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GREAT  
VALUE



*Desire*<sup>™</sup>

TO TAME  
A SHEIKH

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Olivia Gates

HIS THIRTY-DAY  
FIANCÉE

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Catherine Mann

Mills & Boon Desire

Olivia Gates

**To Tame a Sheikh / His  
Thirty-Day Fiancée**

«HarperCollins»

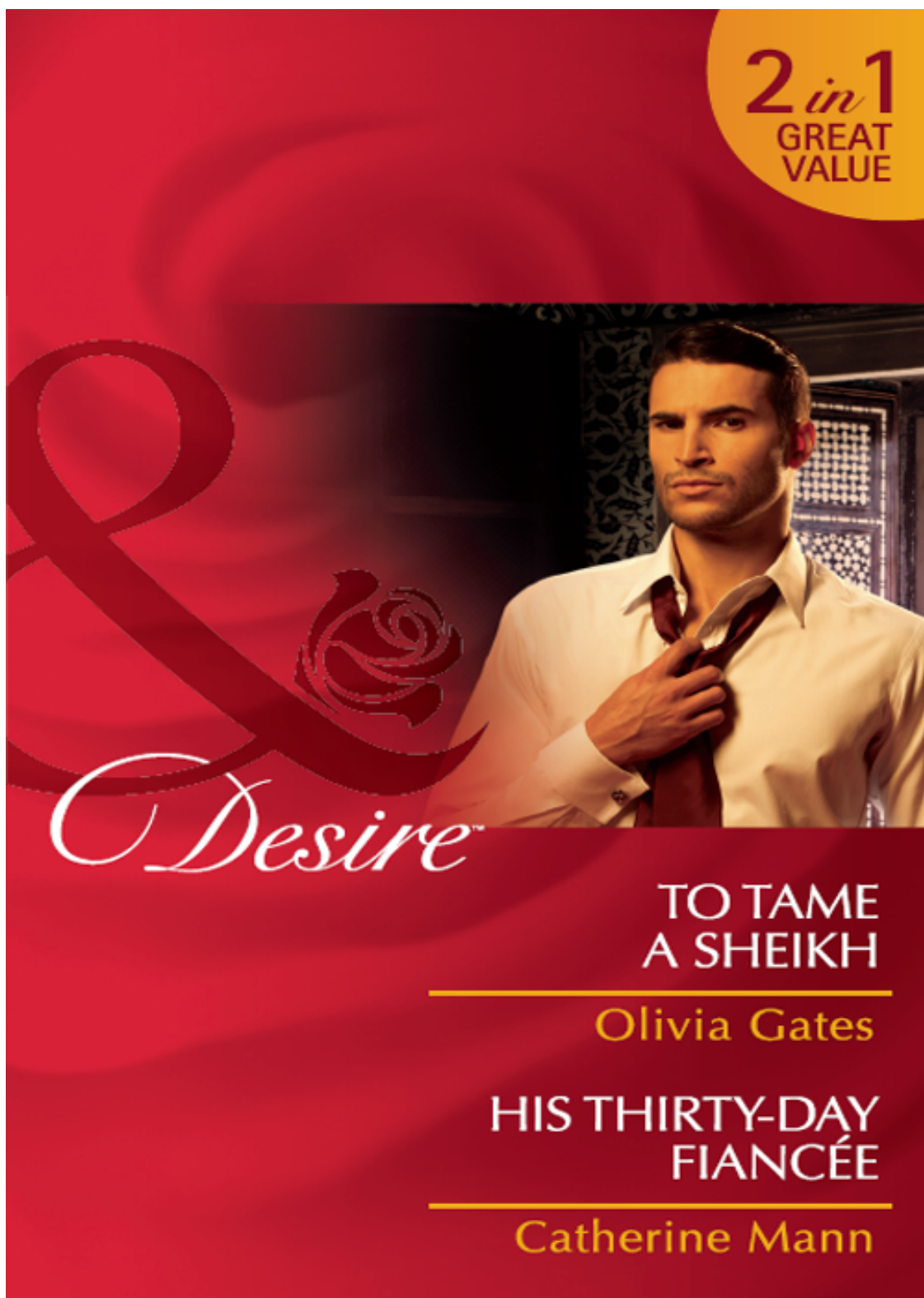
## **Gates O.**

To Tame a Sheikh / His Thirty-Day Fiancée / O. Gates —  
«HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Desire)

To Tame a Sheikh He'd noticed her across a crowded room and in that instant Sheikh Shaheen Aal Shalaan wanted her. With just a few words, Shaheen had his mystery woman in his bed, where she awakened passions he'd long denied. His lineage demanded he take a wife of the throne's choosing. Yet how could he turn away from the woman who carried his baby? His Thirty-Day Fiancée He'd caught her red-handed...and Duarte Medina would use this to his advantage. No reporter infiltrated the royal family, especially not via his bedroom window! If Kate Harper wanted her story, she'd have to agree to his terms – to become his temporary fiancée. Kate would be his for the next thirty days. And if Duarte had his way... thirty nights as well.

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## **To Tame a Sheikh**

**Olivia Gates**

## **His Thirty-Day Fiancée**

**Catherine Mann**



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# **To Tame a Sheikh**

**Olivia Gates**

## **“I wanted to be alone with you.”**

“We could have been alone walking down the pier.”

“That did occur to me, but you’re not dressed for the cold night.” He lowered his gaze as if pondering the pattern his fingers were painting on her palm. He raised his eyes a moment later and she gasped. Gentleness and humor were gone, that grim god of the desert back. She shuddered with the fierceness of her response. “You know where I really want to be alone with you. In my place. In my bed.”

Dear Reader,

When I wrote “The End” in my first Desire™ trilogy, *THRONE OF JUDAR*, I was already dreaming of a sequel in the neighboring allied kingdom of Zohayd. I am so excited to be realizing that dream and beginning my new trilogy, *PRIDE OF ZOHAYD*, starring princes Shaheen, Harres and Amjad.

The trilogy kicks off with the youngest brother, Shaheen, who is about to sacrifice his freedom for his kingdom in a marriage of state. Then he meets the woman of his dreams and everything changes. But like every profound love story, everything is against them, from his commitments to a brewing conspiracy that could topple the royal house of Zohayd and plunge the whole region into chaos. The worst part is that his beloved Johara and her father are the main suspects or at least seem to be pivotal instruments in his family’s plotted downfall.

Will his love stand the test of shocking revelations and discoveries? Will he and his brothers succeed in uncovering the conspiracy and defending their throne and kingdom before it’s too late?

I adored writing Shaheen and Johara’s story, and I hope you enjoy reading it! I would love to hear from you at [oliviagates@gmail.com](mailto:oliviagates@gmail.com). You can also visit me on the web at [www.oliviagates.com](http://www.oliviagates.com).

Enjoy, and thanks for reading.

*Olivia Gates*

## About the Author

**OLIVIA GATES** has always pursued creative passions—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).

To Mom, my daughter and Maria.

I hope you know how much each of you helped me  
in writing this book. Love you all.

## One

Johara Nazaryan had come to see the only man she'd ever love.  
Before he married someone else.

Her heart sputtered on a mixture of anticipation, dread and despondence as her eyes scanned the throngs of top-fashion, highest-class denizens of the party being thrown in his honor.

There was still no sign of Shaheen Aal Shalaan.

She drew in a choppy breath and pressed deeper into her corner, hoping to continue avoiding attention. She was thankful for the extra time to compose herself even as she cursed it for giving her more of a chance to work herself up.

She still couldn't believe she'd decided to see him after twelve years.

Oh, she'd drunk in every drop of news of him for all those years, had stolen glimpses of him whenever she was near where she'd heard he'd be from the time she'd started traveling on her own. But this time, she was determined to walk up to Shaheen and say, *Long time no see*.

Shaheen. To the world he was a prince of the wealthy desert kingdom of Zohayd, the youngest of King Atef Aal Shalaan's three sons from the deceased queen Salwa. He was also a businessman who'd risen in the past six years to become one of the most respected powers in the worlds of construction and transportation.

To Johara he'd always be the fourteen-year-old boy who'd saved her life twenty years ago.

She was six then, on her first day in Zohayd, where she'd come to live in the royal palace with her family. Her Armenian-American father had been appointed first assistant to the royal jeweler, Nazeeh Salah. It had been "Uncle" Nazeeh, her father's mentor, who'd suggested her name, *jewel* in Arabic.

During her father's interview with the king, she'd slipped onto the terrace and ended up falling off its balustrade and dangling from the ledge. At her screams, everyone had come running. Unable to reach her, her father had thrown her a rope noose to slip around her wrist. As she'd tried to put it on, someone below her had urged her to let go. With panic bursting in her heart, she'd looked down.

And she'd seen him.

He'd seemed too far away to be able to catch her. But as her parents had screamed for her to hang on, she'd let go of the ledge and plummeted down the thirty-foot drop, just knowing he would.

And as fast and precise and powerful as the hawk he was named for, he had. He'd swooped in, plucked her from midair and welcomed her into the haven of his arms.

She still dissected those fraught moments from time to time. She knew she would have been able to slip the rope on. But she'd chosen to trust her safety to that magnificent creature who'd looked up at her with strength and assurance radiating from his fiery-brown eyes.

From that day on, she'd known. She'd always be his. And not only because he'd saved her. With every day that passed, the knowledge that he was the most incredible person she'd ever met had solidified, as he became her older brother Aram's best friend and far more than that to her.

But as she'd grown older, she'd realized that her dream of being his one day was impossible.

Shaheen was a prince. She was the daughter of a servant. Even though her father had become the royal jeweler, who both designed new jewelry for the royal family and had the all-important responsibility of maintaining the nation's highest treasure, the Pride of Zohayd royal jewels, he was still an underling, a foreigner who came from a poor background and had worked his way to his current position through his extraordinary talent.

And then, Shaheen wouldn't have looked at her that way even if she were the daughter of the noblest family in Zohayd. He had always been incredibly nice to her, but when it came to romantic partners, he'd had the world's most beautiful, sophisticated women falling at his feet from the time

he turned seventeen. Back then, she'd been certain she possessed no beauty and would never attain any sophistication. But she'd found it enough to be near him, to love him.

For eight blissful years, Shaheen had offered her indulgence and friendship. To stay near him, she'd chosen to remain with her father when her parents had separated when she was twelve and her French mother had left Zohayd to go back home and continue her career in fashion design.

Then, suddenly, it was over. Just before her fourteenth birthday, Shaheen had abruptly pulled away from both her brother and her. Aram had told her that Shaheen thought it time to stop fraternizing with the "help" to observe his role as a prince of Zohayd.

Though she couldn't believe it of Shaheen and thought Aram's bitterness had other origins she couldn't guess at, Shaheen's sudden distance was still a wake-up call.

For, really, what did she have to look forward to but to love him, unrequitedly, until he one day entered the marriage of state that was his destiny? He might even have turned away from her because he suspected her feelings for him and was being cruel to be kind. His withdrawal *had* influenced her decision to leave. A few weeks after her birthday, she'd left Zohayd to live in France with her mother. She'd never returned.

Ever since that day, Johara had found comfort from the sense of loss only when she found news of Shaheen, saw that he was doing phenomenally well on every front. She'd felt she was entitled to hold on to that secret, onesided love.

But now, the blade was about to fall and she'd never again have the right to indulge her emotions, even in the privacy of her heart and mind. And she had to see him. *Really* see him. One last time ... before he committed himself to another.

She'd slipped into the farewell party that one of his business partners, Aidan McCormick, was throwing for him in New York City. If anyone questioned her presence, she'd easily defend her right to be there. As a jewelry and fashion designer who'd been making a splash beyond France in the past couple of years, she was considered one of the glitterati who were expected to stud such a function.

But validating her presence wasn't the difficult part. That was still to come. Working up the nerve to approach Shaheen.

She was praying one thing would happen when she did. That she'd find out that she'd blown him all out of proportion in her mind, and her feelings for him, as well.

Suddenly, a wave of goose bumps swept her from toes to scalp.

She turned around, the rustle of her taffeta dress magnified in her ears.

Shaheen was here.

For a long moment, she couldn't see him. But the people-packed space receded into a void where his presence radiated like a beacon. Not from the entrance, where her gaze had been glued for the past two hours, but from the other side of the room. It made no sense, until she realized he must have used McCormick's private elevator.

His aura, his vibe, hit her like a gut punch.

Then she saw him. Only him.

Everything stilled inside her. In awe. In confusion.

He'd towered over her before, though she'd been five foot seven at fourteen. Now she stood six feet wearing two-inch heels, and he still outstripped her by what appeared to be half a foot. Had she never realized how imposing he was?

No. This wasn't the Shaheen she remembered. This was new.

He'd been twenty-two the last time she'd seen him up close. She'd seen him in the flesh half a dozen times since, most recently a year ago, across a ballroom in Cannes. But during those stolen sightings, she'd barely gotten more than an impression of vitality and virility, of class and power. She'd seen photographs and footage of him throughout the years, but it was clear that neither memory, nor sightings from afar nor photographic evidence had transmitted any measure of the truth.

Sure, he'd been like a god to her anyway, but it seemed there were levels of godhood. And his present rank was at the top of the scale. A desert god, forged from its heat and hardness and harshness, from its mystery and moodiness and magnificence.

His all-black formal silk suit and shirt clung to a breadth that was almost double his younger size. There wasn't an inch of padding to his shoulders, no boosting of the power of his chest, no accentuation to the hardness of his abdomen and thighs or the slimness of his waist and hips. If he'd had the lithe power of a young hawk before, he now packed the powerhouse majesty of a full-grown, seasoned one.

And that was before taking the changes to his face into account. He'd always been what the media had called spectacular, with that wavy mane of deepest tobacco hair, those unique fiery eyes a contrast to his natural tan. Now, with every trace of softness and youth chiseled away to leave a bone structure to tear heartstrings over, he was breathtaking.

But it was his expression—and what it betrayed of his inner state—that sent tremors radiating through her.

Shaheen wasn't happy. He was deeply dissatisfied, disturbed. Distraught, even. It might not be apparent to anyone else, but she could sense it as deeply as she felt her own turmoil.

All hope of reprieve, of closure, vanished.

If she'd found him serene, content, she would have been able to move on. But now ...

At least there was one thing to be thankful for here. He hadn't seen her. And he wouldn't, if she didn't go through with what she'd planned. And maybe she shouldn't.

No. No maybes about it. Approaching him now would have nothing but terrible consequences. If he had this devastating an effect on her while unaware of her presence and standing thirty feet away, what would he do to her face-to-face?

Infatuated, immature moron that she was, she'd achieved only one thing by seeing him again. She'd compounded her problem and added more heartache to deal with. She could now only curtail further damages.

Cursing herself for a fool, she stepped forward to leave. And felt as if she'd slammed into an impenetrable force field.

Shaheen's gaze.

The impact almost demolished her precarious balance as his eyes bored through her.

She'd always thought they resembled burning coals, even when he'd trained them on her with utmost kindness. But now, with the flare of recognition accompanied by a focus searing in intensity and devoid of gentleness, she felt their burn down to her bones. Her blood started to sizzle, her cheeks to steam.

She'd gravely underestimated the size of the mistake she'd made coming here. She now had no doubt it was one she'd regret for the rest of her life.

She stood, rooted, mesmerized as he approached her, watching him with the same fatalism one would an out-of-control car on a collision course.

Regret had swamped Shaheen the moment he'd set foot in Aidan's sprawling penthouse. It intensified with every step deeper into the cacophony of forced gaiety.

He shouldn't have agreed to come. He should have told Aidan this wasn't a farewell party to him, but a funeral pyre.

And here was his friend and partner, coming to add to his misery with a blithe smile splitting his face.

"Hey, Sheen!" Aidan exclaimed over the skullsplitting techno music. "I thought you'd decided to let me look like a fool. Again."

Shaheen winced an attempt at a smile. He hated it when his friends abbreviated his name to Sheen. His western friends did so because it was a more familiar name to them, and those back home

because that was the first letter of his name in Arabic. He didn't know why he put up with it. But then again, what was a nickname he disliked compared to what he would be forced to endure from now on?

Shaheen peered down into his friend's grinning face, his lips twisting on his barely leashed irritation. "If I'd known what kind of event you were planning, Aidan, I would have."

"You know what they say about all work and no play." Aidan hooked his arm high up around Shaheen's shoulder.

Shaheen almost flinched. He liked the man, and he did come from a culture where physical demonstrations of affection were the norm, contradictorily between members of the same gender. Apart from immediate family, he didn't appreciate being touched. Even in sexual situations, he didn't like women to paw him, as they seemed to unanimously wish to. His liaisons were about taking off an edge, not about intimacy. He'd made that clear, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, to all the women he'd had such liaisons with.

He could barely remember his last sexual encounter. Such carnal couplings, devoid of any deeper connection, had lost their appeal and begun to grate, to defile. To be expected, he guessed, when the women he liked and respected didn't arouse any carnal inclinations in him.

He stepped away smoothly, severing his friend's embrace without letting him feel the distaste behind the move. "If being dull is the opposite of this ... frenzy, I assure you, I prefer it."

A disconcerted expression seeped into Aidan's eyes, replacing the teasing. After six years of business partnership, the man had no idea what Shaheen appreciated. Probably because he kept Aidan, like everyone else, at arm's length. But Aidan had set this up with the best of intentions. And though those usually led to hell, it wasn't fair to show him how wasted his efforts truly were.

He gathered the remnants of his decorum. "But it's not every day I say goodbye to my freedom. So the ... fanfare is ..." he paused before he forced himself to add "... welcome."

Aidan's face cleared, and his words came out in the rush of the eager to please. "It's not like you'll really lose your freedom. I hear these royal arranged marriages are the epitome of ... flexibility." Aidan added that last word with a huge wink and slap on the back.

Shaheen almost snapped his oblivious friend's head off. It was a good thing Aidan turned away from him, exclaiming at the top of his voice to the people who'd flocked over to shake Shaheen's hand.

Shaheen set himself on auto, performing as Aidan wished him to. No point in setting Aidan straight anyway. He wasn't really all there with a few drinks in him. Shaheen should let him wallow in his rare surrender to heedlessness without dragging him into the land of harsh reality where *he* now existed.

His whole existence was about to cave in.

Not on the professional level. There, he'd never stopped soaring from one success to another. But on the personal level, things had been unraveling for a long time. He could even pinpoint the day when it had all started to go downhill. His fight with Aram.

Before that point, he'd lived a carefree existence where he'd felt his future was limitless. But things had gone from bad to worse since then.

He'd long known that, as a prince, he was expected to make a marriage of state, but he'd always shoved that expectation to the back of his mind, hoping that one or both of his older brothers would make a terrific political match. Then Amjad, his oldest brother and crown prince, *had* made such a match. And it had ended in disaster.

Amjad's wife had come to the marriage already pregnant, had schemed to murder Amjad and pass the child as his, to remain forever a princess and the mother of the heir to the throne.

After Amjad had divorced her in a scandal that still resounded in the region, he'd torn through the world acquiring power until he'd become almost as powerful as all of Zohayd put together. No one dared ask him to make another political match. He'd said that, when it was time for him to become king, his brother Harres would be his heir. Failing that, Shaheen. Period.

As for Harres, he would never make a political match, either. It had been agreed that his marriage into any tribe in the region would compromise his position. He'd become the best minister of interior and head of central intelligence and homeland security that Zohayd had ever had, and no one wanted to see the belief in his impartiality tainted. So, if he ever decided to marry—which seemed unlikely, since he hadn't favored any particular woman of the reported hundreds he'd bedded in his thirty-six years—Harres would nevertheless be free to choose his own wife.

So it fell to Shaheen to make a blood-mixing marriage that would revitalize the wavering pacts between factions. He was the last of the king's "pure-blood" sons, born to a purely Zohaydan queen. Haidar and Jalal, Shaheen's half brothers from the current queen, Sondoss, who was Azmaharian, weren't considered pure enough for the unification the marriage was required to achieve.

For years now, he'd known there was no escape from his fate, but instead of becoming resigned to the idea, he'd hated it more daily. It felt like a death sentence hanging over his head.

Only days ago—the day following his thirty-fourth birthday, to be exact—he'd decided to get the suffocating suspense over with, turn himself in to the marriage pact. He'd announced his capitulation to his father, told him to start lining up the bridal candidates. The next day, the news that he was seeking a bride had been all over the media. As one of the most eligible royals in the world, his intention to marry—with the identity of the bride still undecided—was the stuff of the most sensational news.

And here he was, enduring the party his associate was throwing for him to celebrate his impending imprisonment.

He flicked a look at his watch, did a double take. It had been only *minutes*. And he'd shaken a hundred hands and grimaced at double that many artificially elated or intoxicated faces.

Enough. He'd make his excuses to Aidan and bolt from this nightmare. Aidan was probably too far gone to miss him, anyway.

Deciding to do just that, he turned around ... and all air left his lungs. Across the room, he saw ... *her*.

The jolt of recognition seemed to bring the world to a staggering halt. Everything held its breath as he met her incredible dark eyes across the vast, crowded space.

He stood there for a stretch that couldn't be calculated on a temporal scale, staring at her. Hooks of awareness snapped across the distance and sank into him, flesh and senses, causing animation to screech through him for the first time in over twelve years.

There was no conscious decision to what he did next. A compulsion far beyond his control propelled him in her direction, as if he were hypnotized, remote-controlled.

The crowd parted as if pushed away by the power of his urge. Even the music seemed to observe the significance of the moment as it came to an abrupt stop.

He finally stopped, too, just feet away. He kept that much distance between them so his gaze could sweep her from head to foot.

He devoured his first impressions of her. Gold and bronze locks that gleamed over creamy shoulders and lush breasts encased in deepest chocolate off-the-shoulder taffeta the color of her eyes, the dress nipping in at an impossibly small waist then flaring over softly curved hips into a layered skirt. A face sculpted from exquisiteness, eyes from intelligence and sensitivity, cheeks from inborn class, a nose from daintiness, and lips from passion.

And those were the broad brushstrokes. Then came the endless details. He'd need an hour, a day, to marvel at each.

"Say something." He heard the hunger in his rasp, saw its effect on her.

She shuddered, confusion rising to rival the searing heat in her eyes.

"I ..."

Elation bubbled through him. "Yes. You. Say something so that I can believe you're really here."

"I'm ... I don't ..." She paused, consternation knotting her brow. It only enhanced her beauty.

But he'd heard enough of her rich, velvet voice to know it matched her uniqueness, echoed her perfection.

“You don't know what to say to me? Or you don't know where to start?”

“Shaheen, I ...”

She stopped again, and his heart did, too. For at least three heartbeats. He felt almost dizzy, hearing her utter his name.

A finger below her chin tilted her face up to him, to pore into those eyes he felt he'd fallen into whole.

Then he whispered, “You know me?”

## Two

He didn't recognize her?

Johara gaped at Shaheen as the realization sank through her, splashed like a rock into her gut. She should have known that he wouldn't.

Why should he? He'd probably forgotten she existed.

Even if he hadn't, she looked nothing like the fourteen-year-old he'd known.

That was due in part to her own late blooming and in part to her mother's influence. In Zohayd, Jacqueline Nazaryan had always downplayed Johara's looks. Her mother had later told her she'd known that Johara, having inherited her height and luminescent coloring and her father's bone structure and eyes, would become a tall, curvaceous blonde who possessed a paradoxical brand of beauty. And in the brunette, petite-woman-dominated Zohayd, a woman like Johara would be both a prized jewel and a source of endless trouble. If she'd learned to emphasize her looks, she would have become the target of dangerous desires and illicit offers, heaping trouble on her and her father's head. Her mother had left her in Zohayd secure that Johara had no desire and no means of achieving her potential and would continue looking nondescript.

Once she'd joined her mother in France, Jacqueline had encouraged her to showcase her beauty and had done everything she and her fashion-industry colleagues could to help Johara blossom into a woman who knew how to wield what she was told were considerable assets.

As Johara became a successful designer and businesswoman herself, she learned her mother had been right. Most men saw little beyond the face and body they coveted. Several rich and influential men had tried to acquire her as another trophy to bolster their image, another check on their status report. She'd been fully capable of turning them down, without incident so far. Without the repercussions her mother had feared would have accompanied the same rejections in Zohayd.

So yes. She'd been crazy to think Shaheen would recognize her when the lanky, reed-thin duckling he'd known had become a confident, elegant swan.

And here he was. Looking at her without the slightest flicker of recognition. That instant awareness, that flare of delight at the sight of her hadn't been that. It had been ...

What had it been? What was that she saw playing on his lips, blazing in his eyes as he inclined his awesome head at her? What was it she felt electrocuting her from his fingers, still caressing her chin? Was it possible he ...?

"Of course you know who I am." Shaheen cut through her feverish contemplations, shook his head in self-deprecation. The flashes from the mirror balls and revolving disco lights shot sparks of copper off the luxury of his mane and into the fathomless translucence of his eyes, zapping her into ever-deepening paralysis. "You're attending my farewell party, after all."

She remained mute. He thought she recognized him only because he was a celebrity in whose name he thought she was here having free drinks and an unrepeatably networking opportunity.

He relinquished her chin only to let the back of his fingers travel in a gossamer up-down stroke over her almost combusting cheek. "So to whom should I offer my unending thanks for inviting you here?"

Her heart constricted as the reality of the situation crystallized.

She hadn't even factored in that he might not know her on sight. But she'd conceded she shouldn't have expected it. But that there was nothing about her that jogged any sense of familiarity in him—that she couldn't rationalize. Or accept.

Her insides compacted in a tight tangle of disappointment.

His words and actions so far had had nothing to do with happiness at seeing her after all these years. There was only one reason he could have approached her, was talking to her, looking at her this way. It seemed absurd, unthinkable. But she could find no other explanation.

*Shaheen was coming on to her.*

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he seemed to tighten all of his virility and influence around her, dropping his voice an octave, sinking it right through to her core. "This will sound like the oldest line in the book, but even though you haven't said one complete sentence to me yet and we met just minutes ago, I feel like I've known you forever."

The music chose that second to blare again, as if accentuating his announcement, cutting off any possibility of her blurting out that he felt that way because he had.

At the deafening intrusion, he dropped his hand from her cheek, raised his head, his eyes releasing hers from their snare as he cast an annoyed look at the whole scene. He caught her again with the full force of his focus a moment later. "This place is incompatible with human sanity." His eyes forged another path of fire down her body to where her purse was hanging limply from her hand. "I see you've got your bag with you. Shall we go?"

She gasped as currents forked through her from where his hand curved around her upper arm in courteous yet compelling invitation. "B-but it's your party."

His eyes crinkled at her as his lips spread, revealing the even power of his teeth. "*Aih*, and I'll leave if I want to." His thumb swept the naked flesh of her arm, causing a firestorm to ripple through her as though through a wheat field in a storm. "And how I want to."

Her free fist came up, pressing against a heart that seemed to be trying to ram out of her chest cavity.

The world had always transformed into a wonderland when he smiled. But this was ... ridiculous. There should be a law against his indulging in the practice in inhabited areas!

She blinked, her sluggish gaze drifting from his at the pull of something vague. And she blinked again. In disbelief.

She was no longer in the middle of the party. She was in a spacious marble hall, walking on jellified legs toward what she judged to be McCormick's private elevator.

Had she really walked here? Or had he teleported them?

Suddenly it was all too much. His every move and glance stripping her of basic coherence, his very nearness inching her to the verge of collapse as she and the situation spiraled out of control. He didn't have the slightest memory of her, was enacting this aggressive seduction based on her anonymity, confident of her availability.

Still, only when they stopped in front of the elevator did she manage to attempt to extract herself smoothly from his loose yet incapacitating grip. Her spinning senses made her stumble back instead, wrenching her arm away.

She could see astonishment reverberate through him as the spectacular wings of his eyebrows snapped together and his lips lost the fullness of intimacy, chiseling into harsher lines that accentuated their perfection. And showed her yet another side of him that she'd never been exposed to—the ruthless royal he could become when provoked or displeased.

So he couldn't comprehend that a female would have the temerity to not fall all over herself to obey his decrees? Maybe this encounter would end in closure, after all. Just in a different way than she'd imagined.

She glared her disillusion up into his eyes. "You're so certain I want to leave with you, aren't you?"

Bitterness hardened her voice. She knew he heard it loud and clear, too.

The last of the heat in his gaze drained as stillness descended. "Yes, I am. As certain of my desire to leave with you."

She huffed her fury. "You're right. You *are* spouting the oldest lines in the book."

His pupils expanded, almost engulfed his vivid irises. "I realize they sound like that, but they happen to be true."

Her lips twisted, mimicking a fiercer contortion of her heart. "Sure they are."

“You think I’m so lacking in imagination or finesse that I’d use something so hackneyed to express myself if it wasn’t the simple truth, and no other words would do?”

“Maybe you’re just too lazy, too jaded to think of something new. Or you can’t even fathom the possibility that you might need a new line. Or maybe you didn’t think I warranted the effort of coming up with something a tad more original, since you thought I’d fall flat on my back at the idea of your interest.”

He seemed more taken aback at every word firing from her lips, his scowl dissolving into a flabbergasted look.

She was as shocked as he was. Where had all that come from? It was as if pressure had been building up inside her, and disappointment was a blade that had slashed across the thin membrane holding it in, her feelings bursting out of containment.

She’d just loved him for so long!

She’d fantasized about how it would be if they met again, and reality had demolished every comforting scenario. His indiscriminating carnal purpose made a mockery of the soul-deep connection she’d been convinced they’d resurrect on sight. A connection, it seemed, that existed only inside her lovesick mind.

The insupportable deduction squeezed more resentment from her depths. “And didn’t it occur to you that the person you felt you owed unending thanks to for bringing me here might be my boyfriend, or even my fiancé or husband?”

All expression evaporated, leaving his face a hard mask. “No. It didn’t.”

“It didn’t, or the possibility of my being committed to another man didn’t seem relevant to you?”

“You *can’t* be. I would have felt something, from you, a connection with someone else, a disconnection from me. But—”

He stopped abruptly. That limitless energy that had radiated from him from the moment he’d caught her eye flickered, wavered. Then it blinked out. The gloom she’d thought she’d seen tainting his aura before he’d noticed her descended on him again like a roiling thundercloud, seeming to slump his formidable shoulders under its weight.

He closed his eyes, swept a palm over his eyes and forehead. His other hand joined in, raking up through his hair before rubbing down his face.

Then he let his hands drop to his sides, leveled his eyes at hers. The bleakness there shriveled her insides.

“I don’t know what came over me. I saw you across the room and I thought ... No, I didn’t think. I *knew*. I was certain you looked at me with the same ... recognition. That sense I’ve heard people experience when they meet someone who’s ... right. It must have been a trick of the lights. Your recognition was of the literal variety, and I saw what I subconsciously wanted to see. I must be in worse shape than even I thought, imagining I’d found an undeniable connection at such a party. Or at all. I apologize. To you, and to your man. I should have known you’d be taken.”

His fists clenched and unclenched as he spoke, as if they itched with the same sick electricity discharging inside her limbs. Then with a shake of his head and an indecipherable imprecation, he turned away.

She stood feeling as if she’d been struck by lightning, watching his long strides take him away from her. All she could think was that he didn’t seem callous or indiscriminating, only hurt, and that the last thing she’d ever see of him was that look of despondency on his face.

“It was a hypothetical question.”

At her squeaking statement, he stopped. But didn’t turn. He only inclined his face so that she saw his profile, eyes cast downward, tension emanating from him in shockwaves.

She forced the explanation he was waiting for between barely working lips. “When I mentioned a boyfriend or fiancé or husband, it was only in a ‘what if’ scenario. I don’t have anyone.”

“You’re not taken.” His hoarse whisper shuddered through her as he turned toward her, animation creeping back into his face. She shook her head, had locks snaring in her trembling mouth. “You objected to me sweeping you away because—” he accentuated every other word with a leisurely step back to her side, each hitting her like a seismic wave “—you mistook me for a lazy, jaded oaf who doesn’t possess an original bone in his body to express his inability to wait to be alone with you, or a poetic cell with which to do justice to the wonder of our meeting.”

She was panting as he fell silent. “Okay, I hereby revise my opinion. You have nothing but original bones and poetic cells.”

The elation reclaiming his expression spiked on a guffaw. Her knees almost buckled. And that was before a hunger-laden step obliterated the last of the distance between them. Every hair on her body stood on end as if with a giant static charge.

Then he whispered, “Tell me you feel it, too. Tell me the almost tangible entity I sense between us exists, that I’m not having a breakdown and imagining things.”

This was the second time he’d alluded to his condition. The idea of his suffering spread thorns in her chest. She bit her lip on the pain. “The ... entity exists.”

“I am going to touch you now. Will you shake me off again, or do you want me to?” She shook her head, nodded, groaned. Her teeth would start clattering any moment now with needing his touch.

He took both her arms in the warm gentleness of his hands. Then he pulled her to him. She stumbled forward, ended up with her head where she’d dreamed of having it since she’d been old enough to form memories. Where it had rested once before, during that moment that had changed her destiny. On the endlessness of his chest. He pressed it there with a hand that smoothed her hair, his rumbling purr of enjoyment echoing her own.

He finally sighed. “This is unprecedented. We’ve had our first fight and reconciliation before you’ve even told me your name.”

“It wasn’t really a fight,” she whispered as she pulled back a bit, so she could breathe, so her heart wouldn’t stop.

He smiled down at her, his eyes telling her she delighted him. “Not on my end, but you were about to claw my eyes out. And I would have gladly let you. But I’m not putting it off any longer. Your name, *ya ajaml makhloogah fel kone*. Bless me with its gift.”

He’d just called her the most beautiful creature in the universe. He probably didn’t realize he had spoken in his native tongue, or he would have tagged it with a translation.

“J ...” Her voice vanished on a convulsive swallow as he drew nearer still, as if to inhale her name when she uttered it like the most pleasurable fragrance, like life-sustaining air.

And she realized she couldn’t tell him who she was.

If she did, he’d pull back. There would be embarrassment, consternation followed by distance and decorum. And she couldn’t bear to lose this moment of spontaneity with him.

It would be the last thing she had of him.

“Gemma.”

She almost slapped herself upside the head. Gemma? Did she have to go for a literal translation? How obvious could she get?

But then, she’d started to say her name, and he would have thought it suspicious if she’d gone on to say Dana or Sara or something. Gemma had been the only name that had come to her that started with a *J* sound.

Before she made it worse, she had to tell him how nice it was to meet him and walk away. *Run* away. Without looking back. She had the rest of her life to look back on this magical encounter.

He thwarted her feverish plans, pressed her head closer as he sighed his contentment. “Gemma. Perfect, *ya joharti*.” She lurched at hearing her real name. Before she could have a heart attack, he loosened his embrace, smiled his pleasure. “That’s ‘my jewel’ in my mother tongue. So, my precious Gemma, will you come with me?”

“Where?” she choked.

“As long as you’re with me, does it matter?”

It was clear by now that nothing mattered.

Not to Johara. Not when measured against wringing this opportunity to be with Shaheen of its last possible glance and smile, touch and comeback. Of the sheer unbridled joy of being the object of his interest, the target of his appreciation, the instigator of his desire.

Another breaker of pleasure frothed inside her as she beheld him, a vision made man, sitting across from her in the exclusive restaurant he’d made literally so for their dinner.

They’d been talking nonstop since they’d left McCormick’s penthouse. She’d answered his questions about herself without specifying names or places, and nothing she told him had rung any bells. That still rankled, but her thankfulness for this time out of time his unawareness afforded her with him surpassed any disappointment.

“Do you want to know what the maitre d’ told me after emptying the restaurant?” His eyes glittered at her as his hand covered her upturned palm with hypnotic strokes. “That such heavy-handed tactics wouldn’t work on a lady of such refinement as you.”

She giggled, surrendered her hand to his possession. “A very astute gentleman.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “I wish you had told me that before *he* emptied half of my supposed no-limit credit card.”

She giggled again at his mock woe. Even in her upheaval, the thrill rose. Her fantasies throughout the years had gotten it right. Their connection *was* there. And he was showering her with the delighted, delighting banter that had always textured and colored her life.

He remained the man she’d loved since she could remember. No, he was better than that man. Much, much better.

She sighed at the bittersweetness of it all. “But seriously, you shouldn’t have gone to any expense. I thought we’d agreed it didn’t matter where we were.”

“I wanted to be alone with you.”

“We could have been alone walking down the pier.”

“That did occur to me, but you’re not dressed for the cold night.” He lowered his gaze as if pondering the pattern he was painting with his fingers on her palm. He raised his eyes a moment later and she gasped. Gentleness and humor were gone, that grim god of the desert back. She shuddered with the fierceness of her response. “You know where I really want to be alone with you, Gemma. In my place. In my bed.”

She squeezed her eyelids shut as emotion tore through her.

She couldn’t handle this. She shouldn’t have sought him out ...

His tough rider’s fingers smoothed over her eyes, making her open them, so that there was no escaping his fierceness, his intention. “I want you, Gemma. I never knew wanting like this existed, that I could feel anything of this intensity and purity.”

“Purity?”

“Yes. It’s unclouded, untainted, absolute. I want you, in every way. And you want me in the same way. I know I wouldn’t be feeling like this if you didn’t also. My desire surges from me as much as it stems from you. It flows to you and is reflected back at me exponentially, then back to you in a never-ending cycle. It’s taking on a life of its own, growing too powerful to deny. With every breath its power heightens, sharpens. Will you let me fulfill our desire? Will you let me worship you?”

“Shaheen, please—”

He suddenly pushed his chair back, stood up. Before her heart could stumble on its next beat, he was bending to pluck her from her chair and into his arms. Her head lolled back over his arm with shock as he tightened his hold behind her back, beneath her knees and buried his lips in the neck she exposed to him. “This is all I want to do. Please you. I never want to stop pleasing you.”

Voices yelled inside her head. *Tell him who you are. He'll stop this torment the moment he realizes your identity.*

And he'd be furious with her for hiding it. She couldn't let it end like that. With him feeling deceived. And hating her.

She had to say no. He'd abide by her refusal. She hadn't meant for any of this to happen. From the moment he'd caught her eyes and zapped her control across the room, she'd been reacting without volition.

Then she opened her mouth and without any trace of it she whispered, "Yes. Please."

## Three

Johara hadn't known what to expect when she'd said yes to Shaheen.

It certainly hadn't been anything that had happened in the two hours since.

After he swept her into his arms and obtained her unconditional capitulation, he put her down, let her walk out of the restaurant and to his limo. He gave his driver an order in Arabic to take the most roundabout way home then sat beside her talking, about everything under the sun. All through the long drive to his penthouse, he didn't touch her at all, except for resuming his thorough fascination with her hand.

For a stretch, he showed her family photos on his phone. He had a few of his father and brothers. They looked much like she remembered, just older and harsher towering specimens of manhood. But the photos were mostly of his aunt Bahiyah, his half sister, Aliyah, and his cousin, Laylah, the only three females born in their family in five generations straight. Shaheen said they were the only ones worth taking and keeping photos of, the vivacious centerpieces of their all-male family, splashes of beauty and grace and exuberance among the range of darkness and drive of what the ladies called their testosterone-compromised relatives.

Aliyah, who was three years older than Johara and who'd seldom been around in the eight years Johara had lived in the palace, had been thought to be King Atef's niece. It was only two years ago that it had been revealed that Princess Bahiyah had adopted her and passed her off as hers from her American husband, when she was actually the king's daughter from an American lover. Instead of causing a scandal, the discovery had aborted the looming wars in the region when Aliyah entered a political marriage with the new king of Judar, Kamal Aal Masood.

Aliyah looked nothing like the sallow, spaced-out girl she remembered. In fact, she looked the epitome of femininity and elegance. And bliss. It was apparent her forced marriage to Kamal had become a love match. Like Shaheen's impending marriage would no doubt become. For what woman wouldn't worship him?

She blinked away the mist of dejection and concentrated on Laylah's photos. The twelve-year old girl she'd been when Johara had last seen her had fulfilled all the promise she'd shown of becoming a spectacular beauty. Johara had never had a chance to really know her, since Laylah's mother, Queen Sondoss's sister, had never let her mingle with the help, as Aram had put it.

Shaheen said Laylah was one of three reasons he forgave his stepmother for existing, since she'd married her sister to his uncle, the other two being his half brothers, Haidar and Jalal. He also said that the ladies reveled in giving their male family members—especially Shaheen and his brothers—a view of a life that didn't have to bend to their wishes. Because of that, along with many other things he could see they shared with Johara, he was certain they would set the palace on fire getting along.

Everything he said alluded to his taking it for granted that her presence in his life would continue beyond tonight. But he must know there was no chance of that.

Yet not only had he already secured her surrender, so he had no reason to say anything more to encourage it, he seemed to believe in what he was saying, to have forgotten the marriage of state he'd announced his intention to enter only four days ago.

She guessed that the marriage was what had been weighing so heavily on him when she'd first seen him. He was loathe to succumb to duty. But it seemed to have slipped his mind since he'd seen her.

She wouldn't remind him. They'd both remember harsh reality soon enough, live with it for the rest of their lives.

Tonight was theirs.

So here she was, standing in the middle of his extensive, austere masculine foyer, watching him as he hung his jacket and her wrap with tranquil, precise movements.

Why was he wasting their precious time together?

She might not have known what to expect, but she'd thought he'd escalate the urgency he'd shown so far. She'd had visions of him carrying her to the limo, drowning her in kisses all the way here, pressing her against the door the moment they entered and showing her how eager for her he was.

Had he remembered his commitments and decided to cool things off, let her down easy?

She should spare him the discomfort, should leave. She shouldn't have come at all, shouldn't have said yes, shouldn't have gone to that party ...

Something whirred, flashed. She blinked in surprise, her left eye riddled in blue spots.

He'd snapped a photo of her with his phone. Now he walked toward her, big and lithe, gloriously male and impossibly beautiful. But it was his expression that made her sway, sending her heart swinging in her chest like a pendulum.

The lightness of the trek here was gone, sizzling sensuality replacing it, setting his eyes deeper on fire and his charisma to a higher level.

He stopped a foot away, reached for the hands he seemed so enamored with. "You looked so ... pensive. And if possible, even more breathtaking. This photo is the stuff of the immortal masterpieces the old masters would have begged to portray." He took her hands to his lips, giving each finger a knuckle-by-knuckle introduction to the cossetting of his lips, his eyes empty of all but seriousness. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"No." The denial shot out of her, its fierceness mortifying her as it rang around them. But she had to know. "A-are you?"

He huffed. "The only thoughts I'm having are where to begin worshipping you and how to stop from swallowing you whole."

So that was why he was holding back. He feared being too aggressive. She was being insecure again.

But who could blame her? All through the years, her love for him had been emotional, spiritual, with slight sensual overtones. She'd never imagined he could actually want her, and when she'd fantasized that he did, even in the freedom of her own imagination, he'd done no more than hold and kiss her. Yet she couldn't breathe with wanting all he was willing to give her, with needing to experience him to the fullest.

She swayed closer, her heartbeats merging like the wings of a hummingbird with the enormity of what she was feeling, what she was about to reveal. "B-begin anywhere, Shaheen. J-just begin. And don't stop your self. I don't want you to stop."

His eyes flared with her every faltering word. When she fell into embarrassed, panting silence, he entwined her hands in his, brought them to her face, twisting their embrace around so the backs of his hands stroked up and down her flaming cheeks.

"Then I'll begin here. Your skin. It's incredible, like every part of you. Lush, thick cream, free of paleness and fragility. It doesn't flush with your emotions, no matter how strong, only becomes more vital, more vivid. It's glowing now. Your eyes are gleaming like polished onyxes under spotlights, inundating me with an avalanche of expressions, each intoxicating in its clarity and beauty. And your lips. The way they mold to your every thought, the way they take the shape of your every emotion, the way they tremble to the frequency of each sensation ... each tremor shudders through me until I am nothing but uncontainable hunger."

She almost choked with stimulation. "I was right. You are made up of nothing but original bones and poetic cells."

His lips twitched in a lethal mix of appreciation and predation as he touched the pad of his thumb to hers, stilling those tremors that so affected him. "It seems you didn't hear my last words clearly."

Her lips trembled even more as humor warred with anticipation and agitation. He rubbed his thumbs against them, his breathing becoming harsher.

She closed her eyes to savor the long-dreamed-about sensations. Her wildest imaginings hadn't prepared her for reality. She moaned with the pleasure that corkscrewed through her, emanating from his breath, his nearness, his touch, to her every inch, her deepest reaches. Then her lips did what they'd been longing to do for most of her life—caressed the fragrant warmth and power pressed to them with a trembling kiss.

She heard his intake of breath. It sliced away more of the leashes of her inhibition. She opened her lips, grazed her teeth against his skin. Its texture, its scent, brought more moist heat surging from her core.

A fiercer inhalation expanded his chest until it pressed against her swelling breasts. She knew he could scent her arousal, felt the wildness it sent seething through him. It made her light-headed, the knowledge that she could do this to him, that he was doing this to her, that they had this to share.

Feeling bolder, she swept her tongue against his skin. Her knees did buckle at her first taste of him. He disentangled his other hand, caught her around the waist. She kept her eyes closed as she dove deeper into the sensations, her whole existence centering on his thumb against her tongue as he began to thrust it gently in and out of her mouth.

“This is extremely dangerous.” His bass hiss made her eyes snap open. His bore into them before moving to her lips with burning intent as he fed them his thumb, as they suckled it with increasing greed and abandon. She knew what he meant. He still elaborated. “That you want me as fiercely as I want you.”

She nodded, breath leaving her body under choppy pressure. She felt she was disintegrating with need for him.

He let go of her waist, grazed across her lower teeth as he slid his thumb lingeringly from between her lips, then dropped his forehead to hers, nuzzling her, inhaling her. “This is unparalleled. Agonizing but sublime.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Though she had no experience to back up her belief, she knew the protracted inflammation of their senses was far more satisfying than any frenzied mindless coupling would be.

He eased her away only to glide both arms around her back, to her dress's zipper. He slid it down with torturous slowness, never letting go of her eyes as he went back up to unclasp her bra. She gasped as its constriction eased, and again at the spike of ferocity in his eyes as he monitored her reaction. He drew more gasps from her as he caressed her dress and bra loose, then in one silky sweep, freed her from their shackles.

Before she could snap her arms across her nakedness, he dragged her dress beyond her waist to her hips, dropping downward with it. He ended up on his knees before her.

Her mouth opened, closed, opened again. From unbearable stimulation. From the way he looked her up and down, as if he would truly gobble her up.

Then he pulled her to him, rumbling, “Now, I worship you.”

She would have keeled over him if his shoulders hadn't stopped her forward pitch. He added to her imbalance, burying hot lips into her flesh. She whimpered at each press into her abdomen, every tongue thrust into her navel, each tooth drag across her breasts. Her moans sharpened as he gently clamped her nipples, until a cry rushed out at his first hard pull. “Shaheen . . . *please*.”

In answer, he bunched her skirt in his hands, his thumbs hooking into the top of her panties. Then, in one magical move, every shred of covering was shed off of her.

Standing in nothing but her shoes with her clothes pooled at her feet, she felt the world recede. Shaheen looked up, the worshipping he'd promised her setting the hard nobility of his face ablaze.

This was beyond unprecedented. Beyond unparalleled. *She was with Shaheen*. Standing before him naked. She was about to be his in the flesh, just as she was already his in every other way.

She watched as he raised each leg to kiss and fondle from calf to thigh, her consciousness flickering like a bulb about to short out. She heard his magnificent voice as he raggedly lavished far better than poetry on her, spontaneous wonder pouring out in whatever language expressed it best.

She moaned constantly, becoming a literal puddle of arousal by the time he rose. She would have collapsed at his feet if he hadn't swept her up as he stood.

When she flopped in his arms like a ragdoll, he whispered into her ear, "Wrap yourself around me, my Gemma. Cling to me with all of your priceless flesh and desire."

That injected power into her limp muscles. She wanted to. *He* wanted her to. She only ever wished to give him what he wanted.

She clasped her arms around his shoulders, her thighs around his hips. And it was indescribable. Feeling all of his heat and bulk and power and arousal encased within her limbs, being draped around all of that. She'd be forever empty and anchorless when she no longer had him to enfold, to hang on to like this.

But she had him now.

She rested her head against his shoulder as he strode across his penthouse with her clasped in his arms. Her eyes remained open, but she registered only impressions of his character, his taste and wealth imbuing the spaces, all the more impressive for being unpretentious. Then he crossed into a bedroom. His bedroom.

This was the last thing she'd expected would happen when she'd embarked upon her mission to see him one last time. That she'd end up in his bedroom. In his bed.

But she wanted to be here more than literally anything.

Her senses revved out of their stupor. This was where he slept, where he woke up, where he read and showered and shaved, where he dressed and undressed. Where he pleased himself. And where she was convinced he'd never pleased another.

This was his sanctum, when he lived in New York. And he was giving her the exclusive privilege of being here. It would be a one-time pass. She had to make all she could of it.

The huge, high-ceilinged room was lit with only a bedside lamp. Her gaze, avid to soak in more of his privacies and secrets, had just registered the slashes of bold décor, gradations of dark grays and greens with accents of hardwood the color of his eyes when her wandering ones came to a hiccupping halt.

He pressed her against the door as she'd vaguely hoped he would before, held her there with only his bulk bearing down on her.

She shuddered at the sensory overload. The coolness of the polished wood against her back, the feel of him pressing against her, the heat and hardness of his erection against her intimate flesh with nothing but his clothes between them.

Until minutes ago she'd been too shy to inspect his arousal. Even now she couldn't make the leap of imagining anything beyond this. Her mind almost shut down at the thought of having him inside her. And he hadn't even kissed her on the lips yet....

He raised his head from razing his way down her throat. "And now, I pleasure you, *ya galbi*." Hearing him call her "my heart" tore a sob from her depths.

He frowned at the sound. "Gemma, if you want me to stop, I will. If you're not totally sure ..."

She dragged his head down to her, took the kiss she'd been starving for all of her life.

He stilled under her uncoordinated frenzy, let her smash her lips against his, imploring his reciprocation, his taking over, before he wrenched his lips away.

"What's wrong, my Gemma?" He swept her around, took her to the bed, laid her down on it, where the lighting afforded him the best view of her. And he jerked up in dismay. "You're crying!"

Her hands flailed over his shoulders, trying to drag him back to her. "I-I'm not ... I just want you, too much. I can't wait anymore. Please take me, Shaheen. T-take me now."

The concern on his face dissipated, sheer ferocity slamming down in its place. “I want to take you. I want to invade you and ride you until you weep with pleasure this time. But I can’t. I have to ready you for me first or I’ll hurt you.”

“You won’t. I’m ready. Just ... just ...”

“*Galbi*, let me pace this. I need to make it perfect for you.”

“It will be perfect. Anything with you is perfect.”

He growled something as he dragged her onto his lap. “Don’t say one more word, Gemma. If you don’t want to have a raving lunatic all over you. I’ve never even imagined being out of control. But I am now.”

She sobbed a giggle. “If this is you out of control, I’d hate to see you in it. You’d probably kill me with frustration.”

*This* time it was his lips that stopped her words, in that kiss she’d imagined since she was old enough to know what kisses were. It turned out she’d never even come close to knowing.

This was a kiss. This tender ferociousness. This gentle devouring. Only this. Shaheen possessing her lips, each sweep and pull and thrust layering sensations, burying her in pleasure. His scent and taste and feel filling her, his hunger finishing her.

She undulated beneath him, until he subdued her, held her arms above her head as his other hand flowed down from her face to her shoulder, ending up cupping the aching heaviness of one breast. “You’re only allowed to moan for more, and cry out with pleasure. That will be enough to drive me out of my mind.”

“Let me see you,” she moaned.

“Not yet. And you’re already breaking the rules.”

“You said I could moan for more. I am, for more of you.”

“You’ll have all of me, every way you like. Just not now.”

“You’re being unfair,” she whimpered.

“It’s you who’s unfair. Nothing should be this magnificent.”

She tried to free her hands. She needed them on him, any part of him, without the barrier of clothes.

He growled deep in his chest, spread her back and continued owning her body with his sensual torment. But it was only when he slid her hips to the edge of the bed and knelt before her again that she realized his intention. Her heart stuttered.

It was stupid to feel embarrassed at having his mouth and hands on her intimate flesh when she was begging for far more. But there it was. She tried to close her legs.

He insisted, caressed them apart. “Open yourself to me, let me feast on you. Let me prepare you.”

“I’m prepared,” she cried out. “Please!”

“I don’t want to hold back when I take you, and only a few climaxes will prepare you for my possession.”

“A *few* ...?” She choked on incredulity.

What was he going to do to her?

Anything. She’d take anything and everything he did to her.

She opened herself to him and those long, perfect fingers caressed her feminine lips apart, slid through her molten need. She keened, lurched with jolts of sensation almost too much to bear. And that was before he dipped one finger in. Each slow inch felt like pure pleasure. It made her realize how empty she’d felt. How only having him inside her would fill the void.

She tried to drag him up to her with her legs. He only opened her fully and burned her to the core in his ragged hunger.

She malfunctioned completely as his magnificent head settled between her thighs and his lips and tongue scorched the heart of her femininity. The sight, the concept of what he was doing to her, giving her, was almost more incapacitating than the physical sensations.

Through the delirium, she watched him cosset her, strum her, drink her, revel in her essence, in her need and taste and pleasure. He seemed to know when she couldn't take any more.

"Now, *ya roh galbi*, let me see and hear how much I pleasure you." Then his tongue swept her flesh again.

Her body unraveled in a chain-reaction of convulsions, in soul-racking ecstasy, as she held his eyes all through, letting him see what he was doing to her.

She subsided, unable even to beg him to come to her, and he began again, varying his method, renewing her desperation, deepening her surrender.

She'd lost count of how many times he'd wrung her pleasure when at one point he kept her on the brink, came up to straddle her.

He painted her with caresses, kneaded her breasts, gently squeezed her nipples. "I've never seen or tasted anything so beautiful."

Her hands shook on his belt, trying to undo it. "I want to see you—all of you. I want you, inside me, filling my body. Please, Shaheen, please *now*."

He surged up to stand over the bed, over her, stripping off his clothes with barely leashed violence and absolute economy.

Though she was dying for him, the one opportunity she'd have to see his exposed glory took precedence. She swayed to her knees, gazing at his proportionate perfection, the rippling power encased in polished bronze and accentuated with dark silk.

With a cry she surged forward, her hands and lips seeking all she could reach of him, wanting them everywhere at once.

"Shaheen ..." she moaned between kisses "... you're more beautiful than I imagined ... I want to worship each inch of you, too."

He threaded his fingers through her hair. "Later, *ya hayati*, we'll worship each other inch for inch. Now I take you. And you take me."

"Yes." She fell to her back, held out her arms.

He surged to her, covered her. She cried out, reveling in how her softness cushioned his hardness.

Perfect. No, sublime. Like he'd said.

She opened her legs, as she'd always opened everything she was to him. He guided them over his waist, his eyes seeking hers, solicitous and tempestuous, his erection seeking her entrance.

Finding both hot and molten, he growled his surrender at last, sank into her in one forceful thrust.

She'd been certain it wouldn't hurt, that she was ready.

But she couldn't have been ready for this. For him.

And it wasn't only her untried body. She was sure experience wouldn't have helped her withstand the first invasion of his girth and length.

It was on the second thrust that he seemed to realize. Why the first had taken such force, found such resistance, why her cry had been so sharp, why her body was so tense and trembling.

He froze. Shock rippled over his face. At last he choked out, "You're a *virgin*?"

"It's okay ... I'm okay. Don't stop ... please, Shaheen, don't stop."

"*B'Ellahi!*" he rasped, tried to pull out of her.

She clamped her quaking legs over his hips, stopping him from exiting her body.

"Stop, Gemma!" he growled, resisting her. "I'm hurting you."

“Yes.” This made him heave up, his eyes horrified. She only clung harder to him, arms and legs and core. “And the pain is nothing compared to how you feel inside me, is making it all the more ... intense. I feel you ... branding me. Please ... you said you wouldn’t hold back.”

“This was before I knew you were ...!” He shook his head, his disbelief and bewilderment rising. “*Ya Ullah*, I’m your *first*.”

“Are you ... disappointed?”

“Disappointed? Try flabbergasted, overwhelmed. *Ya Ullah*.”

Mortification flooded her. Her limbs relinquished their hold on him. “I should have told you. It wasn’t a conscious decision not to ... but you have no reason to believe that ...” She swallowed the weeping jag that was building behind the barrier of her throat. “Let me up. I’ll go and you’ll never—”

He slid deeper into her, gentler, slower, his eyes heating again. “Does this feel like I’m sorry I’m your first? I already knew you were the biggest gift I’d ever received. But now you’ve bestowed this on me, and the gift is even bigger. I wish I could offer you something of the same magnitude.”

“You *are* giving me the biggest gift, too.” Tears were overtaking her. And that would spoil everything. Her lips trembled with what she hoped approximated teasing. “Figuratively *and* literally.” He inhaled sharply, grew even bigger inside her. Even through the burning, she thrust her hips upward, engulfing more of his erection. “So if you really want to give me a gift, don’t hold back. Give me all of you.”

“You do want a raving lunatic all over you, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

“You say, yes, please, and everything insides me snaps,” he growled as he rose, cupped her hips in his hands, tilted her and thrust himself to the hilt inside her. It was overwhelming, being stretched by him, being full of him, beyond her capacity.

He withdrew, and she cried out at the loss, urged him to sink back into her. He resisted her squirming pleas for a moment, his shaft resting at her entrance before he sank slowly back inside her.

She cried out a hot gust of passion, opening wider for him. He watched her, gauging her reactions, adjusting his movements to her every gasp and grimace, waiting for the pleasure to submerge the pain before he let her really have all of him, before he quickened his pace. All through, he kept her at fever pitch, caressing her all over, suckling her breasts, draining her lips, raining wonder over her.

Then he groaned into her lips, “Glorious, *ya galbi*, inside and out, literally and figuratively. Everything about you, with you.”

She keened as her depths started to ripple around him. As if he knew, he tilted her, angled his thrusts, and snapped the coil of tension inside her. Convulsion after convulsion squeezed shrieks out of her, clamped her tight around him, inside and out.

Only then did he let go, a moment she’d replay in her memory forever. The sight and feel of him as he surrendered inside her to the ecstasy that union with her brought him. She peaked again as he threw his head back on a roar of pleasure, as the heat of his release surged into her womb until she felt filled, never to be empty again.

Shaking with aftershocks, she whimpered as he moved, needing him to come down on top of her. He swept her around instead, took her over him, careful not to jar her, to remain inside her.

She lay on top of him, the biggest part of her soul, satiated in ways she couldn’t have imagined, in perfect peace for the first time in her life.

As he encompassed her in caresses and murmurs of appreciation, awe overtook her at everything that had happened tonight.

Then he made it infinitely better.

He shifted, brought her to her side facing him, kissed her deeply, leisurely, then whispered into her lips, “This was, hands down, the best thing that has ever happened to me. *You* are.”

She believed he meant it.

But he wasn't free to mean it.

The knowledge expanded inside her soaring heart, a ton of dejection bringing it crashing to the ground of reality.

But she still had the rest of tonight with him.

Shaking off despondence, she focused on the miracle in progress, in her arms.

She suckled the tongue rubbing against hers, caressed the muscled back rippling beneath her fingers, smiled into his kiss. "Your feelings, sir, are a mere reflection of mine."

He pulled back to look down at her, his own smile bliss and bedevilment at once as he pressed her buttocks closer, driving his intact arousal deeper into her. "Then it's up to me to prove to you how authentic my feelings are."

And for the rest of the night, he left her in no doubt.

Johara drank in the magnificent sight Shaheen made.

Sprawled on his back, the dark green cotton sheet twisted around one thigh and leaving the rest of him bare for her to devour, he had one muscled arm arced over his head, the other with its palm flat over his heart. He looked as if he were holding the kisses she'd planted there before she'd left his side, telling him she'd go to the bathroom and would be back in moments, in place.

Her heart constricted. Her vision blurred.

And she choked out her pledge. "I will always love you, *ya habibi*."

He sighed in his sleep, his lips curving in contentment.

Even though she was across the room, she thought he said, "I love you, too, my Gemma."

Tears poured thicker, as if they were flowing from her heart. She closed the door and walked away from his room and out of his penthouse. Out of his life.

She felt as if hers was over.

## Four

The moment he opened his eyes, Shaheen knew something was wrong. Wonderfully wrong. He was ... serene.

He remained still, closed his eyes again, to savor the alien sensation of absolute contentment.

Yes. Alien. He'd never felt like this, even on his best days.

He'd always been aware of all he had to be thankful for, had never taken any of his privileges for granted. He'd accepted the prices he had to pay for them, had even considered the payments and the load they placed on his shoulders more privileges. He'd reveled in all the challenges and hardships that making use of those privileges had dictated.

What he'd never been as fond of were the constraints they placed on his choices, the frustration he encountered when bowing to their demands meant doing less than what he thought was right.

Usually he relegated those limitations to the back of his mind, but they were still there, a source of constant tension.

There was not a trace of that now. He felt something he'd only ever experienced partially, had never imagined feeling in full. Peace. Permeating. Absolute.

And it was because of her.

Gemma. Even her name was perfection. Everything he'd felt from her, seen of her, had with her had been that. And the wonder of it seemed to have wiped him clean of all that had come before her. That he had to exert conscious effort to remember anything but her was amazing. One night with her felt like the sum total of his experience in life.

He stretched, humming to the tune of satisfaction and elation that strummed through him.

So this was *passion*. He hadn't felt anything like it before. He'd known passion for commitment, for success, for details, he felt love for his family, had felt mild and ephemeral interest in some women. But he'd never imagined anything so encompassing, so consuming. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, his feelings had engulfed him whole, had overwhelmed his reason and control. Not that what he felt went against either. She satisfied the first and he felt no need to employ the second. Being with her had emptied him of tension and inhibition, had freed him to focus his all on the wonder of being with her, experiencing her, savoring every moment with her.

He did feel he'd known her all his life.

And now he couldn't imagine his life without her. The life she'd derailed. And righted.

He sighed deeply as images and sensations of the previous night and early morning cascaded through his mind and body.

He *had* taken her as if he'd been craving her all his life. He hadn't even been able to stop when he'd found he'd been her first. Or later, when he'd told himself he wouldn't do it again that night. But she'd again hijacked his sense and control ...

Suddenly unease slithered through him, unraveling his surreal state of bliss.

He'd approached her, taken her, as if he was free to make his own choices and pursue his own destiny. And he wasn't.

How had he forgotten that for a minute, let alone a night?

But he *had* forgotten. Totally. And he remembered now.

Dammit, no. It made no difference what was demanded—no, *needed*—of him. There was no way he could blindly point at a bride from the royal catalogue now.

He had no idea how he'd be able to avoid the arranged marriage, but he would. No matter the pressures or the exigencies. Everything in him demanded that he make Gemma his.

He foresaw an epic battle.

He wiped both hands over his face, bunched them in his hair, pulled with a steady, stinging tension as if that would counteract the pressure building inside him.

What a mess.

But what a delight, too.

On the heels of visualizing the upcoming strife, images of her, of them together, conversing, caressing, joined, filled his mind again. In a balance where all the troubles he had piling ahead were weighed against being with Gemma, there was absolutely no contest. Claiming her outweighed the whole world.

He sat up, swung his legs off the bed. He ran his hands over the place where she'd slept—or at least lain—in between their lovemaking sessions. They hadn't slept until morning, too busy talking and experiencing each other in every way, sensual, sexual, mental. His body, already hard, started to pound at him in demand for her.

He tried to convince it to subside. There was no chance it was having her. Not today. After what he'd done to her—twice—no matter how eager she was, she needed at least a couple of days to recuperate.

He got to his feet. "Gemma?"

Silence. He called again, and this time, when the same absence of any sound or movement answered him, the lips that had twitched at imagining her soaking away the aches of his initiation in his tub tightened with alarm. He rushed to the bathroom, burst through the slightly open door.

He almost slumped to the floor at finding it empty. He was in worse shape than he thought. Being with Gemma had just masked his condition. He'd imagined a dozen macabre scenarios during the minute his calls had met with silence.

She had to be in the kitchen. There was no way she could hear him there. Images of her tousled and glowing from a shower, dressed in one of his shirts or lost in one of his bathrobes filled his mind. And she'd be awkward and swollen in all the places that would make him ache until he could barely speak.

He considered walking to her naked, then pulled on pants. She'd let him expose her to every intimacy, had responded with every fiber of her being, but she was still shy when she wasn't in the throes of pleasure. He didn't want to test her more, for now. He'd already rushed her in so many ways. So what if she'd asked him to? That didn't mean he should be so eager to comply. He was the experienced one here, and he shouldn't behave like an overeager teenager.

Seconds after this self-lecture, he was almost running to the kitchen. *Aih*, he *would* embarrass her again.

The premonition hit him before he stepped into the kitchen. All through his penthouse. The feeling of ... emptiness. Absence.

The feeling became fact in seconds. The kitchen was also empty.

He didn't stop this time. He whirled around and bolted to inspect each room. Nothing.

Gemma was gone.

He stood in the middle of his living room, overlooking Manhattan, unable to process the knowledge.

She couldn't have just left!

She must have had an overwhelming reason for leaving. Maybe some emergency. Yes. That made sense. But ... if something had happened, why hadn't she woken him up? To tell him, to let him help? She knew what kind of power he wielded. If any of her loved ones were in trouble, she knew he'd be the most qualified to help.

Was it possible she didn't realize he'd do anything for her? Was it possible she didn't believe, as he did, that they'd transcended all the conventions of relationship development, had taken a short cut to the highest level one could attain? Or was she so independent that she couldn't bring herself to ask for help because she was determined to deal with whatever problem had cropped up on her own? Or maybe it hadn't occurred to her to ask, in her rush to whatever the emergency was?

*Stop.* He was probably off base in all of his assumptions, was assigning a ludicrous interpretation to something that would be clear the moment she contacted him.

Something else hit him like a sledgehammer.

He hadn't exchanged any contact info with her.

And it was even worse. He didn't know her last name.

Just what had he been thinking last night?

That was it. He hadn't been thinking. Of anything but her, what they'd shared from first sight onward. He had, for the first time in his life, lived totally in the moment.

He'd always held back from fully trusting others, even his closest people, despite believing in their best intentions. He'd guarded himself against the consequences of their mistakes and misdemeanors. But with Gemma, he hadn't only dropped his guard—it hadn't been raised in the first place. He'd not had a moment of doubt. She was the woman he'd dreamed of but never truly thought he'd find.

The one.

And she was gone. After giving him the most perfect night of his life, after giving him herself and a glimpse of a magnificent future filled with an unprecedented connection, she was just ... gone.

*Calm down.* She'd have an explanation, a perfectly reasonable one, for leaving without waking him up. It had to be the only thing she could have done, or she wouldn't have done it. She wouldn't have left him like that if it weren't.

So he should cool it. He might not know her last name or her whereabouts, but she knew his. All he had to do was wait for her.

She'd come back the moment she could.

Gemma didn't come back.

It seemed she'd disappeared off the face of the earth.

He'd thought his security detail would have kept tabs on her. But when they'd seen her leave in the early-morning hours, all they'd worried about was him. They'd called to make sure he was okay, and when he'd answered, what he'd remembered doing only when they reminded him, clearly fine but sleepy and brooking no further interruption, they'd let her go. They hadn't seen any reason to follow her. That had destroyed his biggest hope of finding her, and the hope of doing so was becoming dimmer by the minute.

He'd widened his search until it had encompassed the whole United States. No one had heard of her.

With the evidence suggesting that she'd never existed on American soil, he'd begun to think that she and the enchanted night they'd spent together had been a figment of his imagination. Even with his one proof of her existence—the photo he'd taken of her—everyone insisted they'd never seen her. Everyone his people had questioned had commented that they would have remembered someone like her. And they didn't. As for her name, it rang no bells.

*It was* as if she'd never existed.

An explanation had reared its head constantly during his frantic search. He'd knocked it out of the way, determined not to let it have a hearing. But once he'd breathed again with the certainty that she hadn't had an accident or worse, he found his options narrowing down until they'd dwindled to nothing.

Nothing but that explanation made sense.

There was no escaping it anymore. He had to face it, no matter how mutilating it was.

She didn't want to see him again.

She might have been the woman who'd turned his life upside down, but it seemed he'd been nothing to her but a one-night stand. A man she'd chosen to initiate her nubile body into the rites of passion and unlock her limitless sexual potential. Perhaps he'd seemed exotic to her, a man from a different culture and country whom she could cut out of her life once the adventure was over.

Now that resignation had replaced desperation and he'd given up on the dream of her, there was nothing to fight for anymore, nothing to keep him here.

It was time he returned to Zohayd to confront his duty.

To embrace his nightmare.

“Shaheen.”

That was all his father said, minutes after Shaheen had walked into his office.

It was enough. Disappointment and exasperation blared in the toneless delivery of his name.

Shaheen didn't blame him. He had ignored his father and the rest of the world for the past eight weeks. After that single phone call telling his father he was not coming home as promised, he'd made himself unavailable to anyone. He hadn't explained why.

His father had left him a dozen messages, had sent emissaries to bring him back or to at least get him to explain his renegeing on the decision he'd arrived at only days before.

His father rose from behind his desk, majestic and packed with power and ire and wreathed in the full-blown regalia of the King of Zohayd.

Shaheen held his gaze as his father approached him. King Atef Aal Shalaan made no attempt to hug him as he usually did, but instead stood there, flaying him with his displeasure-radiating glower. His father was a couple of inches shorter, yet broader with more than three decades head start in maturity and responsibility. Shaheen had always thought his shoulders broad enough to carry the weight of the kingdom's fate on them. And that was not to mention his overwhelming presence.

Yet King Atef needed far more than presence to keep the kingdom at peace, to keep his enemies in check and his allies in line. More than ever, he had to appease the most powerful of those who constantly snapped at the heels of the ruling house, demanding their cut of power, prestige and proceeds. And that was something only Shaheen could deliver by sacrificing himself at the literal altar.

His father exhaled, the golden eyes he'd passed down only to Shaheen's brother Harres glittering from below intimidating eyebrows. “I won't ask what made you disappear. Or what brought you back.”

“Good.” Shaheen didn't attempt to temper his terse mutter. His father would have to be content that he *had* come back. Nothing else was his business.

“But,” his father went on, “I'm letting it go only because this is not the time to take you to task over your potentially catastrophic behavior. The reception is in full swing.”

The reception. Aka the bridal parade his father had put together the moment he'd been informed Shaheen was on his way to Zohayd onboard his private jet. He was trapping him into it, before he had a chance to change his mind again.

And there it was, brewing in the main ceremony hall—the storm that would destroy his life. Two thousand people were in attendance, all those with a stake in the marriage and all those involved in the negotiations and manipulations and coercions.

But Shaheen wasn't expected to just flip through the women like he might a mail-order catalog and circle the model he thought most bearable. He was supposed to assess the merchandise in a more comprehensive fashion.

With marriages being what they were in Zohayd—especially the higher you went up the social scale—it was families who married, not individuals. He would have an extended family for a wife. And every potential family was here so that he could decide which one he could best stomach having as a constant presence in his life through their influence on his wife's and children's every thought and action.

“You're not dressed appropriately.” His father's reprimand brought him out of his distasteful musings. “I told your *kabeer el yaweran* what was expected of you tonight.”

Shaheen's head of entourage *had* said his father wanted him to wear Zohaydan royal garb. He'd scowled at the man and resumed staring blindly at the clauses in his latest business contract.

Now he scowled at his business suit and then at his father with the same leashed aggravation followed by the same pointed dismissal.

His father drew in an equally annoyed breath. “Since you’re flaunting yet another expectation, I demand that you at least wear an expression that doesn’t reveal your abhorrence for being here.”

Shaheen exhaled in resignation. “Don’t ask more of me, Father. A pretense that this isn’t torture is foremost among the things I don’t have to give.”

“You’re being unreasonable. You’re not the first or last royal to enter a marriage of state for his kingdom’s sake.”

“And you did it twice, so why not me, eh?” Shaheen knew he was stepping over the line talking to his father, *and* king, this harshly. But he didn’t care. He had no more stamina for observing protocol. “And I *am* here to do it, Father. So why should I even attend this farce at all? Why not spare me this added torment? I’d rather not choose the method of my own execution. I’ll leave it up to you to pick the most humane one.”

King Atef winced at his analogy. “That’s the problem. Many candidates have pros and cons that weigh each other out. It has to be your personal preference that tips the balance in one’s favor.”

“You think I care if I’m shot or electrocuted or cut to pieces? They’re all equal and interchangeable to me. Just pick one.”

“You’re exaggerating now. All your bridal candidates are fine young women. Beautiful, well-bred, highly educated, pleasant. You’ll get to like your bride, and maybe in time love her.”

“Like you love Queen Sondoss? And loved my mother?”

His father’s scowl deepened at Shaheen’s ready counter. The best he’d reached with Shaheen’s mother was peaceful coexistence. As for Queen Sondoss, leashed hostility was all he could hope for on a good day.

“There are Aliyah and Kamal. I believe no one can be any happier than they are.”

“Don’t bring them up, Father. They were already crazy in love when they married. Circumstances just forced them apart, and thankfully, forced them back together.”

His father’s gaze wavered. Then he let go of his kingly veneer.

Nothing remained but the loving father who looked and sounded pained at what he couldn’t save his son from. “I can’t tell you how much I regret that you’ll have to walk in my footsteps. But there’s no way around it. And that is why I’m asking you to pay attention to the candidates. At least you have more than one to choose from. I had no say in choosing either your mother or Sondoss. You may have better luck finding someone who’s compatible with you among the dozen possible brides.”

Shaheen’s teeth ground together. He’d already found someone who was compatible with him in every way.

Gemma had clearly not thought the same. She hadn’t even thought him worthy of a goodbye.

That didn’t change anything for him. He knew now that everything he’d ever dreamed of existed, even if she didn’t want him, even if he could never have her. What were the chances that fate would gift him with another woman who was even close?

He not only believed it wouldn’t, he didn’t want it to.

He refrained from saying anything. His father would have to roll the dice and decide Shaheen’s fate himself.

Finally his father gave up, brushed past him and walked out with heavy steps.

Shaheen watched him, compassion flickering through the deadness inside him.

His father hadn’t had an easy life. Certainly not a contented one. Shaheen had grown up believing that his father had never known happiness or love outside of what he felt for his job and children. It had been only a couple of years ago that they’d found out he’d once tasted that happiness and love, with a woman. Anna Beaumont.

He’d had an affair with her during his separation from Queen Sondoss two years after Haidar and Jalal were born. Then Anna had fallen pregnant, and his efforts to end his marriage to Sondoss had failed. And though it had nearly destroyed him, he’d left Anna, telling her he could never be

with her again, due to the threat of war with Sondoss's home kingdom of Azmahar, and that it was imperative to abort their child.

Instead, Anna had put her baby up for adoption. Shaheen's aunt Bahiyah, secretly knowing about her brother's affair, had adopted Aliyah and passed her off as hers.

It was only many years later, while his father was recovering from a heart attack, that he'd searched for Anna again and discovered the truth. It was a timely discovery, as another flare of unrest in the region could only be resolved if a daughter of King Atef's married the king of Judar. Now Aliyah was King Kamal's worshipped wife and Judar's beloved queen, and Anna Beaumont had become a constant presence in Aliyah's and, by association, his father's lives.

Shaheen believed that had only deepened his father's unhappiness. For he could never have the only woman he'd ever wanted, and as Shaheen sensed, still did.

He and his father had that in common, too.

Shaheen kept his eyes fixed on his father's slumped shoulders as they reached their destination, braced himself as they stepped into the ceremony hall.

Brightness and buzzing seemed to rise at their entry, but he couldn't register the magnificent surroundings beyond the darkness and ugliness inside him. It was reflected on every surface, on every face that turned to look at him.

Suddenly every hair on his body stood on end.

*What now?*

His eyes panned the room, seeking the source of the disturbance that had drenched him. It now felt as if a laser beam was drilling through his gut.

Then everything came to a grinding halt.

His heart almost ruptured with one startled detonation.

There, at the farthest end of the hall ...

*Gemma.*

## Five

Shaheen's mind had snapped. It must have.

He was seeing things.

He swallowed the lump of shock that had lodged into his throat, shuddered as it landed like a brick in his stomach.

He was seeing Gemma.

But he couldn't be. His mind must be projecting the one thing it wanted most, the woman whose memory and taste and touch had been driving him insane and whom he'd despaired of seeing again.

He closed his eyes.

He opened them. She was still there.

"Shaheen, why did you stop?"

He heard his father's concern as if it were coming from a mile away. Gemma, who was at the far end of the two-hundred-foot space, felt mere inches away.

Her gaze snared his across the distance, just like that first time, was roiling with the same intensity, the same awareness. One thing was missing. Shock.

Of course. She was expecting to see him. There was no element of surprise for her this time. But there was more in her expression. Apprehension. Aversion even.

She was that loath to see him? Then why was she here?

The relevant question hit him harder than the shock of her being here.

*How* was she here? In Zohayd, in the palace, at this function?

He felt himself moving again, his body activated and steered by his father's hand on his forearm as he led him deeper into the throngs of people gathered to watch his sacrifice.

Moving forced him to relinquish his eye lock with Gemma. He rushed ahead to gain another direct path to her. But she evaded his eyes now, hid from him.

Frustration seethed through him, questions. The urge to cleave through the crowd, push everyone out of the way till he got to her overwhelmed him. He imagined hauling her over his shoulder and storming through the palace to his quarters, pressing her to the nearest upright surface and devouring her.

It wasn't consideration for his father's guests, the most influential people in Zohayd and the region, that stopped him. It was her avoidance. The knowledge that she didn't want him as he wanted her. That whatever had brought her here wasn't him.

For an interminable time, he believed he responded when addressed, monosyllables that he vaguely thought were appropriate, shook hands and grimaced at eager female faces and fawning family members, all the time trying to catch glimpses of her, desperately trying to get her to look at him again.

At one point, his older brother Harres appeared at his side.

"You look out of it, bro. Got stoned to get through this?"

Shaheen felt the urge to deck him. "And what if I did, Mr. Immune-From-This-Abominable-Fate Minister of Interior?"

Harres grimaced. "I did offer to do it myself again. I told them that, unlike you, I don't care one way or another, and I'd certainly remain neutral in my post since I would never get attached to whatever wife they saddled me with. They still refused."

Shaheen's aggression drained. Harres *had* tried to take his place time and again. He would spare him if he could.

He exhaled. "They know you'd get attached to your children."

Harres shrugged. "Maybe. Probably. I don't know. I really can't imagine being a husband let alone a father." He put an arm around Shaheen's shoulder, gave him a hard squeeze of consolation,

the golden eyes that could have been their father's flaring with empathy. "I would have done anything to spare you this."

Which Shaheen had just thought. "*Aih*, I know."

He again caught sight of Gemma among the shifting crowd, took an involuntary step nearer as if to force her acknowledgment, resurrect her hunger with his eagerness.

"And *I* know who you're looking at. Who would have thought our little Johara would turn out to be such a stunner?"

Harres's words made no sense. Had Shaheen's mind started to deteriorate from the stress?

Shaheen looked at Harres, *seeing* him for the first time since they'd started talking, the juggernaut knight the kingdom had entrusted with its security, and who'd done the best job in its history. An expression softened his hewn, desert-weathered features, one Shaheen had never seen there except around their female family members. A rare gentleness, a proud indulgence.

And he'd thought Harres had said ... No. He couldn't have said that name. Where would it come from, anyway?

He shook his head, desperate to clear it. "What are you talking about?"

"The vision in gold over there. Our Johara ... or I should say *your* Johara all grown-up." Harres gave a nod in Gemma's direction. "You've been looking nowhere else since you walked in. And I can't blame you. I gaped at her for a solid ten seconds when Nazaryan greeted me with her on his arm. Who would have thought, eh?"

Shaheen stared at Harres as if he'd started talking in a language he'd never heard before. "Nazaryan?"

Harres snapped his fingers in front of his eyes. "Snap out of it. You're scaring me."

Shaheen shook his head again. "What do you mean Nazaryan?"

"I mean Berj Nazaryan, our royal jeweler, her father."

Shaheen's eyes slid from Harres's, as sluggish and impeded as his thoughts, followed the direction of his earlier nod.

Gemma was the only one in that direction dressed in gold. Harres was talking about her. And he was calling her ... calling her ...

*Johara.*

The bubble of incomprehension trembled inside Shaheen. Then it burst.

*Gemma was Johara.*

Shock mushroomed through him like a nuclear detonation.

His mysterious Gemma was Johara. Berj Nazaryan's daughter. Aram's sister. The girl he'd known since she was six. Who'd become his shadow since the day he'd plucked her out of the air from a thirty-foot fall.

No wonder he'd felt he'd known her forever. *He had.* He *had* recognized her with that first look, even if not consciously.

And no wonder. She looked nothing like the fourteen-year-old she'd been when he'd last seen her. Skinny with glasses and braces, with no ability to wield her femininity the way girls in Zohayd learned to from a very early age. She hadn't only realized her potential, she'd become the total opposite of her former self.

He'd thought he'd seen every brand of beauty this world had to offer. But she was something he'd never thought would be gathered in one woman, all his tastes and fantasies come to life. And that was just on the surface. Deeper, where it counted most, little Johara, as Harres had called her, had become the woman who'd seduced Shaheen on sight, had possessed him in a single night.

He rocked on his feet with the mushrooming realization. Only Harres's hand on his arm steadied him.

Among the storm tossing him about, he managed to answer Harres's worried question. "No, I don't need air. I'm fine."

But he was so far from fine he could be on another planet. He might never be fine again.

*He'd taken Johara to his bed.*

He'd taken her, in every way, repeatedly.

Just as he thought shock couldn't engulf him any further, his eyes captured her incredible dark ones again. And the final piece of the puzzle crashed down in place. It should have been the first thing he understood the moment he realized who she really was.

He might not have recognized her, but she had known who he was from the first moment. She'd given him enough clues. Her first word to him had been a gasp of his name. She'd later told him all about herself, which had amounted to what he *did* know of her family history, without the names, dates and places.

And when he hadn't clued in, so bowled over by her he hadn't even connected the sun-size dots, she'd chosen to leave him in the dark. The apprehension he felt from her must be her anxiety about his reaction now that she knew he'd finally wised up.

"Now that you've met your potential brides, how is your stomach holding up?"

"Can we give you tips who *not* to choose?"

Shaheen dazedly turned toward the two warm, musical female voices. Aliyah and Laylah flowed to him, hugging him on both sides, reaching up to kiss a cheek each, their exquisite faces brimming with vitality and joie de vivre.

He automatically hugged and kissed them back as the ramifications of what had happened between him and Gemma ... *Johara* expanded inside him, squeezing all his vitals.

"The beauty in emerald over there, the one with the incredible black hair down to her feet?" Laylah pinched his cheek playfully as she turned his head in the direction of the woman she was describing, before turning his face back to her quickly. "Don't even look at her again. Her unbelievable locks will turn to serpents at the first opportune moment."

"And the redhead over there." Aliyah directed his gaze toward the woman she was mentioning with more discreet taps on his cheek. "Run if you ever see her again. She grows scales and blowtorches anyone within a mile radius."

Harres laughed. "If you're trying to make Shaheen feel better about this, you're going about it in bizarro fashion."

Laylah poked a teasing elbow into Harres's abdomen. "Hey, we're saving him from settling on the prettiest flower and being devoured alive."

"So now that you've eliminated the most beautiful flowers, do I surmise you think he should go for the ugliest one?"

Aliyah gave a horrified shudder. "Oh, no, *that* one is just as monstrous, without the advantage of being nice to look at. What's inside is on the outside in her case. In fact, we've narrowed down his choices to two."

Harres huffed a sound of pure sarcasm. "Don't tell me. The candidates with the *least* monstrous qualities."

"Actually they're both pretty decent. One is not as accomplished or worldly as Shaheen would prefer, but we believe she would become so as his wife. The other one is really nice, but doesn't have much of a sense of humor. Again, with Shaheen for a husband, she'll definitely develop one."

Shaheen felt as if he'd fallen into the twilight zone, expected to hear a laughter track burst into the background any moment now.

He cleared his throat. "*Shaheen* is right here." The two women squeezed him again, sheepishness coating their expressions. "Thank you, my dears, for vetting my bridal nightmares as only you two discerning ladies could. Write down your choices and hand them to Father. But if he decides one of the monsters is more beneficial to the negotiations, that is who I'll end up with. Anyway, my life as I know and want it is over. So, as I told Father earlier, one catastrophe with which to meet my end is as good as another."

A pall fell on the duo in the wake of his words.

Horror dawned in Aliyah's and Laylah's eyes, contrition twisting their features. They really hadn't realized how much Shaheen hated this, were now mortified that they'd been oblivious to his own distress and teased him about it.

"Oh, Shaheen, I didn't know you were ..."

"Oh, Shaheen, I didn't realize ..."

Aliyah's and Laylah's apologies stumbled over each other. They fell silent, Aliyah biting her lip, Laylah's eyes filling with tears.

His focus flowed back to its captor, to Gem—to *Johara*. Her eyes darted away the moment his fell on her. She'd been watching him.

A bubble of agitation and elation expanded inside him.

She might be avoiding him, but she *wanted* to look at him and did so the moment she could.

Harres's phone rang.

He answered. After a few terse sentences, he turned his eyes to Shaheen. "I'm sorry to leave you. But something's brewing at our borders. It may take hours or even days to defuse."

Shaheen nodded, accepted Harres's bolstering hug, watched him hug the women and stride away.

Shaheen looked back at the fidgeting Aliyah and Laylah, a calculating smile spreading his lips even as his heart twisted inside his chest. "How about you atone for your sins by granting this doomed man a last request?"

They both jumped, voices intertwining with promises of anything at all if it would make him feel better.

He looked back at Johara, who again turned her eyes away and bestowed a brittle smile on the group surrounding her.

"Remember Johara Nazaryan?"

Both women looked to Johara.

"Oh, yes," Laylah said. "My mother used to drag me away every time I tried to talk to her. Now look at her, flitting around Johara as if she were an A-list movie star."

Aliyah smirked. "It's not only your mother. All our female relatives and acquaintances who never deemed to speak to her or her mother before are falling over themselves to be reintroduced."

Laylah giggled. "Bless their superficial souls. They never acknowledged what a classy, talented woman Jacqueline Nazaryan was, or what a sweet girl Johara was. But now that Johara has become *the* new designer on the cusp of international stardom, they all want to secure a chance to be the first to wear her latest exclusive designs."

"It's amazing to see that they consider their next outfit more important than their husbands." Aliyah's lips twisted. "Their men are about to flood the ceremony hall in drool, and the women can't care less."

Shaheen blinked, noting the people gathered around Johara for the first time. Women who'd treated her with condescension, or at best the dismissive courtesy due to a valuable employee's family member, were now treating her not just as an equal but as a celebrity.

But it was the men's behavior that made aggression swirl inside him. Many were openly ogling her and courting her attention and favor. His muscles turned to steel as every territorial cell in his body primed for a to-the-death fight for his mate.

Yes. No matter what she'd done or how impossible it all was, his body, his very being, considered her his mate. Accepted nothing else.

Aliyah turned back to him. "What about Johara?"

His burning conviction seemed to force Johara's gaze to him. He muttered, low and hungry, "Bring her to me."

Shaheen was about to combust.

With frustration.

It had been two hours since he'd told Aliyah and Laylah to pluck Johara from her new rabid fans and bring her to him.

After a brief surprise, the two women, who clearly weren't aware of the seriousness of the situation that necessitated his making a marriage of state, thought it a brilliant idea.

They thought he *should* flaunt the royal council's decrees and marry whomever he liked. And with their former connection, who better than Johara?

They'd gone after her as dozens of people inundated Shaheen again. He'd fended them off as he struggled to track the two women's efforts to disentangle Johara from her companions.

After sinking in the quicksand of the court's convoluted maneuvers, the two women could only look on as they lost Johara to another tide of eager fans until she exited the hall.

He had no doubt she'd thwarted them on purpose, had escaped. He had no idea where she'd gone, or if she'd even remain in Zohayd.

By the time he'd freed himself, he'd had a choice between interrogating guards and servants and having the news that he was looking for her spread like wildfire throughout the kingdom, or inspecting every guest suite in the palace himself and causing an even bigger scandal for his—and her—father.

So here he was, pacing his quarters, barely stopping himself from driving his fist through a wall.

He couldn't let her avoid him. He had to confront her. If only for one last time.

Plans were ricocheting in his mind, each seeming more ludicrous than the next, when a knock floated to his ears from his apartment's door.

"Go away," he growled at the top of his voice.

He'd thought whomever was unfortunate enough to seek him now had heeded his order when the knock came again, more urgent.

He stormed to the door, flung it open, ready to blast whomever it was off the face of the earth.

And there she was. Gemma. Johara.

She stood there, in the gold dress that echoed her hair's incredible shades and luster, looking up at him with anxiety in her gaze, a tremor strumming those lush, petal-soft lips he'd been going mad from needing beneath his for eight agonizing weeks.

"Shaheen ..."

The memory of that night when she'd said his name, looked at him like that and changed his life forever ripped through him.

He didn't give her a chance to say anything else.

He swooped down on her with the same speed and determination he had two decades ago, when he'd snatched her away from death's snapping jaws. He hauled her into the room, his feet feeling as if they were leaving the ground in his desperation to have her against him, beneath him, *with* him.

Everything merged into a dream sequence. Gemma, Johara, filled his arms, her sweet breath mingling with his, her lips pressing desperately against his own, her flesh cushioning his, her heat and hunger enveloping him.

But questions gnawed at him, eating a hole through his gut as big as the one her disappearance had left in his heart. Why had she withheld the truth from him, why had she left him that way, why had she chosen now to come back, and the most important question of all—had she come back for him?

Nothing came out but an agonized, "*How could you?*"

She jerked as if the words singed her. She wrenched away, pressed her face into the bed. "You're angry."

"Angry?" He rose on one elbow, gazed down at her trembling profile. "You think I'm *angry*?"

"N-no." The tears he could see glittering in her eyes welled, spilled over to drench her cheek, making a wet track down to lips that trembled. "You're way more than angry. You're enraged. And outraged. And y-you have every right to be both."

“I’m none of those things. I’m ... I’m ...” He sat up, raked his hands through his hair, felt close to tearing it out. “I still can’t believe you did this to me.”

“I’m so sorry. I know I should have told you who I was ...”

“Yes, you should have. But that isn’t what I meant. How could you leave me like that? Didn’t you realize how I’d feel? I felt ...” He paused as she hesitantly turned to face him, searched for the words to describe his desperation and desolation after her disappearance. Nothing came to him but one word. It gashed out of him “*Bereaved.*”

She lurched as if he’d shot her. Emotion crumpled her face, and more tears poured from her.

He studied her, paralyzed by the enormity of the distress radiating from her, then he reached for her, even now fearing he’d grab thin air. He groaned his remembered anguish as he pressed her harder into him, lost the ability to breathe as her precious body filled his empty arms, when he’d despaired he’d ever hold her this close again.

“I never intended for any of that to happen.” She sobbed on his shoulder. “I-I only came to the party to see you, didn’t dream you wouldn’t recognize me. But when you didn’t ... when you were ...”

He pulled back to watch her, to fill his eyes with the reality of her, her nearness, threaded his aching fingers into her hair. “Were what? All over you? Out of my mind with wanting you on sight?”

“I never imagined things could go that far. I thought I’d see you one last time before you got married and I no longer had the right to ... to ... I should have told you who I am, but I knew if I did, you would pull back, treat me like an old acquaintance, and I couldn’t give up that time with you. If I’d told you, you certainly wouldn’t have made love to me. So I didn’t, and I-I compromised you. And I had to leave before I did anything even worse.”

Shaheen stared down at her, life flooding back into him.

*This* was why she’d left. She’d thought she had to. For his sake. It had been as magical for her as it had been for him. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, and it had killed her as much as it had him when she’d walked away.

But one thing stopped his elation in its tracks. Her mortification, her self-blame. Setting her straight took precedence over every other consideration.

He grabbed her hands, covered them in kisses. “You’re wrong, my Gemma, *ya joharti*, my Johara. You didn’t compromise me—you energized me, stabilized me. You liberated and elated me. And you were wrong about your doubts, too. I might have hesitated when I found out who you were, mostly from surprise, but *nothing* would have stopped me from taking you. Nothing but you, if you didn’t want me.”

Her tears stopped abruptly, the remorse dimming her eyes then giving way to the fragility of disbelief, relief and finally the radiance of wonder.

His heart expanded, his world righting itself. A hand behind her head and another behind her back gathered her to him, fitting her into him, the half he’d felt had been torn away from his flesh.

“But you wanted me,” he murmured into her mouth, tasting her, plucking at her clinging lips, over and over. “You still want me.”

She moaned, opened to him, let him into her recesses, the most potent admission of desire. He took it all, gave more, one thing filling his awareness. His Johara was back in his arms. And he planned to keep her there, to never let her go again.

He told her. “And I’ll never stop wanting you.”

Johara cried out as Shaheen’s lips came down on hers in full possession. Her world spun in a kaleidoscope of delight, her body in a maelstrom of sensation.

But she wasn’t here for this.

No matter that she’d been dying for him, shriveling up from deprivation.

She dug her shaking fingers into the vital waves of his hair, tried to tug at them, to have him allow her a breath that didn’t pass through both their bodies. Before he dragged her any deeper into pleasure, submerged her into union with him. She failed.

But as if sensing her struggle, he withdrew his lips from hers lingeringly, rose to look down at her, his eyes a mixture of tenderness and ferocious possession. “What is it, *ya joharti*? Your heart is flapping so hard I can feel it inside my own chest.”

“Th-this isn’t why I came here, Shaheen. I just wanted to explain, to say goodbye—”

“There will be no goodbyes between us, *ya galbi*. Never.”

Before she could cry out that there would be, no matter what either of them wanted, he claimed her lips again.

And she drowned. In him, in her need, in a realm where only he existed and mattered. She let herself sink, promising herself it would be the last time ...

“I’m sorry. I did knock. Repeatedly.”

Johara jerked as the soft apology came from far, far away, shattering the cocoon enveloping her and Shaheen. She shuddered, felt Shaheen stiffen above her.

“Get out of here, Aliyah.”

Silence met his growl, then a distressed intake of breath.

“I’m really sorry, Shaheen, but this can’t wait.”

Johara lurched again as Aliyah’s strained words brought the outside world crashing back on her like an avalanche.

Earlier, Aliyah and Laylah had tried to cajole her into speaking with Shaheen. She’d made her escape then, thinking she’d saved him from making more compromising mistakes because of her. But if she’d feared any suspicion of their relationship would tarnish his image and hurt his marriage plans, she’d done far worse now. She’d just given Aliyah evidence.

She lay beneath Shaheen, her dress riding up to her waist, her splayed legs accommodating his bulk as his hands cupped her buttocks through her panties and his hardness ground against her. Her dress hung off one shoulder exposing half a breast that had just been engulfed in his mouth.

Mortification drenched her, all the more so because the arousal coursing through her didn’t even slow down. She wouldn’t have been able to bolt out of the room even if she wasn’t pinned down by Shaheen. She couldn’t move.

She didn’t need to. Shaheen relinquished his possession of her flesh with utmost tranquility, rearranged her clothes with supreme care. Then he scooped her up from the bed and steadied her on her feet, smoothing her mussed hair, gently massaging her worried features.

With one last look of reassurance, one last, lingering kiss, he turned to his sister.

Aliyah looked an apology at Johara. It was clear she did have a paramount reason for being there. One she wasn’t about to divulge in Johara’s presence.

Seeing this unfortunate development as an opportunity to escape, Johara rushed forward to leave.

Shaheen’s hand on her arm stopped her.

“Please, Shaheen,” she choked out, hoping that Aliyah, who’d moved away discreetly, wouldn’t hear. “Let me go. I’ll soon be gone and you won’t see me again, for real this time. I beg you, for as long as I must stay in Zohayd, you must stay away from me.”

She bolted away, gathering the heavy layers of her silk dress in her hands so her stumbling legs wouldn’t snarl in their folds.

She still almost fell on her face when she heard his beloved voice behind her, intense, low, permeated with voracity and finality.

“There is no way I will stay away from you, *ya joharti*.”

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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