for you, especially since I saw your g-groom and thought him incredible...”

Aliyah huffed the breath she'd been holding. “You and every female on the planet, Anna. That doesn't make him human.”

Anna looked as if she might have a heart attack. Aliyah wanted to reach out and comfort her. She curled her hands on the urge for a second then exhaled. What the hell. She was what she was. And one thing she'd never stop doing was comforting others in distress.

Anna jerked when Aliyah reached out and squeezed her shoulder, her eyes widening on such a mixture of surprise and hope that Aliyah groaned. “It's not your fault, okay? I may have thought that when I was still in shock and having an internal tantrum, but that's just too far-fetched. You didn't make the Aal Shalaans into grabby bastards, and you didn't make Kamal a ruthless one.”

“You're making me feel even worse, being so kind.”

“I'm just honest.” Aliyah smiled, prodding her to smile back, to lighten the mood. She had enough heartache in her future, she couldn't take any now. “One way to look at things is that it's a good thing you had me, or two kingdoms would be on the brink of civil war right now. I'll go down in history as the chess piece that defused the whole mess. Not many women can boast such a pivotal role, even if it is, alas, a passive one. Still, most women marry for far, far less and do nowhere as much good. We can even say that your relationship with—let's call him King Atef, since I can't get around to calling him Dad, either—has been preordained, so you'd have me and I'd be the peace chip.”

Anna's smile trembled, as did her voice. “That's certainly one way to look at things.”

“Makes everything sound so much better and worthwhile, doesn't it? How about we sanction it as the official version?”

Anna nodded, her eyes filling with a jumble of pain, relief and anxiety. “I never dreamed I'd cause anything like this. I didn't know who or where you were, then Atef found me and I let him think Farah was his daughter, when she's my...my...”

“Your adopted daughter. Your real daughter, really. Being your biological child doesn't make me that. I always believed a child is raised, not born.”

Anna's gaze faltered. “And you don't want us to have any more than a biological link?”

She surged forward, put her hand on Anna's knee. "Oh, I do. Though I don't know if I can come to think of you as my mother. I already have one, whom I love, even though she let so-called experts mess with my life. But I know she did it out of an almost pathological need to see me healthy and normal."

Anna gave her a sad smile. "Then that is something besides you that I share with Bahiyah. I almost messed up Farah's life with the same pathological need."

Aliyah's lips twisted whimsically. "Hmm, another thing I have in common with Farah. Wow. I can't wait to meet her."

"She can't wait, either. But she doesn't want to impose on you."

Aliyah gave her a mock-wicked glance. "Oh, I'll impose on her. I have three days to get ready for the wedding of the century, as the list my 'groom' gave me indicates. I need all the eager-to-please people I can lay my hands on."

The sounds of powerful cars gliding to smooth stops tickled her ears as she spoke.

Kamal's cavalcade. She knew it. The king had come home.

She quirked an eyebrow. "Say—how about we stretch our legs?"

Anna nodded, swayed to her feet, smoothed her sky-blue skirt suit and fell in step with Aliyah as they exited through huge French windows to the enormous veranda leading to a dozen thirty-foot-wide stone steps and the wing's garden, an explosion of flowers and rare plants.

Anna, still bent on elaborating on the main issue eating at her, didn't seem to notice the cavalcade drawing to a stop at the palace's main entrance. "You're so willing to deal with the most awkward things, with your pain, so openly, and I have the feeling you can take on the whole world and come out the winner. Yet, with all your pragmatic approach, you haven't accepted this marriage as you claim, have you? You're feeling...trapped."

Pragmatic? This lady had way too much to learn about her still. But she'd gotten one thing right at least.

She *was* trapped. In a marriage without love or respect. But she should console herself it was also with a time limit. In nine months' time, if she proved to be a fertile little chess piece, he'd do an encore of his favorite trick and cast her aside.

Not much of a consolation when she thought of her track record. The first time he'd done that, he'd almost destroyed her. Any bets he'd succeed this time?

Aliyah heaved a huge sigh, nodded and stood straighter as Kamal stepped out of the middle limo.

He saw her the split second he straightened, his eyes slamming into hers across the distance.

In the next second anger radiated off of him like a shock wave.

Didn't like that she was letting him see her, did he? Going against the dictates of their culture and its unreasonable demands of decorum, its servitude to and belief in the caprices of luck and its evil influences. Supposedly if the groom saw the bride in the five days before the wedding, their marriage would be blighted with inexplicable incompatibility and strife.

She couldn't see how theirs could be blighted with worse than what they already had—ill will, bad blood and subzero expectations.

She held his gaze, came forward so he could take a good look at her. *Disappointing you yet, ya habibi?*

His imperious face and body filled with the answer, with the unmistakable intent to stride up to her and let her hear it, along with a few more decrees no doubt, maybe even a restraining order. She only made a face at him, tossed her hair and turned to Anna.

Anna gaped at Kamal for a moment before turning stunned eyes on Aliyah. "My. Oh, my. That was...*intense*."

"Yeah, that's Kamal for you."

Anna shook her head dazedly. “I meant both of you. The vibes you generated were enough to send Judarian homeland security reaching for a nationwide red alert.”

Aliyah let out a resigned laugh, glanced sideways at Kamal, found him still standing there, glaring at her, looking like the bronze colossus of a wrathful god.

If only he didn’t look so...everything. And have a character to match. Except when it came to her. A shudder rattled through her.

Anna caught her gaze, concern showing in her heavenly eyes. “This marriage isn’t just a hated duty to you, is it? You want it, yet you believe it won’t work and you’re...scared?”

While that was a simplistic way to sum up the mess, Anna had again cottoned on to her basic turmoil. She took a last look at Kamal, saw the promise of retribution for defying him, for flaunting his precious customs, written all over him.

Her smile was conceding and defiant at the same time as she sighed. “Witless.”

“I like her already.”

Kamal rounded on Shehab, glowering. Shehab only grinned at him, his enjoyment glaring, chafing.

“A woman who isn’t intimidated by you, who can pull that face—*ya Ullah*, that *face*—on you, is all right by me. More than all right. She’s a once-in-a-lifetime find. A treasure.”

Kamal wondered how the international community would react if, during the countdown to his *joloos* and wedding, he engaged his smug older brother in a knock-down, drag-out fight. Would it really matter if they both showed up at the ceremonies with broken noses, stitched lips and black eyes?

He exhaled the surplus of aggression. He wasn’t letting Shehab bait him. Aliyah had done too good a job of it.

She’d let him see her. And after he’d made it clear he expected not to see her until she came to him in her *zaffah*. He’d invoked customs when in reality he just couldn’t deal with the added turmoil of seeing her again one second before he had to.

And he’d been right to stipulate that ban. His current condition testified to the accuracy of his projection that seeing her would mess with his coherence and control. He couldn’t afford that now when he needed them most.

And Shehab, *alf laa’nah alai*—a thousand damnations on him—was taking such joy in plucking at the last anchors holding his restraint in place, giving him a taunting, considering look. “But this isn’t her reaction to a fresh exposure to you, is it? It doesn’t feel like the outcome of one meeting. Her defiance of your incomparable powers of exasperation feels too...estab-lished. As for your reaction...*b’Ellahi*, it was *priceless*.”

Kamal bared his teeth at Shehab before casting his gaze again where she was no longer standing. He still saw her in his mind’s eye, as if her focus on him had left a brand that still sizzled.

He tore his gaze away, cast it to the stately spires of the innermost palace gates, which were flying the flag of Judar at halfmast in mourning for his late uncle, King Zaher.

The weight of responsibility pressed harder on his shoulders, the best cure for his personal upheaval. He exhaled, strode toward the expansive steps, taking in the palace in an inclusive glance. He felt he was seeing it for the first time.

The four-level soaring, sprawling stone edifice was a marriage of the cultures that formed Judar, its architecture a melting pot of their grandeur, each line, ornament and texture owing its design, method and philosophy to one culture or the other. Somehow Byzantine, Indian, Persian, Turkish and other influences conspired to form an Arabian whole, echoing a vast, rich and sometimes brutal history. The palace still owed enough to Western modernization to be a monument of today. And tomorrow.

It reminded him of Aliyah.

And it was his dominion now. The seat of his power. A power that combined his own global influence with that of the throne.

He scaled the steps faster, felt Shehab keeping up with him, his taunting gaze still burning the side of his face.

“What I regret is that I didn’t catch it all in digital memory for the viewing pleasure of the coming generations.”

Kamal shot him a sideways look. “You do remember your warning to me, when I was taking your beloved Farah’s name in vain? You, too, have a perfect set of teeth to cherish and protect, if only to flash them like a fool at your enchantress. So shut up, Shehab.”

“Is this a command, *ya maolai*?” Shehab all but wiggled his eyebrows as he called him “my liege.” Then seriousness crept into his hard, noble features. “Is Aliyah why you think love affairs are destined for heartache and humiliation? Why you’ve been like a tiger with a festering wound these past years?”

Leave it to Shehab to fathom it all simply from watching him seethe across the distance at Aliyah. He *had* been like an agonized tiger since he’d cast her out of his life, his disillusionment becoming total intolerance of any human frailty. But he’d always been fair in his ruthlessness.

He hadn’t been with her. Not two nights ago. He’d slashed at her with unforgivable things. The inferno she’d ignited inside him, physical and emotional, had obliterated control and judgment.

And he couldn’t let that happen. The throne of Judar depended on him. The peace of the region. He had to keep Aliyah at arm’s length emotionally, would join with her physically only to produce the vital heir. He couldn’t let her overwhelm him again. As she could, so easily, so totally, if he ever weakened.

Shehab was going on. “I won’t probe...”

“Oh, please do. Then I can have the pleasure of probing right back. Into your maddeningly, obviously blissful face.”

Shehab sighed. “If I thought it would help, I’d let you. You probably think I owe it to you for passing the throne to you.”

“You talk as if you passed me a ball.”

“I did my share of the running but had to leave the touchdown to you.” Before Kamal turned on him, made *him* touch down face-first, Shehab raised placating hands. “But sports metaphors aside, whatever went wrong between you, Kamal, bury it. She’ll be your woman, your wife and your queen. And she looks and sounds like your match. You must have felt enough for her in the past if it hurt that bad and affected you that long when things went sour. Focus on the positive, dismiss the negative. Treat her well and it can only circulate in a flow of goodwill and intimacy.”

Kamal slowed as they passed through the soaring mahogany doors. “What’s this? Did our mother leave you instructions to read me before I married? Or did you find this in a wife user’s manual? Or an edition of *Domestic Bliss for Dummies*?”

Shehab threw his head back on a hearty laugh before his gaze turned penetrating. “I want you to be happy. You haven’t been for a long time, Kamal. I don’t have any information on the situation, but I do trust my instincts, my heart. Especially after they led me into what you so strongly object to, the deepest reaches of love with my incomparable Farah. I want the same for you.”

Holding back his response, which would have been riddled with obscenities, Kamal picked up speed as they crossed the vast columned hall that sprawled underneath a gigantic dome. The transition from the glare and dry heat to the interior’s soothing light and the coolness achieved by the palace’s structure and building materials silenced him. That, and feeling that he was seeing everything through new eyes now that he would call the palace home. His and Aliyah’s.

The sweeping spaces, the extreme opulence, the floors that looked like polished extensions of the palace’s beaches, felt as unreal as the whole situation. And the man who’d been the cause of it all was at his side spouting romantic nonsense.

He finally shot Shehab a dagger of displeasure. “Thanks, but no thanks. I don’t want to be in the deepest reaches of anything. I’ll leave wallowing in the depths of blinding self-deception to you

and Farooq. You especially, as a spare crown prince, have it really easy. No pressure, no demands. You threw the job of king in my lap, now leave me to do it right.”

Shehab's gaze lengthened until Kamal felt he'd given him a total mind scan, documented every thought and evasion and struggle. Then Shehab finally wagged his finger at him. “Attitude.”

Before Kamal showed him some real attitude, Shehab's gaze suddenly gentled. “Don't take the past into your future, Kamal. It serves no purpose but to poison your views, your very life.”

“Ah, talking from precious experience now, aren't we?” Kamal scoffed as they halted in front of his stateroom and he sent guards away with a flick of a hand. “How preconceptions robbed you of appreciating to the fullest every moment of your plunge from the realm of sanity to life under your siren's influence?”

Shehab had the temerity to look moved. “Such an indescribable waste, yes. But a wise man learns from others' mistakes. Don't try them yourself just to find out for sure that they'll yield the same result. For they will.”

“Your situation,” Kamal spat, “as pathetic as it is, is nothing like mine, your mistakes in no way comparable to my alleged ones. *You* leave the past out of the future and bury your head in the sand. There's nothing more around here.”

Shehab's gaze summed him up again, then he exhaled. “If you don't think you owe it to her, or to yourself, you owe it to your subjects. Forgive and forget, or you won't be the king they deserve. Or change your mind. Try it. It might turn out to be the best move of your life, letting go of preconceptions and bitterness.”

“Watch it, *ya akhi*. You might one day overdose on optimism.”

“I'll take that over doing so on pessimism any day. If the end is the same, at least I'd have the journey. Think about it.”

Kamal gritted his teeth. “Yes, sage older brother. I'm in your debt for this pep talk. How can I live without your wisdom?”

Shehab looked around, then after making certain they were alone, smacked him on the back of his head. Hard.

Before Kamal charged him, Shehab bowed deeply then turned and walked unhurriedly away, chuckling. “Anytime...*ya maolai*.”

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