

AL-BODARI FAMILY  
BOOK 4

HIS  
*Impossible*  
HEIR

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR  
ELIZABETH LENNOX

# His Impossible Heir

## By Elizabeth Lennox

Register for free stories at

<http://www.elizabethlennox.com/subscribe>

Follow me on Facebook:

[www.facebook.com/Author.Elizabeth.Lennox](http://www.facebook.com/Author.Elizabeth.Lennox)

Or on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/ElizabethLenno1](http://www.twitter.com/ElizabethLenno1)

Copyright 2023

All rights reserved

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Any duplication of this material, either electronic or any other format, either currently in use or a future invention, is strictly prohibited, unless you have the direct consent of the author.

# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt to “The Billionaire’s Temptation”](#)

## Chapter 1

The crowd in the airport was heavy and the noise almost deafening. Between the blinking signs, staff calling out gate instructions, throngs of people heading in a hundred different directions...it was all a mass of chaotic insanity and Amanda was exhausted, flustered, and knew she looked like she hadn't slept in days. Which was true.

Everyone seemed to be in a hurry. Amanda tried to act as if she wasn't entirely overwhelmed, but the constant shouts of excitement, the tears, hugs, and utter chaos made her head spin.

"Where are you?" she whispered to herself. She tried to see around the milling crush of people as she pulled her heavy suitcase behind her. But she was shorter than average and everyone was wearing thick, winter coats, making them appear larger than normal.

The scent of coffee washed over her and she almost turned in that direction, needing a spark of energy to get her through the next few hours. However, Amanda was aware that her best friend since their university days, Emma, was waiting for her somewhere in the airport. The faster she found her, the sooner she could get out of here.

Another announcement came through the overhead speakers, but Amanda was too overwhelmed to listen. Besides, she'd been up for hours, unable to sleep on the overnight flight from Philadelphia to Paris.

She should have told Emma, who had married Crown Prince Rayed el Mitra of Fahre, that she would just get a cab. It would have been easier than trying to find her friend in this chaos.

"Right!" she grumbled as she stepped to one side to let a man rush past her. He still managed to bump her shoulder and knock her rolling suitcase over. The jerk didn't even slow down and she glared at his retreating back for a moment. Unfortunately, the glare didn't teach him manners, so she righted the stupid suitcase and turned around, prepared to continue her search.

"Amanda!" a delighted voice called out over the buzz of airport

passengers.

Startled, Amanda looked around, then spotted her best friend in the whole world waving at her. Emma was literally jumping up and down to see above the crowd.

Relief and happiness replaced irritation and anger. She almost dropped her suitcase, then remembered that the Charles De Gaul Airport wasn't the best place to dump one's stuff.

"Emma!" she called out, awkwardly making her way through the wall of people, hauling her suitcase behind her while hiking her tote bag higher on her shoulder and flinging the shawl around her throat. She didn't care that the wool shawl was nearly choking her. Emma was so close!

Emma was just about to race through the crowd as well, but before Amanda's friend took two steps, the strong arm of her handsome husband wrapped around her waist, stopping her. Amanda smiled as she watched Prince Rayed whisper in Emma's ear. Fascinated, Amanda watched as Emma turned a lovely shade of pink and Amanda knew that she didn't want to know what Rayed had just said to his wife.

Before that thought could fully process, Amanda was in front of her, throwing her arms around Emma. "Trying to run away from your body guards?" Amanda chuckled as she hugged her friend tightly, smiling brightly over Emma's shoulder at Rayed. The big guy merely rolled his eyes, but the love was there too. It was like a physical force between Emma and Rayed. Amanda had felt their love before and was relieved that her friend was still madly in love with her husband.

"She's still getting used to the restrictions of royal life," he grumbled good naturedly.

Amanda laughed and pulled back, holding Emma's hands out to her sides to get a better look at her friend. After a brief up and down, Amanda nodded with approval. "You look wonderful! Married life clearly agrees with you," she told Emma, adding an affectionate double squeeze.

Emma laughed and linked her arm through Amanda's. "You look worn out," she replied, never one to hold back. "Oh, it's so good to see you!" she yelped, adding a few more bounces.

Amanda laughed again and they hugged even more tightly. Emma was more than just a friend. She was the sister Amanda had never had.

She saw the rising tension in Emma's bodyguards and realized what was going on. "We need to get you out of here," Amanda sighed in resignation, glancing at the bodyguards who were trying, unsuccessfully, to blend in with the other airport passengers, but they gave themselves away with their vigilance. Not to mention, the occasional comment whispered through the radios hidden under the cuff of their sleeves and the plastic earpieces that weren't particularly inconspicuous.

Emma looked around at the guards and sighed. "You're right, of course." Her grimace transformed when she glanced up at her husband. "You know, we wouldn't be as obvious if you'd stayed at the penthouse."

Rayed grumbled quietly, then put a hand to his wife's back, urging her towards the airport exit. "Let's go, my woman."

The guards surrounded them and Amanda smiled, shaking her head. "I could have gotten a taxi. There's a line of them right there!" she pointed to the taxis that were waiting outside.

Emma shuddered. "Not a chance. Now that I visit the guard offices and hear about what happens in this world, there isn't a chance in hell that I would let you get into a taxi."

Amanda chuckled and, for the next forty minutes as the limousine drove through the beautiful streets of Paris, Emma and Amanda caught up on everything that had happened in their lives since their last phone call.

"So, when is the book conference?" Emma asked, referring to the reason Amanda was in Paris.

Amanda mentally groaned. She wasn't looking forward to speaking in front of a large group of her peers. "The conference starts on Friday evening and goes through Sunday morning."

"I'm so impressed that the organizers asked you to be a speaker!" Emma gasped, wiggling joyfully in the leather seat.

Amanda shook her head. "I'm terrified!" she admitted. "I don't know why they asked me."

Emma grinned triumphantly. “Because your last four books reached best seller status. Because your books are brilliant! Because you weave a mystery better than any other author out there!”

Amanda laughed, grateful for her friend’s support. “I don’t think any of my stories would have reached that status without your help. When you announce that you’re reading one of my books, everyone pays attention.”

Emma made a sound like air escaping from a balloon. “If the book wasn’t brilliantly written, then no one else would have paid any attention to my recommendation and you know it.”

Rayed had been sitting back, listening quietly to their conversation. But he sat up and nodded his agreement. “I’ve read every one of your books so far and I love them all. When’s the next one coming out?”

Amanda smiled with appreciation for this man who had treated her friend so well. Prince Rayed was...amazing! Smart and funny, charming and relentless. If she ever found a man like Rayed, she’d hold on to him like a monkey hanging over an alligator pit!

Alas, the men she’d recently met online hadn’t...uh...measured up. The online dating world was a dreary, disappointing place.

Emma distracted her by asking about Amanda’s next novel and the upcoming conference. “By the way, you’re coming to a big state dinner thing tonight, so as soon as we drop you off at your hotel, you’ll need to take a nap, but not a long one. Then I’m picking you up again and we’re going shopping. You’ll need an evening gown for tonight.”

It took a moment for Emma’s words to process, but as soon as they did, Amanda’s jaw dropped. “I’m sorry...but what did you just say? A state dinner?”

Emma waved her hand dismissively. “Well, not an *official* state dinner. It’s more of just...well, a party sort of.”

Emma’s evasiveness made Amanda suspicious. “A party...where?” Amanda demanded, narrowing her eyes. “What did you do?”

Emma sighed and Amanda ignored Rayed’s soft chuckle. “Rayed was talking to an old college friend recently and mentioned that he was going

to be visiting Paris. Then someone else heard about the Paris visit and it sort of...exploded. So, some bigwig in the French government quickly organized an...event...for tonight.”

Amanda’s stomach clenched with dread. “Nope.” She forced the dread down and politely folded her hands over her crossed knees. “Not gonna happen,” she declared with what she hoped was a firm tone. “I will be in my hotel room, ordering room service, while you attend whatever monumental gala is on your schedule tonight.” Amanda nodded as if that was the end of the discussion. No way was she attending a political gala or... whatever, tonight! No way!

Apparently, Amanda’s tone wasn’t firm *enough*. Emma’s gaze shifted from wary to pleading. “Oh, please Amanda! You *have* to come tonight! First of all, I’ve already told them you’d come. So, the seating arrangements are finalized.”

Amanda shrugged dismissively, stubbornly refusing her friend’s pleas. “I’m positive that the organizer of such an elaborate and important event knows how to shift last minute details, like seating assignments. I’m sure absences happen at every event and the event organizer will cope with it accordingly.”

Emma sighed and dropped her head. “I know. You’re right. But...” she lifted her blue eyes to Amanda’s green ones. “But will you do it, for me? Will you come just to hang out with me? The food will be amazing,” she promised. “Plus, I can’t tell you how many times Rayed starts conversations about financial issues while I’m standing by his side, my mind going numb from boredom.”

Amanda glanced over at the man in question. He didn’t appear offended by his wife’s commentary on his business conversations. In fact, he seemed downright amused. While she watched, he lifted their twined hands to his lips and kissed his wife’s fingers. Amanda heard the slight intake of breath, watched as their eyes met and held. There was an almost electric fission that passed through the interior of the limousine and Amanda had to look away. The matching expressions of love and lust on their faces were difficult to watch. Especially for someone who hadn’t ever experienced even a fraction of that level of emotion.



Amanda's world was more isolated than Emma's. As a mystery writer, Amanda spent long periods of time alone in the small house she'd bought after Emma's wedding and after the explosion of her book sales.

"So, will you do it?" Emma asked entreatingly, pulling Amanda's attention away from the window. "Will you please come tonight?"

Amanda had never been able to say no to Emma. Ever since they'd become roommates during their freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania, Amanda had been awed by Emma's energy and her passion for life.

Amanda's life was the complete opposite. Amanda was introverted and quiet. Amanda's favorite pastime was sifting through the racks at thrift stores, finding hidden treasures among the trash. Clothes, furniture, and accessories could be found for a fraction of the price at thrift stores. Her entire home was decorated with refinished thrifted items and she adored every inch of her little cottage.

"Yes," she blurted out, surprising herself. Emma's delight caused Rayed to chuckle. She looked at Rayed and they shared an amused glance.

"Excellent!" Emma crowed, bouncing in the seat. "We're here." She glanced through the window at the hotel and nodded her approval. "This is a good hotel, but are you *sure* you don't want to stay with us? There's plenty of room at our house."

Amanda knew that Rayed owned a house in Paris that probably had a bajillion bedrooms, each with their own luxurious bathroom, as well as a fabulous personal chef and an entire staff of dedicated servants.

Amanda shook her head. "Thanks again. But the book conference is here at the hotel. So it will be more convenient for me to attend once the conference starts in a couple of days if I'm staying here." Amanda had explained this to Emma twice already.

Emma grimaced. "I know it would be easier for you," she grumbled. "But it's not easier for me to see you."

Amanda's heart warmed at her friend's grouching. She grabbed Emma's hand, squeezing it lightly. "We still have three days to hang out before the conference starts."

Emma brightened. “You’re right. So go,” she said, wiggling her fingers toward the window. “Have a brief nap and I’ll come get you for shopping later today. Don’t nap too long or your sleep cycle will end up out of whack.”

Amanda chuckled. “Why do I get the sense that you’ve somehow managed to manipulate me?” She pushed the door open and smiled her thanks to the bodyguard standing beside the door, holding her suitcase.

Apparently, someone had called ahead to let the hotel know that she was about to check in because a hotel employee waited just inside the revolving doors of the beautifully decorated lobby. Gold and silver brightened up the space with a massive chandelier shimmering over a round table. In the center of the polished table was an enormous bouquet of white flowers with some sort of gold twirly things sticking out at various angles.

“Good morning, Ms. Thomas,” the tall, beautiful brunette greeted her politely.

After having spent the past fourteen hours traveling in a cramped airplane seat with no sleep and crappy food, Amanda couldn’t help but feel frumpy next to this sleek and sophisticated woman. She even knew how to tie a perfect knot on her silk scarf and how in the world had she gotten her hair to be so smooth? There wasn’t a single strand out of place!

Amanda truly hated gorgeous women. Especially when she was so exhausted and rumped, feeling like she was probably swaying on her feet from fatigue. Oh, and she desperately needed a bathroom!

“We are thrilled that you chose our hotel for your first visit to Paris,” the woman continued with a slight bow. “You are already checked in,” Brunette beauty announced with a cool, sophisticated smile. “Here is your key. There is a bottle of chilled white wine in your room, which was upgraded from a premium room to the Gold Suite, compliments of Princess el-Mitra.”

Amanda smothered a sigh at her friend’s machinations. “Emma,” she whispered with a mutinous glare at the disappearing limousine.

The brunette continued as if she hadn’t heard. “Your suitcase has already been delivered to your room. If there is anything more that I, or

anyone on the staff, can do to make your stay here this week more comfortable, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you," Amanda replied, trying to be polite while, at the same time, trying very hard not to dance around as her bladder protested the delay. After looking around and getting her bearings, she took the key card and hurried over to the bank of elevators. For a moment, she considered using the lobby restroom, but after the continuous hum of the airplane over the past fifteen hours, screaming babies, "courteous" small talk from other passengers and flight attendants, not to mention the chaos of the airport, Amanda desperately needed silence. So, she hurried over to the elevators and pressed the call button, giving up and dancing from foot to foot in an effort to keep her body in check.

Glancing back over her shoulder, she realized that the lovely brunette was still watching. Had Amanda been rude? Subduing her dancing, she tried to appear calm as she waited for the stupid elevator.

When it finally arrived, she nearly mowed down several people who were exiting the elevator. Glancing back at the woman again, Amanda groaned. Yes, she looked like an idiot. But what could she do? Her mind was slowly grinding to a halt, rebelling at the thought of making any more decisions after the past twenty-four hours of rushing around to pack and get to the airport.

The elevator doors closed silently and Amanda sighed with relief, leaning her head back against the mirrored wall of the elevator, staring up at the lights indicating the floor level. When the elevator cab stopped on the fifteenth floor, Amanda gripped her tote bag, trying not to dance with impatience. Her bladder was getting ready to revolt entirely now and she regretted that last cup of coffee on the plane.

It took four tries to get the stupid key card to release the door lock. A couple walking down the hallway peered at her curiously as she muttered several choice words under her breath.

"Are you *supposed* to be here?" the man demanded, his tone brusque as the blond woman with her arm looped through his stood by, looking bored. Mistress, Amanda thought immediately with a judgy tone to the voice in her head.

“This is my suite,” she replied, but she was so tired and her bladder was so angry by now, she might have snarled the words. Thankfully, Amanda was able to tap the key card against the digital box in exactly the right place to release the lock. It opened with a soft snick. She hitched her tote bag higher onto her shoulder, smiled awkwardly at the irritated couple, then pushed through the door.

Once the door was closed, she sighed with relief, closing her eyes briefly. But her bladder knew that relief was imminent and she hurried through the enormous suite, searching for the bathroom.

Amanda had reserved a room with a king sized bed, anticipating being able to sleep diagonally across the bed during this hiatus from her real life. What she hadn't anticipated was her friend upgrading her room to a suite, complete with a living room large enough to hold two lush, down filled sofas and a large coffee table in the middle. A polished dining room table filled up the other half of the large room, surrounded by twelve chairs!

“Bathroom?” she muttered, looking around. She danced from one foot to the other, not sure which of the several doors might be hiding the bathroom.

Quickly, she rushed over to the closest door and opened it. A kitchen? Why did someone need a freaking kitchen in a hotel room?

She shook her head and tried the next. Closet. The third hid a large theater area, with another door that led to a small room with a crib and changing table. When she pushed open the fourth door, she finally found the bedroom and rushed inside.

After finishing in the bathroom and washing her hands, Amanda ignored her reflection in the mirror and turned around, looking for her suitcase. The brunette in the lobby had mentioned that it was already here. With wine?

“Where's the wine?” she whispered, beyond grateful for the peaceful silence after traveling in a throng of people for too many hours to count.

“May I...”

Amanda shrieked at the unexpected voice, jumping back as she pulled her tote bag in front of her like a shield. Looking around, she spotted

a man in the hotel's uniform standing in the middle of the ornate living room.

"Who the hell are you?" she gasped, putting a hand over her pounding heart.

The man looked just as startled, and even a touch offended.

"I apologize, Ms. Thomas. I am here to ensure that your suite meets your expectations. Is there anything I can get for you? Would you like a drink, maybe some coffee or tea? Perhaps some breakfast?" he offered. "The kitchen chef has a waffle recipe that is exceptionally wonderful."

Amanda rubbed her forehead, wishing the man would just...go away.

"No, nothing." She didn't realize how tightly she was clutching her tote in front of her until her fingers protested. "I'd just like...I need to sleep."

The man appeared surprised, but he blanked his expression to a bland, professional smile and bowed. "Of course, ma'am. Please, don't hesitate to call the front desk if you need anything at all. I'm the butler for this floor and would be happy to provide anything you require."

With that, he walked silently out of the suite.

Amanda waited for the snick of the door closing behind him before she relaxed. Dumping her tote onto the floor, she looked around. There was a large bouquet of white flowers, similar to the bouquet gracing the lobby table, but smaller. She walked over to the blooms and touched one. Sure enough, they were real.

"How much would that cost?" she whispered, then looked around. She still hadn't spotted the promised bottle of wine. "Figures!"

Even though she was alone now, Amanda felt...uptight. Tense. Perhaps that was simply because her fatigue had transcended well beyond exhaustion. Sitting down, she leaned back into the ultra-soft cushions of the sofa. They were so plump and soft, they actually puffed up around her face.

Swinging her legs up, she stretched out and grabbed the remote control for the television. Resting the device on her chest, she contemplated

figuring out how to turn on the television. But before she could finish the thought, she fell asleep.

## Chapter 2

“How the hell are you?” Rayed demanded as his friend and university co-conspirator walked into the small salon of his Paris home.

Crown Prince Daniesh from Hadair laughed as he approached Rayed. The two men hugged vigorously, slapping each other on the back with enough force to knock down an average sized person. But these two were taller than average, Daniesh perhaps a smidge taller than Rayed. Their brawn was roughly equal and they measured each other up, anticipating a battle on the exercise mats at some point during their visit.

“I’m doing great,” Daniesh replied. When they pulled back, each man looked carefully at the other. Their features were dramatically different from each other. Rayed had a rather hawk-like nose and a square jawline. Daniesh was more classically handsome, with sharp, intelligent eyes that saw more than anyone realized. “When I heard you were already here in Paris, I came right over. I can’t wait to meet this woman you can’t stop talking about!” He paused, looking pointedly around. “So, where is this beautiful and incredible wife of yours?”

Rayed threw back his head laughing, then clapped his friend’s shoulders playfully. “She is truly extraordinary.”

Daniesh chuckled at his long-time friend’s pride. “She’d have to be if she’s able to put up with you,” Daniesh teased, laughing as Rayed opened a cabinet and pulled out two crystal glasses and a bottle of scotch. “So, where is your lovely wife?”

Rayed poured two generous portions of the scotch, handing one to Daniesh. “She’s out shopping with her best friend. Emma’s friend will be at the dinner thing tonight. You’ll get to meet both of them.”

Daniesh accepted the glass of scotch happily, but eyed his friend warily “Tonight isn’t a setup...is it?”

Rayed chuckled, gesturing to the other sofa, offering Daniesh a seat. “Not a chance. There’s no way that I’m letting you get involved with Amanda. Emma would kill me, which means I’d then have to kill you.” He

took a sip of his scotch, shooting his friend a considering look. “You’ve always been a bit of a playboy, my friend.” They sat down and toasted. “However, something odd has been happening lately. You’ve been rumored to have dated no less than fourteen different women over the past ten months. And none of them seriously.” He angled his head slightly. “What gives?”

Daniesh wasn’t ready to share the news of his latest medical tests. The fact that he was unable to produce a child was still a fresh and bitter reality that he wasn’t ready to face just yet.

“It’s nothing,” he assured Rayed. “Just flirtations. Not real dating and the ladies know it.”

Rayed wasn’t convinced. “That’s not what they’re saying. I read about the fight between Octavia Moreno and Rhonda Slavenko.” He winced theatrically. “I didn’t know that Ms. Slavenko had enough power in her skinny arms to throw a punch like what I saw online last week.”

Daniesh had been irritated by the two women fighting, ostensibly over him. “That wasn’t actually about me, though.”

Rayed tilted his head slightly, then took a sip of his scotch. “That’s not what the reporters are saying.”

Daniesh snorted. “And when have you ever believed anything the paparazzi reports?”

Rayed lifted his glass. “Touché.”

Daniesh paused for a moment, then shook his head. “They were actually fighting about a dress. Apparently, there was some magnificent dress that they had both been promised for the Paris fashion show. The designer was playing the two models off each other, for the extra publicity.”

Rayed rolled his eyes in disgust. “Well, that certainly backfired! There was no mention of a dress or fashion show in the reports.”

“I can’t tell you how thrilled I am that the paparazzi assumed that Octavia and Rhonda were fighting over me. It just excites me to no end!” His sarcasm earned a knowing chuckle from Rayed, who nodded his head.

“Does throw a wrench into the acquisition of a new lover, eh?”



Daniesh snorted. “I don’t need another lover,” he asserted firmly. “I have enough on my plate already. I’ll be focusing on the economic growth of Hadair going forward.” He grinned. “In fact, I had a meeting earlier today with Sincorp. They’ve signed a contract with a leasing company in Campour for their next office site.”

“The hell you say!” Rayed snapped, his glass frozen halfway to his mouth. “I was romancing Sincorp for Farhe, you old bastard!”

Daniesh chuckled and downed the last bit of his scotch. “The better man won.”

Rayed chuckled and they moved on to other economic issues. Neither man was truly upset about the competition between their countries. It was all done in good spirits.

By the time Daniesh rose to leave, they had made plans for new economic cooperation between their countries, maybe even a few investments together. They’d worked together in the past and the results had been profitable for both countries.

“I’ll see you tonight, then,” Rayed replied, walking Daniesh to the front door. “Where are you staying?”

“Last year, I bought a place a couple blocks away,” Daniesh replied, giving him the name of the neighborhood.

“That’s close to where Emma’s friend is staying. She’s attending some sort of book conference over the weekend. She’s speaking at some point, but I’m not sure what time or for what purpose.”

Daniesh ignored the comments about this mysterious “friend”, not sure why it mattered. “I’ll see you tonight, but I won’t be around this weekend. I’m flying to Rome on Friday to potentially invest in a new vineyard. The owner bought up a bunch of land and swears his new way of processing the grapes will revolutionize the wine industry.”

The two spoke about the vineyard opportunity as Daniesh walked to the door. When he left the house, he was eagerly looking forward to the evening. Rayed was a good friend and the awards dinner would be an excellent opportunity to get to know his wife a bit better.

“Welcome to the Dorian Hotel, Mr. Sullivan,” the woman behind the reception counter greeted him. Henry blinked. For a moment, he had forgotten his new name and thought that the receptionist was speaking to someone else. He’d have to be better about that, he warned himself. It wouldn’t do any good to have gotten this far, only for Bubba Hargrove to find him.

“Thank you,” Henry grumbled, then rubbed a hand over his face as if he were tired. “Long flight,” he told the woman, offering exhaustion and jet lag as an explanation for why he hadn’t responded quickly.

“I completely understand,” the woman replied. She tapped on her computer screen. “It shows here that you reserved a premium room with a king sized bed.” The woman looked at Henry and he nodded his confirmation. In reality, he had no idea what kind of room or bed he’d reserved. His assistant had taken care of everything for him.

Rubbing his forehead, he tried to ignore the sudden sensation of heat. Looking warily around, he tried to find the source of the heat, but no one else seemed to be bothered. The sudden sweat breaking out on his forehead bothered him, but he tried to pretend that he was fine.

“Here’s your room key, Mr. Sullivan.” The woman slid a plastic key card across the granite countertop. “The elevators are to your right and your room is on the fifth floor. Please let us know if there’s anything we can do to make your stay more enjoyable.”

“Thank you,” he mumbled, taking the keycard. He turned, grabbing the handle of his roller suitcase and pulling it behind him towards the bank of elevators. His vision blurred for a moment but, after blinking rapidly, his eyesight cleared. Still, he felt heavy and...not well.

Maybe he’d been poisoned?

The thought caused his heart to pound in alarm. Had his boss figured out where he’d gone? Henry wasn’t being paranoid. Working for someone like Bubba Hargrove was profitable, but risky. Mr. Hargrove was the head of a major crime family and didn’t put up with shenanigans from his underlings. Plus, the things Henry had done for Bubba were...well,

“unethical” was prettying up his actions. Embezzlement was the proper term for what he’d done.

Of course, he hadn’t embezzled from Bubba! Hell no! Henry wasn’t stupid.

Okay, maybe he was. Henry smiled politely as he looked around, the heaviness in his chest becoming more intense. Not even the thought of meeting his favorite author, Ms. Thomas, eased the pain.

Pushing on, he ignored the discomfort, glancing at the picture on his phone. He was here to meet his favorite author! He’d come here to Paris because he knew that Amanda Thomas was the keynote speaker this coming weekend. She was beautiful and she wrote the best murder mysteries! Her green eyes and dark hair made him almost regret his nefarious past. Still, Bubba didn’t know where he was. Plus, he’d escaped from that stupid club with a few million dollars. If he was careful, Henry would be set financially for the rest of his life.

## Chapter 3

“No way!” Amanda asserted firmly. “You’re *not* buying this dress for me, Emma!”

Emma laughed and nodded her head towards the sale person who immediately understood her signal. “Of course I’m not. I’ll buy it for myself. But you will wear it tonight.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “I’m *not* wearing this. I have a perfectly acceptable cocktail dress. It’s black and has a pearl neckline. It is appropriate for every occasion, which is why I bought it for ten dollars at that cute little thrift shop we used to frequent back in college.”

Emma clapped her hands, applauding her friend. “Although I am continuously impressed with your ability to find treasures at the various thrift shops around Philadelphia, would you mind turning around and looking at your figure in the mirror?” She paused, waiting for Amanda to spin around on the tiny stage that had been set up in front of a row of mirrors. “That dress is absolutely perfect for you! It highlights your tiny waist and those luscious hips of yours, you look like you should be in a nineteen fifties pinup calendar.”

Amanda followed Emma’s instructions and turned, not ready to concede. However, she couldn’t stop a gasp as she saw her reflection. “Woah!” she breathed, her hands moving to her too-wide hips. However, they didn’t look too wide in this dress. And her breasts were pushed up, nearly overflowing the strapless top. But her breasts didn’t appear obscene.

They just looked...lush!

“Exactly,” Emma replied with a knowing chuckle as she stood next to the raised circle in front of the three-way mirror.

Amanda ran stunned hands over her waist, which really did look tiny. And her hips, that normally seemed too wide and too...well, she preferred the term “lush” instead of “chubby”, looked sexy and sensuous! Normally, her breasts were a real problem when it came to clothing. They were too large and cumbersome, and Amanda usually wore big sweaters and sweatshirts to

hide their size. But in this dress, they looked amazing!

Still staring at her reflection, she turned and twisted, admiring her image from different angles. “How is this possible?” she whispered, turning around so that she could examine her butt. Even her derriere looked awesome in this dress!

“I don’t know how the designers do it,” Emma replied, “but it’s perfect, isn’t it? That green matches your eyes perfectly!” Emma turned to the salesperson. “I’ll take this one as well.”

The salesperson could barely contain her glee as she made a note on the tablet. “Any other dresses, Your Highness?” the salesperson asked.

Emma smiled. “No, I think that’s all for today.”

Amanda started to step down from the circle but a seamstress came out of the dressing room. “How about if we hem this just a half of an inch? That way, you’ll feel more comfortable.”

Amanda instantly shook her head. “No, then it won’t be the right length for Emma. She’s the one who will wear this next time.”

“Remember that red dress that you convinced me to wear to that party? The one where I met Rayed?”

Amanda chuckled, nodding at the memory. “That one was incredible! I’d found it at the thrift store a few days before and…” she laughed. “Remember how long it was?”

Emma groaned. “I was tripping over it all night!” She turned to the seamstress. “Go ahead and hem the dress.” She glanced playfully at Amanda. “Just be glad I’m not forcing you to wear shoes like those red, strappy torture devices you convinced me to wear that night.”

Amanda winced away from the seamstress. “Seriously, Em, don’t mess up this dress by hemming it.”

Emma waved Amanda’s concerns aside. “I’m shorter than you are, so hemming it to your height won’t impact the dress when you’re finished with it. Besides, the palace has an excellent seamstress who can adjust the length when I finally do wear it.” The seamstress looked hesitant for a moment, but Emma nodded encouragingly. With more confidence, the

seamstress stepped forward and knelt at Amanda's feet.

The seamstress looked up at Amanda, a teasing glint in her eyes. "You will have all the men doing this tonight," she teased, her French accent making the compliment seem all the more sincere.

Amanda chuckled, but didn't reply. Men never fall at her feet. It was a nice concept in fantasy, but she suspected that, if a man ever fell at her feet, she'd be oblivious and step on the poor sap.

Everyone laughed and the salesperson brought out delicate flutes of champagne to sip while the seamstress got to work.

The rest of the afternoon was lovely. They dined at one of the famous French bistros for lunch and shared a bottle of wine. Then they spent the rest of the afternoon shopping and, because of the wine, Amanda bought several dresses, not at the designer showrooms but at one of the smaller boutiques. She also purchased a pair of shoes and several body sprays in different scents.

They were laughing by the time Amanda stepped out of the limousine. She had two hours to get ready for the event tonight and Amanda was determined to look her best. She'd be next to Emma and her influential husband tonight so she needed to look perfect! Amanda didn't want to humiliate her best friend at an important gala where the press would be present.

So for the next hour and a half, Amanda showered and put on makeup, then twisted and contorted her body so that she could pull her hair up into an elaborate twist. By the time she finished, Amanda was exhausted, but thought that the final result was pretty darn good!

"You look fabulous, dahling!" she told her reflection, then giggled at her goofiness.

Grabbing the small black purse that matched her black cocktail dress, she stuffed her id, room key, and lipstick into it, then snapped the small clutch closed. The black purse didn't match the green dress very well, but it was the best she could manage right now.

Glancing at her phone to check the time, she knew she'd need to hurry. Emma had texted that she and Rayed were on their way to pick her up

and Amanda didn't want them to have to wait for her to come down to the lobby. There were too many security risks and if she could do something to help keep her friend, and her friend's husband, safe, then she would do it. Especially if it was merely hurrying to meet them.

Stepping out of the room, she checked the time once more, then paused to text Emma.

*"Will meet you in the lobby,"* she wrote.

Emma immediately texted back. *"We're almost to the parking lot."*

"Darn it!" she whispered, then stuffed her phone into her clutch under her arm and, reaching down, slipped her heels off. Then she took off at a run to the elevators. Since the strapless dress wasn't made for running, she had to hold her breasts with one hand. Amanda was pretty sure that she looked ridiculous. However, she knew that she'd never meet any of these people again, so she didn't care what they thought of her.

"Excuse me!" Amanda whispered as she slipped around a familiar looking couple as she hurried down the long hallway.

"Good grief!" the woman hissed, clearly annoyed.

"Sorry!" she called back over her shoulder, not sure what she'd done to the woman. She'd slipped around on the man's side of the hallway. Regardless, she pressed the button and was relieved when the elevator door opened immediately.

The woman waved and called out, "Hold that for us!"

But the couple was only halfway down the hallway. Amanda waved back apologetically and smiled as she said, "Gotta go!" and pressed the "close" button. Ignoring the woman's offended huff, Amanda waited for the elevator doors to close and then shifted the strapless dress back into place, using the mirrors on the elevator's walls to check her appearance. A swift readjustment here, a tuck of hair there and she nodded her approval of her appearance. She was ready! Or as ready as she could be. As someone who spent most of her life alone, with only her computer for company, she might have lost track of what "ready" was these days.

Down in the lobby, she slipped her shoes back on, using her clutch

purse to block her overflowing cleavage so that they didn't make an appearance as she bent over. She stepped out into the chilly night and took a slow, deep breath to compose herself as she wrapped her serviceable, black trench coat around her shoulders.

The limousine came to a stop right in front of the hotel doors and Amanda smiled her thanks to the bodyguard who jumped out to open the door for her.

Ducking into the backseat, Amanda smiled to Rayed and Emma as she settled into the soft leather passenger seat. "You look fabulous, dahling!" Emma drawled and both women laughed. It was the phrase they'd always used whenever the other was heading out for the night during their university and early working years back when they'd lived together.

When the limousine pulled away, Amanda eyed her friends, thinking that Emma and Rayed made a beautiful couple! "Love the velvet cape!" Amanda gushed with obvious envy.

Emma rolled her eyes and snuggled closer to her husband. Giggling, she teased, "Like anyone will notice me when you're walking around with *those* boobs in *that* dress!"

Amanda groaned, pulling the lapels of her coat closer so they overlapped her chest. "This is *your* dress, remember?"

Emma chuckled. "No way am I going to wear that after you've stretched it out!"

Amanda sighed heavily. "You're taking it back, woman!"

"You look lovely," Rayed interjected, halting the back and forth.

Amanda blinked, then smiled brightly at the handsome, charming prince. "Thank you," Amanda replied, sticking her tongue out at Emma who laughed. Amanda turned back to Rayed. "And you look extraordinarily handsome tonight, Your Highness."

"Hey!" Emma snarled mockingly, leaning her head possessively against her husband's arm. "Get your own guy!"

Amanda laughed as the limousine pulled up outside of the hotel where the event was to take place. "Is this it?" Amanda asked, peering out



the window.

Rayed sighed as he peered out as well, obviously not looking forward to tonight's event. "Welcome to our world."

The bodyguards opened the door and Rayed stepped out first. He extended his hand for Emma, and helped her out. Amanda wasn't used to men helping her out of vehicles, so she wasn't exactly sure what to do when Rayed extended his hand to her. She put her fingers in his awkwardly, and stepped out carefully, relieved when she was able to straighten again and was grateful that the trench coat was still covering her ample bosom. She wiggled slightly, pulling the dress up a touch higher.

"Stop it. You look great!" Emma whispered in Amanda's ear.

Amanda grumbled and looked around. "Why are we at the back entryway?" she asked, unfamiliar with royal protocols.

"Because it's safer to go through the back than the front," Rayed explained. "We avoid publicity whenever..." he paused, his eyes narrowing, when another limousine rounded the corner.

Before he and Emma could rush inside to safety, another limousine came to a halt and...!

Amanda's breath caught in her throat as she watched a tall, muscular man step out of the limousine. For a brief moment, Amanda wondered if the tall stranger was a member of the security team. But no, he pulled his tuxedo closed ala James Bond, buttoning up the tailored suit and looking better than chocolate! He was...devastatingly handsome! As his lithe form straightened, his dark hair shimmering in the overhead security lights.

The back alley of the hotel was one of the least romantic places Amanda could think of. But she couldn't pull her gaze from the man. Her heart began to pound as shivers of awareness flowed over her.

For a long moment, she stood there, staring, one hand clutching her ugly trench coat as the man stepped forward. He murmured something to his companion, but Amanda couldn't look away from the man long enough to see who he was speaking with.

Then their eyes met and she couldn't breathe. The dark, compelling

stranger kept coming closer and closer. She felt tingles wash down her arms and her head began to spin, sizzling in a way that was completely foreign to her. Part of her screamed to run away, to hide. And yet, another part was compelled to run towards him, to touch him, just to see if the man was real!

Vaguely, she heard Rayed greet the other man enthusiastically. They did that half-hug thing that so many men had perfected, then slapped each other resoundingly on the back. Next, Rayed introduced Emma to the stranger, Emma's hand extended and...for some bizarre reason that Amanda couldn't quite explain, even to herself, she wanted to rip her friend's hand out of the stranger's grip. She wanted to scratch Emma's eyes out, push her away, whatever it took to get her best friend away from the tall, overwhelmingly handsome man.

The moment was too unexpected and overwhelming for her to understand, unfortunately Amanda didn't have time to come to terms with the wash of foreign emotions. Because now Rayed was introducing her! The stranger, the man with the dark, penetrating eyes and the sharp nose, the hard jawline and the shoulders that seemed impossibly wide...he was smiling at her. Those eyes felt like laser beams and she felt like her internal organs were beginning to boil.

"Ms. Thomas," the stranger greeted her, his voice deeper and sexier than even that Barry White guy. His voice felt like warm chocolate, smoothing over her skin and she wanted to curl up against him and...!

Curl up against him? A stranger? Amanda blinked, mentally shaking her head as she tried to make sense of her turmoil.

What in the world was she thinking? She *wasn't* thinking! She was...reacting! And reacting in a completely inappropriate manner! This was a complete stranger!

"It's an honor to meet you," the handsome stranger continued.

"Yes," she whispered, her mouth feeling numb. "Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you as well."

His hand was hot! Her fingers disappeared into his grip and she felt a jolt of something powerful, staggering, and incredibly overwhelming! For a long moment, he didn't release her hand and she stared up into the depths

of his dark eyes. Something flashed, something intense and unfamiliar, in those dark eyes and she felt another jolt. When she tried to pull her hand away, he tightened his fingers briefly, then he released her hand with a suddenness that almost startled her.

She stepped back, feeling chilled now that the intense heat from his touch was gone. She took a lungful of the cool, night air, hoping to calm herself.

“Shall we head inside?” Rayed suggested.

Emma touched her arm and Amanda felt like she was suddenly yanked back to the present. She looked around, stunned to realize that they were still standing in the back alley. The overhead security lights were bright, almost invasive.

Amanda bowed her head slightly, not sure how to react. Emma gave her a smile that held tinges of knowing triumph, but Amanda didn't understand. Her thoughts were racing, trying to make sense of the past several minutes. Rayed wrapped his arm around his wife's waist and led her inside.

“After you, Ms. Thomas,” the stranger offered, gesturing politely towards the open door.

Amanda didn't know his name! She remembered Rayed introducing them, but she'd been too busy having a panic attack to hear his name.

Good grief, this was embarrassing! What was his name? Fabulous! This was going to be painfully awkward.

“Thank you,” she replied, delicately lifting the hem of her green gown as she stepped into the shockingly bright interior of the building. Blinking to help her eyes adjust to the brightness that lit up the busy kitchen. She stumbled slightly and felt a strong hand reach out to steady her. Glancing up, she trembled at how close the man was. She couldn't seem to get herself to stop shaking in reaction. He was... amazingly powerful. And attractive in that raw, rugged sort of way. He was a leaner version of the Marlboro man, but without the lung cancer issues.

And his touch, as light as it was, still singed her skin even through the layers of her coat and dress.

“I’ve got you,” the stranger murmured, dangerously close to her ear.

Amanda looked up and froze for a moment, too stunned to move. But a pot clanging somewhere close by startled her, and she started moving forward, trying not to trip again. She couldn’t handle the man’s touch one more time. Nope, that was dangerous!

“You can give your coat to the waiter, Amanda. He’ll store it for later.”

Amanda looked up, realized that Emma was speaking to her.

Take off her coat? No, that wasn’t going to happen! Not with this handsome stranger standing so close! She was...well, the cut of the green dress! It was so low! So revealing!

“Amanda?” Emma prompted.

Amanda blinked and swallowed hard before she turned to the waiting hotel employee. “My coat?” she repeated, her fingers gripping the knot on her belt. Suddenly, she wanted to wear the ugly coat for the rest of the night!

Emma gestured to the waiting hotel staff member, her head tilting slightly. “Yes, just...give him your coat. He’ll keep it safe.” Emma was watching Amanda curiously, a suspicion hovering in the back of her mind. In the end, there was nothing she could do but hand over the coat.

Daniesh couldn’t believe how beautiful Amanda Thomas was. She was beyond stunning with her shining dark hair, sparkling green eyes and beautiful, alabaster skin. There was a slight tinge of pink to her soft, petal-like cheeks. Who was she? Amanda Thomas, he thought, saying her name over again in his mind. Amanda. The name suited her.

Quickly, he shrugged out of his coat and handed it to the hotel staff member, then waited while Emma released the elaborate buttons on her velvet cape. Turning, Daniesh stepped behind Amanda, ready to take her coat and hand it over before they moved into the reception. But the beautiful woman was clutching at the coat as if it were a shield. Odd, but his hands were still itching to touch her, to feel her slender shoulders.

She was absolutely incredible, he thought. He wondered why she

was hesitating about taking off her coat until...!

Rayed and Emma didn't hear the sharp intake of his breath, but Amanda did. She glanced at him over her shoulder and Daniesh quickly schooled his features into something more polite and less...aroused!

The miserable trench coat dropped away to reveal the soft swells of the most magnificent breasts Daniesh had ever seen. The strapless green dress pushed those lovely mounds high, making his mouth water for just a taste.

Somehow, he managed to pull himself together and stepped back, handing the coat to the waiter who quickly vanished with it.

"May I escort you into the reception, Ms. Thomas?" he asked, offering his elbow.

She blushed and he was enchanted. He couldn't help but watch as the pink flowed down her throat and kept going to her breasts. Somehow he managed to rip his fascinated gaze away and look up...his breath caught all over again. Her emerald green eyes were even more appealing than her breasts. The corners of her eyes tipped up ever so slightly, making him think of a purring kitten. Amanda Thomas was...extraordinary.

"I don't really know how to...*do* these kinds of events," she whispered nervously to him.

He smiled, delighted at such a golden opportunity. "You put your hand right here," he explained patiently, taking her hand and tucking it into his elbow. "And I get the honor of escorting you around tonight." He leaned in and added, "The only other advice I can offer is to smile and nod as if you know and care about what someone is saying to you. If they think you don't agree, or worse, don't understand, then they will keep talking in an effort to help you understand and convince you to agree with them."

She laughed and he was delighted. Her laugh was light and melodic, plus, her breasts bounced appealingly with every step she took. "That sounds absolutely miserable."

He lowered his head as they moved through the kitchen, keeping his voice low, as if saying something top secret. "These things usually are."

She smiled up at him, those sparkling green eyes making his heart skip a beat.

Someone, perhaps a hotel employee, opened the doors, revealing the lobby filled with guests, and he looked around. He didn't notice the glittering chandeliers or the crowd applauding as Crown Prince Rayed made his appearance. His whole focus was on the slender beauty clinging to his arm.

She took a breath, pasting a smile on her gorgeous features. "The rest of the world thinks this is what a very glamorous life is like. Are you trying to tell me you don't appreciate all of the glittering beauties?"

He didn't even look around. The only beauty he wanted to get to know was the lovely Amanda. "Everyone here has a schtick," he explained. "Everyone wants to see or be seen with the most important person in the room."

Those lovely green eyes lifted, watching him. "And who would be the most important person in the room?" she whispered as they walked through the lobby. Immediately, the paparazzi started yelling, lights flashing as cameras clicked about a gazillion photographs.

"Just hold onto me and I'll get you through tonight unscathed," he promised, patting her hand reassuringly.

"Can you give us a synopsis of your speech, Your Highness?" one called out.

"Will you donate the prize money?" another yelled.

"The report you published is already..." There were more questions, but the man guiding her into the dining room ignored the crush of reporters. Unfortunately, there were even more cameras as soon as they stepped into the event room. The man paused and Amanda stood at his side, worried she looked as stunned and stupid as she felt.

Who exactly *was* this guy? And what prize had he won?

He turned toward her, his dark eyes amused. "You have absolutely no idea who I am, do you?"

Amanda blinked up at him. "You're obviously very important, but other than that, no clue," she admitted candidly.

Daniesh was surprised by how much her honesty pleased him. He'd felt her reaction when they'd been introduced. He'd seen the way she'd reacted when he'd touched her, felt the inexplicable trembling. He'd wanted to pull her into his arms and hold her close, reassure her that he would protect her.

But he couldn't do that. It wasn't his right to protect Amanda Thomas. Nor could he realistically offer his protection. That protection came with responsibilities and duties. Like babies and a future. He couldn't give her that.

So, this was as far as their mutual interest could go, he thought, pushing away the sting of bitterness and resentment.

"Are you going to explain?" she asked, her soft, full lips quirking up into a small, challenging smile.

He pulled her towards him. If he couldn't have everything, he'd take the few scraps she allowed. If she was willing to stand by his side for the night, he'd take it! She was beyond lovely and smelled incredible! Plus, judging from the covert glances he saw, every other man in this room, except Rayed, was envious of the dark-haired beauty on his arm.

"Not a chance," he replied. He heard her soft laughter and wanted to kiss her. Damn, he wanted to do a hell of a lot more than just kiss her, but he'd take what he could get.

"Who do *you* think I am?" he asked, accepting two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter. He handed one to her and watched as she sipped, fascinated by the delicate, tentative touch of her soft lips against the glass. She even touched her sexy, pink tongue delicately to the glass and he swallowed a groan as fresh lust poured over him.

As she lowered the glass, she assessed him. "Well, you're obviously important. I'm guessing from the deference and the bellows of 'your highness' out there," she nodded towards the crowd, "that you're a royal?"

Daniesh shrugged, pretending to watch the milling crowd as Rayed grabbed champagne for he and his wife and came towards the pair.

Rayed interrupted their private conversation with a toast. "To Daniesh!" Rayed announced, lifting his glass high. Daniesh gritted his teeth,

irritated at his friend.

“Right,” he grumbled, then tilted his glass towards his friend the ass before gulping down the contents. Thankfully, a waiter noticed and hurried over, offering a tray full of the bubbly wine. Exchanging his glass, he sipped the next one more slowly.

“Ignore Daniesh’s annoyance,” Emma instructed, coming to stand beside Amanda. “He’s just grouchy because tonight is specifically for him.”

“Really?” Amanda asked, shooting a curious glance at the man in question.

Daniesh looked down into her gorgeous green eyes and wished he could toss her over his shoulder and race out of here. With her!

“It’s not really,” he replied, shrugging dismissively.

Rayed sighed and shook his head dramatically. “It literally is,” he argued, and turned to Amanda. “My obnoxious friend here,” he tilted his champagne flute towards Daniesh, “released a paper on the economic hardships of the poor and how corporate greed and their marketing manipulations intensify poverty. The recent price gouging by several corporations that resulted in record-breaking profits while refusing to use those profits to increase salaries to a living wage has been a hot topic recently. But Daniesh studied the subject in detail and wrote about it. He presented his paper to the United Nations two months ago. Tonight’s dinner is celebrating that report and the steps he’s taken in his country to counter the surge in corporate greed. His new economic policies are already beginning to help alleviate the poverty in his country.”

Amanda looked up at the man with renewed amazement. “That’s amazing, Your Highness.”

Daniesh hated the sound of his title from her lips. When others used his title, he didn’t care. Hell, most of the time, he didn’t even notice. But for some reason, he didn’t like Amanda using his title. He wanted...more from her. More, as in, something more meaningful.

Which was an absolutely unbelievable thought since he’d only just met the woman.



He glanced over at Rayed and saw an oddly knowing look in his eyes. Not wanting to encourage his friend, he turned his attention back to... well, he'd *meant* to casually look around the room. But he couldn't seem to stop his gaze from returning to the slender, stunning woman with dark hair and glowing green eyes.

She glanced at him, and then quickly looked away. Interesting! He also enjoyed the blush that flooded up her neck without reaching her cheeks, which was pretty fascinating.

"Your Highness!" a man called out.

Daniesh sighed mentally as he turned to face the man walking towards him. "Good evening, Mr. Hanover," he said, extending his hand in greeting.

Pierre Hanover was on the shorter side, but what he didn't have in height, he more than made up for in girth. Daniesh wasn't sure how the man didn't topple over, considering how front heavy he was. But he did make an impressive sight in his tuxedo and crimson sash. Daniesh wasn't sure what the sash was supposed to symbolize, but if he wanted to wear one, more power to him.

Daniesh occasionally had to wear a sash, as well as far too many obnoxious medals, whenever there was a formal ceremony at home. In his opinion, both the sash and the medals were a pain in the ass! The corner of the sash constantly got in the way of the required sword and caught on the medals he'd earned through his military and civil service.

Before he could step further into the room, someone called out his name. From that moment forward, he was inundated with people hoping to speak with him. Sometimes, it was just a congratulations, and other times, the person wanted to ask him questions about the study and results.

Unfortunately, the surging crowd caused Amanda's fingers to loosen, then eventually slip away from his arm. She fell into step with Emma and the lovely pair meandered out of the worst of the crowd towards the wall, their heads close together as they talked.

The whole time, he kept an eye on Amanda. Thankfully, Rayed and Emma stayed close, introducing her to the various guests and ensuring that

she was never left alone. Every time he looked over at her, she stopped what she was doing or saying and looked back at him. It was as if she could feel the weight of his gaze.

It was a heady experience, seeing he had such an effect on her. He needed to stop watching her, he realized when, during his last glance, Amanda must have stopped speaking in mid-sentence. The person she'd been conversing with looked around and obviously noticed the connection between them.

Daniesh didn't want the gossip columnists to get wind of his interest. At least, not until he understood his interest more fully.

Then he remembered his problem and stopped, silently cursing his parents. There could be no future with himself and Amanda. None at all!

Still, he couldn't seem to stop watching her. Emma and Rayed generally stayed in one place with Amanda nearby, but there were several men clamoring for her attention. Some of those attention seekers were married men, he noted with increasing fury.

Before he could embarrass himself, or her, by stomping over and punching out the jerks vying for her attention, the bell rang, indicating that dinner was about to be served. Everyone moved *en masse* to find their seats. Thankfully, Daniesh had been given a table for himself and whoever he wanted to invite. Rayed and his wife, as well as their guest, were all seated at his table. So, he was relieved and elated to step up to Amanda's side. Finally!

"May I escort you to our table?" he asked, extending his elbow.

She smiled at him and he felt a jolt. "I'd be delighted," she replied, and put her hand on his arm. They moved slowly through the crowd, most of whom stepped aside as he walked by. By the time they reached the table, Daniesh was thoroughly sick of the whole stupid evening. All he wanted to do was find a quiet place to sit and talk to this amazing woman who set his blood on fire!

As he pulled out her chair, then pushed it in as she sat down, he was able to admire her magnificent breasts from above. His body responded immediately and he considered taking off his tuxedo jacket so that he could

drape it over her shoulders, shield her from other people noticing the same view he had.

But that would still draw attention, he reminded himself. The green, strapless gown fit her like a glove. He should be proud to be sitting beside such a stunning woman.

Still, he wanted Amanda all to himself.

Sitting down next to her, he breathed in her scent. Soft flowers with a hint of lavender. Delicious!

Amanda tried to smile as the waiter set a beautifully arranged salad before her. She tried to eat, but with Daniesh sitting so close to her, she couldn't help being distracted. She pushed the food around on her plate, far more interested in the man than her dinner.

"You aren't hungry?" he asked after the main dish of steak and seafood had been cleared.

Amanda glanced up at him, their eyes connecting with a jolt and she wanted to sigh with...with what? With devotion? That was ridiculous. With need and hope and some indefinable yearning for this completely unattainable man?

Yeah. Definitely!

"The night has been just a little...overwhelming," she finally replied, relieved to be able to tell him the truth. She didn't admit that he was the most overwhelming aspect of the evening.

"It seems pretty tedious to me," he countered. The wait staff brought out dessert, a beautiful sugar and raspberry mousse confection that was more art than food.

She picked up her fork, but hesitated to break the lovely sugar design on top of the molded mousse. "You only say that because this is your world." She glanced at him again, a small smile on her lovely face. "You've grown up with this kind of decadence. But if I were back home, I'd be eating a bowl of cereal for dinner tonight. And if I was lucky, there would be a carton of cherry vanilla ice cream in the freezer, waiting for me." She

grimaced. “No, not cherry vanilla. Some other flavor.”

“You don’t like cherry vanilla?” he teased, cracking the spun sugar design with his spoon. The pieces of the sugar shattered over the top of the mouse, looking like tiny pieces of shimmering goodness among the tart raspberry mousse.

She forgot to smother her groan. “I absolutely *love* cherry vanilla ice cream. It’s my favorite.”

“But?” he asked, a dark eyebrow lifting in inquiry, prompting her to continue.

She grimaced. “Only the top half of the carton is truly cherry vanilla.”

He was just about to scoop up a bite of the dessert but paused, startled and baffled by her comment. “Why only the top half?”

Amanda paused to shatter her own spun sugar top before answering. “Because the manufacturers of cherry vanilla ice cream only put cherries on the first inch or so of the container. Once you eat those initial cherries and get to the middle or, even worse, the bottom half, the cherries become scarce and they are only bits and pieces of a cherry.” She took a bite, then closed her eyes, sighing at the amazing tart-sweet flavors. “Oh my, this is wonderful!”

“So, you’re saying that the cherry vanilla ice cream makers cheat customers out of cherries?”

She smiled, appreciating that he was teasing her. It was a silly topic, but it still infuriated her every time she got her favorite flavor of ice cream.

She carefully set her spoon down beside the decadent dessert. “I feel as if the manufacturers of ice cream are lying. The top layer is false advertising. If they are going to put big, delicious cherries at the top of the container, there should be a similar number of cherries spread evenly throughout the container. To only put the cherries at the top, and the small crumbs of cherries at the bottom, is lying to the consumer. It sets false expectations.”

His lips quirked in amusement. “So, you don’t buy cherry vanilla ice

cream?”

She sighed and made a face. “No. I buy it every time. Because every other flavor leaves me disappointed.”

He shrugged slightly, smothering his laughter now. “So, the manufacturers don’t need to change anything. They can continue to cheat consumers.” He pointed his spoon at her, still teasing her. “Until consumers organize and protest, stop buying cherry vanilla, and demand that the manufacturers evenly distribute cherries throughout the container. Then they’ll get the picture and comply with your demands.”

She laughed, as he’d meant for her to do. “Then we’re risking the manufacturers assuming that cherry vanilla ice cream is no longer a popular flavor. If they completely discontinue the flavor, then what will I do?”

He leaned forward slightly. “I suppose you’re going to have to find a new favorite flavor. Something that leaves you more satisfied. A dessert that satisfies you from the beginning of the experience all the way to the end, as it should.”

Were they still talking about ice cream? Because it didn’t sound like it! Being satisfied from the beginning to the end...that sounded like... something more than ice cream.

Amanda swallowed hard, her thoughts spinning. But she couldn’t manage a pithy response. Satisfaction? She’d love to be satisfied. Would he be willing to satisfy her?

“I think that...!” She paused. Thinking? What was she thinking about? Thoughts weren’t actually...thinking! Her brain was stuck on a series of images, all of which centered around him...satisfying her. And then Amanda could ...satisfy...him...all the way to the end! From beginning to end!

The microphone squealing on the stage broke through the sudden tension pulsing between them. Amanda looked around, startled to find the room still filled with people in glittering evening gowns and tuxedos.

“Please welcome, His Highness, Crown Prince Odenton of Quarati, ladies and gentlemen!”

The thunderous applause startled Amanda all over again. She glanced over at Daniesh and stared as he stood up, buttoned his tuxedo jacket, then strode confidently up to the stage. He took a moment to thank the person who had announced him, who murmured something that made Daniesh chuckle. They shook hands and Amanda wondered what the announcer had said.

There was a crystal thing on the podium. Was that an award? Like an Oscar or an Emmy statue?

Emma sat in Daniesh's seat, leaned in and whispered, "He's been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the economics of poverty."

Amanda's jaw dropped. "Oh wow. Seriously?"

"Absolutely," Emma replied with a secret smile. "He's *that* good!"

Amanda listened as Daniesh spoke. He was funny and articulate, keeping a rhythmic cadence that captured everyone's attention. Had he written the speech? Or had he hired someone to write the profound and humorous words?

It didn't matter. The way he spoke, the way he delivered the speech was magnificent. Daniesh had the crowd on the edge of their seats, waiting eagerly for whatever he was going to say next.

He was amazing!

When the speech ended, Amanda jumped up, applauding enthusiastically. Daniesh scanned the room until his eyes landed on her and he smiled. Several heart flips and stomach flutters later, he returned to their table.

"That was wonderful," she whispered, smiling up into his eyes. "You're an exceptionally good public speaker."

"Comes from years of practice," he replied, taking her hand. "Dance with me?"

As he spoke, the doors to the next room opened up. Amanda was surprised to find a smaller room where the lights were dimmer. A band was playing off to the side and there were several bars set up around the edges of

the room. Lines were already forming for drinks, and several couples were making their way out onto the dance floor.

Amanda allowed herself to be led onto the dance floor and she stepped gracefully into his arms.

Unfortunately, she couldn't think of anything to talk about. He was a prince. He was *literally* royalty. Plus, he wasn't just any prince. He was next in line to rule a freaking country! Okay, so there were rumors that his brother's wife was pregnant, which would push him back in the line of succession. But still! The man was a freaking *prince*!

Trying to remember the bits of news she'd read, Amanda focused on the easiest bit of gossip. "When is your niece or nephew due?" she asked.

"Lila's baby is due in about six weeks. I'm not exactly sure though."

She spun with him on the dance floor, impressed with his graceful dancing skills. "Will you be upset if the baby is a boy?"

He tilted his head quizzically. "Why would that upset me?" he asked.

"Because you will be pushed back in the line of succession?"

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "That's actually a benefit. I don't want to rule Quarati. I want to keep doing the economic stuff. I prefer the financial aspect of helping my people. It's what I'm *good* at. I understand economics and numbers." He spun her, ostensibly to keep her from being bumped by another couple, but then he pulled her closer, their bodies brushing together sensuously. "I am more than happy with leaving all of the other stuff to my brother."

"You don't help out in other ways?"

He shrugged slightly. "My brother and I discuss some of the more important policy issues together. And he comes to me when he needs advice. But for the most part, I run the financial issues and my brother does the rest." He grinned. "It seems like a fair trade to me, don't you agree?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Not a chance."

He chuckled as well. "Actually, I don't either. He has a heavy load

to bear. It's not something I would ever want on my shoulders, but if something *were* to happen to him, I'd absolutely step in until my nephew comes of age."

"That's very generous of you. But, it would mean giving up so many things that you love, wouldn't it? Plus, the freedom that you currently enjoy would be significantly diminished."

"Everyone has to sacrifice. People who don't have a lot of money might struggle with financial issues, but they still have the freedom to walk down the street whenever the urge strikes them."

"You don't have that freedom?"

"Not a chance. But I have a private plane and servants. I can't visit any country whenever I want, but I don't have to clean toilets." He shrugged dismissively. "It's a balance. Everything has pros and cons."

"Sounds like you're a bit more adept at calculating the pros and cons of complex issues than I am, so I'll have to take your word for it."

"You don't want to know how it works in reality?"

She tightened her grip on his shoulder as he spun her again. Laughing, she felt as if she were dancing on a cloud.

"You're beautiful when you laugh, Amanda," he murmured.

Something melted within her and she smiled up at him. "I have to admit, tonight was much more...amazing than I'd anticipated. I'm very impressed with what you do and how you think, Your Highness."

He lowered his head and she would have sworn that he was about to nip at her earlobe. Instead, she heard him whisper, "I thought I told you to call me by my first name."

She smiled, shivering slightly. "Yeah, well, that was before I realized what a very important person you are."

"I'm no more important than the next guy."

"I doubt that."

He shrugged dismissively. "To some people, I'm not important at all."



“I’m guessing that everyone would consider you to be a very important person.”

“I think that you are...now alone with me, in a dark place.” His voice dropped further. “What are you going to do about that, Ms. Thomas?”

She laughed, feeling surprisingly daring. Looking around, Amanda realized that he’d led her out onto the wide, stone patio. The night was dark, but the lights from the ballroom’s windows shimmered onto the stones. Further out, she could see the trees and darkness, but she felt...safe with him.

Amanda slipped out of his arms, walking over to the decorative balustrade. Feeling brave, she leaned back against the support, turning to gaze up into his dark eyes. “I’m going to pretend I’m Cinderella tonight. I’m going to flirt with the handsome prince and enjoy every moment of tonight before my carriage turns back into a pumpkin.”

He stepped closer, his tall, muscular body blocking out the lights from the ballroom. “Would this add to your enjoyment?” he offered, but before Amanda could define what “this” might be, he took her into his arms and kissed her deeply.

She didn’t even consider hesitating. She went up on her toes, returning his kiss with interest. This man was...extraordinary! He made her feel special. And she knew that dozens, maybe hundreds, of other women had probably experienced this bliss in his arms, but she didn’t care. Not tonight! Tonight was...magical and all hers!

Danesh pulled Amanda closer, her soft curves pressing against him and her even softer lips opening for him. He’d meant to give her just a small kiss, something to put a smile to her face. But she was so damn lovely and that dreamy, amazing smile urged him on.

For a brief moment, his gut warned him that kissing Amanda would be a bad thing. She was too beautiful, too soft, lovely, and innocent in the ways of his world. Plus, she was dangerous to him. To his self-control, which had already been tested tonight. Hell, his self-control had vanished the moment he’d seen her step out of the coat, revealing that stunning green

dress.

His cynical nature had been silenced. When she'd smiled up at him with that starry-eyed happiness shining in those stunning eyes, he'd been unable to hold back. Touching her had become just as necessary as breathing. He'd known that his body language had been possessive all night, and he didn't care.

Kissing her, feeling her body shift against his, blurred his common sense. In the back of his mind, Daniesh knew that Amanda wasn't the kind who would appreciate a brief, meaningless fling. And Daniesh also knew that any sort of intimacy with her wouldn't be brief, let alone meaningless. And because of his limitations, he should step away from Amanda. He should walk away and let her find someone who could give her the children and family that she deserved.

But the thought of her going to another man goaded him further. She opened her mouth to him and those soft, delicate fingers caressed the back of his neck. He wanted to roar with need and triumph. Instead, he literally lifted her up and carried her deeper into the shadows.

His hands skimmed over her back and waist, but the damn dress had some serious infrastructure. If he were thinking more clearly, he would have known that a strapless dress would need a great deal of strength in order to support Amanda's magnificent breasts. However, as her lips moved against his and he felt her sweet tongue dancing with his own, he couldn't think. Daniesh was in reaction mode now.

She moaned and the sound spurred his need higher. Pressing her back against the wall, he angled her head slightly, wanting to deepen the kiss, to devour her whole!

Sanity was a tricky thing to focus on when Amanda was in his arms, but a tiny bit of control returned when he heard voices. They weren't close, but the fact that he and Amanda weren't completely alone reminded him that being caught with a woman in his arms would be a bad thing.

Plus, Amanda deserved better! She deserved someone who could fulfill her dreams. He couldn't be that man!

Reluctantly, Daniesh pulled away, but he couldn't stop touching her.

For a long, wonderful moment, he watched as she collected herself and licked her lips, almost as if she was savoring the taste of him. It took every ounce of self-control he had left to keep from kissing her again.

Then Daniesh felt her soft, sweet sigh and he groaned. The sound must have startled her because her eyes popped open. She stared up at him with shock and something he couldn't quite define.

She shook her head slightly and pulled her shoulders back and then nodded as if in response to an inner thought.

“Right!” she whispered and started to step backwards, but since she was against the wall, there wasn't space. She looked around and decided to step to the side, but his hands were still on her waist and he held her still.

“Don't leave me quite yet, Amanda,” he urged, needing her to...well, to stay in place because he wanted her close, but also to hide his arousal. His body had never gotten so out of control before and he was struggling to hide his rock hard reaction to their kiss.

“But...,” she peered around his shoulder and he swallowed a chuckle. “Shouldn't we...uh...head back inside?”

He swallowed hard and looked up at the sky. “Just...give me a moment, please.” When he looked down at her, he suspected she was blushing, but he couldn't be sure in the dim light “Just...,” he contemplated kissing her again. Her lips were swollen, tempting him back for another long, lingering kiss. “No. We shouldn't.”

“We shouldn't?” she whispered. Her pink tongue darted out, licking her lips again. He wanted to suck that tongue into his mouth, to taste her and feel her tremble against him again.

He grinned, amazed at how good she made him feel. Amanda Thomas was...delightful. When had he ever applied that term to a woman before? Never, he thought with a mental chuckle.

“You're so beautiful, Amanda,” he growled.

A sudden sadness dimmed her previously sparkling eyes. “There's a 'but' in that sentence,” she replied quietly and stepped to the side.

He released her waist, but grabbed her hand. “There's no but,

Amanda. You're lovely."

Daniesh watched as she looked around, taking a slow, deep breath. Was he a bastard for noticing the delicious swells of her breasts? Probably. Did he care? Was he going to stop watching?

He wasn't sure he could. Watching Amanda was like music. She was lovely and fascinating.

"We should go back inside," she announced with an upward jerk of her adorably stubborn chin. Her eyes had shuttered and he hated that he'd caused it. However, he also knew she was right. Since this ridiculous dinner was supposedly in his honor, people would wonder about his absence. Of course, when he escorted Amanda back inside on his arm, they would know immediately what he'd been up to.

For some reason, that made him feel a little better. Amanda's lips were swollen and, despite her best efforts, she still appeared to be slightly mussed up and off-balance. He'd done that. He'd put that need into her eyes. He'd aroused her lust!

Taking her hand, he pulled her against his side. "Let's return to your friend. I'm sure Emma is wondering where you've gotten off to, having been gone so long."

"It wasn't *that* long," she replied, straightening her shoulders. The slight movement brought his gaze back to her lush cleavage. He was going to hell, Daniesh thought, forcing his eyes to look away as he led her back into the room.

The noise inside the smaller ballroom was nearly overwhelming. Now that dinner was over and the tedious speeches finished, the guests were mingling, chatting loudly over the music and the alcohol was flowing more freely.

"I should go back to Emma," Amanda said. He leaned down, in part to hear her, but also because he wanted to hold her, wanted to feel her lean into him.

"They are over there," he pointed towards the far corner where Emma and Rayed were standing, surrounded by a group of people. A year ago, he would have assumed that everyone there was vying for Rayed's

attention. But after Emma's journalistic revelations last year about that corrupt governor, he suspected that many of the people were trying to speak with Emma. She had become a bit of a celebrity. What most people didn't know was that she was still writing and investigating. She was just more subtle and careful about it now. Plus, she had begun publishing her investigative efforts under a pen name.

She was incredible, but he thought Amanda was even more interesting.

"How do you come up with the plots for your mysteries?" he asked, unwilling to relinquish her company just yet. He guided her towards Emma and Rayed, but because the group was so large, they stayed out on the fringes. That suited his purposes, since he wasn't ready to enter the fray. Daniesh wanted to find a more private place to sit and talk with Amanda. He wanted to know everything about her.

Amanda flushed at Daniesh's question, wondering if he was sincere. Was he just a player? A womanizing jerk who tempted women into his bed every night? Because as far as she could tell, he was too good to be true. That kiss on the terrace...it had been unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

Looking up at him, she didn't get the playboy vibe. In fact, his eyes seemed to be shielding some sort of hurt. She couldn't quite figure him out. He was so tall and shockingly handsome. Not to mention, powerfully built. His dark hair and dark eyes were a sensuous promise. But now she knew that he kissed like the devil, tempting her in the most shocking ways! He'd been the one to stop their kiss outside. If he hadn't pulled back, what would have happened?

She blushed at the flood of images that popped into her head.

Amanda looked up at him, trying to remember what he'd just asked. "Ideas?"

He grinned, then glanced around at the surrounding crowd. He stepped closer, shielding her from the crush of people. "Yes. You don't look like the murderous type. So, how do you come up with ideas for your books? What inspires you?"

Amanda's heart warmed with his words. "Readers ask me that question all the time," she said.

"And what's the answer?"

After giving him a shy grin, she shrugged and admitted, "I don't know, actually." Amanda noticed his eyes drop to her breasts. It was just a brief glance, but she caught it. When his eyes returned to her face, she felt the heat emanating from him and that, in turn, heated her up.

He inched closer, but Amanda would have sworn that he hadn't physically moved. He was just...there! Her breath caught in her lungs and it took every particle of her being to keep her hands at her sides instead of reaching for him.

"So the stories just...come to you out of nowhere?" His tone was lower, huskier now.

Books. Plots. Yes, that was a safe subject. It was like work! Almost. Amanda never considered the writing part of her job to be work.

Concentrating on his eyes, not allowing her gaze to drop to his lips... again...she forced herself to reply. "The plots are just there, in my head. All the time," she explained. "Several years ago, I was surprised to discover that the entire population didn't have stories constantly running through their minds. All the time. Every moment of the day." She grinned at his confusion. "Yes, I am continually coming up with book plots or ideas for scenes. I like to sit on a bench, watching people pass by and my head conjures up ideas, either for how someone will eventually be murdered by the person walking behind them, or the thoughts of the person walking behind someone as they contemplate murder." She grimaced, her mouth pulling outward. "I know it's a bit gruesome. And I promise, I don't *actually* contemplate how to murder someone. In fact, I'm one of those weird people who takes spiders out of my house instead of smashing them."

He threw back his head, laughing and the rich sound of it warmed her soul.

When he looked at her again, she was still smiling.

"So, you go through life plotting how to murder random strangers."

His comment startled a laugh out of her. “Oh, goodness!” she gasped, putting a hand to her chest, unaware of how several men looked lingeringly her way. “That makes me sound like a serial killer.”

Daniesh grinned, shaking his head. “Not a serial killer, a writer.”

She contemplated his word choice for a moment, then nodded. “Well, I suppose that I do that, then. Yes. I’m constantly thinking up new plot twists.”

He leaned in and she pretended that he was fascinated with her. For just one night, she wanted to think of herself as a fascinating person instead of the reality. The truth was, Amanda was someone who woke up and drank gallons of coffee, then showered and pulled on a pair of leggings and a sweatshirt to write in her little cottage home. All. Day. Long. It was rare that she ventured out into the world, except when she needed to restock the fridge. Or get more wine.

And even the need to go out for more wine might end soon since she’d discovered a vineyard in California that she absolutely adored *and* they shipped wine! By the case! Amazing!

Wait. No, that wasn’t healthy. She was trying to get out into the world more. She shouldn’t order from the vineyard. She should force herself to drive the five minutes to the store and interact with humanity.

Hermits were not attractive, she reminded herself, not for the first time.

“So what’s your process for nailing down one specific plot?” Daniesh asked.

Amanda eyed him warily. “Do you really want to know? Or are you just being polite?”

He chuckled and she felt his hand move to the small of her back. “Ah, Amanda, if you knew me better, you’d know that I am *never* polite.”

She laughed and, for the next thirty minutes, they talked about the process for developing story ideas into books. As they talked, the rest of the world faded away. The noise created by the other guests was just a faint buzz in the back of her head. And eventually, the conversation shifted from how

she developed plots to how he sniffed out good investment opportunities and what criteria he used to evaluate companies that are interested in investing in his country.

So it was a surprise when Emma and Rayed joined them, looking worn out.

“Are you ready to call it a night?” Emma asked, looking between Amanda and Daniesh.

Amanda looked around, startled to discover that nearly all of the other guests had departed. “Oh my!” she gasped and turned, looking up at Daniesh. “I’ve kept you from mingling. I’m so sorry!”

He took her hand, pulling her back to his side. “You saved me from the tedium of talking with a bunch of boring people.”

She smiled, charmed in spite of herself, even if she didn’t completely believe him. “Well, thank you,” she said adding a small curtsy. “I know I’ve monopolized your time and attention tonight, but I’ve enjoyed myself immensely.”

“I would be honored to see you home,” he offered.

Emma opened her mouth, and Amanda knew exactly what her best friend was about to say. “No need,” she interrupted before Emma could say anything. “Emma and Rayed were going to take me home, but my hotel is in the opposite direction from their place. So, I’m taking a taxi home.”

“Nonsense,” Emma replied. “There’s no way that we’re letting you take a cab in an unfamiliar city.”

“She’s staying at the Dorian,” Rayed said to Daniesh. “Isn’t that your direction?”

Amanda took a breath to protest, but words failed her. Especially when Daniesh immediately nodded. “Yes. I would be honored to see her safely back to her hotel.”



## Chapter 4

Amanda trembled as she stood awkwardly beside the door to her suite. “Thank you for a...um...wonderful evening, Your...,” She paused when he lifted a dark eyebrow, and corrected herself. “Daniesh. I’m very impressed with your award. I’m sure that it will—”

Amanda’s words halted as his mouth covered hers. He stepped closer, pulling her against his chest as he deepened the kiss and she nearly fainted from the flood of intense desire. The awkward walk down the hallway, the irritating boning in the support system of her dress that kept poking her, the bright, overhead lights in the hallway...every irritant vanished. The whole world disappeared except for Daniesh. He cupped her head with one hand while the other curled around her waist, the feeling of his hard chest brushing lightly against her breasts and the tingling that raced over her skin as his mouth moved sensuously over hers.

His mouth caressed, his teeth nipped, and when she gasped at the unexpected sensation, his tongue met hers, coaxing her mouth to more fully participate in the kiss. It was erotic and...somehow innocent. He didn’t touch her anywhere other than her lips and with his hands, but she felt him echo through her, all the way down to her toes!

Unfortunately, he pulled back far too soon, gazing down at her. She could feel his erection throb against her stomach, but before she could react, he resolutely stepped back.

“Thank you, Amanda. I wasn’t looking forward to tonight. However, you made the evening incredibly enjoyable.”

And then he bent down and picked up the key card that she must have dropped during their kiss. With a swish, he released the locks on the door and pushed it open for her. “Sleep well, *jamila*.”

He handed her the key card with a final smile and walked away.

Amanda smiled dreamily, as she half danced into the hotel room and closed the door. That man was...beyond incredible!

## Chapter 5

The scream shattered the silence and it took Amanda several moments to realize that *she* was the one screaming! She screamed while backing frantically away, not sure if her eyes were playing tricks on her. Yes, that had to be it. This *had* to be a dream!

No, a nightmare. Yes, this was just a nightmare!

Suddenly, Amanda realized that she'd closed her eyes. Opening them reluctantly, she stared down at the man lying on her carpet, trying to make sense of the trickle of blood that had dribbled from the wound in the middle of his forehead. A gunshot wound! Yes, she knew that much, at least.

Fumbling, she searched for something, not really sure what. But the hotel phone tumbled to the floor. She bent down, pressing her back against the wall in a futile effort to get away from the dead man. The wall didn't cooperate with her efforts and she could barely speak when someone greeted her with a friendly, "How can I help you, Ms. Thomas?"

How could someone sound so friendly when there was a dead body in her living room?

"Dead!" she muttered, trying to speak through numb lips. She took a breath and tried again. "Dead body!" she gasped. "Dead! Help! Dead body!"

There was a pause, then the receptionist asked, "Ms. Thomas, are you saying there is a dead body in your suite?"

"Yes. Dead. Help!"

The friendly voice disappeared, replaced by a much more efficient voice. "Ms. Thomas, this is Jordan Effeson, the night manager. Could you repeat what you just told my staff member?"

"Dead body!" she shrieked, clutching the phone with a white knuckled grip. "Help! Dead body!"

Daniesh was whistling as he walked through the lobby. He didn't notice the massive flower arrangement or the elegant décor in the lobby. It was well past midnight and he wanted...to go right back upstairs and make love to Amanda. She was...glorious! Her smiles and enthusiastic conversation had made the evening so much more endurable. No, more than endurable. She'd made the evening fun!

He chuckled as he thought about how she'd whistled and clapped after his speech while everyone else in the room merely applauded politely. He'd looked so astonished by her break in high society protocols, but had only chuckled at the awkward moment and sat down.

Apparently, Ms. Amanda Thomas came from a far more exuberant background.

There was a commotion behind the receptionist desk. He glanced in that direction, but didn't concern himself with whatever guest crisis was happening.

"Home, Your Highness?" his chauffeur asked as one of his guards stood beside the door of the limousine.

"Definitely," he replied. There was a distant sound of sirens in the background, but Daniesh ducked into the back, inhaling the lingering scent of Amanda's soft perfume. Thankfully, she didn't wear that cloying, miserable scent that so many women thought was enticing. Amanda chose a light, floral scent that made him smile.

The limousine drove away and he peered out at the quiet streets. Normally, the streets of Paris were clogged with traffic. It was such a dramatic change to see the streets clear of the normal congestion. It took only a few minutes to get back to his house. Once in his bedroom, he got ready for bed, then stretched out on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, wondering what Amanda was doing. Was she staring up at the ceiling, thinking of him? Or was she building another plot line? Was he going to be the next person she 'murdered'?

He chuckled at the possibility.

Then he remembered his condition.

Amanda...she wasn't for him. No woman was for him! Amanda

was young and beautiful and definitely wanted children. Unfortunately, he couldn't provide her with children. He couldn't give her what she needed most.

## Chapter 6

“And you’re telling me that you don’t know the man?”

Amanda huddled in the uncomfortable chair of the scary police interrogation room, pulling her black trench coat closer around her. “I’ve never seen the man before in my life,” she asserted for the tenth time. Why did these detectives not believe her?

“You just arrived back at the hotel and found a dead body lying on the floor with a copy of your book in his hands?”

“Yes,” she sighed, exhausted, hungry, and overwhelmed. Plus, she desperately wanted to change out of this ridiculous dress! There was something poking into her back and she wanted nothing more than a soft sweatshirt and a comfortable pair of socks. A toothbrush and brush might be nice too.

“We’ve gone through your laptop, Ms. Thomas,” the detective announced, his tone hard and uncompromising. “Can you explain your search history?”

Amanda’s heart stuttered in her chest and she blinked at the two men, startled by their question. “My search history?” Someone went through her computer?

The first detective looked bored, as if he’d already made up his mind that she was guilty. “*Oui, mademoiselle,*” he replied with a thick French accent. “You have some...*interesting* tastes.” He turned to a page in the file that was growing thicker by the moment since various officers kept stepping into the interrogation room to add to the pile. “Could you explain why you were reading about poisons? And how to cut up a body with a butcher knife?”

Amanda cringed, pulling her coat closer around her shoulders again. “I’m a writer,” she explained again. She’d told them this already, but she tried to remain patient. “I write mystery novels. My stories are always gruesome in the beginning, but I slowly, carefully unwind the mystery. My last novel was about a serial killer who liked to shoot someone and then...”

Her voice trailed off to nothing as she realized how her explanation might come across, and she heaved a sigh. “Well, I just...I write stories. I don’t act out those stories in real life.”

The panic was climbing up her throat now, choking her. Did these people really believe she was capable of killing someone?

“And you say you were at a gala earlier tonight as the guest of Prince Rayed el-Mitra and his wife?” The detective’s tone implied he didn’t believe her.

“Yes. Emma. Emma el-Mitra now. She’s my best friend.” Amanda leaned forward, her eyes pleading with them. “If you would just call her, or give me my phone so that I can call her, she will tell you everything. She’ll confirm my whereabouts.”

The detective wrote something down on the file, then glanced up at her. “We tried to get video surveillance of the event. Just to verify your alibi.”

She nodded, eager to get this mess over with. “Good! So, you saw me? You saw me on the security video? You know that I was there, right?”

The detective leaned back in his chair, obviously tired and irritated. “We don’t have security clearance. There were some very important people at the event last night. So your alibi for the evening is still in question.”

Amanda’s jaw dropped. For a long moment, she simply stared at the man, too terrified to react.

One of the detectives leaned forward. “There was a couple from the Dorian Hotel that came forward. They said that they’d seen you running down the hallway earlier in the evening, without your shoes.” There was a long pause and the other detective chimed in. “That doesn’t sound like an innocent person. It sounds like you were...perhaps running away?”

Amanda blinked, trying to think back to earlier tonight. Or last night? She wasn’t sure what time it was since the police officers had taken away her cell phone.

She bowed her head, struggling to think back. “A couple? Running?” She blinked, trying to remember. “Why in the world would I be

running...?” She stopped, thinking back to the events of the night. Before she’d met Emma, Amanda did remember running down the hallway.

“Wait! A couple on the fifteenth floor?” she asked, waiting for one to nod their head in confirmation. She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “I wasn’t running away from a crime scene,” she explained, trying to be clear. “I was running to meet my friend, Emma. There are security issues. As I’ve already told you, she’s married to Crown Prince Rayed.” When they simply stared at her, disbelieving, she continued. “I’d just texted Emma, Princess Emma, that I would meet her at the front door. She’d texted back, saying that she and her husband were nearly there. I didn’t want her bodyguards to have to wait for me, so I took off my high heels and ran down the hallway.” She waited, looking at each detective in the hopes that they would nod with understanding.

However, the cynical expressions in their eyes indicated that the detectives weren’t convinced by her explanation.

“It wasn’t anything nefarious,” she asserted with exasperation. “I just didn’t want to put my friend, or her husband, in danger. So, I rushed down the hallway. The couple, I don’t even know who they were, seemed offended when I wouldn’t hold the elevator for them.”

“Why wouldn’t you hold the elevator?” one of them asked, shifting in his chair.

“Because they were more than halfway down the hallway and they weren’t in a hurry. I would have had to wait several minutes for them to reach the elevator!” she explained, as her frustration grew.

“What about Ms. Elissant?” the other detective asked. “She explained that you’d been acting suspicious as well.”

Amanda blinked at the men, shaking her head when they didn’t continue. “Who in the world is Ms. Elissant?”

“She’s the woman who personally checked you into your hotel.”

Once again, she was confused. She frowned, trying to remember. When she thought back, she couldn’t immediately remember checking into the hotel. Emma and Rayed’s limousine had pulled up outside. One of their guards had pulled her suitcase out of the trunk and...!

She lifted her head. “The hotel employee? A beautiful brunette?”

“I see that you remember her now. She said you appeared,” he paused, reading through his notes. “Shifty, I believe is the translation.”

Amanda sighed, shaking her head. “I’d been on a plane for more than twelve hours. I was exhausted and a mess. The woman who met me at the front of the hotel lobby was gorgeous.” Just like now, Amanda thought, pushing her dark hair out of her eyes. “I felt...pathetic standing next to her.” She rubbed her neck. “I wasn’t shifty,” Amanda argued. “I was exhausted and struggling with jet lag.” She sighed again. “I still am.”

“That’s a very convenient explanation, Ms. Thomas.”

Horrified at their disbelieving tone, Amanda whispered, “You honestly believe that I would kill a stranger?”

“Who says it is a stranger?” the detective replied, using that shrug that was the epitome of French casualness. “The man was in your suite. You are a beautiful woman. Perhaps this man...wanted something that you were unwilling to give to him?” he suggested, adding another Gallic shrug. “You rejected him and...there was a scuffle.”

The other detective nodded in agreement with the first. “You had motive and opportunity.” He leaned forward, his dark eyes watching her carefully. “Tell me,” he urged, “Did this man make a pass at you? Maybe he took it too far? You brought him up to your suite, but changed your mind? Maybe you decided that you didn’t want to have sex, or perhaps he became too rough?”

“No!” she gasped, shocked at the clearly painted scenario, shaking her head emphatically. “I’ve never seen the man in my life!” she asserted yet again. “I just arrived in Paris earlier today!” Then she blinked and shook her head, pressing her forefinger against her forehead. “Wait. I got back from the event around midnight so it’s actually tomorrow now, isn’t it?” She sighed, deflating. “Or today. But the next day. Or...whatever.” She lifted her eyes to the man, pleading with him now. “Can I call someone? If I could just call my friend, then I can clear this up.”

“You can call someone soon,” the detective replied.

No phone call? She’d answered their questions at the hotel, then



endured the humiliation of being dragged out of the hotel, through the nearly empty lobby. Then she'd been left in this room for...Amanda had no idea how long she'd been here. They'd asked her the same questions, over and over again. She'd had only a couple of hours of sleep in the past...however many days it had been. She was beyond exhausted. And now, she was angry!

"No!" she replied, unwilling to keep answering the same questions. "I'm not talking until I get a lawyer to represent me. You're just trying to railroad me for some ridiculous reason."

"Railroad?" he asked, tilting his head quizzically. "What is this... railroad? I thought railroads were how trains traveled."

Amanda sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. "It's an American phrase and, honestly, I'm not exactly sure what it means other than you're trying to push me into saying something just so that you can close this case without having to do any real work to solve it."

Another officer stepped into the interrogation room, handing a paper to the detective. The man read through the new information, nodding to himself.

Amanda waited, feeling herself tense up as she waited to hear whatever was on that newest piece of paper.

The detective didn't leave her in suspense for long. He slid the paper into the file folder, then looked across the table at her, his expression bored. "Apparently, the victim checked into the hotel earlier today. You say you're a writer. Perhaps this man is a fan of yours? And maybe you...?"

"Stop!" she snapped, lifting a hand to stop whatever bullshit conjecture he was going to put forth next. "Whatever is on that paper, I guess you're trying to wrap up disconnecting facts so that you can blame me for his murder." She leaned back in the amazingly uncomfortable chair, folding her arms over her chest. "I'm not saying another word until I can make a call."

"You're kidding!" Emma gasped. She lifted a hand, stopping Rayed's question. "No!" More silence. Then Emma abruptly leapt to her feet. "No!" Then she looked around. "Tell me exactly where you are! I'm

on my way! Don't say *anything* until I get there!" She scribbled a note and nodded. "I'll be there as soon as I can. Just...stay safe!"

Emma ended the call and looked around at the elegant dining room, not sure what she was looking for. She felt a surge of panic rising in her chest.

Rayed touched her wrist gently, stopping her. "What's wrong, love?" he asked.

Emma glanced over at Daniesh, who had arrived about ten minutes ago for a breakfast meeting with her husband. She hesitated to say anything with Daniesh around, not wanting to hurt Amanda's chances with him. She'd seen the chemistry developing between Amanda and Daniesh last night and wanted to help the romance along. It would be wonderful if Amanda found the same happiness with Daniesh that Emma had with Rayed.

However, she couldn't hide anything, especially not something this big, from her husband.

So she blurted out what Amanda had just told her. "Amanda was arrested last night for the murder of some guy who was found dead in her suite last night. She's at the—"

Emma didn't have time to finish her explanation before Daniesh stood up so quickly, his chair toppled over. "Where is she?" he demanded, his voice low and lethal.

Emma didn't hesitate. She handed over the paper with the information from Amanda. "This is the police station where she's being held."

Daniesh grabbed the paper and turned, rushing out of the robin's egg blue breakfast room, unaware of the deadly expression on his face.

He was already on his phone with one of the top lawyers in France before he made it outside. Daniesh handed the paper to his guard. "Get me to this address as quickly as you can!"

The guard looked at the address, nodded, then murmured something into his microphone. Within seconds, Daniesh was on the road at a

breakneck pace.

When he entered the police station ten minutes later, he was nearly vibrating with fury. He couldn't help but picture Amanda, the gentle beauty with the most amazing smile, terrified while sitting in a foreign country's prison system.

"Your Highness," a man in a spiffy suit and red, silk tie greeted him as he stepped through the door. "I'm Monsieur Jalois. I'm here to represent Mademoiselle Thomas."

The man was obviously well trained, because he didn't extend his hand in a normal greeting, which would violate royal protocols. But hell, Daniesh even being here in the police station, or "commissariat", as they are called in Paris, was a violation.

"What do you know?" Daniesh demanded, clenching his fists by his sides.

"Mademoiselle Thomas has been interrogated for the past several hours. The police think the man who was shot in the head was a fan of her novels, snuck into her suite, and was hoping for an autograph from Ms. Thomas." He cleared his throat as Daniesh's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I agree, Your Highness. It is a ridiculous scenario. My staff have already procured permission from a judge for her release."

"Excellent," Daniesh replied, nodding his head. "When can I see her?"

"The police are bringing her out of the jail cell now. She should be here in—"

Before he could finish, a uniformed officer escorted a barefoot and trembling Amanda through the door. The lovely up-do had tumbled over her shoulders. Her lipstick had worn away and there were streaks of mascara on her cheeks, proof that she'd been crying.

"Amanda!" he growled.

She hiccupped, trying to stifle another sob. "I didn't do it!" she cried, her bare shoulders quaking as the sobs overwhelmed her.

It took him only two strides to reach her. The moment he touched

her shoulders, he pulled Amanda into his arms, wrapping his arms around her. Her skin was cold to the touch and he slipped his coat off, draping it around her. “Where is your coat, *habibi*?” he demanded.

She hid her face against his chest and he tightened his grip around her. “They took it before they put me in the jail cell,” she explained, as she snuggled into the warmth of his coat. “I’m sorry. I don’t want you to be mixed up in this mess.” She tilted her head back so she could look up at him. “How did you even hear about this?”

“I was having breakfast with Rayed,” he explained softly, pulling her to the side while the lawyer spoke to someone who looked very official. “You should have called me.”

Amanda shook her head and another lock of hair tumbled out of the clips she’d used the previous night. “No way. I didn’t want you to know anything about this.”

“Why not?”

She tried to laugh, but the sound came out as a sob. “Because you’re...*you!*” She blinked hard, fighting back more tears. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Daniesh.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper. “You’re big and powerful and charming and...!” Angrily, she wiped a tear away. “And this is so embarrassing!” She lifted a hand, patting at her hair. A moment later, she sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. “But I’m truly grateful to you for getting me out of that jail cell.” She looked up at him. “I’m going to get a taxi and head on back to the hotel, if you don’t mind.”

The lawyer walked over to them and cleared his throat. “Ms. Thomas, I’ve arranged for you to be released into the custody of Prince al-Bodari.” He looked at each of them, his features professionally neutral. “The police still want to question you further and you will need to present yourself to the courts next Monday. They believe they have enough evidence already and are prepared to present their case to the judge. If the judge agrees that there is enough evidence, then you will be required to stay in Paris until the trial date.” He shifted slightly and looked at Amanda. “I have some contacts that I can tap into so that I can find their supposed evidence. But I will need to ask you more questions, and I need to work quickly.”

“Yes,” Amanda replied, pulling away from Daniesh. “What do you need to know?”

“I need you to give me a timeline of your activities from the moment you touched down in France,” he explained succinctly. He was clearly a no-nonsense kind of man. “The more detailed, the better. If you got a cup of coffee somewhere, include it. If you looked at a clock in the airport, write it down.”

“Okay.” She felt a great deal of pressure as he continued.

“If you ordered a drink from room service, rode the elevator, or saw someone in the lobby, I need to know. Tell me *everything*.”

“She was with me most of the night,” Daniesh interjected.

“That’s good,” the lawyer replied, nodding firmly. “Give me that information as well. The police looked at security footage of the entryway to the awards ceremony last night and Ms. Thomas was not among the guests who came through the front entrance. Since there was a large group of paparazzi at the door, and none of them saw you, there’s no evidence of your arrival.”

“But...” she glanced at Daniesh, then back at the lawyer. “I was with Prince Rayed and Emma. They went in through the back doors in order to avoid the press. We entered through the kitchens.”

“That’s our security protocol,” Daniesh confirmed with a firm nod. “We wouldn’t ever walk through a crush of paparazzi unless there was bullet proof glass confining them.

The lawyer nodded with understanding. “That’s good.” He turned to Amanda. “I need every detail, every person you saw, or who might have seen you.” He looked at each of them in turn. “My staff will go through any security footage we can find that might provide you a rock solid alibi.”

“Shouldn’t the police officers be doing this?” she asked, impressed by the man’s thoroughness, but also intimidated by the potential cost of what he was going to do for her.

M. Jalois nodded his head, but his gaze remained steady. “Yes, that’s their job, but they think you killed this person and you’re not a French

citizen,” he explained, his voice stern. “They consider you a flight risk, so they’ll keep you here in Paris until they’ve finished their investigations. And since they think you’re guilty, they’ll take their time about looking into the details of the night.” He grunted slightly. “Trust me, you *don’t* want to linger in jail until they get around to confirming your alibi.”

He was right and she shrank back even more. That’s when Daniesh’s arm tightened around her shoulders and she was grateful for his strength, as well as whatever connection had gotten this lawyer here so late...uh...early in the morning.

“Thank you for all your help, Monsieur Jalois.”

He nodded sharply, then asked, “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

She started to shake her head, but then she realized that several items had been taken from her hotel suite. “My laptop!” she gasped. “The police took my laptop! It has my speech for this weekend and all of my files. Including the book I’m currently working on.” Her fingers twisted together as her anxiety escalated. “It’s just a rough draft, but it has so many details!”

Monsieur Jalois nodded. “I doubt I can get the laptop back quickly, but I can request that certain files be sent to you. You might want to get a new computer, at least a temporary one for this weekend. And perhaps beyond this weekend if the police become stubborn about your presumed guilt. And if they become stubborn about you remaining in Paris as a material witness.”

Stay? Here in Paris? The expense alone would bankrupt her! She’d had success with her books, but the world had a warped sense of how much an author earned from royalties! The publisher kept the lion’s share of her book sales!

“But...I can’t stay here! I have a job and responsibilities back home!”

M. Jalois lifted a hand, stopping her. “One step at a time, my dear,” he said with that Gallic tone. “Let me get the charges against you dropped first, then we’ll work on the other problems.”

“He’s right,” Daniesh spoke up. “You’ll stay with me until

everything is resolved.”

She turned huge emerald eyes up to him. “Stay with you? But...I can’t! The hotel...!”

Taking her hand, he looked into her eyes. “Your hotel suite is a crime scene, Amanda,” Daniesh explained gently. “The police won’t let you back into it until the case is closed.”

That wasn’t good news! “What about my clothes?” she whispered, feeling like an enormous burden. “I don’t have anything to wear but this stupid dress!”

His smile widened. “I would enjoy taking you shopping for more clothes.”

Amanda closed her eyes, wishing desperately everything would just stop long enough for her to catch her breath, and maybe sleep for a week.

She felt his arm around her waist and the touch of warm lips to her forehead. “Like M. Jalois said, one step at a time. How about a shower and some sleep? Then something to eat? I suspect you are running on fumes by now.”

“Yes,” she sighed, melting into him again. “That would be lovely.” She bit her lip again and looked around. “But you don’t have to help me. Emma will—”

“I will do this,” he asserted firmly. “Come. You need to rest,” he told her, as he stroked her cheek. “These dark circles tell me it’s been too long since you rested.”

She swallowed hard, fighting back another bout of tears. “Why are you being so nice to me? I might be a murderer.”

He chuckled. “You’re not a murderer.”

“How do you *know*? The police saw my search history on my computer. I know exactly how to chop up a body and hide it so that no one will ever find it.”

He laughed again. “You may know how to do it in theory. But I’m confident that you don’t have the mental fortitude to do that in real life, *Habibi*.”

“I could!” she mumbled, as she followed him out of the police station, relieved to get away from that horrible place. “Especially if I’m mad.”

He took her hand, helping her into the back of the limousine. “How about if we debate your murderous tendencies once you’ve gotten some sleep and food in you?”

She yawned as she slid into one of the soft leather seats. She started to lean her head against the back cushions, but his strong arm pulled her against his side. So, she used his hard, muscle-packed shoulder and knew that it was infinitely more comfortable.



## Chapter 7

Amanda woke up and stretched, opening her eyes to the dim sunshine filtering through the soft, filmy drapes. But the royal blue room wasn't familiar. This wasn't her bedroom at home. It wasn't the hotel suite either!

She gasped as memories of the previous night flooded her. Last night! The murder! The man with a hole in his forehead!

And the police thought she killed him!

Pushing the sheets and comforter out of the way, Amanda got out of bed and looked around, trying to get her bearings. Last night...no, this morning, Daniesh had led her up here to this beautiful room and told her to sleep.

What time was it now? And where was she? Where were her clothes? Glancing down at herself, she remembered Daniesh handing her one of his dress shirts to sleep in and she'd felt...special. The shirt was huge on her, but she didn't care. It was his and she felt safe, wrapped up in his scent.

A knock startled her and she spun around just in time to see Daniesh open the door.

"Good. You're awake. I thought I heard someone moving about." He stepped into the room and smiled at her. "Are you hungry?"

Her stomach let her know rather forcefully that she was starving. "Yes. Definitely."

"Good." His eyes moved over her figure in the overly long dress shirt and he smiled faintly. "As enticing as you look in my shirt, I'm sure that you'd be more comfortable in something else." He pointed towards the bathroom. "My assistant arranged for several outfits to be delivered. They should be in there, ready for you to choose which you prefer."

"You bought me clothes?"

"Of course."

She sighed, clasping her hands together. "Thank you. I will pay you back for everything."

He shook his head. “You will *not!*” he replied firmly. “It is my pleasure to help you.” He turned, reaching for the doorknob. “Come downstairs when you are ready. I have a new computer ready for you so that you can write up a timeline for your lawyer.”

After he left, Amanda stood still for a long moment, wondering how exactly her life had gotten here.

## Chapter 8

“What’s on your mind, *Habibi*?” Rayed asked, setting the cup of coffee down as he smiled at his wife.

Emma smiled back engagingly and he instinctively knew that she’d been waiting for him to finish reading the file his assistant had given him.

“I’m so glad that you asked!” she replied sweetly.

“This is about Daniesh and your friend, isn’t it?”

Those blue eyes of hers lowered and she toyed with the silver knife and fork. “Why would you ask that?”

He swallowed a chuckle at her attempt at subtlety. His Emma was brash and bold, diving enthusiastically into any situation in which she thought the underdog needed help. Apparently, her best friend was her newest project.

“Because I was there last night too. Because I felt the instant spark of electricity that passed between them. Because I saw the dreamy look in Amanda’s eyes when Daniesh brought her back from the terrace, and we both could tell they’d been kissing.” He ignored her gasp of surprise and continued. “And because Daniesh is obviously more than halfway in love with her and...” he lifted a finger when she drew breath to say something, “...because you want your friend to be as happy as you and I are.”

Emma’s beaming smile nearly blinded him. But he was getting used to his wife’s impact on him. She was just so...glorious! Even now, after making love to her last night and again this morning while in the shower, he wanted to pull her onto his lap and make love to her all over again. She was...his! Rayed had never believed in the term “soul mates” until he’d met Emma. Now he understood.

“So, you’re on board?”

Rayed turned his head slightly, wary of the mischievous sparkle in her beautiful, blue eyes.

“On board with what?”

She grinned, leaning forward, resting her elbows on the table. “To help the romance bloom between our good friends.”

Rayed agreed...sort of. “Why not just let them figure things out on their own?”

Emma waved his suggestion aside. “Amanda is only here for less than a week. We need to encourage them to explore whatever is happening between them.”

As a man, he didn’t like what she was saying. As a husband though, he completely agreed.

“What did you have in mind?”

Emma’s head tilted slightly, as if she were considering her options. But he knew his wife well enough. She already had a plan.

“I think we should encourage them to have sex.”

Rayed stared at her for a long moment, then threw his head back, laughing at the ridiculous suggestion. “I guarantee Daniesh doesn’t need encouragement in that department.”

“But he dropped Amanda off at her hotel last night. He didn’t stay with her. Therefore, they probably weren’t thinking about sex.”

He chuckled again. “First of all, Daniesh brought her back to his home after rescuing her from the police station. The suite in which she’d been staying is a crime scene. Secondly, Daniesh is *definitely* thinking about sex, my love,” he explained, taking her hand and pulling her around the table. When she was in his lap, her head on his shoulder, he put his hands on her scrumptious derriere, holding her in place. “Men always think about sex.”

She pulled back, even though she didn’t release her arms that were curled around his neck. “We just had sex less than an hour ago. Are you telling me that you’re...thinking about sex now?”

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation. “With you? Always.”

Emma rolled her eyes and he swatted her bottom.

“Men are too single minded.”

He shrugged. “Well, if you’re hoping to get those two together, perhaps *you* should encourage them to have sex.”

Emma tapped her finger thoughtfully against his neck. “I think that’s a good idea. I mean, Amanda hasn’t been with anyone in…” she tilted her head slightly, then blinked. “Well, I can’t remember the last time she dated any guy. It’s been a while. Maybe since our university days.”

“That’s…” he shuddered, causing Emma to roll her eyes, “…an awfully long time.”

Lowering her head, she brushed her nose against Rayed’s neck, smiling at his expected response. His arms tightened on her waist and he pulled her closer, his body tightening in a delicious manner.

“You’re playing with fire, my love,” he warned her.

She laughed and pulled away. “I wouldn’t want to do that, would I?” Standing up, she returned to her chair, but glanced at him coyly. Emma couldn’t stop a burst of laughter when she heard his growl, and she knew to move very fast out of his reach.

“Behave!” she admonished.

“Me?” he asked in a warning tone. “You…you are telling me to behave?”

Emma grinned, then picked up her cup of coffee. “Focus, my dear. We have to figure out how to get Daniesh and Amanda to realize that they were meant to be together.”

Rayed leaned back in his chair, his gaze promising retribution. But he acknowledged her point. “I have to caution you though. There might be a strong chemistry between the two, but their personalities might not mesh. Whatever you plan to do, do it carefully. We don’t want them to be hurt.”

Emma lifted a dark eyebrow. “Amanda was arrested yesterday. Do you really think that she could be hurt even more?”

“She probably feels very vulnerable right now. Be careful of her mental state when you’re making plans for their future.”

“That’s a good point.” She sipped her coffee thoughtfully, then nodded. “You’re right. I’ll talk to Amanda. You talk to Daniesh. Let’s go!”

She jumped to her feet and hurried off, leaving her handsome husband sitting at the breakfast table, not sure what had just happened.

## Chapter 9

Daniesh paced the formal living room, running a hand through his hair. His confusion was nearly palpable as he tried to restrain himself from rushing right back up the stairs so that he could take Amanda into his arms and assure her that he would make everything right again.

There was zero possibility of Amanda being sent to jail. That simply wasn't a possibility. He knew with every cell in his body that Amanda wasn't capable of hurting anyone. Not even a stranger who appeared in her suite unexpectedly. He suspected that Amanda would scream bloody murder, but she would never hurt someone.

Not Amanda.

His frustration ramped up a notch as he thought about her this morning. The beautiful, vivacious, smiling woman with sparkling eyes had disappeared. The Amanda he'd brought home from the police station was a heartbroken, confused woman, still lovely, but with an air of tragedy surrounding her.

He wanted to protect her. Hell, he wanted to...marry her?

Impossible! He'd only known Amanda for less than a day!

The doorbell broke through his mental castigations. Turning, he waited for his butler to announce the newest visitors. But it was still a surprise when he watched Rayed striding arrogantly into the room with Emma by his side.

Did he walk like that too? Daniesh knew that he and Rayed were similar. He chuckled softly, wondering how other people perceived him.

No, he was wondering how Amanda perceived him. Did she think him arrogant? Was he unapproachable? Daniesh suddenly worried that he made Amanda nervous.

She'd get used to him, he decided as he watched Emma lift up onto her toes to kiss her husband. Rayed, for his part, wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her in for a longer kiss before releasing her.

"I'm off to speak with Amanda!" Emma called out, then hurried up

the stairs.

Daniesh turned, watching his friend as Rayed paused to observe his lovely wife. When she was finally out of sight, Rayed turned around and grinned at Daniesh.

“What?” he asked.

Daniesh chuckled, dropping his arms as he walked over to the bar. “Scotch?”

Rayed snorted. “It’s ten o’clock in the morning!”

Daniesh hesitated, then shrugged and put the crystal stopper back on the decanter. He walked over to the chair opposite and sat down, silently noting that his friend was already seated. “What the hell do you want?” he grumbled, aware of a bit of envy that Rayed could so openly touch his pretty wife whenever he wanted.

“How is Amanda today?”

“Fine. She’s not leaving here,” he snapped, his body tightening as if battle ready.

Rayed lifted his hands up, palms out. “Wouldn’t think of suggesting it.”

Daniesh relaxed enough to notice Rayed’s smug expression. “What?” he demanded.

“She’s it for you, isn’t she?”

Daniesh knew exactly what Rayed was asking, but feigned ignorance. “I have no idea what you mean. Are you here to discuss the new Tokyo collaboration? Because if you aren’t, I have things to do.”

“We already settled the Tokyo collaboration yesterday. The fact that you don’t remember doing so means that you have it worse than I thought.”

“Worse?”

Rayed chuckled. “You have it bad for Amanda.”

He did! “I don’t,” Daniesh argued. “She just needs my help.”

“Right.” When Daniesh started bristling, Rayed lifted a hand. “I get



it, my friend. As soon as I saw Emma, I knew she was it for me. It took me a while to realize and acknowledge it to myself, but in the end, it all worked out.”

Daniesh sighed, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “How long did it take you? A week? A month?”

“To realize that Emma was the woman I wanted for the rest of my life?” Rayed clarified.

When Daniesh nodded sharply, Rayed continued. “I think it took...about an hour. Maybe two.”

Daniesh wasn’t surprised. He remembered last night, seeing Amanda step out of the limousine. His attention had been captured instantly.

“She can’t be the one,” he snapped, remembering the verdict from the doctor’s office.

“Why not?”

Daniesh shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Amanda...I’m not the man for her.” His fingers tightened into fists as he thought of another man touching Amanda, another man’s baby growing within her body. A baby he couldn’t give her!

Rayed snorted. “Amanda certainly seemed like your type when she came in from the terrace last night.”

Daniesh ignored his friend’s comment, but the thought of having Amanda for his own was already taking root in his head.

The quiet knock on the door startled Amanda and she spun around, her bare feet still luxuriating in the soft fibers of the thick carpeting.

“Come in!” she called out.

A moment later, the air in Amanda’s lungs whooshed out as she saw Emma coming through the door. “Thank goodness!” she gasped, rushing over to embrace her friend.

Emma held her as a fresh wave of tears washed over her. “I didn’t do it!” she gasped.

“I know sweetie!” Emma whispered, hugging Amanda tightly. “There was never any doubt in my mind. As if you’d hurt anyone!”

Amanda sniffed and pulled away, smiling at her friend. “Thank you!”

Emma snorted. “Like you had any doubts of my support?”

Amanda laughed wetly as she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. Emma was already leading her over to one of the overstuffed chairs set up by a beautiful bay window.

“So, what happened? Tell me everything.”

Amanda explained everything, right up to the current moment.

“So, you’re all stressed out and not sure what the next step should be?” Emma pondered, her forefinger touching her cheek lightly.

“Oh, the stress will eventually ease up. I’m sure that the police will figure out who actually shot that man.”

Emma nodded, tilting her head as if contemplating the recent murder. So, it was a surprise when she said, “I think that you should have a fling with Daniesh.”

Amanda blinked, staring at her friend with serious eyes. “I’m sorry, but...weren’t we talking about the guy with the hole in his head a moment ago?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Amanda slumped in her chair. “Okay, so could you explain the leap you made from the dead stranger in my hotel suite to me having a fling with a random stranger?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “First of all, Crown Prince Daniesh Odenton of Quarati is not a random stranger.”

Amanda crossed her legs and her arms while her eyebrows shot up. “Out of that whole statement, the first point is the random stranger issue?” she queried. “Not the dead body issue?”

Emma laughed and mimicked Amanda’s posture. “Well, Rayed’s security team is already looking into the dead stranger.”

“Why?” Amanda interjected. “Shouldn’t the police be investigating?”

Emma snorted. “The police think you killed him. They’re looking at all of the evidence with an eye to confirming their hypothesis.”

That news stunned Amanda. For a moment, everything inside of her went slack. “Seriously?”

“Yep.”

She stared at her best friend, not sure how to respond. “But...that’s wrong!”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Amanda, please don’t try to convince me that you live in a fantasy world where people aren’t lazy. Those detectives have a gift in you. You’re a foreigner with few resources. You’re the perfect person to pin this murder on to close the case quickly.”

Amanda sighed, then slumped slightly. “You’re right.” Leaning her head back, she slapped her hands over her face. “This is such a mess!”

“I agree. However, I have the perfect solution.”

Amanda lifted her head again and peeked at her friend through her fingers. “What’s that?”

“Have sex with Daniesh.”

The four words hung in the air, vibrating between them. Amanda’s heart pounded, her body began to thrum with hope. Sex with Daniesh?

Amanda realized that she was staring at Emma and shook her head, trying to dislodge the images. “I...uh...can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

Why not? Because it was crazy! The idea of having sex with...with him...was outrageous! “Because...well, because I just...”

Emma leaned forward. “Look, Daniesh is very attracted to you. You’re attracted to Daniesh. I can guarantee he’s a good man. He’s handsome, powerful, attractive, and what’s even more important, you want to have sex with him, and he with you.”

Amanda wanted to deny it, but she couldn’t. So instead, she asked,

“Says who?” Not the most pithy response, but...hell, she was being framed for murder! If ever there was an excuse for fuzzy thinking, that was a good one!

Emma snorted. “Says you! I saw you when you came back in from the terrace last night. You were completely dazed from his kiss.”

After an uncomfortable squirm in the plush chair, Amanda asked, “Who says that he kissed me?”

Emma’s gaze turned cynical. “Are you seriously going to try to convince me that you didn’t kiss him last night? You went out onto the terrace looking slightly wary and came back inside with a dreamy, completely stunned expression. So, there’s no way you can convince me that you were out there arguing about investment strategies.”

Amanda laughed and the sound eased some of the tension in her shoulders. “So, you’re saying I should go from just a kiss to hopping in bed with the man?”

Emma nodded emphatically. “Purely medicinal. To ease the stress of being accused of murder, as well as going through a ridiculous investigation.”

It was Amanda’s turn to roll her eyes. “Right. And after all of our years together and late night chats over cheap, barely drinkable wine, you think I’m the type who would indulge in casual sex?”

Emma groaned, then sighed heavily. “Okay, no. You’re definitely not the casual sex type.” She leaned forward, bracing her elbows on her knees. “How about this; if the opportunity arises to have sex with Daniesh, take it.” She lifted her hand, stopping Amanda’s argument. “I’m not saying that you should jump the guy and climb him like a monkey. I’m just saying that, if things should progress and you’re in the mood, he’s in the mood, and you have the time, why not indulge?” She paused, then pointed out the window. “You’re in Paris. It’s one of the most romantic cities in the world. It’s the perfect place to splurge a bit, not just on the clothes and the food, but maybe on a certain man that...I *suspect*,” she paused, emphasizing the verb, “genuinely cares about you.”

Another knock on the door revealed the man in question. Rayed

followed, but Amanda only had eyes for Daniesh. When he came in, he paused by the doorway, sliding his hands into his pockets. It wasn't the way he stood that caused her heart to flutter. It was the way he looked at her. It was almost as if he'd heard what she and Emma had been discussing! But... was that possible? The door had been closed. Hadn't it?

Swallowing, Amanda couldn't pull her eyes away from the intensity of Daniesh's gaze.

"Well, we have to go," Emma abruptly announced, bending to kiss Amanda's cheek lightly before turning to leave. "Rayed's team is helping your guards look into the murder," she told Daniesh. "My assistant sent a statement to the police, explaining that you two were at the event last night and there simply wasn't any point during the evening that Amanda could have slipped out, run back to the hotel, shot a man in cold blood, then rushed back to the evening's festivities." She added a firm nod to emphasize her statement.

"Thank you," he replied, not taking his eyes away from Amanda. She wondered if he'd actually heard what Emma said. Amanda didn't hear what Rayed said next, since she was too absorbed with the singeing heat coming from Daniesh's gaze.

Then there was silence.

Daniesh walked towards her, his eyes never leaving hers.

"You are worried?" he asked, reaching out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Terrified," she replied, and cleared her throat, finally looking away.

"Why?"

Amanda's mouth opened and she started to say something, to be honest with him, but no. That wouldn't be polite. Emma was literally advising Amanda to use the man.

"It's...nothing."

He took her hand, lifting her fingers to his mouth. "You are worried that your friend's advice might be offensive to me."

Amanda's jaw dropped and she tried to reclaim her hand. "You were

eavesdropping on our private conversation?”

He chuckled. “The door was not fully closed. I tried not to listen, however, it was a...fascinating discussion.”

She searched for something pithy to say, but Daniesh was too close, too tall and...just too distracting!

He lowered his head and whispered in her ear. “Feel free to use me all you like.” He pulled back so that he could see her eyes as he added, “Consider me your boy-toy.”

She laughed, his comment too outrageous. “You are definitely not a boy,” she shot right back.

He chuckled. “I’m relieved you’ve noticed.”

“Plus, I can’t just *use* someone. At least, not intentionally. I’m sure that I’ve accidentally used someone but...I mean, I just...I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

He tucked her hand into his arm, leading her out of the bedroom. “I think we should have this conversation somewhere that doesn’t have a convenient bed.” He winked at her, then added, “Where I can convince you to change your mind.”

She glanced back over her shoulder at the bed, instantly picturing many lascivious ways to enjoy that bed!

“So what if I offer my services as your...uh...” he lifted his eyes to the ceiling as he led her down the ornate staircase, “...stress reduction therapist?”

Despite the awkwardness of the subject matter, Amanda smiled at his offer. “I appreciate how generous you are with both your body as well as your time, but I don’t think I could really enjoy any sort of sexual escapades at this moment. Not with a murder charge hanging over my head.”

He nodded understandingly as if her comments were only to be expected. “I can see how that could be a hindrance.” They moved down the wide stairway now. “How about if we leave that subject for now and re-visit it later? Perhaps there are other ways in which we could resolve your dilemma.”

She huffed a bit. “I love that you think of my possible imprisonment as a mere ‘dilemma’. However, I consider the potential to be a touch more... nerve-wracking.”

He chuckled while nodding his agreement. “Then we will resolve the issue.”

They stepped into a large, old-fashioned library with two walls filled with books. There was even a small balcony and a spiral staircase to reach the second level. Amanda stared, taking a deep breath and inhaling the scent of old leather, books, and musty history with delight.

“This is beautiful!” she gasped.

“Because of your chosen profession, I suspected that you would appreciate this space.” He gestured to one of the leather chairs. “Please, have a seat.”

He waited until she sat down before seating himself. Amanda loved the way he jerked at his slacks before sitting down. For some reason, it seemed like such a male thing to do, although she knew that women did it as well whenever they sat down. Perhaps Daniesh just did that little flick with a touch more flair.

He opened his mouth to speak, but a knock at the door interrupted.

“I apologize for the interruption, Your Highness,” a man in a formal suit explained with a bow. “However, three men have arrived unexpectedly. They said that they have information about the incident from last night.”

Daniesh turned to Amanda. “Have you contacted anyone about the problem at the hotel?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t had time to contact anyone,” she admitted, gripping the chair tightly. “Is it the police? Are they going to arrest me again?”

The man shook his head. “I do not believe so, ma’am,” he replied in an oddly formal voice that was tinged with a French accent, although his English was perfect. “The gentlemen explained that they were here from the United States, and have some information that might prove useful.”

Amanda glanced worriedly at Daniesh, but he seemed calm and in

control. Meanwhile, Amanda kept thinking back to the humiliation of being marched out of the hotel and taken to the police station, the misery of being questioned for hours. Oh, and she couldn't forget the horror of walking into her hotel room to find a man laying dead on the carpet in a pool of blood!

Daniesh must have sensed her fears because he stood up and pulled her into his arms. "It's okay, love," he whispered into her ear as his arms tightened around her. "Nothing is going to happen to you. You're not going to jail ever again!"

"I've already been charged," she whispered back. But whereas his whisper had been firm and encouraging, her voice was thin and tinged with terror.

He pulled back, his hands gripping her upper arms as he stared into her green eyes. "I will *not* let anything bad happen to you. Do you understand me?"

She stared back, blinking back tears as she fought down her rising panic. "Yes. Thank you."

Daniesh continued to watch her carefully for another moment, then nodded at whatever he saw in her eyes. "Good!"

He leaned down and kissed her briefly, then wrapped his arm comfortingly around her waist, before nodding to the man who was still standing stiffly by the door, staring at the floor.

"Show them in," he said.

The man, Amanda assumed he was the butler, nodded immediately.

"Yes, Your Highness," he bowed again, then turned and left the room.

"Who...?" she started to ask.

Daniesh squeezed her waist, and kissed the top of her head. "I don't know, love. But you will be safe. My guards will be right outside the door. They won't allow anything to happen to you."

"But, what if...?"

"It's best not to speculate, especially when we will know their



identities and their reason for being here in a moment.”

He was right, she thought, unconsciously leaning against him for support. She didn't like how dependent she felt on Daniesh at the moment. And she shuddered at the amount of money he'd already spent on her. There were the attorney's fees and the clothing, not to mention the food and...and was he staying in Paris to help her? Should he be somewhere else? Oh, goodness, that hadn't occurred to her until this moment.

He must have felt the tension increase inside of her because he tightened his hold on her waist and kissed her forehead again, only moments before three tall men stepped into the library. Amanda instantly relaxed. These men weren't police. First, they were dressed in dark, tailored suits that had probably cost more than a police officer made in a year. Even their shoes, she noticed, were expensive. She'd researched men's shoes for a plot twist once and was stunned to realize that a single pair of handmade men's shoes could cost upwards of five thousand dollars!

Of course, she'd drooled over a pair of Jimmy Choo heels that had been almost that much. So perhaps it shouldn't be so shocking that men's shoes cost the same.

But it was more than just expensive clothing and shoes. There was a power behind each man's eyes. If she hadn't experienced Daniesh's kiss last night, she might have been impressed. The men were very tall, all powerfully built, although in different ways, and all had that aura of power. They walked into the room with a purpose. None of the men seemed overly impressed by their surroundings, indicating that they were used to beautifully decorated rooms. In fact, the men seemed oblivious to the wealth around them.

Interesting, she thought, tilting her head to the side as she observed the tableau.

“Your Highness,” one of the men began, adding a quick bow. It was really just a jerk of his head and not a true bow. But Daniesh didn't seem to mind. In fact, he acknowledged the gesture with one of his own, she noticed. He'd noticed the same thing she had. These men were kindred spirits. There was an authority surrounding the trio that was similar to Daniesh's power, although she doubted that the men held any sort of formal title.

“I’m Matteo del Campo,” the first man said with a curt nod towards Daniesh, then a more relaxed nod in Amanda’s direction. Then he angled his body slightly as he continued, “And these are my business partners, Levi Harris and Sian Byrne.”

Daniesh stepped forward, shaking their hands and Amanda followed, not sure what the protocols were here. She’d just remembered that Daniesh was a Crown Prince. He was royalty. There were different rules for members of a royal family. She’d read once that the British royals always married in Westminster Abbey and that no one was allowed to kiss in the abbey. Not even to seal their wedding vows. There were hundreds of other rules that the royals were required to follow and she would have thought that shaking hands was verboten.

But what did she know? Amanda was just a mystery writer from the United States, here in Paris awaiting trial for a crime she didn’t commit!

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Daniesh replied. “What can I do to help you?” While he said that, he gestured towards the leather chairs and sofas. Daniesh pulled her towards the long sofa and she sat next to him, feeling protected by his height and strength while the other three men took seats as well.

They didn’t relax back into the leather though. Each leaned forward, resting their elbows on their knees as if they needed to speak quickly and move on to whatever was next on their agenda. They all seemed to vibrate with power and authority.

It would be quite intimidating if she weren’t with Daniesh.

“Actually, it’s Ms. Thomas that we’d like to speak with.”

Amanda felt Daniesh tense and she leaned into him slightly, reassuring him. Immediately, he relaxed, but he also put his arm around her. It was a protective and possessive gesture.

“Ms. Thomas is here under my protection.”

Levi’s eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn’t argue. “Ms. Thomas, it’s our understanding that you know this man,” he said and pulled a picture out of one of the gazillion pockets that men have on their suits. Well, all clothing. Men *always* had pockets. It was a conspiracy against women, she

thought with a mental sigh.

He laid a small picture onto the coffee table that separated the two sofas and Amanda looked down at the image, then gasped. “That’s him!” she blurted, picking up the picture. “That’s the man who was shot in my hotel suite two nights ago!”

“That’s the man?” Daniesh asked.

“He was shot?” Sian Byrne demanded, leaning forward slightly. “Are ye sure, lass?”

There was a slight accent to his words, an Irish accent, but the man didn’t shorten or alter his words like so many other people with accents do. He was careful to enunciate each word perfectly. Almost as if he were trying to...hide something? No, that wasn’t right, Amanda thought, squinting at the man.

“Yes, this is definitely the man I saw in my hotel room.” She handed the picture to Daniesh, then shrugged slightly. “Not to be...well, harsh, but he had a bullet hole in his forehead. But yes, I got a very good look at his face while I was screaming for help. And yes, that’s the man who was killed.”

“Who is he?” Daniesh asked, handing the picture back to Levi Harris. He took it and stuffed it back into the handy interior pocket.

“His name is Milton Burrows. He used to be the accountant for one of the businesses that we own. He embezzled approximately five million dollars from us. We tracked the bastard here to Paris and saw the news yesterday about his murder.”

Levi leaned closer. “What can you tell us about him?” he asked, his tone implying a level of urgency. “What did he say? Who was he meeting with? We would appreciate any information you could provide about his intentions here in Paris.”

Amanda shrugged, feeling horrible that she couldn’t give them anything. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but whoever this man is, I never met him. I came back from an...uh... an event...and he was there, already dead in my suite. I never met him, hadn’t spoken with him, and I didn’t even know the man’s name until you told us.”

“He flew here to Paris as Milton Burrows,” Sian Byrne announced. “Although, we’ve since discovered that he has several aliases. He checked into the hotel under the name Henry Sullivan.”

Daniesh lifted a hand, stopping the next explanation. “Tito?” he called out. Immediately, one of the guards stepped into the library.

“Yes, Your Highness,” he replied with a bow.

“Can you explain what you and your team have discovered about the man found in Ms. Thomas’ room?”

Tito bowed slightly, then turned to face the others, including Amanda. “We located the hotel room he was staying in, which contained multiple identifications. He flew into France under the alias Milton Burrows, although we’re not sure how he boarded the flight under that name.” He looked at Mr. Byrne with a nod. “We also found three other passports and driver’s licenses, but none under the name of Milton Burrows, sir.”

The three men shared a look, their mouths compressed with frustration. It was Levi who spoke next. “Mr. Burrows, or Cologne... whoever the man was, is a person of interest in several other investigations in the US. There are other businesses as well as ours that had substantial amounts of money stolen. Some of them seem to be a bit less...,” he paused, considering his words, “...less forthright than others.”

“And you’re trying to get your money back?” Amanda asked, feeling horrible for these three handsome men.

Sian sliced his hand through the air. “The money is gone,” he said with a finality that Amanda couldn’t imagine. If she ever had five million dollars and it was stolen, she’d be angrier about the situation. Losing five million dollars would not be something she’d accept!

“You’re just going to forget about losing five million dollars?” she asked, stunned and confused.

All three men were hard and angry, but she didn’t get the sense that it was because of the money.

“Oh, the man stole from us and that piss...uh...angers us,” Levi replied, quickly correcting his word usage after a glance towards Amanda.

The silent man, the tanned Adonis, Mr. Matteo del Campo, finally spoke. “We suspect Mr. Burrows is part of a larger organization. There is evidence that he was not the mastermind of this organization.” His voice was deep, low, and as smooth as velvet with a lilting accent that she couldn’t quite place.

“So, you’re looking for the brains of the operation?”

Levi nodded. “We will shut this down and expose everyone involved with the embezzlement scheme.”

“What if they are dangerous?” Amanda asked, her voice soft with worry. She didn’t even know these men, but she sensed a deep well of integrity, and anger, inside of them. And determination!

Sian looked at her, his eyes hard but his lips curled into a half smile. “We are dangerous, Ms. Thomas.”

For a moment, those words hung in the air. Amanda should be scared, but she wasn’t. Not even a little. These men wouldn’t hurt the innocent. After only just meeting them, she suspected that these men would fight for the underdog and the innocent. They were good, decent men.

Not men she’d like to cross though. They weren’t puppies. Nope, they were wolves with razor sharp fangs, dressed in expensive suits. Those tailored suits didn’t even subtly hide their danger.

“Yes, I can see that,” she replied with a smile and a nod of understanding.

The three men stood up. Daniesh and Amanda did as well and, for some reason, she hoped that she would see these men again.

Matteo’s sharp eyes looked down at her, concern lingering in their depths. “I understand that the police think that you murdered Mr. Burrows.”

“That’s true,” she replied, folding her hands in front of her as horrified shame washed over her.

Matteo leaned forward, his eyes softening slightly. “Our next stop is to the police. We will provide enough information that they understand that you are not the prime suspect in Mr. Burrow’s murder. There are many, *many* others who are far more than capable of murder, and with a much better

motive.”

Amanda’s heart lurched and her green eyes widened with hope. “Oh my gosh! That would be wonderful!” she gushed, reaching out to shake his hand gratefully. “If the police drop the charges against me and start looking for the real culprit, I would be completely in your debt!”

Matteo’s other hand covered their clasped hands, trying to reassure her. “You will not be in my debt, Ms. Thomas. You were falsely accused and the police were hoping for an easy scapegoat to close the case. The murder happened in the early hours of the evening and, from what we’ve gathered, they didn’t even call in a forensic team to gather evidence yet. They focused on you and didn’t bother to investigate further.”

Tito returned and everyone turned to face the large bodyguard. “We have information that Mr. Burrow’s wife is on her way here to collect his body for burial.” The stern man looked at each of them as he continued. “She’s flying a private plane donated by The Levinthal Group.”

Amanda watched as Daniesh shifted into “authority” mode. “When is her flight due to land?”

Tito glanced at his phone. “According to her flight plan, she’s due to touch down at a private airfield in six hours.”

Daniesh turned to the three other men. “I will—”

“We’ll take care of this,” Levi interrupted. He looked at Amanda. “We still have time to speak with the police. As soon as we’ve discussed this information with them, we’ll contact you again. Do you have a cell phone?”

Amanda automatically touched her upper thigh where she normally kept her phone in a side pocket of her leggings. But the police had taken her phone and her laptop. Her heart sank at the memory. “The police still have all of my electronic devices.”

Sian’s jaw tightened. “We will convince the police to release your belongings.”

Amanda felt lighter after that promise. “That would be wonderful,” she replied with a relieved smile. Unaware of her actions, she leaned against Daniesh, who hadn’t left her side, not for support this time, but perhaps in

gratitude?

“Until later, then,” Levi said and the three men all nodded, then filed out of the room. Tito closed the door, giving Amanda and Daniesh some privacy.

“That’s such a huge relief!” she said in a rush.

“Yes, but I don’t want to leave anything to chance. We should still do a bit of digging as well.” She started to open her mouth to say something, but he stopped her with a finger to her lips. “After breakfast. You haven’t eaten anything in hours, and even last night, you only nibbled at your dinner. You need food, and while you eat, we’ll plan what we’re going to do this afternoon.”

He took her hand and led her out of the library.

“Don’t you have work to do?” She asked, pulling back and he stopped to look down at her. “I’m not really hungry, but I could...I could...” she stopped, not really sure what she could do if he needed to work. She didn’t have her computer, so she couldn’t work on her next book release. She didn’t have her phone so she couldn’t read the rest of the electronic book she’d been reading on the flight over the Atlantic.

“You could sit down and eat something,” he said, his voice softer now, and the sound of it warmed her. Then he touched her arm. “And after that, I think we should...” he paused, a slight grin forming on his handsome features, “...sneak into Burrows’ hotel room and see what we can find out.”

Amanda’s features darkened. “No!”

“Why not?” he asked, tucking her hand onto his elbow and leading her towards what she assumed was the dining room. “The police obviously haven’t figured out where the man was staying. I’m not even sure if they’ve managed to identify the fellow.” He glanced at her again, a spark of mischief in his normally stern, dark eyes. “Besides, we don’t have anything more important to do. Why not do a bit of investigating?”

Because he looked too adorable when he smiled like that, was the first answer that popped into her head. “Because I won’t allow you to put yourself in danger in order to help me,” she replied instead.

She caught a smothered chuckle from one of the guards. Amanda glanced over at him, her eyes narrowed. But the guard's features morphed into polite blandness, despite the amused light sparkling in his eyes.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

Daniesh laughed softly as well, patting her hand in a patronizing manner. “My guards and I know how to get into and out of places without being detected. Getting into a hotel room without hotel security knowing won’t be a problem. It won’t even strain our skills.”

“Oh,” she replied, feeling foolish now.

“What do you prefer to eat for breakfast?”

She sighed, wishing that she had her computer. Amanda’s outlet was to lose herself in the plot of a book. Words were wonderful. They made sense and she could manipulate her imaginary world however she wanted. In other words, she was in control. Which was the complete opposite of her life at the moment.

And now Daniesh wanted her to eat? She was too overwhelmed to eat right now. “Just coffee, thank you.”

The waiter standing by the dining room table hesitated, looking questioningly over at Daniesh. “We’ll have eggs and fruit along with a side of,” he hesitated, glanced at Amanda, then said, “I’m not sure what kind of breakfast meat Ms. Thomas would prefer, but I would like some bacon.”

Amanda tried to hide the eagerness in her eyes, but she must have failed because Daniesh, the bastard, noticed and nodded in satisfaction. “Ms. Thomas will have bacon as well.”

He held her chair out for her, waiting until she sat down before walking to the other side of the pretty table. “You like bacon?” he asked.

She sighed, shaking her head slightly. “I love bacon. However, I know that it’s not a particularly healthy option.” She laid the linen napkin over her lap. “There’s this tofu bacon that I buy at the grocery store whenever I’m in the mood. I’m sure that it’s filled with chemicals that aren’t any better for one’s body than the saturated fat in bacon. But it makes me feel a bit more virtuous and that helps.”



“Fake food helps with...?” he prompted, fighting not to laugh at her.

“It makes me feel as if I’m doing something good and healthy, okay?” she admitted, laughingly lifting her hands into the air.

Before he could reply to that, the big guard named Tito stepped into the dining room and laid a plastic rectangle beside Daniesh’s plate. “Thank you,” he replied, nodding to the guard who quickly stepped out of the room.

“What’s that?” she asked, taking a sip of her coffee as she eyed the piece of plastic curiously. Then the rich flavors of the coffee washed over her and she groaned with pleasure. Oh my, that was good! She usually bought the cheap stuff, because she drank so much coffee throughout the day, and sometimes even at night. But this...! This was excellent. This made the coffee she prepared at home taste like sewer sludge!

He glanced down at the card and then passed it over to her. It was just a white, plastic card without any indication of what it might be.

“That’s the key card to Mr. Burrow’s hotel room.”

She flipped it over, blinking. “It is?”

“According to Tito, yes.”

She flipped it again, and then blinked at him. “He just...created a key for you?”

“For us, and yes.”

“How?”

He shrugged and leaned back as a servant came in with their breakfast. “I don’t know. I don’t ask questions. My entire staff is efficient and capable.” He paused and smiled at the waiter. “Thank you, this looks delicious.”

The man bowed and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Amanda tilted her head slightly, staring at the now-closed door. “You’re not the typical rich guy, Daniesh.”

He’d already picked up his knife and fork, prepared to cut into the omelet. “I’m not? How am I different?”

“You acknowledge your staff. You treat them like human beings.

You care about their pride and thank them for their service.”

“That’s not typical?”

She shrugged and picked up her fork. She didn’t need the knife for her eggs. “It’s different. In college, I worked as a waitress at a high-end country club in the outskirts of Philadelphia. The houses in the area there are huge and the egos of their owners were even bigger.” She used the side of her fork to cut a bite of her omelet, sighing with contentment when cheese oozed out. “At the best of times, my fellow wait staff and I were invisible to the patrons. At worst, some of them were abused.”

“Abused how?” he demanded.

She lifted an eyebrow, silently telling him that he didn’t want to know. “Suffice it to say, there was high turnover at the club. Especially with the female staff.”

While they finished their breakfast, Daniesh peppered her with questions about the other jobs she’d held over the years. She told him stories about working in the country club, at a fast food restaurant, and an ice cream shop.

By the time the servant arrived to clear their plates away, Amanda felt much more comfortable with him. No, that wasn’t true. She didn’t feel comfortable, exactly. She still felt the zing of awareness every time their eyes met. But there was an informal, relaxed flavor to their conversation now that felt...good! Like he was her friend!

Nope. Not a friend either. No way could Amanda ever think of Daniesh as a friend. She watched him quietly while he spoke to another staff member in Arabic, giving him instructions on whatever urgent matter had come up now.

“Are you ready?” he asked, standing up and extending his hand.

Amanda jumped, startled by his abrupt question. She’d been having a nice little, rather distracting, fantasy about Daniesh. “Ready? What are we doing?”

“We’re going to visit Mr. Burrow’s hotel room to see what we can find, of course.”

Amanda jerked back her hand, then peered warily out through the tall windows. “But...it’s still light outside!” she exclaimed, horrified at the thought of doing something so illegal in broad daylight.

Daniesh chuckled, taking her hand as he led her out of the dining room. “Is breaking and entering easier or less illegal in the dark?” he teased.

She blushed, but nodded her head. “Yes. It is. I don’t know why, but illegal activities should always take place at night.”

He chuckled and took her hand, leading her out of the room. “Because murders and illegal activities always happen during the night in the movies?”

“And television shows,” she asserted firmly, nodding for emphasis.

He laughed again, shaking his head. “There are easier ways of being stealthy during the day light hours.”

Amanda was intrigued. She smiled faintly, watching him carefully. “What do you have in mind?” She paused and her eyes turned wary. “I don’t want to be arrested again.”

He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the chair. “If I guarantee your safety, will you trust me?”

She considered that question for a long moment. Looking deep into his eyes, she mimicked his stance, bracing her own hands on the doorjamb. “Yes. What is your plan?” she asked, and felt a spurt of excitement. She wasn’t like this, Amanda reminded herself. She wasn’t the kind of person who did daring or exciting things.

Amanda was a quiet writer, who lived in a small house, alone, and delved into the underbelly of life only through her words and imagination.

This was going to be dramatically different!

“Are you sure?” he asked, obviously seeing her hesitation.

“No,” she replied honestly. “But what do I have to lose? The police have already arrested me for murder. Why not go big? If I’m going down for murder anyway, why not add a charge for breaking and entering?”

“You’re not going to be arrested,” he promised. “Come with me,” he

ordered and took her hand. “You need to change into something more...” he eyed her black slacks and soft, pink sweater, “dramatic.”

Amanda followed because there was nothing else she could do. Every nerve ending in her body was sizzling with excitement. And it had nothing to do with whatever plan Daniesh had in mind to get into the dead man’s hotel room. Nope, her excitement was all because he was holding her hand.

What was it about his touch that sent her body and senses to high alert?

“Tito!” he called out and Amanda watched, fascinated, as Daniesh and the bodyguard quickly and quietly discussed something. She stood by the doorway, noting the darker shade of Daniesh compared to Tito. There was also a difference in their body language. That could be because of Daniesh’s demeanor as a royal heir and the power that surrounded him. It could also be that he was an uber confident man.

Whatever the reason, it was hot! Amanda had been around a lot of men during her university years. Plus, she went to mystery writers’ conferences, book signings, and such every few months. So, it wasn’t that she didn’t spend plenty of time around men. She just...hadn’t ever been so intrigued by the male species. Not until meeting Daniesh.

Emma’s words from earlier rushed back to her. Did she dare have a fling with Daniesh? Could she relax her inhibitions enough to enjoy a sensual liaison with him?

Why not? Why wouldn’t she enjoy whatever this man could give her? If he could give her pleasure, even momentary pleasure, wasn’t it worth it? Her future held two possibilities. One, she could be in prison for the rest of her life. Two, she could be exonerated and she’d fly back to Philadelphia and return to her quiet, isolated life.

“Okay, we’ve got a plan,” Daniesh announced, clapping his hands together and looking as pleased as if he’d just solved world hunger!

Amanda felt a tingle roll through her, starting high and flowing down her back. She’d never felt more alive.

“I’m in,” she replied immediately. If this was all she had before

she'd return home or before she was imprisoned, then she was taking every scrap of adventure life offered her. She had days, maybe weeks, before she'd be in one prison or another. Daniesh was a...present. A gift to her from the universe.

His eyes widened slightly, and he gave her a half grin. Damn, the way his mouth quirked up on one side was so incredibly appealing!

"You don't even know what I'm planning." He leaned closer, shifting his body so that he was between her and the others in what she suspected was some sort of security headquarters for the house.

Her grin widened and she felt her body soften, angling slightly more towards him. "I don't care," she replied, noting that her voice was lower. Huskier. "I'm in, no matter what you have planned."

His eyes narrowed as he watched her face. Daniesh wasn't sure what she was actually telling him. And perhaps she wasn't sure either. But for this moment, for this day, she was "in". No more hiding. No more worry about prison. Not today.

She'd worry about tomorrow when it arrived. Today, she was free.

"What do you have planned?" she asked, unconsciously leaning forward.

He chuckled. "What caused the daring change?"

Since his eyes were sparkling with something more than amusement, Amanda felt her body heat up even further. She was more turned on than she'd ever been in her entire life!

"You don't think I'm daring?" she asked, her shoulders swaying as if she were challenging his assumption.

He let his eyes rove over her figure, the smile broadening. "I think that you're one of the most beautiful, sexiest, and amazing women I've ever had the pleasure of getting to know," he told her honestly, his voice low and with a heat that sent renewed sizzles racing over her skin.

Damn! Why did he have to say something so perfect?

Unfortunately, before she could lift up onto her toes, Tito called out and they turned.

Even as she stared at the object in the man's hand, she still didn't understand. "What *is* that?" Amanda asked, pulling away from the oddly hairy thing dangling from his fingertips.

Daniesh blinked, trying to get his body back under control. Amanda was such a delight! Every time he looked at her, he discovered another aspect that he liked. She'd been timid and shy when he'd first met her, but her eyes had been bright and eager to enter an event that he'd been dreading. She'd enlivened the awards ceremony with her excitement. It was all new and exciting for her, and that made the world new and exciting for him.

Then she'd been arrested and, despite her tears and fear, she'd still managed to look dignified, her inner strength shining through. The tears had been understandable. If he'd been in the same situation, he would have been fuming with fury. Tears and fury were equally valid and he respected her more for her ability to process her feelings.

But now! Something inside of her had shifted. There was a definite change in her body language that he couldn't quite define, but it certainly turned him on! She was eager, but there was more. Something...hot!

Tito interrupted his latest contemplation of Amanda. When he realized what Amanda was asking about, Daniesh threw his head back, laughing at her horror. When he was able to regain his control, he chuckled again and took the fuzzy thing. "It's a wig," he explained, flipping it around so that she could see it more clearly. "A blond wig."

Amanda took the hairpiece gingerly, examining it carefully. "Okay, so...what's it for?"

Daniesh took it back and plunked it on her head. She looked a bit silly, but even more beautiful, with her dark hair sticking out underneath the Marilyn Monroe style wig.

"Well, you asked about sneaking into a place during the day." He adjusted the wig slightly, but it didn't do any good with her dark hair still draped over her shoulders. "The best way to sneak into a place is to be obvious." He flipped another lock of the wig. "If one goes in stealthily, trying to avoid being seen, then the odds of being questioned are higher." He

took the bag Tito was still holding and peered inside, grinned, then handed it to her. “Whereas if you go into a space trying to get people to look at you, then you don’t look guilty.”

Amanda peered into the bag, then gasped as she pulled out a low cut, crimson dress with a flirty skirt that would float around her legs when she walked. “And you want me to wear this dress and wig?”

“Yep,” he replied, turning to find Tito offering him a wig and a fake mustache. “You’re going in as a movie star.” He twirled the greyish wig on a finger. “I’ll be your manager and my bodyguards will be your bodyguards for the afternoon.”

“That’s brilliant!” she gasped, bouncing slightly.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked, thinking to warn her. But she merely bounced some more, nodding her head in time. She looked absolutely adorable! Like a kid heading to a candy store. Her eyes were bright, her lips soft and inviting. And he couldn’t even glance down at her breasts because he knew that they would be bouncing under that soft, pink sweater!

Twenty minutes later, she came down the stairs wearing the red dress and he nearly fell off his chair.

He suspected that his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn’t seem to close it as Amanda stepped down the last tread of the stairway, smiling brightly. Her dark hair had been tucked away so that only the champagne blond wig surrounded her bright, eager features. She wore red lipstick that perfectly matched the red dress and a thick layer of mascara and eyeliner that made her eyes look huge!

But it was the dress that had him feeling stunned. It hugged her breasts, clinging lovingly to those magnificent globes. He let his gaze linger on her breasts, but then they lowered, taking in her tiny waist, full, ripe hips, and legs that went on for miles! Her red shoes looked painful, but incredibly hot!

Slowly, he let his eyes move higher and...yes, they again lingered on her breasts because they were truly that amazing...then lifted higher until he was looking into her eyes again.

“Perfect!” he whispered, utterly shocked by the transformation. She looked...wrong. Yes, Amanda looked hot and beautiful, but this wasn't *his* Amanda.

He recognized the possessiveness instantly and tried to correct himself. But the need to have her in his world, to know that she was his woman, was overwhelmingly strong.

Clearing his throat, Daniesh stood up, relieved that he hadn't fallen on the floor.

“Yes, that is exactly the look we had in mind.”

Tito cleared his throat and stepped forward. “You're going to need these as well, ma'am,” he said, offering her a dark pair of sunglasses and a white cape.

She accepted the sunglasses, but Daniesh all but snatched the cape from his bodyguard's hands, glaring at him. Tito didn't take offense. In fact, the bastard smothered a smile as he stepped back out of the way.

Daniesh stepped forward and carefully draped the soft white cape over Amanda's shoulders. If his fingers lingered on the exposed skin for a moment...well, he was only human after all. And no man would have the self-control to stop himself from touching that beautiful, alabaster skin!

Amanda cleared her throat and he came to stand in front of her. “You...uh...” she cleared her throat one more time, lowering those incredibly long lashes to hide her eyes as she fiddled with the clasp. “You look very nice as well,” she finally finished.

Daniesh lifted a hand, smoothing the fake mustache over his upper lip. It tickled a bit, but otherwise, it wasn't too bad. The wig was warm, but again, not as obnoxious as he'd anticipated.

“The grey wig looks odd,” she admitted with a laugh. “But I guess, now we know what you'll look like when you're older.” She pursed her lips, tilting her head as if contemplating something, then nodded. “Very distinguished!” she declared with a firm nod.

“I'm glad that you approve of my future self,” he grumbled, taking her elbow and leading her to the front door. He paused though, and turned to



Tito. “Is everything in place?” he asked.

Tito nodded. “Ms. Olivia Bennet is being checked in by her assistant now. We also have three other rooms reserved for Ms. Bennet’s staff.”

“Excellent!” Daniesh replied, feeling a strange sensation building in his chest. Was this excitement? He hadn’t felt it since he’d been a kid. The unfamiliar sensation was odd, but he liked it.

“So, the plan is that you’re going to walk into the lobby, wearing your sunglasses. I’ll be right behind you and my bodyguards will surround you. We’ll be very obvious. One of Tito’s guards has already checked us all into the hotel, so the keycards will be handed out in the lobby.”

Daniesh patted his pocket. “I have the key to Mr. Burrow’s room.” He looked at Tito. “As her manager, I’ll accept the other keys, so why don’t you take this one?” he suggested, handing the blank key card to his guard. “That way, they won’t get mixed up.”

Since Amanda was sitting behind the driver in the SUV, she could see her reflection in the rear-view mirror. And each time she did, she was shocked all over again by the unexpected image staring back at her. The reflection was her, she thought. However, that reflection was definitely a stranger! It was quite thrilling to see her reflection looking so different from before.

However, when the driver pulled up to a smooth stop just outside the doors to the hotel where she’d seen a dead man laying on the carpet, and then been arrested for that poor man’s murder, she trembled with sudden fear. Did she look different enough? Was her wig straight? What would happen if she fell on her face in these heels? She normally wore slippers around her house! Heels were a big deal for her!

“You’re going to be great!” Daniesh whispered into her ear, taking her hand and kissing her fingertips. “Act like a movie star, and the rest of the world will accept that you’re a movie star.”

He was right. She’d read about that phenomenon during her research for several of her books. She could do this! People saw what they interpreted in their heads and it wasn’t always the truth. Perception was

ninety-nine percent of what people acknowledged in their brains.

“I can do this!” she whispered. Then Amanda smiled at him, startled at how close he was. “I won’t let you down,” she vowed.

He squeezed her fingers as the door to the SUV opened. One of his guards, not Tito, held the door for her. Stepping out, she balanced carefully, using her finger to push her sunglasses in place as she stepped away from the SUV. Turning, she feigned a bored expression while she watched Daniesh step out behind her. Her persona might have fallen slightly as he stepped out. Watching Daniesh’s tall, masculine body straighten was like watching art.

Or maybe something more lascivious.

“You good?” he asked, putting a hand to the small of her back.

Did that moan come from her? Surely not! She wasn’t the kind who moaned at a man’s touch.

“Yeah,” she said, although her voice croaked slightly. She cleared it and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine.”

He smiled at her and the expression was just as devastating to her equilibrium. “You’re more than *fine*, Amanda,” he replied, his voice low and husky.

Was he feeling the chemistry too? Or was he merely reacting to the danger? Was he an adrenaline junky?

Hmm...something to contemplate later. Right now, she needed to find evidence to clear her name!

Feeling daring, she lowered her sunglasses slightly and smirked up at him, giving him an audacious wink before sliding the shades back up. And with that, she turned in what she hoped was an excellent twirl, adjusted her cape around her shoulders more securely, then lifted her nose and stalked through the doors of the luxurious hotel. Her “movie star” persona was back in place.

It took a great deal of effort not to laugh as she walked through the elegant space. Had she really been here only three days ago? Or was it two? She was losing track of time. A transcontinental, overnight flight and being

arrested tended to do that to a person. She'd have to remember that for another book plot.

"Ms. Bennet!" someone called out from the left.

"That's you," Tito whispered. The other guards that had been walking in front of her also stopped and turned, forming a tight circle around her and Daniesh. She knew that they were really protecting Daniesh, but goodness, it felt nice to have them surrounding her. They were like a tough, impenetrable bubble, keeping everyone away from her!

The person rushing towards her looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't remember where she'd seen the man. However, he fell in with the act, smiling vacuously as he handed her a keycard. "You're all checked in, Ms. Benet," the man announced as he gestured towards the bank of elevators. "Your room is this way."

Amanda channeled a nineteen-fifties actress, pretending impatience as she walked behind the newest member of her "team". Behind her, she heard Daniesh swallow a chuckle. As did several of the other guards? She had to concentrate to keep herself from laughing. Even a simple grin would give the game away.

Everyone stepped into the elevator and turned around, facing the doors as they slowly closed. Daniesh stood right behind her while the guards fanned out in front of and beside her.

She felt his hands on her back and gasped, jumping slightly. But then heard his voice murmur, "Don't move. Cameras in the right and left corner of the elevator."

"You're cheating," she muttered, trying to keep her lips still in case the security personnel watching the cameras knew how to read lips.

Several of his guards chuckled and the hand disappeared. Somehow, Amanda was able to maintain a straight face until the elevator doors opened. Then she stepped out and looked around with a disdainful glance, scouting out the hallway. The double look was mostly for any other security cameras that might be around, but it was also to determine if anyone else was in the hallways.

"This isn't the hallway I stayed in last time," she muttered, still

trying not to move her lips.

Daniesh stepped up beside her, showing her a tablet. It only showed a bunch of puppies tumbling in the snow, but he pointed to the middle of the screen as if it were the most important piece of information.

“You were several floors higher, where the suites are located. Mr. Burrows, or Henry Sullivan, since that was the name he checked into the hotel with, was on this floor.”

The group moved down the hallway slightly, then suddenly, Tito stepped up and slapped the keycard on what seemed to be a random doorway. “Invite all of us in,” he grumbled, holding the door open.

Amanda lifted her hand, calling back the other guards, who had meandered further down the hallway. “We need a meeting!” she called out imperiously, and twirled her hand in the air before pointing towards the open door.

Once in the room, where they were safe from the pervasive cameras, the guards immediately spread out, expertly searching the room from top to bottom.

“What in the world?!” Amanda gasped, walking over to the suitcase that was lying open on the bed. “This is filled with my books! Every single one of them!”

Daniesh rushed over, handing her a pair of surgical gloves. “Don’t touch *anything* until you’ve put these on. We don’t want your fingerprints to be found in here. Since they think you’re guilty, the police still haven’t gotten around to searching this hotel room. They are still investigating you as the only suspect and consider the case closed.”

“Idiots!” she grumbled, then pulled on the gloves, silently thanking Tito for the wig. Fingerprints were easy enough to detect, but she knew enough about forensic evidence to know that hair strands were even better than fingerprints. She started to ask why they hadn’t investigated anyone else, or even attempted to locate evidence in the dead man’s hotel room, but decided she didn’t care. Not anymore.

Carefully, she followed the others’ lead and started methodically going through the man’s belongings. There wasn’t much, but at the bottom

of the man's laptop case, Daniesh found a secret compartment. "Tito!" he called out, gesturing for the other man to come look.

Five passports emerged, one each from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Great Britain, and Switzerland.

"Didn't your friends say that they knew of three identities for this guy?" Amanda asked, everyone silent while they stared down at the newest evidence.

"Yeah," Tito replied. "Let me photograph these and then we should finish the search quickly and get out of here." He looked around at everyone. "Be sure to put everything back exactly where you found it."

Everyone nodded dutifully. Obviously, they'd done this sort of thing before. She wasn't sure if that was comforting or alarming.

A little of each, she decided and shoved the books back into the suitcase.

"Take those with you though," Tito called out.

Amanda froze, looking over her shoulder at the man. "Take the books?"

"Yes," he replied with a firm nod. "They imply that the man was obsessed with you. No need to add fuel to the Paris police's theory that you are involved."

"Good point," she agreed, tucking the books under her arm. "But... how are we going to carry all of these out?" she asked. There were four of them. The fifth book that she'd released was the one that the police had found with the body days before.

"We'll each take one of the books and walk out the back of the hotel. We'll be seen, but it won't be too obvious."

"Excellent plan," she replied and stacked the books, then fluffed the clothes so that the suitcase didn't look suspiciously empty.

"What about this, sir?" one of the other guards called out, bringing over the man's toiletries case. "There are five bullets here and two syringes."

Tito's jaw clenched and he sighed. "Normally, I'd take one of those

syringes and get it tested. But really, we need the police to find it.”

“Why not take one?”

Tito considered that, but before he could answer, Daniesh raised the question that had also just occurred to Amanda.

“Did the guy have a third syringe on him when he snuck into your room?”

Amanda’s mouth went dry at the possibilities.

She turned to Tito. “Take one of them!” she hissed. “If that man was trying to drug me, and the only thing that stopped him was someone murdering him, then I deserve to know!”

Everyone looked a bit grimmer after that. Tito nodded curtly and pocketed one of the syringes out of the toiletries case. “Everyone do one last quick search of the room, but change areas. Double check everything since we can’t vacuum up forensic evidence or dust for fingerprints.”

Daniesh tucked Amanda against his side while the others did another quick search, but no one found anything more.

“Okay, let’s get out of here,” Tito announced. He turned to Amanda. “Are you ready to get back into character? I noticed security cameras at both ends of the hallway. You’re going to have to look like we just had a meeting in here and now you’re giving everyone orders.”

“Got it.”

Tito looked to Daniesh. “Anything else, Your Highness?”

Daniesh shook his head. “No. Let’s get out of here. I’ll meet our friends for dinner tonight and we’ll give them this information.”

Tito nodded. “I can probably have the contents of this syringe analyzed by tonight.”

“Excellent.”

They all filed out of the room, the guards ensuring enough chaos that the security personnel couldn’t be positive about which room they were coming out of. Then they all walked out! It was too easy actually. They took the elevator down to the parking garage level where the SUVs were

waiting at the exit. Everyone piled inside and the drivers merged into traffic.

There were no sirens, no bullets zinging past, or even a high-speed chase through the Parisian streets. The movies really did a better job of creating tension than real life, she thought as she slipped the wig off and stuffed it into one of the bags Tito had brought along for that express purpose.

The problem that Amanda had wasn't the fear of getting caught. It was the opposite. It was the fact that they *hadn't* been caught. Everything inside of her was tingling! She felt alive and wanted to scream! She wanted to laugh and cry and...she glanced over at Daniesh. He was watching her carefully.

Thankfully, the driver pulled into a garage back at the house. Everyone exited the SUV, the guards pairing up as they walked into the house.

Amanda walked silently beside Daniesh. He didn't say anything either, but she could feel him. She could smell him! All of her senses were extra sensitive! It was almost as if she could see the air particles vibrating! She wanted to run and scream, leap and laugh.

He pulled her into the library and...that was it. Never in her life had Amanda been the one to initiate a sexual interlude. She'd never been interested enough in sex before to start something that was a mediocre pastime at best and a messy, irritating checking of boxes at worst.

As soon as the door closed, she rushed into his arms, literally jumping into his arms and wrapping her legs around his waist as she reached up to hold his head.

"I want you, right now!" he growled, his strong hands cupping her bottom as he held her tightly.

"I want you now!" she groaned right back, kissing him with all of the lust and need and passion within her. She sensed the same intensity building inside of him. She shifted against him as her cape fell to the floor. There were some tearing sounds, but she ignored them, entirely focused on the way Daniesh tasted.

She felt him caress her breast, and the pleasure was so all

encompassing, she couldn't even look down to find out what was going on. If she had any rational thought left in her, she might have wondered how he'd gotten her bra off without her noticing, but it didn't really matter. She only hoped he never took his hand away.

A hard, flat surface pressed against her bottom, and she whimpered, bracing herself against it and pulling him in tighter, desperate for more. Her fingers smoothed down his chest, then she found and began fumbling with his zipper. She didn't care that they were both still mostly dressed. Every moment in his company had been leading up to this moment and Amanda wasn't waiting a second longer. Somehow, her panties vanished and she felt his finger sliding into her. Amanda rolled her hips, moaning at the sensation, but it still wasn't enough!

“Now!” she gasped, her voice a guttural command. “Now! I need you *now!*”

He groaned, then thrust into her. She was so wet, so ready for him that there was no resistance. They froze as the pleasure of him fully embedded inside of her body washed over them and they stared into each other's eyes.

Then he began to move. It was just a small movement at first. But the friction was so mind-blowing, she gasped, gripping his hips more tightly with her legs, drawing him in closer.

Daniesh knew that there was something he was forgetting. But for the life of him, he couldn't think beyond the mindless, overwhelming pleasure of Amanda. He needed this. He needed Amanda. He needed to feel her tight, inner muscles clench around him, pulling him in deeper, trying to become one with him.

He should probably help her climax, but she was screaming his name, her fingernails digging into his shoulders and small sharpness felt so good, he couldn't stop. His mind blanked as she pulled him in again and again, her whispered, “Faster!” urging him on. He thrust harder, faster, as they reached for that pinnacle and then...!

“Yes!” she screamed, her body shuddering as she convulsed with



pleasure. And that brought him to his own climax and all he could do was hold on as they rode the wave together.

Slowly, very slowly, Daniesh opened his eyes and looked down at Amanda. She looked stunning and stunned. Her lips were swollen from his kisses and her cheeks flushed a warm pink. There was a dreamy smile on her lips and she purred, soft, and sexy in the back of her throat. She looked... beautiful!

“Now I understand what all the fuss is about,” she whispered, opening her eyes as she stroked a finger down his neck.

“You...?” he didn’t understand initially, but when her grin widened, he grinned in response. “Was that the first time you’ve climaxed with a man, Amanda?” he asked softly, trying to hide how important her answer was to him.

There was something so primal, so incredible about the idea of being the first man to bring her true pleasure during intercourse.

“The very first,” she whispered, then lifted up to kiss him gently.

Immediately, his body hardened all over again. The soft, satisfied expression was gone and she looked surprised.

“We need to get upstairs,” he groaned, pulling out of her and grabbing tissues. That’s when it hit him. What he’d forgotten! “Amanda!” he hissed, cleaning himself off.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, grabbing a couple of tissues herself. Awkwardly, she cleaned herself up a bit, turning shyly away from him. But she smiled at him over her shoulder. Then, she realized what he was trying to say and she froze.

Spinning her around, he gripped her upper arms. “It’s okay,” he told her. “There won’t be repercussions from what we just did.”

“But...!” she gasped, looking up at him. “I’m not on birth control.”

He swallowed painfully, wishing that he didn’t have to tell her this. “I can’t get you pregnant, love,” he explained, stroking her soft skin. “I had a disease as a child. I’m not...I can’t...”

Her fingers pressed against his lips and he stopped. “That doesn’t

make any difference,” she told him, heat in her words. “In fact, that makes everything...” she beamed, her eyes lighting up as she moved closer to him, pressing her breasts against his chest. “So much better!”

He laughed, wrapping his arm around her back and pulling her even closer. “Oh yeah?” he asked, unable to keep from wishing that things were different. He wanted to give Amanda everything.

She smiled and kissed his chest. “Yeah. Definitely better.” She shivered when her nipples rubbed against the soft hair of his chest. “Now, what were you saying about going upstairs?”

He chuckled and lifted her into his arms. Daniesh ignored her squeak of surprise and carried her out of the library and up the stairs. “You’re a vixen,” he growled, nipping her earlobe as he took the stairs two at a time. When they were alone in his bedroom, he tossed her onto the middle of the bed. “Now, what were you saying about never having done that before?” he asked, then stripped off his clothes, tossing them onto the floor as he watched her watching him.

“You’re beautiful!” she whispered, getting up onto her knees to get a better look.

He paused in the act of unbuttoning his dress shirt to blink at her. “I’m not beautiful,” he argued, his voice raspy. “That’s a term I would use for you.” Quickly, he shucked his slacks and boxers, coming back to her completely and gloriously nude.

Amanda gloried in his firm chest, letting her fingers dance across the muscles and the light dusting of hair. “You’re absolutely beautiful, Daniesh.” She licked her lips, then leaned in, licking him. She heard him groan, and kept exploring, fascinated by his wealth of muscles, letting her fingers stroke the warm skin. She heard a sharp hiss, then looked at her left hand to find that she’d slid her fingertips over his nipple. Looking up into his eyes, she did it again, watching his jaw tighten and his eyes drift closed for a moment. Feeling daring beyond measure, she touched him again, her other hand sliding down lower. And lower! She watched the tension build in his shoulders and the intense heat burning in those dark eyes.

At first, her touch was light, just a brush of her fingertips against that

part of him. But when he inhaled sharply, lowering his forehead to hers as his hands tightened around her hips, a slow smile formed on her lips and she tightened her grip, stroking his throbbing erection with growing confidence.

He reached out to touch her chin, lifting her face to his, and he kissed her deeply. No, this wasn't just kissing, she thought as her hand moved over him, exploring that part of him. This was ravishment. This was possession! Whatever you'd call this was utterly intoxicating and she moaned, her grip tightening, her thumb sliding sensuously over the head of his shaft, then down to grip the base tightly. She kept stroking him as they practically fed at each other's mouths.

*"Ant tusibuni bialjunun!"* he growled, then pulled away from her touch as he lifted her off her knees, flipping her onto her back.

Before she could react to this new position, he'd flipped her skirt up and spread her legs. Amanda pushed up onto her elbows, watching his face as he gazed down at her. He grinned wolfishly and leaned down, kissing her aching core before licking her pink folds and...and...and!

"Daniesh!" she screamed, arching her back, which only thrust her body more firmly against that teasing tongue. One finger moved inside of her and she nearly climaxed just from that. But the bastard pulled his mouth away, teasing her only with his finger while the cool air tickled that sensitive nub. Then his mouth was back and...!

"Don't! Stop!" she gasped, her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling, tugging, and guiding his mouth as she rolled her hips underneath his ministrations. Before long, she was screaming his name as another orgasm overwhelmed her. It was too much and she pushed him away, her body throbbing with waves of intense pleasure.

"Not done!" he warned as he kissed his way higher and hooked her knees with his arms.

Amanda gasped as her body curled, her knees bending and widening as he pressed that hardness into her. She moaned, feeling a rush of tingles. Thrusting deeper and deeper, she welcomed all of him into herself, rolling her hips to take even more of him into her body. "Yes!" she sighed, arching and wrapping her legs around him again.

Daniesh's focus narrowed to a single detail, sliding slowly out of her and then thrusting deeply into her tight, hot sheath. He could feel every damn inch of her! It felt...incredible! Even better than when he'd been inside her downstairs. Of course, that time, he'd been out of his mind with lust, needing to possess her. Needing to claim her!

After watching her work her way through the hotel, watching her roll her hips as she walked and lifting her chin as if dismissing him, then the knowing smile afterwards...he wanted her!

Yes, he knew that he couldn't keep her forever, but for just this day, he could pretend he could. For this moment, Daniesh could pretend that this multi-faceted woman could be his, *forever!*

Rolling over, he brought her with him so they ended up with her astride his hips. For one beautiful moment, she looked startled, her swollen lips parting. Her glorious hair was a tousled mess. He had no idea where the wig had ended up, nor did he care.

"Like this," he explained, gripping her hips and leaning her forward slightly. He lifted her hips up, paused, then slowly lowered her back down against his shaft, ensuring that her nub rubbed against his pubic bone. "Now you try," he ordered, his tone harsher than he'd intended, but that couldn't be helped.

Amanda placed her hands on his chest and lifted up, her knees braced carefully. When she lowered herself down again, her eyes fluttered closed and she gasped quietly.

"Shift forward more," he grumbled, trying to hold back against his rising pleasure as her movements brought him even closer to that peak. Gritting his teeth, he pulled her forward even more, her beautiful breasts bouncing in front of him. He couldn't resist the allure of those breasts and pulled her dress out of the way. One ripe, luscious nipple taunted him, so he took it into his mouth, enjoying the gasp of surprise as well as the shifting of her hips as she rode him. Every movement, every movement of her gorgeous, lush body brought him closer to climax.

He was so damn close, he laid back, reluctantly releasing her nipple

so he could watch as her body slid up and down his shaft.

His fingers stroked her thighs and he had to block out the sounds of her moans. Using his thumb, Daniesh teased that nub, rubbing that bundle of nerves as she shivered. Over and over, he repeated the pattern until...she stiffened, her back arching and she pressed her hand over his thumb.

So hot! Seeing her like that, feeling her body quake, then her cries of release pushed him over the edge and he rolled her over onto her back. He pounded into her so fast and hard, he worried that he was hurting her. But he couldn't slow down. Everything was just so...damn...perfect!

That was his last thought before his own climax took over. He pressed into her, deeper and deeper as his orgasm throbbed inside of him.

*"Milki,"* he groaned as the pleasure slowly eased. *"Anti li."* Mine, he thought in his head. You're mine! The words repeated in his head over and over, even though Daniesh knew that he couldn't claim this beautiful, sensuous, incredible woman.

Collapsing on the mattress, he pulled her into his arms and held her close as they relearned how to breathe. His arm tightened around her as he felt her soft, sweet breath wash over his skin, making him tingle. Daniesh looked up at the ceiling, cursing himself. Cursing the world for being unfair.

If only he could give her everything. Children, he thought and kissed the top of her head. He couldn't love this woman. He couldn't love anyone!

But deep in his head, he knew that it was too late. He loved Amanda.

## Chapter 10

A knock on the door woke them. Amanda looked around, disoriented and confused. Daniesh sat up and gently shifted her head onto a pillow. Giving her a light, sweet kiss, he slipped out of bed.

She watched sleepily as he pulled on his wrinkled slacks, not bothering with the boxers. Amanda smiled, admiring the rippling muscles in his back. She yawned hugely and tried to rouse herself, but her body simply wouldn't cooperate yet.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he told her, leaning down and brushing his lips over hers.

The knock sounded again, a bit harder this time. Daniesh pulled on a shirt as he walked over to the door. She thought she heard him growl, but wasn't sure.

Instead of pulling the door wide open, he slipped out and spoke to the person in the hallway. Amanda was grateful for his courtesy in not exposing her to whoever needed his attention, even though he'd pulled the bed covers over her, hiding her nudity.

Stretching, Amanda looked around. The bed was a complete mess. Which made sense since they'd made love all afternoon and well into the night. At some point, she wasn't sure what time, they'd showered and he'd ordered dinner. Or had it been lunch? Her perception of day and night was completely off. It didn't help that the heavy, blue velvet curtains blocked out the light, leaving the bedroom in a deep twilight.

Swinging her legs to the floor, she held the sheet over her nakedness, then felt silly since she was the only one in the room. Still, she looked around, wanting a shower.

Padding barefoot and naked to the bathroom, she flipped on the shower. Surprisingly, the warm water was instant. Stepping under the warm spray, she lifted her face up and rinsed off the scent of sex, smiling as she remembered all the delightful things they'd done overnight. It had been a marathon of sensual decadence and she'd experienced pleasure unlike

anything she'd ever know was even possible.

She should be exhausted, but Amanda felt...energized. Powerful!

Yesterday, playing the part of a movie star had been a thrill. But considering her predicament, perhaps it was time she took control of her life. So far, she'd been overwhelmed at being arrested and the terror of being charged with murder. She'd only been reactive. Maybe, it was time to be proactive.

When she finished showering, Amanda stepped out and looked around. There was a fluffy, white towel that she wrapped around herself. But, as she stepped out of the bathroom, she realized she wasn't sure what to wear. Her clothes were either at the police station or in the other room.

Peering out into the hallway, she looked both ways. When the coast was clear, she hurried down the long hallway to the room she'd been in her first night here. Smiling dreamily, she slipped into the room and laughed at what a crazy whirlwind her life had become over the past few days.

Quickly, she dressed in one of the outfits that had mysteriously arrived in this room. Today, she wore a pair of blue slacks and a yellow sweater. She dried her hair and used a touch of the makeup and felt a thousand times better.

"Time to get your life back!" she told her reflection in the mirror.

Heading down the stairs, she looked for a clock. The first order of business was to get her cell phone back. Her phone had all of her contacts, plus she used it for a watch! She felt lost without knowing what time it was. Oh - and the weather! Goodness, Amanda silently laughed at how often she checked the outside temperature on her phone instead of simply opening the door or window.

There was one time when she looked out the window to discover that it had rained. She'd immediately looked at her phone to check the weather, as if she needed the weather app to confirm what her eyes were telling her.

Yep, she desperately needed her phone. It was her crutch and kept her grounded. Surely, that high-powered, scary lawyer that Daniesh had hired would be able to get her phone and her suitcase back. And her laptop! Damn it, she felt lost without her laptop! Of course, she'd been a bit

preoccupied over the past few days, so she hadn't needed the distraction of her latest rough draft to help her get through the days, but still, she wanted her property back! Or at the very least, she wanted the files on her laptop back. If the police didn't return the laptop, she would...!

Daniesh was just stepping out of the library, the three men from yesterday following him. Goodness, Daniesh looked delicious. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, her thoughts flashing back to the things she'd done to his body last night.

"Oh good, you're up," he called out.

At the flash of her tongue, his eyes heated up, but he gave her a warning look. "Levi, Matteo and Sian have some new information for us. And I was about to call Tito and ask him to join us to show everyone the pictures of what we found last night."

Amanda smiled at the three men as Daniesh slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her against his side.

"Hello again. It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" she said, her gaze taking in all three men in greeting.

All three men looked surprised at first, but then smiled and nodded. "It is, indeed," Levi agreed, speaking for them.

The three men looked amused, but Amanda felt too good to care. "We had an exciting day yesterday," she told them, leaning forward as if she were sharing a secret.

"I invited them to share breakfast with us, so we could discuss everything together," Daniesh told her.

"That's wonderful!" she replied, looking up at him. Then she looked at the others. "His chef is uh-mazing!"

Everyone chuckled and she suspected that they were laughing at her, but Amanda didn't care.

Daniesh led the way into the dining room where a buffet of delicious scented foods was simmering on the ornate sideboard.

"Please, help yourselves," Daniesh announced, gesturing towards the buffet.



“Ladies first,” Matteo urged, gesturing for Amanda to serve herself.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling up at the man. She heard a soft growl, turned and realized that Daniesh was glaring at the Spanish Adonis. Amanda swallowed a giggle, and kissed Daniesh lightly before grabbing a plate and filling it with eggs and fruit.

Sitting down at the table, she was amazed and impressed as she watched the four other men load up their plates. Picking up her fork, Amanda felt tiny compared to the men around her.

“What happened with the police yesterday?” Daniesh asked as soon as they started eating.

A servant stepped into the room, pouring hot coffee for everyone.

“The detective we spoke with, a guy named Detective Leymon, said that he wasn’t dropping the charges against Ms. Thomas, but he would look into our claim about the embezzlement issue.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Daniesh snapped.

Matteo sipped his coffee, nodding emphatically. “We agree with you. However, we showed him evidence of Mr. Burrow’s cooked books. We don’t have copies of his bank statements, so we’re not exactly sure where he kept the money. But since he was in Paris, we still aren’t sure about his other connections or if Burrows-Sullivan was a member of an organized crime syndicate.”

“What about the wife?” Amanda interjected. “Did Burrow’s wife know anything?”

Levi shrugged. “The wife flew in on a private jet, which is owned by The Levinthall Group.”

“I know that company,” Amanda announced, cradling her cup as she sat up straighter in her chair.

Four sets of eyes turned to stare at her so she continued. “The Levinthall Group offered me a really good deal to take over my accounting needs.” She concentrated, thinking back to the emails she’d exchanged. “I think the person who called me was named...” she bit her lower lip, trying to remember. “Chad! Chad...Burton. Yes, that’s it,” she leaned forward and

braced her forearms on the table. “Chad Burton tried to convince me that he could save me a fairly ludicrous amount on my taxes.”

“If Chad Burton is part of the Levinthall Group, then they were going to swindle you,” Levi sighed.

Matteo’s dark eyes were hard and concerned as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the edge of the dining room table as he lightly held his cup of coffee. “They start working with companies, offering their services for extremely discounted rates, usually less than half of what a legitimate, reputable accounting firm would charge,” he explained. “From what we’re piecing together, they then make up the difference by embezzling funds through fake vendor invoices. The invoices start small, but grow if the clients don’t question their reports or the billed amount. And the people working for Levinthall Group are charismatic and charming, quickly gaining the trust of their clients to the point that they don’t ask questions.” He sighed and sipped his coffee. “That’s all we’ve been able to figure out so far.”

Sian, the quiet, brooding member of the group, spoke up. “Once we figure out why Burrows was here, we’ll fly back home and ferret out the rest of the pack of hyenas,” he asserted. His lilting Irish accent should have made the words sound melodic. Instead, the statement was delivered with a hard, merciless tone.

Deep down, Amanda suspected that Mr. Byrne was a very good, very kind man. But she doubted that the rest of the world got close enough to see that side of him. The very fact that he was here, ready to fight for her, to protect her, warmed her and she smiled gratefully at him.

“What is your plan in that regard?” Daniesh asked. His tone pulled her attention away from the angry Irishman.

Levi smiled, but there was no warmth to his eyes as he said, “We only have the beginnings of a plan, but we’ll keep you informed. Suffice it to say, there will be no one left in the organization to swindle anyone once we’re done with them.”

Matteo and Sian both nodded, their jaws tight with determination and anger.

Amanda glanced over at Daniesh, wondering how he was taking their

comments. But before she could say anything, the butler stepped into the room.

“I apologize for the interruption, Your Highness,” he said, sweeping a polite glance over the rest of the table, including them in his apology. “However, Ms. Thomas’ lawyer has arrived with news.”

Daniesh nodded and quickly picked up his napkin, wiping his mouth as he rose to his feet. The others did the same.

“We’ll get out of your hair,” Levi announced. “But if we have any more information, we’ll—”

Daniesh stopped their departure with a simple lift of his hand. “If you wouldn’t mind, could you join us in the library? I suspect that this has to do with Mr. Burrow’s death and I’d like you to explain what you just told me to Amanda’s lawyer. It might help to get the charges dropped.”

“Of course,” Matteo replied, bowing slightly with his head. Amanda suspected that the head bowing was the maximum courtesy to Daniesh’s title that these proud, powerful men were willing to offer. The three men were impressive, but each had a simmering fury just underneath the surface of their polite demeanors. Unfortunately, none of them offered any additional insights into what had caused that anger. She didn’t think that it had anything to do with the embezzlement.

Or maybe the embezzlement was part of the problem?

She’d like to get to know these men better. They seemed to be good and honest, but with a merciless drive to succeed. Or had they already succeeded?

Amanda immediately began weaving a plot around them. She knew that she could develop something sinister to put into their pasts that might...!

No, she wouldn’t violate their privacy like that.

Amanda followed them down the hallway, smiling when Daniesh fell into step beside her with his arm around her waist. It felt good, having him close. Too good, she warned herself. But did she move away? Nope. The opposite, in fact. She shifted closer, leaning into him slightly. His response was to tighten his grip around her waist.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Jalois!” Daniesh greeted the lawyer. They shook hands, speaking in rapid French for a moment. Then he turned and introduced Monsieur Jalois to the rest, quickly explaining their relationship to the investigation.

“Ah!” Monsieur Jalois replied, nodding in that Gallic fashion that Amanda was starting to truly appreciate as he switched to English. “I see that this is a larger problem than we originally anticipated.”

“What have you discovered?” Daniesh asked, gesturing for everyone to sit down. Everyone settled into the leather chairs and sofas and Amanda perched on the edge next to Daniesh. He kept her hand, lacing his fingers with hers.

Monsieur Jalois turned to Amanda. “Mademoiselle, since I was hired to represent *you*, I need your explicit permission to discuss your case with these others.”

“Absolutely,” she replied quickly, then turned to smile at the others. “They are just as invested in this as I am.”

“Only, we’re not facing imprisonment,” Levi commented, then smiled back at her. “We only lost money. You might lose your future.”

She didn’t like that reminder, but agreed anyway. She turned to the lawyer, nodding for him to continue. “What have you found out?”

The butler arrived with a coffee tray, pouring coffee for everyone. The room was silent until the butler exited, pulling the doors closed behind him.

When they were alone, the lawyer began. “You’re not going to lose your freedom, Mademoiselle Thomas.”

“Please,” she urged, “call me Amanda.”

“Merci. Amanda,” he corrected with a nod. “As I was saying, the police detectives working your case are lazy bastards,” he explained, saying the last word with a savage twist of his mouth and a contemptuous flip of his hand. “After a conversation with them earlier today, I could see that they both know they are wrong, but are refusing to accept the new evidence simply out of pride and obstinacy.” He took out a flash drive. “I gave them

this.”

“What is it?”

He took a sip of the coffee, then closed his eyes to savor the excellent flavors. A moment later, he opened his eyes and looked at her. “My investigator is *tres bien!*” he explained. “She found security footage of the gala at the hotel where His Highness received honors for his economic report. The video clearly shows your arrival into the smaller ballroom and the speeches, in which you are in the audience, as well as,” he paused and smiled mischievously, “a very *romantique* kiss on the terrace.”

“The kiss?” she gasped and felt Daniesh tense beside her. “But...we were outside! There were no cameras!”

“*Oui,*” he replied with a hearty chuckle. “*Fortunatement,* your kiss was captured by a paparazzo who was willing to sell me the picture.” He took another sip of his coffee. “There is additional security footage of you walking through the lobby of the hotel and all three videos have been verified by time stamps.” He waved his fingers in the air. “I have also given them pictures of the additional identities and passports that you provided, Your Highness.” He chuckled. “Those pictures were not time stamped and,” he held up a hand when Amanda started to offer an explanation. “I don’t need to know how those were obtained.”

Amanda froze for a brief moment, then chuckled as she leaned back, finding Daniesh’s chest to be a perfect “cushion”.

“Regardless,” the lawyer continued, “I expect that the Paris detectives will arrive shortly to explain that the charges against you have been dropped.”

Amanda stared at the man, stunned and not sure what to say. She felt lightheaded for a long moment, then she turned to Daniesh and...kissed him. With both of her hands cupping his head, she kissed him with every ounce of love and relief inside of her. It was almost as if her life had been given back to her. In a way, it had!

There were several soft chuckles, and Amanda pulled away, blushing but not ashamed. Everyone stood up and she stood with them, grabbing Monsieur Jalois’ hand. “Thank you!” she gushed. “*Merci! Mille mercies!*”

The lawyer chuckled and lifted her hand to kiss her fingertips. “You never should have been charged, my dear. It was the fault of the police detectives that were lazy and inept. They should have obtained those video files before charging anyone with a crime. They didn’t bother, assuming they could easily close a case.” He turned to bow to Daniesh. “With your permission, Your Highness, I will follow up with my upper level contacts to have these detectives admonished.”

“You have my full permission,” Daniesh replied.

Daniesh pulled Amanda closer as they both shook the lawyer’s hand, then he and the trio departed.

“We’ll keep in touch,” Levi replied, doing that curt, head-nod thing.

“I would appreciate that,” Daniesh said with honesty. “I look forward to hearing about your future adventures.”

Levi smiled, then walked out. Matteo was next and he lifted Amanda’s fingers to his lips. “You are a lucky woman,” he murmured, then turned to Daniesh. “She deserves better, but I suppose you will do.” Without any other explanation, he also left the room.

Sian was last and he lingered for a moment, watching Amanda carefully. Finally, he said, “If this arse doesn't be treatin' ye right, come to me, lassie..” His Irish accent was full on now, making his words sound a touch more genuine. He bowed over her fingers and gave her a wink. “I’ll treat ye like the princess ye are!”

Amanda stepped in front of Daniesh, stopping his tackle of the Irishman and laughing at both of their outrageous reactions. Sian simply walked out the door, chuckling as he adjusted his coat collar against the cold wind.

“He was joking!” she said with another laugh as she turned, placing her hands on his chest. “Just joking!” To soothe his temper, she lifted up onto her toes, kissing Daniesh deeply. “I’m here, Daniesh. I’m here and I’m a free woman!” She paused, giving him a lingering kiss on his neck. “Make love to me. Please?” She kissed his jaw, her fingers toying with his shirt buttons. “I want to celebrate getting my life back! And I want to do it with

you.” She released the top button. “You make me feel more alive than anyone else in this world!”

He growled, then scooped her up into his arms, taking the stairs once again.

## Chapter 11

Amanda finished her speech, then smiled out into the crowd of authors. The audience was on their feet, applauding her enthusiastically. But there was only one person she wanted to see. Daniesh was in the back, clapping loudly and she beamed, looking directly at him.

The detectives had stopped by his house yesterday morning, explaining that they were dropping the charges and looking for another suspect. They had a tip about someone who had come into the hotel earlier, asking about Mr. Burrows, but since the detectives had only known the victim as Henry Sullivan, they'd initially ignored that piece of information. It wasn't until the powerful trio, Sian, Matteo, and Levi, had provided evidence of the victim's other identities, that they realized that the man's murder might be connected to the person asking about him.

Unfortunately, the detectives hadn't managed to locate this mysterious person. However, at this point, Amanda didn't care about the investigation. As long as they no longer suspected her, the man's murder wasn't her concern. All she cared about was spending time with Daniesh.

Walking off the stage, she smiled at Tito. "The car is this way," he said, gesturing around the back of the conference hall. She headed towards the exit door, wondering where Daniesh was.

As soon as she ducked into the back of the limousine, he pounced on her. "You were magnificent!" Daniesh told her a moment before his lips covered hers.

He gave her only one passionate kiss before they stepped into his Paris house, then he swept her up into his arms and carried her up the stairs. "Get your clothes off!" he growled.

Amanda didn't hesitate. She twisted slightly, trying to reach for the zipper that ran along her back. Daniesh growled impatiently and spun her around. Amanda laughed, bracing herself on the wall as he tugged the zipper down.

"Hurry!" she whispered, then gasped when she felt his fingers trail



down the newly exposed skin of her spine. “Yes!” she hissed, leaning against his touch, needing more. “Touch me, Daniesh!” she urged. “I need you to touch me everywhere!”

“My pleasure,” he replied, pushing the black dress down, ignoring it when it whispered to the floor around her black heels. He’d bought her a pair of Louboutin heels yesterday and she’d felt incredibly sexy walking onto the stage in the spike heels. Now, she was several inches taller than normal and she wiggled her bottom, feeling brave and audacious.

He laughed, his big, strong hands cupping her butt. “Do that again and this will end too quickly!”

She laughed, leaning her head back against him. “And that would be a bad thing?”

He slid his hands from her bottom to her waist, then higher to cup her breasts. She wasn’t sure how her bra had disappeared, but Amanda appreciated his deftness. Then she gasped when his thumbs brushed over her nipples. He pinched them, earning a moan from her, as she gripped his rock-hard thighs behind her for balance.

“You said you wanted me to touch you everywhere,” he whispered in her ear, nipping at her earlobe. “That can’t happen if you want it fast.”

Amanda spun around, and grabbed his hands, putting them back on her breasts. “How about if we compromise?”

He grumbled, his thumbs teasing her nipples until she was writhing. “And if I’m not in the mood to compromise?”

She smiled, shifting and lifting her leg to wrap around his waist. She balanced on her other leg, holding onto his shoulders. “What if I suggested,” she kissed his chest, then nipped at his nipple, “that we go really fast now, then slower later?”

Daniesh pinched her nipples again. “I think I could be on board with that plan.” He spun her back around, her hands on the wall again. “Don’t move!” he growled. He spread her legs wider, his hands stroking down over her back. “I want to take you just like this!”

Amanda gasped, her body throbbing with the need for him to fill her,

to feel that pinnacle of pleasure that only he could bring her.

Biting her lip, she waited, glancing back at him over her shoulder. She heard his zipper and she unconsciously wiggled her hips, desperately needing him to fill her, to make her whole!

When he finally entered her, pressing into her hot softness, she sighed with short-lived relief. Because his magical hands caressed her, teasing that nub as he started thrusting. She heard him muttering something behind her in his own language, which only turned her on even further! Pressing his fingers against that sensitive nub, she guided his hand. With one hand braced against the wall and her other hand pressed against his fingers, it took no time at all for a climax to wash over her. Thankfully, he was just as turned on as she was and he found his own pleasure just as her own climax was winding down.

Moments later, she felt his chest against her back, their breath coming out as gasps.

“That was...”

“*Rayieat haqana*,” he whispered, then nipped at her neck, kissing the spot immediately afterwards.

She smiled at him over her shoulder. “I don’t know what that means, but it sounds beautiful.”

He pulled out of her and she gasped, but before she could protest, he had her in his arms, carrying her over to the enormous bed as he said something else in his native language. Amanda still had no idea what he was saying, but by the soft look in his eyes, her heart fell a bit more in love with him. Then he made love to her in a slow, thorough way that had her shuddering with pleasure over and over again!

## Chapter 12

“I have to go,” she whispered, the watery sunshine filtering through the filmy curtains of his bedroom.

The bed was a ruffled mess and the pillows had vanished several hours ago.

“I know,” Daniesh replied, stroking a hand down her back. “What time is your flight?”

“Four hours from now.” Amanda blinked back the tears, wishing more than anything that she could stay with him forever. But Daniesh hadn’t talked about anything beyond today. Beyond her flight home. They’d made love for hours, neither willing to sleep since they both knew that their time together was coming to a close.

“I should shower and get dressed.”

She felt his arms tighten around her and closed her eyes, trying to stop the tears. Her heart was breaking at the thought of never seeing Daniesh again.

“Will you start a new story when you get home?” he asked.

If ever a question was designed to tell her that this romantic liaison was over, that was it.

“No. I have to finish the one I’ve been working on,” she told him, thinking about the laptop sitting in her suitcase. The detectives had come yesterday to return her laptop, suitcase, and cell phone.

And in a few hours, she’d return home. Everything would be back to normal.

Her life was back on track.

But...was it, *really*?

Amanda wasn’t so sure. She sat up, holding the sheet over her naked breasts. Even that was odd. Ever since she’d been free, Daniesh hadn’t allowed any inhibitions. They’d gone from the bed to the shower and then back to the bed, only pausing for food so they’d have the strength to make

love again.

There were certain parts of Amanda's body that were sore, but if he pulled her into his arms for another round, she wouldn't resist. She...loved him. Adored him with all her heart. Walking into the bathroom, she turned the shower on, then stood there, watching the stream of water tumble to the marble floor. It took all of her energy to soap her body and wash her hair. When she stepped out of the shower, she wrapped herself in a towel, then came out to the bedroom to get dressed. Her suitcase had been delivered to the other bedroom, the one she'd slept in originally.

"I'm coming to the airport with you," he told her.

She didn't bother to look at what she grabbed. She simply pulled on clean underwear, grabbed a pair of black leggings, and one of the oversized sweatshirts she'd packed for comfort. When she was finally dressed, her wet hair pulled on top of her head, Amanda turned, finding Daniesh standing in the doorway. He'd showered as well, and was wearing a casual pair of jeans and a soft sweater that was probably cashmere. The material hugged his broad shoulders, revealing the definition of his biceps, reminding her of all the moments she'd held onto him over the past several days.

Biting back the sob that threatened to rip her heart out of her chest, she took a slow, deep breath, and shook her head. "I appreciate the sentiment, but..." she stopped, taking another breath and looking down at her feet. "I should just catch a taxi to the airport."

Emma had called yesterday, asking if she had a ride. Amanda had told her she had everything taken care of.

"You won't even let me see you off?" he snarled, stepping further into the room and pacing the thick, white carpet.

She turned, stuffing the clothes into her suitcase. "It would be easier."

"You don't *do* easier, Amanda!"

She stiffened, angry now. "What does that mean?" she demanded.

He turned, glaring at her, then spun around. "Nothing." And a moment later, he stomped towards the door. But before he walked out, he

braced his hands on the doorframe and sighed heavily. “Will you...at least... text me when you get home safely?”

She turned, unconsciously clutching a sweater to her chest.

“I will,” she replied, holding her breath.

Daniesh stared at her for a long moment and Amanda prayed he would ask her to stay. She would! It would devastate her to stay longer, but if it gave her a few more hours with him, she’d do it! She’d do anything for a little more time with him!

But he didn’t ask. As she watched, a muscle clenched in his jaw, but he remained silent. Finally, he left the bedroom.

It took every particle of self-discipline to keep herself together. She wasn’t sure how she did it, but she stuffed all of her clothes, the old and the new, into her suitcase. Then she grabbed the strap to her laptop case, her purse, and her suitcase, dragging everything with her as she made her way down the stairs.

It was the most painful moment of her life.

At the doorway, she looked around, wanting just one more kiss, or at the very least, a hug from Daniesh. A last glimpse of his crooked smile?

But he wasn’t there. She wasn’t even sure if he was still in the house!

Turning, she trudged out of the house, somehow finding a smile of thanks to the limousine driver who helped her store her suitcase in the trunk.

Daniesh watched Amanda from the window, gripping the glass of scotch so hard that it shattered. The pain of the glass shards in his hand didn’t register since the pain in his chest was so overwhelming. He watched as Amanda argued with one of his guards. She’d said she’d take a cab to the airport, but there wasn’t a chance in hell that he’d leave her to the nebulous security of a taxi driver. Not his Amanda. No, he’d ordered his guards to ensure that she was taken directly to the airport and flown home. She thought she was flying home on a commercial airline, but he’d ordered his pilot to see her safely back to Philadelphia.

There was a short argument but, in the end, she acquiesced to the driver and he felt his shoulders relax slightly. At least she would be safe. Amanda wouldn't be in his life, but she'd be safe.

Long after she'd stepped into the limousine, he lingered by the window. A part of him wanted to call her back. He wanted to beg her to stay.

But she deserved everything life could offer her. And a man who couldn't give her children couldn't be what she wanted.

No, they had never discussed children or a future. But Amanda was too caring, too beautiful, and wonderful to not want children.

And he couldn't give her that. Eventually, she'd find someone who could give her children. She'd be happy and in love and she'd have children and pets and the world.

A sound behind him made him turn away from the window.

"Your Highness!" his butler gasped, rushing forward. "You are bleeding!"

He was? Daniesh looked down at his chest, wondering if the pain in his chest had created an actual wound. But there wasn't anything there. What the hell was he talking about?

That's when he noticed his hand and the shattered glass scattered across the carpet at his feet. "Oh."

His butler bellowed and Tito rushed into the room. The lead bodyguard assessed the situation and immediately called his team on the radio.

Ten minutes later, Daniesh was in the emergency room, having his hand sutured. He hadn't sliced any ligaments, but the glass had cut deep into his hand. Twenty stitches later, he was back at the Paris house. What to do now? Amanda would be somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean now. Far away from him.

He should go home. He should...? He had work to do, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember what work awaited him.

Amanda was gone. That was the only thought that his brain could

process. The rest of his life, his world, and his future, faded into a grey haze.

## Chapter 13

Amanda forced her legs over the side of the bed to the floor, and just sat there. The debilitating sadness that she'd felt after leaving Daniesh three months ago hadn't diminished and now it was affecting her health. She'd decorated her bedroom with an iron bedframe and covered the mattress with a colorful quilt. The sheets were a bright, sunny yellow and the curtains echoed the light pink the artist had used in making the quilt. But Amanda didn't see the cheerful colors. She was too focused on the pain in her heart that wouldn't go away. She felt miserable and tired, her body sore, and her breasts missed Daniesh's touch so much that they ached constantly, feeling heavy and swollen.

"Get over it!" she muttered, pushing her hair out of her eyes. She pulled the ragged strands of dark, brown hair around, noticing the split ends and limpness. "And get a freaking haircut!"

She glanced at the clock. Three o'clock in the morning. When was the last time she'd slept through the night?

It had been at least three months ago. Three months of painful loneliness. Three months of just pushing herself through every moment of the day. Three months of losing weight and feeling as if nothing would ever be right again.

"Get over it!" she repeated more firmly, louder this time.

Her phone rang and Amanda forced herself not to look at the caller. It wasn't Daniesh, so she didn't care who was calling. Ignoring her cell phone, she walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. For the first five days after coming home, she hadn't showered. She'd barely eaten anything as she'd lost herself in her latest plot. It was about three men who may or may not look similar to Sian, Levi and Matteo. The three had opened a detective agency and were solving mysteries all over the world.

Her publisher loved the concept and had asked her to write more. Her publishing house was holding off on releasing the first book until Amanda had more ready to go. Then her publisher would release them one at

a time.

There had been a short article about a man arrested in Paris for shooting a tourist by the name of Henry Sullivan. Apparently, Henry had multiple aliases and had stolen money from several people. One of those people had followed the man to Paris and shot him when Sullivan, or Burrows, refused to return the stolen money.

It seemed rather anticlimactic to hear that the case had been solved. Amanda read through the article twice, trying to find some emotion other than just...blah.

Amanda didn't care. She didn't care about anything anymore. The icy, miserable greyness of winter had slowly shifted to the bright warmth of spring, but Amanda rarely left her house.

Letting the water pour over her face, she tried to find the energy to care about...anything. But she just felt too awful. Her stomach churned most of the time and her heart ached. She read the news every damn day, hoping to read something, anything, about Daniesh, but there were only old gossip stories and a ton of supposition about why he wasn't attending one economic conference or another.

She finished showering and pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt from her alma mater. She turned on the coffee maker, then sat down at her desk and lost herself in the plot. This, she thought as her fingers flew over the keyboard...this was her only reprieve from the debilitating heartache.

It was four hours later when she realized she had a headache and looked around. She still hadn't had any coffee this morning, but the effort to walk over to the coffee pot felt too overwhelming to contemplate. So instead, she turned back to her computer and kept writing, ignoring the sick feeling in her stomach. It would eventually go away. It had every day, eventually.

This was her new life. This was her world.

A knock on her door interrupted her concentration. It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't bothered to open the windows this morning. Or yesterday? How long had she been here?

Time had lost any meaning.



Another knock, louder and more impatient this time, made her sigh as she pushed up from her desk. Walking over to the door, she wondered why she had only one sock on. But instead of worrying about that, she opened the door.

Emma stood in the doorway looking bright and fresh in a sunny yellow dress with a softer yellow cardigan and matching heels. Amanda's best friend looked her over, then gasped, "Dear heaven!"

Amanda was startled to find her best friend here in Philadelphia and, as soon as Emma stepped inside, Amanda peered outside at her driveway. Sure enough, two bodyguards stood sentry outside, but Emma's husband wasn't around.

"Where's Rayed?" Amanda asked listlessly.

Emma hugged her tightly, then pulled back, assessing her carefully. "What have you eaten today?"

Amanda looked around, not sure what time it was. The coffee pot had turned off, so it was...?

"What time is it?"

Emma's mouth pursed and her concern deepened. "Where's your phone?"

Amanda looked around, not sure where she'd left it. "I don't remember where I put it." Her eyes moved back to Emma's and she shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Emma sighed. "Go put some other clothes on. I'm taking you out for dinner."

Amanda blinked. Dinner? She hadn't even had breakfast! "It's that late?" She looked over at her computer, shocked that she'd been working for so long. Although, Amanda wasn't sure what time she'd started, so it might have only been thirty minutes since she'd woken up. Not opening the curtains meant that she had no idea what time it was.

"Go!" Emma ordered. "Change clothes!"

Amanda considered arguing with Emma, but she simply didn't have the energy. And her stomach didn't feel well. Adding to her general sense of

malaise, Amanda acknowledged she ached everywhere. So instead of telling her friend that she wanted to be alone, knowing that Emma wouldn't allow it, Amanda headed into her bedroom. She looked around, but wasn't sure what to wear.

Apparently, Emma had anticipated her inability to decide. She pushed open the doors to her closet and pulled something out. "This," Emma ordered, pulling out a pair of black slacks and...!

"Not *that* sweater," Amanda announced, cringing away from the familiar pink sweater. She hadn't worn it since she'd been with Daniesh. She hadn't worn any of the clothes he'd bought her. It was too painful.

"Okay, then how about this one?" Emma suggested, her tone softer.

Amanda looked over her shoulder and saw that Emma was holding up a white shirt. She nodded. "That's fine."

Emma left, but warned, "I'll give you five minutes, then I'm coming back in."

Since Emma wouldn't give in and go away, Amanda pulled off the ratty sweats and tossed them into the laundry basket. She'd need to do laundry soon. The pile was...even as the thought occurred to her, the pile toppled over. When was the last time she'd vacuumed?

A while, she thought and pulled on the slacks. They were too loose and she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. She'd lost a lot of weight. Yes, she needed food, but the thought didn't bother her too much. Amanda shrugged into the white blouse, buttoning it up and trying not to think about Daniesh's hands and the way he'd trailed his fingers down her belly. When she realized that she hadn't put on a bra, she let out a disgusted snort and undid the buttons again, forcing herself to concentrate on the present and not the past.

She turned, grabbing a bra and pulled it on. But...dear heaven, what had happened to her breasts? They were enormous! The mounds spilled out over the cups of her bra and...! She tossed the pointless bra away and grabbed another. But this one was too small as well. She found a sports bra, which, at least covered her breasts, but they squished out the sides!

Plus, the sports bra was pink and turquoise. The colors would show

through the white blouse, so she grabbed a different sweater, this one black. She'd look like she was heading for a funeral, but Amanda didn't have the energy to care. People were going to think whatever they wanted anyway.

"You ready?" Emma called, jerking Amanda out of her contemplation of her hairbrush.

Quickly, she touched her hair, ignored the increasing nausea, and smoothed out her hair. She added a touch of lipstick, but the thought of hunting down her concealer to hide the dark circles under her eyes was too much to consider.

She took a deep breath, touched her stomach to try to calm the nausea and jerked the bedroom door open.

Emma was sitting at Amanda's desk, reading the rough draft that was still open on her computer.

"This is really good!" Emma replied, standing up. Her eyes moved over Amanda's figure. "Why have you lost so much weight?"

Amanda's hand shifted to her thighs, because her slacks were hanging off her hips. She shrugged. "I don't know. I just...feel sick a lot." She touched her forehead. "I think I'm coming down with something."

Emma's head tilted slightly. "Hmmm." Then she turned and opened the house door. "Let's get you some food. You need to put on those ten pounds you've lost."

Amanda followed, and by the time they were sitting down at a Mexican restaurant with a basket of warm tortilla chips and spicy salsa, Amanda was starting to feel better. In fact, the more salsa she ate, the better she felt. "Oh my gosh, this is so good!" she gasped, loading another chip with the tomato and jalapeno based goodness.

"So, what have you been up to since you left Paris?" Emma asked.

Amanda told her about the book series she was working on and Emma told her about the newest investigation she'd started. But Amanda could tell that Emma was holding something back.

By the time dessert arrived, Amanda couldn't hold back her curiosity. "So...? What's the *real* reason for your visit?"

Emma put down her spoon and looked at Amanda from across the table. “The fact that you haven’t answered your phone, barely respond to my texts, and have lost more weight than you can afford to lose isn’t enough?”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “You read what I’ve been working on. It’s more complicated than my previous stories and I’ve had to concentrate.”

“I’m calling BS,” she said, picking up her spoon and pointing it at Amanda. “Why are you so sad? Why aren’t you sleeping? Why have you lost so much weight?” She paused in her interrogation, narrowing her eyes. “Does all of this,” she waved her spoon at Amanda’s figure, “have something to do with a certain handsome prince you met in Paris?”

“Of course not,” Amanda muttered, the lie tasting sour on her tongue. She looked wistfully down at the bowl of cheesecake with a spicy, sweet jalapeno sauce dripping over the side. Her appetite had vanished. “How’s Rayed?”

“He’s fine. We’re going to have a baby, so-“

Amanda screamed, jumping up and coming around the table to hug her best friend. “That’s wonderful! Why did you wait until dessert to tell me?”

Emma laughed, returning Amanda’s hug with interest. “Because you look like hell,” she admitted.

Amanda sat back down, still grinning, utterly delighted for her friend. If a small bit of jealousy tempered her excitement, well, she’d hide it and analyze it later. Once she was alone again.

They talked about babies and due dates, Emma’s health and Rayed’s joy. Apparently, Emma’s husband was already buying out every local toy store, more than ready to spoil his first child.

When Amanda returned to her house later that evening, after giving Emma several more congratulatory hugs, she locked the door and looked around with a sigh. Her house was a mess! She wasn’t eating properly and she was working too much. Emma was happy and...okay, Amanda wasn’t. She’d probably never be happy without Daniesh, but she could at least stop living like a slob.

So for the next two hours, she cleaned. She did several loads of laundry, washed the dishes, scrubbed the kitchen floor, vacuumed, dusted, and straightened up her space. After she finished folding and putting away the third load of laundry, she looked around and felt significantly better.

“Maybe I’ll be able to sleep tonight,” she whispered hopefully as she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. But instead of grabbing her toothbrush, she rushed to the recently scrubbed toilet and...threw up the delicious meal she’d just enjoyed with Emma! The wrenching was painful, the salsa made it far worse, and she was more exhausted afterwards than she’d thought possible.

Pulling herself up, she rinsed out her mouth and brushed her teeth. Not bothering to change into a nightshirt, she simply climbed into bed and closed her eyes, falling asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

## Chapter 14

The knock on the door woke her the following morning and she padded barefoot to answer it, but before she could make it to the door, she turned and rushed into the bathroom. The nausea that she'd been battling the previous... however long...was in full riot mode. She threw up again and this time it was worse, since she didn't have anything left in her stomach.

The pounding was louder now, more urgent. She knew that it was probably Emma coming by to take her out for breakfast, but the thought of food made her feel even worse.

She rinsed out her mouth and made it to the door just as Emma pulled out her phone. "I was about to call the police," she announced, pushing through the door. "What's wrong?" she demanded.

Amanda dropped onto the couch, holding her head in her hands. "I'm just not feeling well," she muttered.

Emma sat down next to her. "I know that you were with Daniesh recently."

Amanda leaned her head back against the sofa, closing her eyes at the flood of painful memories. "That was three months..." she froze. Three months. And she'd been feeling sick for...how long? She couldn't remember for sure. The nausea had been a near constant companion over the past several weeks. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she hadn't felt horrible.

"Are you pregnant too?" Emma whispered.

Amanda's eyes popped open and she stared at her friend with open-mouthed shock. "No!" she gasped, denying the possibility even as a part of her wondered if it was possible. "No. I can't be pregnant. Daniesh said that...he couldn't. That it wasn't possible."

"Which means that you two didn't use protection?"

Emma was right and Amanda couldn't wrap her mind around the possibility.

"I'll be right back," Emma said, then disappeared out the door.

Amanda was still sitting on the sofa fifteen minutes later when Emma rushed back through the door, carrying a bag from the drug store down the street. “Here,” she said, taking out a box with a pregnancy test in it. “Go pee on this and tell me what it says.”

Amanda stared at the box in Emma’s hand, not sure that she wanted to know the answer. What if she *was* pregnant? A burst of happiness filled her chest, but she tamped it down. What if she wasn’t?

Emma touched Amanda’s shoulder. “You *need* to know. If you’re not pregnant, then I’m taking you to a doctor. Because obviously, something isn’t right.”

Emma made a good point, but it didn’t make Amanda feel any better. With a huff, Amanda took the box, her fingers shaking.

Before Amanda could stand up and head into the bathroom, Emma gripped her arm. “It’s going to be okay,” she whispered. “No matter what the answer, we’ll figure this out *together*, okay?”

Amanda nodded, her lips numb. She went into the bathroom with the box. Once she’d done her thing, she set the plastic stick on the countertop to wait for the test to process. For a long time, she couldn’t look.

Emma knocked on the door and Amanda opened it, tears in her eyes. Staring into her friend’s concerned, blue gaze, Amanda shook her head. “I can’t look!” she whispered.

Emma understood and took Amanda’s hands, giving them a reassuring squeeze. “Let me see,” she urged.

Amanda stepped out of the way and Emma bent over the stick. When she turned around, her expression was carefully blank. “So...do you want it to be positive or negative?”

Amanda thought about it for a moment, not sure what to say. However, an image of her holding Daniesh’s baby in her arms popped into her head and she put a hand to her chest. “I’d love to have Daniesh’s baby!” she whispered, then pressed her lips together, terrified of being disappointed. The past three months had been beyond miserable. Was she about to be dumped back into that well of despair and loneliness?

Emma's expression brightened into a delighted grin. "Then, you're pregnant!" she whispered, then held her breath as she waited for Amanda's reaction.

Amanda's breath caught in her throat. Emma's blue eyes were lit up, but was she teasing? "Are you kidding?"

Emma shook her head, her grin widening. "Nope. The test is positive," she said, picking up the stick and showing Amanda.

Amanda blinked, looked at the stick and...sure enough, there was a bright blue plus sign in the tiny window.

"I'm...pregnant?" she whispered.

"Yep!" Emma laughed, hugging Amanda tightly. "We're both going to have babies!"

Amanda laughed and the sound felt raw on her throat. It had been a long time since she'd laughed! Too long!

"When are you due?" Amanda gasped, holding onto Emma's arms.

"The doctor says I'm due in September."

Amanda did the math and realized that she might have her baby right around that time as well. "Me too!"

Emma did a little dance, but the bathroom was a bit too small for dancing. They moved out to the living room, then Amanda froze. "I...uh... how do I..." she stopped and looked at Emma, worriedly. "Daniesh thinks he's incapable of making a baby."

Emma chuckled, shaking her head. "I think you've proven him wrong."

That was true, but then another problem occurred to Amanda. "How do I tell him?" she asked in a tiny voice wringing her hands as she paced the living room.

Emma grinned. "I think you should fly out there and tell him in person."

In person? Just fly to his country without any warning? No! Impossible! "I can't! I should just text him."



Emma grabbed Amanda's hand, stopping her from grabbing her phone. "Would you want to hear news this big through a text message?"

Amanda sighed, rubbing her forehead. "No. You're right, I wouldn't." She glanced at her computer. "Let me find a flight. I *should* do this in person."

Emma shook her head. "Why don't you fly to Fahre with me, then my pilot can take you to Hadair?" she offered.

Amanda didn't even hesitate. "No, I don't want...I think..." she stopped, rubbing her forehead. "I can't really think at the moment." She took a long, slow, deep breath, trying to process. She was pregnant? "Could the test be wrong?"

Emma smiled gently. "There is a very low possibility of a false positive."

Amanda nodded, her mind still whirling.

She continued. "Plus, you mentioned that you've been feeling nauseous over the past few weeks. That's a pretty good sign of pregnancy during the first trimester. And sometimes longer. Some women are nauseous for their entire forty weeks."

With that news, Amanda grimaced. "That would be absolutely miserable."

Emma nodded. "Of course, that's the exception."

Amanda looked at her friend. "How far along are you?"

Emma's fingers fluttered to her stomach and she smiled. "The doctor estimates that I'm about fourteen weeks along." One side of her mouth quirked upwards. "Remember in Paris when I sort of abandoned you?"

Amanda's green eyes looked at her friend, startled. "You didn't abandon me. I was fine."

Emma chuckled. "You were fine because Daniesh was there. But the reason I wasn't with you during that miserable time was because I was suffering from morning sickness that was so bad, I could barely get out of bed."

“Oh, Em!” Amanda cried out. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She laughed softly. “Because you had more than enough to deal with at the time. I didn’t want to add to your burden.” Emma touched Amanda’s forearm. “Are you...upset about this? Are you angry about being pregnant?”

Amanda stared at her friend for a long moment, contemplating her question. Was she upset? “No. Not even a little,” she replied. “I mean, I don’t have great health insurance because the health insurance here in the United States is so awful, but...” Her hand covered her stomach where her growing baby rested. “But if I’m pregnant, which I’m still not fully convinced I am, by the way, but *if* I am, then I’m...thrilled.” She thought about it for a moment, her wonder and amazement growing. “I would be truly excited to have this baby.”

Emma clapped her hands together, excited as well. “Good! Now, how are you going to tell Daniesh?”

Her excitement dimmed. Amanda bit her lip, contemplating her options.

“I will fly to...um...” she stopped, worrying her lower lip. “Actually, I’m not exactly sure how I’ll tell him.”

Emma smiled. “You’re going to let me and Rayed fly you to his country. I will make some calls to smooth the way through palace security and you’ll sit down with Daniesh, face to face, and tell him what you just told me.”

Amanda cringed. “Why do I have to do all the hard work? Why am I the one who has to push through my nervousness to confront him?” She grumbled and resumed pacing. “Why do women always have to do the hardest parts?”

Emma shrugged. “He doesn’t get to feel the first flutters of his new child’s life. You will.” She moved closer to Amanda, taking her hands. “There are benefits and downsides to any and every situation. You know that. And this is one of the downsides to being a woman. We have the advantage of *knowing* we’re pregnant. We get to feel the baby kick and grow in our bodies. But we also have the responsibility of ensuring that our fetus is well cared for. And in our circumstances, we have the responsibility to

nurture the next generation of leaders for our country.”

Amanda wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. It put Daniesh even further out of her reach. “Maybe I should just—”

Emma held up a hand, stopping Amanda. “You should get on a plane and talk to him. The man is desperately in love with you. I saw it happen the first night.”

“He's not,” she whispered, her lips trembling. “He hasn't contacted me once since I left.”

Emma eyed her sharply. “Have you called him?”

Darn it! She had a point! “No. I didn't think he wanted to hear from me.”

“Maybe, he feels the same way about you.”

That thought had occurred to her, but Amanda had wimped out. There was also the fact that she wasn't sure HOW to contact him. He hadn't given her his personal cell phone number. And she wasn't sure how to contact the palace in Hadair to leave him a message.

“I'll fly there once I've finished this rough draft. Then, I can edit the book on the flight.”

Emma rolled her eyes and heaved a heavy sigh. “Why won't you take me up on the offer of a private flight?”

Amanda looked down, her fingers lacing together. “I think...it's because I need more time to process everything.” She lifted her eyes to her friend. “And I'm scared. I need time to figure out what I'm feeling. What to say and how to say it.”

Emma stared at her for a long moment, then nodded slowly. “I get that,” she replied, her words soft, but filled with understanding. “Okay, I'm going to stop insisting and let you do your thing. But call me as soon as you've told him, okay?”

“I will.”

Emma shook her head. “No, I need you to call me as soon as you get on your flight, then as soon as you land. And then, *again*, after you've told

him.”

Amanda laughed. “Why are you becoming a mother hen, all of a sudden?”

Emma gave her a half smile. “There are security issues to consider.” She patted Amanda’s hand. “You’re carrying the heir to a very powerful man. You really shouldn’t be on a commercial flight.” She hesitated for a moment, then continued, “In fact, you should be on a private plane with a military escort.”

Amanda rolled her eyes and sighed. “I’m going to go pack a small bag. I’ll probably only be gone for a couple of days.”

“That’s what you think!” Emma teased, standing up and following her friend into her bedroom. “Pack for at least a week.” Then she tilted her head. “No, on second thought, don’t bother packing anything more than a couple of outfits. I guarantee that none of your clothes will be good enough for whatever is coming at you next.”

## Chapter 15

Amanda walked slowly down the long, open hallway to the luggage pickup. Her nerves were fluttering dangerously and she felt nauseous. Of course, she’d felt that way for the past several weeks, so nothing was new there. She’d picked at her in-flight meal, a reheated, barely recognizable piece of chicken covered in some sort of “cream” sauce. The flight attendants had been apologetic about the food they’d served on the overnight flight.

The airport in the capital city of Hadair was big and bright, ultra-modern and very efficient. The overhead signs helped visitors in several languages to find their way. Amanda swallowed as she followed the signs to the taxi service.

But before she could unload her suitcase, strong hands reached for it.

“Tito?” she yelped, looking at the man who was taking charge of her luggage. “What are you doing here?”

The man picked up her heavy suitcase as if it were a feather. He turned and handed it off to a second guard who quickly took charge of her luggage.

Tito turned to her. “We were informed of your flight plans about six hours ago, Ms. Thomas,” he explained, his expression shielded by dark sunglasses. “Would you please come with me?”

Amanda cringed from the man’s cool demeanor. What had happened to the casually friendly guard who had helped her so much in Paris?

She considered ignoring his order. It would be simple enough to just catch a taxi. But she really needed to speak with Daniesh. And how was she to get into the palace without Tito’s security clearance?

So she sighed and followed Tito. There, she found two more familiar bodyguards standing by an SUV that was waiting just outside the airport exit . “You can’t park there!” she gasped, looking around for the police who were sure to yell at them to keep moving.

“We *can* park here,” Tito assured her. “But, if you wouldn’t mind, we do need to get moving ma’am.”

Amanda felt like a burden all the sudden, so she stood her ground. “Tito, I need to check into a hotel and then—”

He swept a glance around the parking area before turning back to her. “Princess Emma called to let us know you were coming.” He looked around again. “We need to get you to safety.”

Amanda mentally groaned at Emma’s machinations, but because they were done out of concern, she kept her mouth shut and ducked into the vehicle without another protest. There was a bunch of mental grumbling though! And Emma was going to get a big piece of Amanda’s mind. She even pulled out her phone, texting to her friend.

*“You’re in so much trouble, woman!”*

Emma sent back a winking smiling face.

The drive through the streets of Hadair’s capital was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. There were sirens and police vehicles halting traffic so the three black SUVs could drive straight through without stopping.

“What’s going on?” she asked, nervous and not sure why there was such a fuss being made.

“Prince Daniesh has requested that you be escorted to the palace

promptly and without incident,” Tito replied, his eyes scanning the streets and buildings.

He was stiff and formal, unlike the man who had been so helpful in Paris. Amanda didn’t understand why, but he kept scanning the streets.

Her suspicions were confirmed when the caravan of SUVs drove through a set of formal gates. No, not a single set of gates. There were three sets of gates! The first set were ornate iron bars with a gold medallion in the middle. The second set were steel vertical bars reinforced with wide horizontal bars. This gate didn’t open until the first gate behind them was closed. She looked around, as panic welled up in her chest when she discovered that she was literally caged between the front and back gates with more reinforced bars along each side of the SUV.

“It’s okay,” Tito said, offering her a tight, but slightly reassuring smile. “You’re safe now.” He looked around, but his jaw was still tightly clenched. “Almost.”

Once the second gate opened, they drove down a cement tunnel into a parking garage. There were about fifty black SUVs and all of them looked exactly the same. She noticed that even the license plates were the same. Odd, but she didn’t say anything as the driver pulled through another gate.

He drove down several more levels and Amanda had to release her grip on the door handle when her fingers started cramping.

“We’re here,” Tito announced, his voice softer now. He parked the SUV facing an elevator.

Amanda was trying not to hyperventilate without much success. Unconsciously, her hand drifted protectively over her stomach. Tito noticed her gesture, and half turned toward her as she whipped her hand away.

With wide, startled eyes, he examined her more carefully. “Are you...?” he started to ask, but the elevator doors opened and he stopped, watching as Daniesh and more guards stepped out.

Tito stepped out of the vehicle as Daniesh nearly ripped the door on her side off its hinges. Then with gentler hands, he reached in and pulled her into his arms.

“Amanda!” he rasped, his arms tightening around her.

Amanda gave up fighting back tears. It had been so long since she’d felt Daniesh’s strong, powerful arms around her! She couldn’t let him go! Not again! Leaving him in Paris had been hard enough! She wrapped her arms around his neck, and sobbed against his chest.

“What the hell are you doing!” he demanded moments later, pulling back as he gripped her upper arms, bending down to look into her eyes. “Amanda!”

Amanda was bone tired and her stomach didn’t feel very good. “Could I...get a cup of water, please?” she asked, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

Daniesh looked into the eyes of the woman he’d been desperately missing for the past several months. He couldn’t stand the thought of letting her go for even a moment, but she looked as if she might drop where she stood. There were dark circles under her eyes and she’d lost too much weight. He looked her over, torn between joy at seeing her and worry. That’s when he realized that her breasts hadn’t lost any weight. Hell, they were...huge! Magnificently huge!

But before he could process that fact, she slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and she looked around desperately until she found a garbage can. Racing over to it, she tumbled forward, bracing her hands on either side of the garbage can as she...threw up?

Was she just tired? Had the flight been too long?

Several moments later, someone put a glass of ice water in his hand. Daniesh walked over to her and stroked her back. Amanda flinched and he quickly pulled back. “What’s going on, love?” he asked, his voice soft and soothing.

“Pregnant,” she groaned, then threw up again.

Pregnant. He stood there, poleaxed. Still clutching the glass of water while the woman he’d missed so badly threw up into a well-used garbage can. It took him several more minutes to understand exactly what that word

meant.

Pregnant.

That's when the anger rolled over him.

"Perhaps you should come with me," he said, trying not to weaken when she lifted her head, looking at him with those deep, green eyes of hers.

He handed her the glass of water and she downed it. Then smiled weakly at the guard who stepped closer to take the empty glass.

"Where to?" she asked, wiping her sweaty forehead, then delicately wiping the corners of her mouth.

Daniesh turned and walked back into the elevator, not bothering to see if she followed him. He felt so enraged, so...betrayed...that he couldn't think properly.

His Amanda, the woman he'd been dreaming about for months, had slept with another man! She was pregnant with another man's child! Damn it! He'd left her so that she could do exactly that, but, why had she come to him? Why not her new lover?

Amanda was a passionate, sensuous woman. Why wouldn't she seek pleasure after leaving him?

She stepped into the elevator, her shoulders hunched. She looked... dejected!

Damn it, he didn't want to feel anything for her! She'd done exactly what he'd wanted her to do. So why was he so angry?

Because he still wanted her!

"Why have you lost so much weight?" he snarled. "It can't be good for your baby to have lost that much weight!"

Amanda flinched at his harsh tone.

"You're...right."

There was a long, uncomfortable stretch of silence as they rode the elevator up to the main level of the palace. He wanted her gone! Standing here, breathing in the sweet, delicious scent of her, was making his head spin! And knowing she was pregnant...!



The doors opened and, because she was in front of him, he had to wait for her to step out first.

He reached out to touch her back, but realized that he couldn't handle touching her. He'd been thinking nonstop about her since she'd walked out of his life in Paris. But seeing her now, she looked...defeated.

"Do you not want the baby?" he demanded, leading her into his office. There were several computer monitors on his desk. He liked seeing all of the data laid out in front of him. Instead of leading her over to the comfortable sitting area of his office, he gestured to one of the chairs situated in front of his desk while he walked around and sat down behind his desk.

Her head jerked up and he saw the surprise. "Of course I want this baby!" she gasped, covering her stomach with both hands. She wore a pair of jeans that probably fit her figure about fifteen pounds ago. But now, they looked like they might slide off her hips if she stood up too fast. "Don't you?"

Now that shocked him! "Why the hell would I want your baby?"

The look on her features was similar to what he'd expect if he'd slapped her. Stunned, horrified, and silent.

It took her several moments to regroup, and he sat there, silently stewing. She knew that he couldn't produce children! He'd told her that! It was why they hadn't used protection and now she saunters into his office, looking sick and distraught, and has the audacity to ask if he wants her baby?

The question only infuriated him further and he stood up, bracing his hands on the desk as he leaned forward. "Are you here asking me to...be the father to your baby?"

Her mouth opened and closed and he could read the answer in her eyes before she responded.

"You *are!*"

Daniesh couldn't believe the gall. Pushing away from the desk, he backed up to the windows, unable to stand being so close to her. She had no idea what she was doing to him, how much he *wanted* this baby to be his. And damn it, if he didn't get her out of here, he might just beg her to let him

do it!

And he would! Daniesh wanted Amanda, and any baby she had, to be his. He could pretend that the child was his. He was strong enough. He could pretend as long as he had her in his arms.

“Get out!” he snarled. At the wounded look in her eyes, his voice softened slightly. No matter what, this was still the woman he loved, even if she’d gone to another man right after. “Get out of here and don’t ever come back.” He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to keep himself from reaching for her.

Maybe if he’d been stronger, maybe if he’d been sleeping more and not dreaming about her every damn night, wondering if she was okay, if she was eating and sleeping well, wondering if she was thinking and dreaming about him too...maybe if any of that had happened, then he could have kept silent as she stood up on trembling legs and walked out of his office.

But none of that had happened. He was exhausted. And she looked even worse than he felt. So he couldn’t stop the words as her fingers touched the doorknob.

“Do you need money?” he barked. “Is that it?”

Slowly, Amanda turned and stared him down. His chest felt like it was on fire as his rage filled him.

“I came here hoping that you’d want to be a part of our child’s life, Daniesh. But apparently, you’re not the man I thought you were.” She opened the door, her back stiff. “I don’t need anything from you!”

And she walked out.

Daniesh heard only two words; our child. “Our” child? He raced around his desk and jerked the door open in time to see Amanda turning the corner, heading the wrong way. He wasn’t sure where she was going, but he raced after her.

“Amanda, stop!” he bellowed.

Everyone in the hallway stopped, staring at their leader in alarm. He never spoke to anyone in that tone. He was always cool and professional. But Amanda didn’t stop! She kept on going. He knew that she’d heard him

because her too-thin shoulders jerked. However, the command didn't convince Amanda to stop. In fact, she sped up!

The woman disobeyed him!

Now why did that make him burn even hotter for her?

He was losing his mind! Yes, that had to be it. Desire for her was driving him insane!

He rushed down the hallway and grabbed her arm, spinning her around. She glared up at him, her lips pressed tightly together as if she were trying to hold back the barrage of outrage.

“What the hell do you mean? That isn't *our* child!” he hissed.

Amanda jerked her arms and he released her so that he wouldn't hurt her. “You're right,” she snapped back, leaning forward as she added, “Apparently, it's only *my* child!” And she turned and started walking again. “You don't want to have anything to do with our child, Daniesh. I heard you loud and clear. I will not bother you again!”

And she pushed her way through a doorway. Right into a broom closet!

A split second later, she stomped back out, disgruntled and annoyed, then looked both ways down the hallway. “How the hell do I get out of here?” she snarled. “This place is a freaking maze!”

“This way,” he replied, taking her upper arm again. She stiffened and jerked her arm away from him again. He sighed, then extended his arm. “If you would...?” he offered.

She sniffed, her chin lifting defiantly. Amanda didn't reply or touch him, but she walked in the direction he'd indicated.

Daniesh trailed behind her, his thoughts whirling. “Our” child? “Our”?!

Impossible! His doctor had told him years ago that he'd never be able to have children! He'd had measles as an infant!

“Where am I?” she asked, coming to a stop in the middle of a long, unfamiliar hallway. “This isn't the way I came in.” She turned around and

glared at him, stepping back when she realized that he was so close. “I’m leaving, Daniesh. I’m going home.”

“This way,” he sighed, then opened the door to usher her into his private suite.

She stomped in, obviously beyond angry and he loved that about her. But he was still too confused by her comment.

“This isn’t the way out!” she exclaimed, turning around and glaring at him.

“These are my private quarters.”

She looked nervous now. “I’m *not* staying here. You didn’t stutter when you said you weren’t going to be the father to our child. I’m going back to Philadelphia. I can raise this baby on my own. I don’t need you or anyone else.”

Her assertion would have been more convincing if the tears weren’t streaming down her cheeks. And if her chin wasn’t quivering.

“Amanda, that *can’t* be my baby,” he asserted, but this time, his voice was very soft. “I had measles when I was a child. I am sterile. You got pregnant by your next lover. It can’t be mine.”

He hated those words. He hated the unknown man who had touched this woman. But he curled his fingers into fists, fighting to keep himself from touching her, from reaching out to comfort her and be comforted.

“You *ass!*”

He reared back, startled by her reaction. “Excuse me?”

She huffed a bit, angrily wiped the tears from her cheeks. “First of all, I haven’t had sex with anyone but you in...well, too long! There was no man before you for several years and I definitely didn’t go from your bed in Paris to some other man’s when I returned to Philadelphia. And go to hell for thinking that I ever would!” She threw her hands in the air, letting the anger take over. “And furthermore, sterility only comes from the Mumps, you complete imbecile! Not the measles!” She stomped to the door and jerked it open. At the moment, he was too stunned by her declarations to react. “Get your diseases straight!”

And she slammed the door behind her. Once again, the woman he couldn't stop thinking about was walking out of his life.

For a long time, he simply stood there, too shocked to react. He could have children? Granted, he'd never taken chances with sexually transmitted diseases in the past. He'd always used protection with every other lover. It had only been with Amanda that he'd thrown caution to the wind, needing to be as close to her as possible.

However, he'd genuinely believed that he couldn't get a woman pregnant!

Was she right? Was the doctor from so long ago wrong? Was his body able to produce sperm that could result in a...pregnancy?

He turned, needing to clarify her words. But Amanda was gone! Again!

“Damn it!”

He stepped out of his suite and noticed Tito standing guard along with several other guards. “Where did she go?”

Tito didn't appear overly concerned about his woman's disappearance. Until Daniesh announced, “She's pregnant with my child!”

At that point, a stunned and horrified Tito leapt into overdrive. He was muttering into his radio while he raced down the hallway, searching for Amanda. Daniesh rushed down the hallway with him.

For a pregnant woman who was exhausted and not eating well, Amanda could really move! She'd made it all the way to the palace kitchens before he finally caught up with her. She was literally pulling at her hair, so angry that she couldn't find the exit in this maze of a palace.

“Amanda!” he called out, absently noting that Tito was still barking orders into his radio. Hopefully, the man was organizing a whole team of bodyguards for Amanda. She'd have to be protected now. Daniesh might have laughed at the other man's frazzled appearance but he was too frayed himself.

“Are you kidding?” he asked, stepping forward. She stepped back but he wasn't letting her go this time. Hell, he'd never let her go! “You're

pregnant with *our* child?”

She sniffed and shook her head. “No Daniesh. You denied this is our child. This is my child now. I’ll raise my child in Philadelphia and we’ll be perfectly fine. I earn a respectable living with my book sales. I’m not wealthy, but I make enough to take care of us. You don’t need to worry.”

She stepped around him but he stopped her with his arm, pulling her back to him.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. She stiffened slightly, but there was a bit less tension in her eyes. “I’m so sorry! I honestly believed that I couldn’t produce a child. I was told a long time ago that I was sterile.”

“You were wrong!” she hissed angrily. But at least she was listening and not trying to walk to the stables. Or some other place that she assumed held the exit.

“I was wrong,” he replied, nodding to emphasize his statement. “In so many ways.” He sighed and stepped closer. Thankfully, she didn’t step back this time. “I let you walk away from me in Paris because I couldn’t keep you. I believed I couldn’t give you the children and family that I knew you would eventually want.”

She tilted her head, considering his words. “Are you telling me that you didn’t stop me from leaving three months ago because you thought that I didn’t love you enough to live a life without children?”

“Yes.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are *such* an idiot!” she hissed, pushing him away. He didn’t move, so she stepped around him. He caught her again and pulled her close again. Unfortunately, Amanda wasn’t finished. “Daniesh, you made decisions on our future without asking me!” she snapped, poking her thumb against her chest. “I cried every night for three months because I missed you so much.”

He watched with fascination as the tears rolled down her cheeks. Bigger tears now, but he didn’t doubt the sincerity of the previous tears, nor these.

“I was in so much pain because I fell in love with you in Paris. I fell

madly in love with you and you just let me walk away because you thought you knew what was better for me! You didn't *talk* to me, you arrogant bastard! You just decided what I needed, what I would want in the distant future, so you put me through hell!"

"I was in hell as well, my love," he admitted. "I haven't been sleeping well because I dream about you every night."

"No!" she snapped, lifting her finger and backing away from him. "You don't get to be sweet and charming now!" She took another step backwards. "I came here, terrified of what you might say. But I came here and put my heart on the line for you. What did you do with my feelings? You crushed them by calling me a whore!"

"I'm so sorry," he said again, stepping closer. "I will never do it again. I will protect your heart with every part of my being."

"You...you...!" she swiped the tears away again with the back of her hand. "You decided I moved on to someone else. That this baby wasn't yours! You just...assumed—"

Now she was sobbing, her head bowed and her shoulders shaking with the intensity of what she was feeling.

"I'm so sorry!" he pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. He had to protect her. He had to make this right! "I was an ass and an idiot! I will never do anything to make you feel that way again."

"Yes, you will," she cried, pressing her face against his chest. He let his fingers dive into her hair, reveling in the softness. "You're a man. You're going to hurt me again."

He laughed, but nodded, accepting the truth of her statement. "Yeah, I probably will."

She sighed, snuggling against him. "So...what now?"

He pulled her even closer, needing as much of her touching him as possible. "Now, I tell you how much I love you. Now, I give you a tour of your new home. Next, you tell me when you'll marry me. And I will work so hard to make you the happiest woman in the world."

Daniesh took her silence as acceptance of his plan. Smiling, he

pulled her around so that they were walking back to his suite.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I love you,” she whispered.

He stopped and looked down at her. “I love you too!” he replied. “So damn much!”

She lifted lashes that were heavy with tears, looking into his eyes. “And you...do you want this baby?”

“Hell yes!” he groaned, pressing his forehead against hers. “I want it almost as much as I want to marry you and keep you in my bed for the rest of our lives!”

She tried to laugh, but it came out a hiccup. “I guess that will work. We spent a whole weekend in bed in Paris.”

He laughed and kissed her. When she melted against him, Daniesh knew that this was going to work!



## Epilogue

“No! You are *not* allowed to tie up your brother!” Amanda called out, pulling the jump rope out of her daughter’s hands. “No tying anyone up!”

Her daughter lifted her beautiful, dark eyes, so like her father’s. “But Momma! He said it was okay!”

Daniesh walked into the playroom to find their five year old son eating a cookie while their eight year old daughter contemplated the best way to tie him up.

Amanda turned, putting a hand on her swollen belly while she shoved the jump rope into her husband’s hands. “Here!” she said and waddled out the door. “You handle this!”

Daniesh took the rope, but he wasn’t sure what was going on. “What am I supposed to handle?” he called out.

“Explain to your daughter why she’s not allowed to tie up her brother!”

Daniesh looked at the rope, then at his angelic looking daughter. “Were you really trying to tie up Martin?” he asked.

Sure enough, Bella’s adorable head bobbed in confirmation. “Yes. Why not?”

He looked down at Martin. “And you were going to let her tie you up?”

Martin shrugged casually. “I can get out of it, Daddy.”

Daniesh looked at his precious children, then groaned, tossed the rope off to the side, then bent down, scooping his children up into his arms. “It appears that I need to get you two out of the nursery and into the wild outdoors.”

The children clapped delightedly as if they were getting a treat. He passed Amanda on his way towards the stables. “Seriously?” he asked teasingly, hefting a child under each arm. “You realize that our children are kidnappers-in-training and you just leave?”

She laughed, rubbed her belly and leaned forward to kiss him. “Of course. I figure that I’m taking care of one of our little devils,” She ruffled the hair of both son and daughter, then turned away. “It’s about time that you showed them who is really boss.”

Martin twisted his head around and, with a wicked grin, whispered, “It’s Momma, isn’t it?”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Of course it’s Momma. Women are always in charge!”

Daniesh watched as his beautiful wife waddled off down the hallway. He had to agree with his precious charges. His wife definitely had him completely wrapped around her little finger. As they watched, Amanda looked back over her shoulder, smiling at her family.

“Absolutely,” Daniesh confirmed. “She’s in charge.” Of his heart and every other part of him. Definitely in charge.

*A message from Elizabeth:*

*Just so ya know – this story wasn’t supposed to happen. ☺ The Al-Bodari Series was only supposed to have 3 books. I can’t explain the evolution of how this story came about because it’s still sort of confusing in my mind. But I’m extremely relieved that I was able to create a love story for Amanda. She sort of floundered after Emma married – and she really needed her own romance.*

*So – having said that – what did you think? If you wouldn’t mind, could you take just a moment to leave one for me? Here’s a [QUICK LINK](#) to the review page – and I thank you!*

*As usual, if you don’t want to leave feedback in a public forum, feel free to e-mail me directly at [elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com](mailto:elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com). I answer all e-mails personally, although it sometimes takes me a while. Please don’t be offended if I don’t respond immediately. I tend to lose myself in writing stories and have a hard time pulling my head out of the book.*

*Elizabeth*

*Keep scrolling for a sneak peek at the first book in the FOURTEEN book series titled “The Billionaires Club”. I had a horrible time deciding if “billionaires” should be possessive or plural so please forgive me if you see it both ways.*

*Anyway – next up is an excerpt to “The Billionaire’s Temptation” – BUT – if you haven’t read the free prologue – click [HERE](#) first. The prologue isn’t necessary to enjoy the books in the series – it’s just a way to give you a bit of background on the men you’ll meet soon.*

## Excerpt to “The Billionaire’s Temptation”

Release Date: January 19, 2024

[Click HERE to get Levi’s Story!](#)

Clarissa stared at the envelope, unable to process what the man had just said. She was trying hard not to feel down about the lack of a work promotion. She knew she was the hardest worker in the factory. But her thoughts kept circling back to the man sitting across from her. For some odd reason, her mind fizzled whenever she looked at him.

Maybe if he put that jacket on so that his massive shoulders and bulging biceps were out of view, she might be able to make sense of this conversation.

However, the man with intense, blue eyes didn’t look away. She felt a fluttering low in her belly as she glanced at the envelope. “I inherited something?” she asked. “My father is...he’s this Arthur person?”

“Arthur Fuque,” the man supplied, adding a nod and a tap on the thick envelope.

She looked at him, still ignoring the envelope. “And you are?”

Clarissa watched with fascination as the muscles in his jaw clenched. Did he not want her to know his name? He might be gorgeous, but he was clearly a bit of an ass.

“I’m Levi Harris,” the man admitted grudgingly.

She nodded as if that meant something. But in reality, she had never heard of him.

She frowned thoughtfully, still trying to make sense of this conversation. “You were a friend of this...Mr. Fuque?”

The man sighed, rubbed impressively long, sexy fingers over the scruff on his jaw. Clarissa assumed he’d shaved at some point today. But it was well after five o’clock and it showed.

The thought of this man kissing her flashed through her mind. The scruff would be harsh against her skin, but Clarissa knew she wouldn't mind. Not one little bit!

"Arthur Fuque didn't have any friends," the man, Levi...Mr. Harris...said.

Shaking her head, she turned back to the envelope. "Okay, so...you were enemies with Mr. Fuque. Why are you here, delivering this to me, if you were his enemy?"

He sighed and she wondered what his breath would feel like washing over her skin.

She shook her head sharply, trying to dissipate the images. She was just tired, Clarissa reminded herself. She'd been up late studying last night and she'd started her shift at six this morning. She still had another hour to go before she could head home to shower, and maybe grab something to eat before she started the whole process over again.

"So...what did he leave me?" she asked, not really interested. "Please don't tell me that he left me a car." She sighed, glancing at the keys resting on top of the envelope. "I can't afford to pay the taxes on another car."

The man chuckled and the sound was...unexpectedly delicious! Soft, sexy, and oh-so-masculine. Not like the high-pitched laughter of so many men she knew. Nope, this guy had a laugh that could send a woman into a swoon!

Unfortunately, he glanced towards the doorway, indicating that he was eager to get away.

"You have the money now," he told her. "Your father left you several houses, maybe ten cars, and..."

Okay, enough was enough! She didn't have time for practical jokes!

Clarissa snorted and stood up. "Right. Nice prank." She turned, ignoring the envelope and the keys sitting on top. "I have to get back to work." She grabbed her yellow hard hat and headed for the door, disgusted by the waste of her time.

Stalking out of the “break” room, inaccurately named since no one was allowed breaks here, she shoved the hard hat back onto her head. What a jerk! The noise and heat were at peak levels today. She hurried across the cement floor and plucked the electronic package-tracking device from the holster on her hip. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the ass, envelope and keys still in hand.

What a jerk! Tease the woman with hopes and dreams! Tell her she has a father. Okay, a dead father, she corrected as she made her way towards the shipping area. “I don’t have time for cruel pranks,” she muttered. Giving the man one last glance, she ignored his stare and got back to work.

[Click HERE to get Levi’s Story!](#)