

A romantic scene featuring a man in a dark suit and a woman in a white lace dress kissing on a city street. The background shows a cityscape with a prominent building and a cloudy sky.

THE
SHEIK'S
Redemption

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The Sheik's Redemption

By Elizabeth Lennox

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Chapter 1

“Don’t you dare!”

Astir del Taran, Sheik of Silar jerked the rifle higher so that it was safely pointing towards the sky as he spun around at the furious command. Since Astir was normally the one giving the commands, hearing the strident voice coming from somewhere behind him was an unwelcome shock. His dark eyes quickly surveyed the area, but he wasn’t sure where the angry, feminine voice was coming from. A moment later, he was startled when the bushes rustled, but he still couldn’t see the owner of the voice. His guards instantly moved into place, hands resting on the weapons hidden underneath their light coats, out of sight for the moment but easily available if a threat was presented.

A moment later, a beautiful, but angry, female burst through the trees, glaring at him with a stern expression on her surprisingly lovely features. “Do not harm that animal!” she hissed, blue eyes crackling with fire.

Astir wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh at the daring woman or...or pull her into his arms and kiss her soft, full lips. His guards promptly ascertained that the female wasn’t a threat and faded back into the woods, resuming their vigilance as the woman carefully stepped over branches, weaving around bushes as if she needed to protect every precious leaf and treasured twig.

Astir’s eyebrows lifted and he swung his eyes back towards the surprisingly round skunk that was now toddling harmlessly towards his or her den in a hollowed-out tree. When he looked at the woman once again, it was to discover that her profile was almost as lovely as her full face. Astir watched her as she watched the skunk escape, oblivious to the danger of his guards or being alone in the woods with a stranger.

“Good. She got away!” the tiny woman sighed, then nodded with relief, as if the world was once again right and

happy.

Astir stared at her, not sure what the hell was going on. “You...*want*...the skunk to live?” he asked, astounded by the mere possibility.

Her crystal blue eyes blinked up at him, causing his mind to blank for a moment.

“Of course I want Jasmine to live!” she replied, her tone implying that she thought his question ridiculous. The woodland beauty waved her hand impatiently towards the log, shaking her head with exasperation. “Why wouldn’t I want her to live? She’s a beautiful lady!”

What the hell were they talking about? Astir glanced down at her smooth neck, wondering if she’d taste as delicious as she looked. Her bulky sweater didn’t do a very good job of hiding the full, round breasts underneath and her leggings hugged soft, enticing thighs. It took every ounce of self-control to stop himself from ordering the woman to turn around so that he could view her derriere. He was certain that the backside of this luscious woman was just as delightful as the front. And yet, she was looking up at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“Why would you want to hurt her?” the strange woman gasped. “Did she try to attack you?”

“She?” he asked, still too absorbed in the beautiful woman’s...uh...delights to mentally follow the conversation.

“Jasmine!” the woman replied back, her tone revealing her vexation.

Astir turned his head in the direction of the woman’s waving arm. Slowly, his mind began to work. “The skunk?” he asked. “The skunk’s name is...Jasmine?”

For the first time, the woman’s features showed an emotion other than anger. “Well, yes!”

Astir valiantly suppressed a chuckle. “You named a skunk after...a sweet-smelling flower?” Then something else occurred to him. “How do you even know that the skunk is female?”

The lovely, delightful woman shifted on her feet, her arms crossing over her ample chest. “I don’t know... exactly...that Jasmine is a female.” Her eyes narrowed and that adorable pointed chin lifted in challenge. “But do you know that she isn’t a female?”

The beauty had a point, he thought. “Okay, so...*why* are you protecting a skunk?”

Her arms dropped to her side, the fingers clenching into small fists. “Why wouldn’t I protect Jasmine? What did she do to you?” the woman snapped, jerking her head towards the area where the skunk had disappeared.

What did she do? Her very existence was an annoyance! “She’s a skunk!” he replied, wondering why this was even a question. “She could spray one of my employees!”

The woman snorted, shaking her head with disappointment. But her features cleared and her anger dissipated, morphing into one of patience now. “Skunks are excellent animals to keep around,” the beauty explained, her tone the same as what she might use if explaining to a toddler. “And if you don’t bother them, then they don’t spray anyone. Their scent is merely a defense mechanism and they give you several warning signals before they spray.”

“Skunks are vermin.” Astir settled more comfortably on his feet, enjoying this conversation. He wasn’t convinced by her argument, but he liked the sound of her voice. It was soft and feminine, as were those intense, blue eyes and the riot of blond hair that framed her heart-shaped face. His comment had the added benefit of sparking her temper again, creating a flush in those ivory cheeks.

With narrowed eyes and a furious step forward, she shook her head, causing his gaze to move from her gorgeous blue eyes to...well, everywhere! The woman was literally vibrating with fury now.

“Skunks are *not* vermin! They are extremely beneficial to any neighborhood lucky enough to attract one!” she gestured to the area behind him. “They eat real vermin like mice, moles, voles, and bugs! They’ll even feast on the

termites around a house if they find them, helping homeowners from those destructive creatures. They are omnivores and eat everything that we don't want near our homes!" She shook her head as if disappointed. "I can't believe you would shoot something simply because it might defend itself at some amorphous point in the future! Jasmine wasn't causing anyone harm! She was simply walking back to her home. They are nocturnal, so the only reason you might come across her again is if you're invading an area in which she is foraging."

The woman stepped closer, her blue eyes changing from angry to pleading. "I'm begging you! Please don't hurt Jasmine. She's just a sweet little lady who only wants to eat mice and bugs and maybe a few leaves and berries. She won't hurt you if you leave her alone."

At this moment, with those eyes staring up at him with such pleading, Astir knew that he'd do anything for this woman. His intense reaction made absolutely no sense, but there it was. He didn't even know her name, and yet, he knew that he'd do just about anything to protect her.

"Your friend will be safe," he promised, surprised by the husky rumble of his voice. His reward for that vow was the most stunning smile he'd ever beheld.

"Thank you!" she whispered, then she stunned him even more by throwing her arms around him and hugging him.

Hesitating a second, Astir shifted the rifle slightly as his free arm wrapped around her back, pulling her in closer as he savored the brief moment of contact.

When she pulled away, Astir wondered what else he could do to feel those magnificent breasts against his chest again. Preferably without the bulky sweater to hinder his enjoyment.

Her face showed a bit of surprise and embarrassment for her enthusiasm of moments ago.

“I’m Rachel, by the way,” she explained, then extended her hand, pretending as if she hadn’t just wrapped her arms around his waist.

Astir took her hand, enfolding her cold, slender fingers in his own. “Astir,” he replied, leaving off his title.

Her eyes sparkled as they shook hands, her lips curling into that delightful smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Astir,” she said with a bit more formality. For a long moment, they stood there, staring into each other’s eyes, their hands clasped. The air seemed to throb with a strange vibration and the early morning sounds disappeared. Then she spoke again and the noises rushed back, his eyes blinking in surprise. “And as a reward for your kindness towards Jasmine, can I offer you a cupcake?” She blushed and Astir was entranced. He’d never seen a woman blush before. The women who had come through his life in the past were too worldly and sophisticated, or perhaps too jaded, to blush.

“A cupcake?” Astir wanted to laugh. For a man who was normally presented with food that could also be considered a work of art, the thought of a simple cupcake was...enticing! Just like every other aspect of this woman standing in front of him.

Rachel couldn’t believe what she’d just said. A cupcake? This man was... incredible! Tall and powerfully built, she doubted that the man ever put anything “bad” into his mouth! He probably drank those nasty green protein smoothies for every meal and worked out three or four hours a day. Her body still tingled from that too-brief moment when she’d stupidly hugged him.

“What kind of cupcake?” he asked.

She opened her mouth, but the words seemed to be stuck in her throat. Not to mention, her mind was...not working. Okay, that was a lie. It was working. It simply wasn’t working on the right things! Her mind was completely focused on this man’s shoulders. And his arms. He had beautiful hands. And a trim waist along with a hard...really

hard...chest! That chest, when she'd pressed her face against his chest...yeah a stupid, silly move...she'd felt the scrumptious muscles underneath the expensive wool of his shirt. She'd felt a lot of muscles! What had he asked her again?

"Chocolate?" she offered, but it sounded more like a question.

He stepped closer and his rough, barely handsome features were transformed into an almost boy-like beauty! "Almost" because there was absolutely no way that this big, huge, tall, intensely attractive man could ever be considered a boy. No way! He was just too...male!

"What kind of frosting?" he asked, his deep voice reverential, almost a whisper.

That's when she recognized his expression. The intense desire! For cupcakes? How odd! This big, buff guy wanted cupcakes! Rachel almost laughed with delight.

"You don't look like the kind of man who would eat a cupcake," she commented, feeling a bit more in control now. No, not control. Actually, she wasn't quite sure what she was feeling at the moment. She felt strange and tingly, excited and oddly alive, along with other feelings that she'd never experienced before.

"Chocolate cake is my favorite," he told her, moving even closer. "What kind of frosting?"

"Triple chocolate buttercream," she told him, waiting for...yep! Those dark, mysterious eyes lit up with eagerness!

He was in love! Oh, not in love with her. Rachel didn't fool herself into believing that a man like this could fall in love. He was too tough, too manly and harsh, and yet...!

He was definitely in love with the concept of a double chocolate cupcake. With a grin that she didn't know was delightfully mischievous, she leaned forward slightly and whispered, "I also filled the center with chocolate cream."

She watched, fascinated as his jaw clenched and his eyes burned brighter. Was he really that tempted?

“Woman, give me a cupcake or...” he looked over at the log where Jasmine was most likely sound asleep. “Or I’ll wake up your friend and...”

“Don’t you threaten Jasmine,” Rachel interrupted, then laughed because she could see that he wouldn’t harm the adorable skunk. Jasmine was safe enough, from this man at least. “Come on. The cupcakes are all yours.”

“Lead the way,” he said, gesturing with his free hand, the rifle still leaning against his shoulder, safely pointed towards the sky.

Rachel turned, gently pushing the branches out of the way as she headed towards the pathway that would lead to her cottage. “What are you doing out here in the woods at this early hour?” she asked, needing to fill the silence. Rachel hated silence. She preferred music or the television on, even when she was working.

“I was out riding this morning and came across your friend.”

Rachel looked at him over her shoulder. “You must have been up very early if you saw Jasmine this morning.”

“Yes. She was...hunting perhaps?” he offered, stepping over a thick tree that had fallen during one of the thunderstorms that had swept through the area over the summer months.

Rachel paused, her brow crinkling with concern. “Skunks are nocturnal. They usually hunt at night. For her to have been out during the daylight hours, something must have disturbed her.”

“Perhaps she smelled your cupcakes baking,” he teased.

Rachel’s concern vanished and she laughed, enchanted by the thought of a skunk toddling along, seeking out the sweet treat. “I doubt it, but that would be a pretty cute idea.” She ducked under a branch, then held it back for him to follow her.

“What do you do for a living?” he asked, pulling back another branch and waiting for her to go through.

“I’m a lifestyle vlogger,” she told him, hurrying down the pathway and not looking at him after the announcement.

“What is a vlogger?”

She smiled, ignoring the shiver of awareness when he held out a hand to help her over another tree. “I create lifestyle videos and post them online. I focus on recipes or tips for organizing one’s home. I do a lot of upcycling videos too. Mostly thrift store crafts, but also furniture refinishing.”

“Upcycling?”

She laughed, nodding her head as she explained, “Yeah. I’m trying to convince my followers to shop at used clothing stores or find old, damaged furniture that they can fix and paint instead of buying new stuff. It’s better for the environment, shockingly inexpensive and most of the older furniture is better quality than what someone could buy in the big-box stores now. The older stuff just needs a bit of repair work. Same with clothing.”

“Why would you wear someone else’s cast off clothing?” he asked, bewildered.

Rachel heard the horror in his voice and laughed softly. “Well, because a lot of the clothing that is made today, the stuff people wear and discard after only a few months, is brutally toxic to the environment. Most of the ‘fast fashion’ that is created now is made out of synthetic materials. It’s like burying a plastic bag in your backyard.”

“I don’t normally bury plastic in the ground,” he replied.

Again, she smiled, amused at his grunting tone. “Most people don’t. But you’d be shocked at how much of our old clothing and clothing production waste goes into the landfills. Meanwhile, I show my online followers how to take an old shirt and transform it into a cool new rug or a reusable grocery bag. And the stuff at the thrift stores only costs one or two, maybe ten dollars at the most. I’ve bought men’s shirts at

the thrift store that still have the original tags on it. Baby clothes too! Baby clothes are a steal at thrift stores!”

“Why the hell would anyone do that?”

They emerged from the woods into Rachel’s small but beautifully landscaped backyard.

“Wow!” Astir stopped and looked around. “This is... amazing!” he replied.

Rachel looked at her small backyard, trying to see it from his eyes. “The pink bike is the newest addition,” she told him, referring to the old bike that she’d gotten at the thrift store for five dollars and painted a soft pink. In the springtime, the bike will perfectly match her fairy rose bush. “The tires were full of holes but...”

“I love the way you’ve woven the tires with the ivy. It looks as if the bike is actually a living part of the landscape.”

Rachel’s smile brightened. “Thank you!” she whispered. “That’s exactly what I was going for. The English Ivy was starting to climb up the fence line. When I pulled it over so that it was climbing the spokes and metal parts of the bike, it won’t damage the wood now.” She looked around at the other pieces. “In the spring and summer, this area looks almost magical.”

He looked to the right. “You filled an old bathtub with bamboo?”

She laughed, nodding her head. “Yeah, bamboo is invasive, so I couldn’t plant it in the ground. But it grows really fast, so it’s perfect to hide the tools that are hanging behind it.”

“It’s all pretty ingenious.”

“Thank you!” she replied, feeling a warm, gushy feeling. “This is what I do. I help people to visualize ways to use old stuff for a new purpose.”

“I couldn’t picture what you were talking about, taking old things and reusing them. But this... it’s... spectacular!” he replied, still taking it all in.

Rachel stood next to him, feeling the heat sizzle in the air. As far as she could tell, though, he didn't feel the same sizzle. The man was a veritable mountain of muscles and confidence. No shivers running up this man's body! But at least he was impressed with her backyard. That was a good thing, she told herself.

Unfortunately, this was the first man she'd met that was even remotely interesting and he was more impressed with her backyard than with her. But then, what could she expect? She wasn't wearing any makeup, her sweater was three times too big for her and her thighs were probably twice as big as any of the other women's that he associated with.

No, this man wouldn't look twice at someone like her. A man this intoxicatingly virile would most likely go for the svelte, blond beauties that worked out next to him at the gym every day, tossing him sultry, inviting looks. The kind of women that wore skimpy, tight outfits that showed off every tight, non-cellulite curve of her surgically enhanced figure. The kind that looked hot and sexy in tight spandex. Rachel wore spandex, but the soft parts that tended to bulge over the edges of the spandex were covered up.

With a mental sigh, she waved him towards her back door. "This way to the chocolate cupcakes," she said with a smile, hoping that she didn't look too forlorn.

Stepping through the backdoor to her cottage, she glanced over her shoulder. "Sorry about the mess," she said, her mouth pulling into a cringe as she surveyed her messy, disorganized craft room. "This is...well, I develop my ideas back here," she explained and held onto the back of a chair that was halfway sanded, hoping she didn't trip and fall. There were paints scattered over a "table" that was made up of two sawhorses and a giant piece of plywood. Scattered across the table were craft paints, acrylic paints, cans of latex paint, bits and pieces of fabrics, twisted wires and a million other miscellaneous craft supplies. "I know I should make a pathway to the other rooms, but..." she shrugged, wishing that she was more organized. "Well, I spend my time showing

others how to organize their worlds and don't have a whole lot of time to do it myself.”

In addition to the plywood “table”, there were pieces of furniture that she planned to upcycle, shelves filled with bins stuffed with other craft supplies and even more paints and along another wall, there were hooks where her tools used to hang. Unfortunately, those tools weren't neatly hanging from a beautifully decorated pegboard. They were scattered around the room, hiding in and around, sometimes under, in-progress craft projects. It usually took her fifteen minutes of searching to find the power tool she needed for each project.

“So you make videos teaching people how to organize their homes and...”

Rachel stopped in the middle of the chaotic room, looking around with a disparaging shake of her head. “Yeah. Kind of hypocritical of me, isn't it?”

He laughed and she turned to peer at him over her shoulder again. “I'm sure this is organized in some way that only you can understand.”

Rachel's mouth twisted wryly and she pulled her eyes away from him, once again looking around at the colorful chaos. “Nope. I'm a hot mess when it comes to organizing my world.” Her features brightened then. “But I'm an amazing cook! Come on. I owe you cupcakes.”

She stepped over several boxes of...stuff, then noticed her palm sander laying on the floor next to a chair. She lifted that up and put it on the table, excited because she'd been looking for that yesterday. “Kitchen!” she announced, then hopped over two more boxes until she reached a non-descript doorway. Pushing through the door, she slipped her sneakers off, then sighed with happiness as she walked through a stunning room.

“This is...” Astir looked around. The floor was covered with polished hardwoods, a long white sofa as well as two smaller white chairs facing the sofa with a low, black

coffee table in between. On the sofas and chairs were beautiful, colorful pillows that didn't match, but somehow, the various patterns all looked right together. There were several lush plants that added a pop of green to the room and curtains in the same mis-matched fabrics as the pillows. The walls were white, as were the kitchen cabinets and kitchen island. There was no separation between the living space and the kitchen, creating a wide, open area that was both inviting and shockingly clean.

"I know," she laughed, walking straight through to the stainless-steel fridge. Pulling it open, she grabbed a plastic container, then peeled the top off, revealing a dozen cupcakes, all with a thick layer of shiny dark chocolate frosting. "Ta da!" she sang, setting the container down on the gleaming white island.

Astir stared down into the container, his mind once again emptying as he looked at the perfectly topped cupcakes. When he'd gone through the "craft" room, he hadn't held out much hope for a decent cupcake. But looking at these... masterpieces...he was more than impressed. He was stunned! The buttercream frosting swirled into a high peak, looking professional and decadently mouthwatering!

Carefully, he took one of the magnificent cupcakes out of the container, marveling at the towering frosting that looked almost like a work of art. "You made these?"

He took a brief moment to look at her and was rewarded by her shy smile. "Yep. I know, after the other room, you were wary, right?"

Once again, Astir looked around. There was no chaos in this room. He couldn't even believe that these cupcakes had been baked in this kitchen space. Everything looked... pristine.

"Trust me, you're going to..."

She stopped speaking when he peeled away the decorative paper and took a bite of the cupcake, then closed his eyes as the intense chocolate hit him. The power of that rich chocolate was unlike anything he'd ever tasted before.

The flavor was extraordinary! The texture of the cake was smooth and fluffy while the buttercream frosting was smooth and decadently chocolate flavored, but with a hint of... something. He couldn't quite put a name to the extra flavor. It wasn't as if it was dominant, because the chocolate was definitely the more powerful flavor. But that extra...?

"What's the secret ingredient?" he asked, moving closer, wanting to reach out and touch her, to feel her. To kiss her. Hell, he'd just met this woman and already he was seduced by her smile. And her cupcakes!

"Coffee," she whispered.

His eyebrows shot up. "You put coffee in the chocolate?"

She nodded, her body vibrating with excitement. "It's only instant decaf coffee crystals, but the small bit of coffee flavor seems to really enhance the chocolate, don't you think?"

He could only nod as he took another large bite of the cupcake. The frosting and the cake were a perfect sensation in his mouth, and he eyed the others in the tray wondering if he could sweet talk the rest from her.

"You have a bit of...frosting...on your..." she gestured with a finger to his nose. A better man might have grabbed a napkin. But instead, Astir stuck out his tongue, not wanting to waste even a small bit of this delightful dessert.

"Better?" he asked, moving slightly closer.

"Yes," she replied, but her voice had dropped to a whisper now. And her eyes, those crystal, blue eyes, stared at his mouth. Her pink tongue darted out, wetting her lips.

Astir's body reacted almost violently to that tongue, wondering what she'd taste like. Would she taste like chocolate? Or cream? Peaches and cream, he thought, the cupcake forgotten as he considered all of the delectable possibilities.

"I can show you..."

Her voice drifted off, and Astir wanted to know all of the things this tiny woman could show him. He didn't care what it was, he wanted to see them.

“What?” he prompted when it appeared that she wasn't going to finish her sentence, his voice gruff. Right at this moment, he really wanted, needed, to know what she would show him!

Her mouth opened, her soft, pink lips fluttering in the most erotic way. It was as if she wanted him to kiss her as intensely as he needed to kiss her, to feel her soft lips and capture that sexy tongue.

“Turtles!” she gasped, blinking suddenly and stepping backwards.

That was so far outside the realm of what he'd wanted to experience, that it took him several moments to get his brain to figure out what the word meant. “Turtles?”

She took another step backwards and Astir had to restrain himself from reaching out to pull her back to him. He could still smell her soft, feminine scent now, but it wasn't as intense. He needed her closer. He needed to....!

His phone buzzed, popping the dreamy bubble of their rapt attention. Those blue eyes blinked again and her soft, full lips pressed together while her pale skin turned an endearing shade of pink.

Astir wanted to ignore the summons, but the ring tone indicated that it was an urgent issue. Pulling his phone out of the pocket of his jacket, he glanced briefly at the message, mentally sighing with resignation.

Ignoring the call for the moment, he looked back down at Rachel, needing to extend his time with her. He had to leave now, but...perhaps later...? “Have dinner with me tonight,” he commanded, surprised by the thought, but relieved when he knew that he might see her again.

Astir watched as the intriguing woman blinked as if shocked by his question. He didn't understand her reaction. It

was obvious that there was a mutual attraction between them. Why would she not want to explore something this intense?

“Dinner?” she asked and he recognized it as a stalling technique. She was going to turn him down, but Astir wasn’t going to allow that. Stepping forward, he looked at her, setting the remainder of his cupcake down on the white marble countertop, he rubbed his thumb against her fingers. “I want to get to know you better. I’d like to take you out to dinner, if you have the time?”

She did that mouth thing again and his body almost exploded with the need to have her, to make love to her. But she was nervous and he didn’t want to scare her away. This need...it was new to him as well. He didn’t fully understand it, but nor would he ignore it.

“I don’t think that dinner would be a good idea,” she whispered, those blue eyes once again dropping to his mouth.

Damn, when she did that, he was hard pressed to keep his hands to himself. He barely knew this woman, and already his body was primed and ready to claim her as his own.

“Don’t think, Rachel,” he urged, his fingers tightening on hers. “Just feel. Feel the tension that is increasing with every pulse of our bodies.” He moved even closer but didn’t touch her except with his fingers. “I promise that I will not hurt you. Ever. In any way.”

Rachel swallowed, startled by his words. He felt it too? For her? This gorgeous, powerful man felt drawn to *her*? He was the kind of man who could have any woman in the world, literally! His clothing was made from expensive materials and immaculately tailored to his large frame, placing him firmly out of her league!

“Dinner would be...”

“Perfect,” he finished for her.

Rachel smiled, but shook her head. His whole demeanor warned her that she and this man were completely on different wave lengths. He was a walking billboard for

beautiful, amazing sex. And sex in twenty different positions! He probably knew all of the best ways to make love to a woman, could find all of her hot spots and would delight her with both legal and illegal methods.

Meanwhile, Rachel knew how to make cupcakes.

Those were two worlds that simply couldn't collide without someone getting hurt. Namely, herself.

"I don't think that dinner would be a good idea," she repeated, breathing a sigh of...relief? Regret? Both, she thought.

He moved slightly closer, his dark eyes intense as he looked down at her. "I think it would be a great idea," he argued, then lowered his head to brush his lips against hers. "I will pick you up tonight at six o'clock, if that time works with your schedule."

With that, he turned and picked up the cupcake. "These are the best that I've ever had, Rachel," and he popped the rest into his mouth.

"Here," she said, grasping the change in subject, pushing the container towards him across the white granite countertop. "Why don't you take the rest?" Her eyes dropped down, sliding over his muscular body. "I suspect that you can handle the calories more easily than I can," and she let her hands drop self-consciously to her hips hidden beneath the sweater.

His eyes followed her hands and Rachel wished that she hadn't brought his attention back to her body. She was definitely too round and too... "fluffy"... for a man like him.

"I will take the cupcakes," he bowed slightly, "and my staff will appreciate the treat. But I still want to have dinner with you tonight. I want to get to know you."

Rachel held her breath, put off balance by the way he was looking at her. "Why?" she asked, her mind whirling, unable to think clearly with him standing so close.

"Because you are a beautiful woman," he replied and she suspected that he wanted to say more. "I want to know

who you are, what makes you smile, what breaks your heart and what delights you, Rachel.” He stepped back again, lifting the container of cupcakes slightly. “Until tonight. Six o’clock.”

And then he was gone, taking those dratted cupcakes away with him but leaving behind the subtle scent of sexy man. The absence of cupcakes was good, but...dinner? Tonight? She had no idea what to wear to a dinner with a man like that! He was shockingly different than any other man of her acquaintance. He was sophisticated and urbane, intelligent and powerful. He was all of those adjectives that she wasn’t!

Nervously, Rachel walked over to the sink and ducked down to the cabinet underneath, grabbing cleaning supplies. In an attempt to work off the lingering energy of Astir’s touch, Rachel cleaned the already-clean countertop. And then, because she was still jittery and not even sure how to reach Astir to cancel his dinner invitation, she bent down to the floor and started cleaning there as well. There was no dirt on this floor, probably because she’d already cleaned it earlier in the day in preparation for the cooking videos she’d work on tomorrow. But the process and movements of cleaning soothed her soul in ways she couldn’t deny.

Two hours later, she walked into her bedroom. It was actually the spare bedroom because she maintained the master bedroom with the en suite bathroom for filming the decorating tips and craft projects. After changing into a loose sweatshirt, she brushed her teeth and washed her face, then tried to settle her mind. The cleaning hadn’t helped. Nor did the romance novel she’d been completely enraptured with the previous night. Nothing could settle the monkey brain inside of her mind.

Chapter 2

“Here’s the map,” Harvey Neville explained, his voice wispy with a touch of gravel due to age, too many cigars and perhaps too many bourbons. He pointed a bony, wrinkled finger towards the center. “Unfortunately, the minerals I need are located underneath this area, which encompasses four different countries.”

The man turned his rheumy eyes towards the group of men standing around the table. “What’s the plan?” he asked, challenging all four of them.

Instantly, Jeffrey Kipsinger stepped forward, jutting his chin towards the map. “I can be drilling within three days. The trucks have already been off-loaded from the ship and are heading towards a staging area which I’ve set up here,” he said, pointing to a small, deserted town north of the large area. “I found several caves here where we can initiate drilling.”

Neville nodded, his lips curling up into a smile that was known to make babies cry and women shudder. “Good. How long until you are operational? I have several factories standing by, needing those minerals. Every day is a costly delay.”

Jeffrey grunted, not bothering with such niceties as a return smile. “You said that you needed the drilling equipment hidden from view.” His icy blue eyes narrowed. “I’m taking that to mean that you don’t have drilling rights for the area?”

Neville snorted and leaned back in his leather chair, lacing his bony fingers over his skeletal stomach. “Is that going to be a problem?”

Jeffrey snorted. “Not for the amount you’re paying me and my men,” he replied. He looked down at the map. “According to the geologic survey you provided, the nearest mineral deposit is most likely here,” he said, pointing to a small village. “But the deposits for this kind of mineral are usually closer to the surface. It would be safer if we just...”

“You can’t dig from the top down!” Neville snapped impatiently, those rheumy eyes glaring at the younger man. “There happens to be a...” he paused, his thin, lined lips curling into diabolical glee, “village sitting on top of this area,” he explained, pointing to the spot where the largest and most easily accessible deposit of efiesium was thought to be. “You’ll have to go in through the caves, like you mentioned, then scrape out the deposits from below the surface.” Once again, Neville tapped the map. “Just get me those minerals!” he snarled now. “I don’t care what it takes. He jerked his chin towards the village represented by a benign black dot. “There are only about two thousand people living there. They subsist on farming and the river running through the area.”

Jeffrey shifted, crossing his arms over his chest. “The kind of mining you’re demanding is going to cause problems. We won’t be able to stay under the radar for long.”

Neville sneered. “If you and your men can’t get the job done, then I’ll find someone who can,” he turned to look at the other candidates currently standing behind the mining expert.

Jeffrey snorted, obviously not overly concerned about displacing a small group of villagers who probably had very little power to stop his efforts. “We can get the job done. I just want to make sure you understand the consequences.” He pointed towards the chart with the data. “According to your surveys, pulling this material from the earth could cause problems with the structure of the town.”

Neville waved that issue aside. “I’ve already bribed the local law enforcement people. They won’t be a problem. Get me the minerals and I’ll handle the authorities.”

Jeffrey sighed, shaking his head. “Fine. I’ll get the minerals and I’ll even beat your delivery schedule. But I want double the reward money if we do.”

Neville considered the younger man for a long moment. He appreciated Kipsinger’s mercenary tendencies. He even respected the man’s abilities. The man had come highly recommended within the mining community. But now,

Kipsinger thought that he was in control, and that simply wouldn't do. Keeping those thoughts to himself, Neville did some mental calculations. Yes, Neville would allow this brutish thug to think he was in charge. For now.

Later, Neville vowed to demonstrate who was truly in charge.

With a sharp nod, Neville superficially agreed to the thug's terms. "Fine. Beat my delivery schedule and I'll triple it."

Neville saw the surprise in Kipsinger's eyes and almost smiled. He glanced over at the other men in his office. They were all thugs, all of them lacking in any sort of moral fortitude. That's the only reason he'd hired them. His eyes touched on the second man, who was a former gang member and now a mercenary who was built like a freaking mountain, another man who had dubious claims to mining, but didn't seem to care how things were done, as long as he was paid, and the last man, a sniveling idiot but with a heart filled with greed. Greed was good, he thought. Greed was a very powerful motivator.

"Get the job done!" Neville snapped, then turned away, dismissing the group of men. He had other projects to review, initiate and deal with.

Jeffrey Kipsinger stared at the back of the man who had just dismissed him, his fingers twitching to yank the knife out of his boot and toss it into the man's back. It would serve him right, Jeffrey thought, disgusted by what the man wanted him to do.

But the payment, if he could get this job done, was astronomical. Of course, it was probably a pittance compared to what the old bastard would earn once the minerals were delivered to the factory. The mineral, efiesium, wasn't even the best. It conducted electrical currents, a process that was essential for the development of every microchip that went into all computers around the world. However, there were better materials on the market. Efiesium initially appeared

strong enough to get past most of the computer experts. Pieces of machinery made from the mineral would last for about two years, helping the microchips perform their functions. But after that time period, the material broke down rapidly. The other materials that the better computer companies used lasted for much longer. So whatever this bastard was doing, he was going to create a lot of angry customers in a couple of years.

By then, Jeffrey figured he'd be retired on a beach somewhere. He intended for this project to be his last. The bonus money for beating the delivery schedule would set him up with a cool ten million, maybe more, that he could invest and live off of for the rest of his life. On a damn beach!

Turning, he walked out of the office, grinding his teeth at the rude dismissal. Here he was, doing the bastard's dirty work and the old man dared to dismiss him?! Jeffrey was livid! Soon, he'd teach the old bastard a lesson in manners!

For now, he'd bide his time and control his temper. At the moment, it was time to get to work, he thought. His mind raced as he came up with a plan that would win him that triple bonus money. As soon as that money hit his bank account, he'd head outta the area and find his forever-beach and screw the old man and whatever additional time tables he might need!

Chapter 3

Rachel paced nervously across the floor of her back deck, pulling the shawl tighter around her shoulders in order to ward off the night's delicious chill. Autumn was her absolute favorite time of the year. She loved the cooler temperatures and drier air, the night sounds singing in the distance and the birds flying en masse to their southerly destinations.

But today the lovely season had done little to soothe her. She'd been a frantic, anxious mess, too nervous to listen to the wind whipping up the crisp, newly fallen leaves. Rachel had been too jittery to even concentrate at her work tasks. Her mind had whirled in circles, trying to figure out what to wear and wondering why a man like Astir would bother with a woman like her. She wasn't sophisticated and classy. Rachel knew she was pretty enough, but deep down inside, she was a home body. She loved crafting and baking, crocheting and sewing!

Rubbing her forehead, Rachel took a slow, deep breath, trying to calm her racing nerves.

She would have to re-do the videos she'd filmed today. They were a mess. Anyone who watched those videos would know that she was flustered. She'd spilled the flour for the pizza crust she'd been preparing. By the time she'd stopped herself from tripping over her own feet while making the pizza dough, the obnoxious flour, that had been in a measuring cup, had fluttered all over the countertop and floors. After taking an hour to clean that up, she'd started all over, but during her second attempt, she'd accidentally flung the olive oil, managing to spew oil on the ceiling, cabinets and...of course, the freshly cleaned floor. She'd then had to take another hour cleaning that up, including the fifteen minutes to find her ladder so she could reach the ceiling and another fifteen minutes researching how to get oil stains out of a dry walled ceiling.

When that was cleaned up and a third batch of pizza dough started, Rachel had been too nervous to simply wait out the rising process. She'd started sanding down one of the chairs she'd bought at a flea market for five dollars. She planned to sand off all of the old paint and repaint it using a more protective and attractive coating. But in the process, she'd forgotten to start filming the sanding tutorial and... well...then she'd forgotten about the pizza crust and...the doughy blob was over proofed and ruined.

So here she was, standing on her back deck. She had settled on her best black dress that, thankfully, was a bit loose since she'd lost a bit of weight recently. Glancing at her delicate wristwatch, she wondered fretfully if Astir had only been kidding when he'd asked her out to dinner. It was five minutes until six o'clock. Why couldn't the man be early? Why was he making her wait like this? Or was he not going to show up? Oh, she prayed that he'd call her and tell her that something important had come up.

“Your Highness!”

Astir mentally groaned, wishing he could ignore the shrill, feminine voice coming out of the dining room as he made his way down the stairs.

The interior decorator he'd hired to restyle the house he'd just purchased came out of the dining room, her long, red talons a red blur as she waved her hands in the air. “Your Highness, you're going to absolutely love this!”

Astir snuck a look at his watch. He had five minutes. Less than five minutes, actually. He needed to be in the car at this point!

“What can I do for you, Adele?” he asked, his tone courteous but vaguely disinterested.

“I found it!” Adele exclaimed, clapping her hands. “I found the perfect light to go over the dining room table! I told you the other day that you needed a statement piece? Well, this one is...”

A light? She was slowing him down to tell him about a light for the dining room? And when had she told him about an “statement” piece? He didn’t even know what that meant! Why did a dining room need a statement? Wasn’t the focus of a dining room supposed to be on the food? If the woman had told him something about a light, statement or otherwise, Astir didn’t remember the conversation.

Impatiently, he reigned in his temper, unconcerned about the light or the statement or whatever other detail Adele felt was so wonderful.

“Whatever you decide, I’m sure that it will be fine,” he said, turning and heading towards the doorway. He was starting to accept that he’d made a mistake in hiring Adele. She’d submitted the best quotes and most interesting designs, but she was quickly becoming a pain in the ass! Her constant interruptions for approval of her designs and fabric choices and...just about every ridiculous detail during the house renovation was making him consider firing her and replacing her with someone who could get the job done more efficiently and without the need for his constant input.

She blinked, her long, fake lashes looking ridiculous. “But...don’t you want to see it? The cost is a bit higher than I budgeted, but it’s entirely worth it!” she cooed, wiggling in a way that caused her breasts to jiggle, a fact that was obvious because of her low-cut blouse.

His eyes sharpened and he turned to fix a stern look at her. “As long as you stay within the budget I gave you, then the dining room light fixture will be fine. If it’s over the budget for that room, then simply cut back in some other area.” Astir didn’t really care about the budget. He knew that quality sometimes was more expensive and he preferred quality work. But Adele was beginning to set off his sycophant radar.

“But...Your Highness,” she laughed tightly, becoming aware she had crossed some line. “You can’t put a price on beauty!”

He stopped and turned back to her, his eyes hard and uncompromising. “The price is the budget I gave you. Work within that budget and without the constant interruptions to my workday, and everything will be fine.” He paused, letting his words sink in. He watched as her face paled slightly, her overly-made-up features not looking as good now. “If you can’t decorate this house within the budget I allotted, then let me know and I will find someone who can.”

With that, he walked out of the front door and slipped into the back of the waiting limousine. Mentally, he’d already dismissed Adele, more than ready to focus on Rachel. He’d been eager to see her all day today, needing to see her and feel that zing, to discover if it had been real or just a product of his imagination. Surely he’d mis-remembered her dazzling smile and the alluring enticement of her luscious figure.

Yes, he’d see her, spend some time with her tonight and this crazy infatuation with a woman he barely knew would dissipate. Reason would return and he’d be able to concentrate once more. The fact that Rachel and her soft, pretty eyes, had interrupted his thoughts too often today was an issue that he didn’t like. Realizing a woman had power over him was a bit disconcerting.

Despite that, he had to restrain himself from ordering his driver to speed up. The need to see her...no, it was more than just to see her. He needed to hold her and...to make sure that she was okay. That craft room had been chaos. He suspected that there were places in that room that could be dangerous.

Thankfully, his driver had already pulled up outside of her house. His security team was already there, ensuring that the house and yard were safe, which relaxed certain parts of his mind. He liked that his security team was there, protecting Rachel. Of course, he knew that their primary goal was his protection, but if that offered Rachel a bit more security, then he was all for it.

Stepping out of the limousine, he started to button his jacket in preparation for knocking on her doorbell. But before

he could even touch the sides of his jacket, the door was opened and...there she was!

Alleana, the black dress she'd chosen highlighted all of her amazing curves. The light behind her hid her features, but she was there. And he knew that she was beautiful with just a hint of makeup to accent her soft, pure features. It hit him all the harder because Rachel was a good person inside as well as beautiful outside.

Of course, he'd gone online and watched some of her videos. In each of them, Rachel laughed and talked her way through each of the tutorials, explaining how to upcycle baskets or casserole dishes. The last one he viewed had been about how to take a man's dress shirt and turn it into a woman's dress. When she'd originally started talking on the video, he'd been cynical about the potential results. But as she'd modeled the finished product for the camera, she'd been smiling and so damn proud of herself, it had taken all of his self-control to wait until tonight to see her again.

"You're here," she gushed, her hands smoothing nervously over the sexy black dress.

"I'm here," he replied, moving forward, needing to touch her if only to take her hands in his. "You look lovely, Rachel," he said, bending over her hand and kissing her fingers. They were so soft and dainty! He wondered what she would do when he sucked on her fingers. Would she squirm? Would she laugh nervously as she was doing now? He couldn't wait to find out! "You look lovely."

She pulled her hands out of his and smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. She was nervous, he understood. But damn, he had no idea how to reassure her. Especially since he knew perfectly well that his intentions weren't very honorable. Hell no! Now that he was standing in front of her, he knew that she was just as enticing and alluring as he'd thought.

"Are you ready?"

"For what?" she asked with a breathy voice.

Astir laughed softly. “I have reservations at La Cambor,” he told her, naming the exclusive restaurant located about twenty minutes away in Middleburg, Virginia. All of the restaurants in Middleburg were impressive in both the quality of food served as well as the ambiance. Middleburg was horse country. That meant that only the very elite could afford to live in that area.

“That’s...” she started to say something, but the words seemed to trail off, as if she were too stunned to continue.

“You don’t like the restaurant?” he asked.

As he watched, Rachel’s features turned blank and he didn’t understand.

“No! It’s fine. Just...fine!” she replied, the last word ending in a murmur that warned him that his choice of restaurants was definitely not “fine”.

“You don’t like that restaurant,” he countered. He turned to one of the guards. “Call my assistant and have him cancel the reservations. We’ll dine here.”

The man nodded instantly and said something into a hidden microphone, stepping away from the doorway.

“Who are those men?” Rachel asked, her eyes wide as she watched several men disappear into the darkness around her house. “And why are they...hiding? Why would anyone hide in the trees like that?”

“They all work for me,” he assured her, taking her fingers into his hand once again. “Tell me what you’d like for dinner tonight.”

She pulled her shocked gaze away from his disappearing guards and looked up at him. For a moment, she didn’t speak, but when she blinked and looked around once more, she said, “The restaurant you chose...that’s fine.”

He laughed softly, shaking his head. “Rachel, one of the things that I’m very good at is reading other people’s expressions. And yours,” he lifted her fingers to his lips, kissing the ends softly, “is warning me very loudly that you don’t want to eat at La Cambor tonight.”

She smiled up at him, but it was a weak effort at best. “Am I that transparent?”

“Not at all,” he lied. “I am just better at reading other people.”

“I’m...fine,” she finished lamely, wishing she could find a better word.

He stepped closer, guiding her back into the house and closing the door. “You keep repeating that, but you’re not fine. And I don’t want to put you into a situation in which you are uncomfortable.” He paused long enough to loosen the knot on his tie. “Americans...they like pizza, correct?” he offered. He shrugged his jacket off and tossed it over the back of one of the white chairs.

Rachel stared at the man, stunned by his words and transfixed by the tanned skin now being revealed as he casually unbuttoned the top few buttons on his dress shirt. He stuffed the silk tie into the pocket of his suit jacket and Rachel couldn’t help but wonder how much the tie had cost him. Certainly more than her mortgage payment, she suspected.

“Pizza?” she scoffed, feeling on familiar turf for some reason. “You’re willing to shift your culinary expectations from La Cambor to a pizza delivery?” She laughed slightly, shaking her head. “I don’t think so.”

He chuckled and moved closer, but for some reason, she wasn’t nearly as intimidated now. Because he’d recognized her anxiety? Or was there a deeper reason? Perhaps, but again, Rachel wasn’t ready to delve into the mysteries of this man. Not at this point, anyway.

“Your American pizza is delicious,” he replied, then looked at her suspiciously. “Unless you suggest putting pineapple and ham on the pizza.”

Rachel hid her horror at the heresy of putting pineapple and ham on a pizza. “What if that’s the only way that I enjoy pizza?” she asked, widening her eyes and blinking, playing the innocent ingénue. “I mean...you promised me

yesterday that you'd never hurt me. But if you hurt my feelings by telling me that you don't like..."

"Don't even try it!" he growled, leaning forward as he braced his hands on the wall behind her head. "You hate pineapple on your pizza too."

She laughed, delighted with this new humorous aspect of the intimidating man's personality. "Fine!" she agreed, lifting her hands in the air with acceptance. "I don't like pineapple on my pizza. I'll admit, I'm a bit of a pizza purist. Sausage, pepperoni and extra cheese."

"Extra cheese?" he asked with surprise. "Are you sure...?"

"Extra cheese!" she interrupted, giving him a warning glance. "That's not up for debate!"

He laughed, and it was a rich, vibrant sound in the colorful room. "Fine. But tell me that you have beer somewhere in this white palace of yours. If you're going to make me eat a pizza with an embarrassing amount of cheese on top, then at least let me drown my horror with beer."

Rachel laughed, delighted with this new man. He was relaxed and approachable, not nearly as intimidating as he'd been just two minutes ago. "Oh yeah, I have beer!" she replied, almost dancing over to the small fridge she'd hidden in a small closet. She pulled the door open and grabbed two bottles of the beer she kept on hand for herself. She was a beer drinker at heart but could sip wine in polite company. But a good beer? Yes! Wine? Meh. Beer? Hooray!

"What do you do for a living?" she asked, handing him a cold beer. He took both of them, twisting the tops off of both, then handing one back to her.

"I suppose I do a lot of things."

"Such as?" she prompted, taking a long sip of her beer as she watched him over the top. She felt a new kind of tension invade her as she watched him take a sip as well. What was it about a man's throat that was so...sexy?

When he finished taking that sip, he looked at her and she instantly sensed that he wasn't going to tell her the truth.

"I oversee several businesses."

She smiled, shaking her head. "No, there's more to what you do than just a few business issues," she replied, then shrugged. "But it's okay if you don't want to tell me. I don't mind a person having a few secrets. I have several secrets of my own." With that, she waved him through to the back door. "Come on. It's a nice night out. Why don't we sit outside while we wait for the pizza to arrive?"

He looked at the doorway with wariness. "Is that back room just as crazy as it was yesterday?"

Rachel laughed. "Probably worse. You scare the bejeezus out of me, Astir. So yeah, after messing up several video takes, thanks to you and your buffness, I gave up trying to make pizza dough and started working on a few décor pieces. None of which worked. Also thanks to you," she explained while she shoved several old cabinets out of the way as she made her way towards the backyard. "Never fear, there's a very nice wooden swing out back that I hung up last month. The pillows are perfect for watching the stars."

Astir watched as Rachel walked through a small pathway towards what he suspected was a little alcove. Following her, he was struck by the innocence of the evening. When was the last time he'd relaxed in the company of a woman? When was the last time that he'd paused to simply look up into the night sky and take in the stars?

Never, he realized. The women who had passed through his life were too intent on seducing him in order to achieve...something other than a quiet evening with him.

This night, following this woman into the quiet of her backyard, was an extraordinary experience. He knew that it wouldn't last. Nothing this perfect ever lasted. Perhaps Rachel already knew who he was, despite his vague responses

to her questions. Perhaps she had a plan that would eventually lead to her bed.

Astir debated calling her out, demanding that Rachel just cut to the chase and explain what she really wanted. But in the end, he was too entranced by the night, by the possibility of a quiet evening...eating pizza and drinking beer of all things. He'd heard others discuss nights like this, but the evenings he'd shared with women were more complicated. More...mercenary.

So even if this night was going to end in a plea for a pretty bracelet or some other form of monetary payment, Astir was willing to go along with it. Hell, he was actually enjoying himself. The experience of a quiet night along with non-sexual conversation was certainly...unique! And for that, Astir was willing to pay a very high price for the experience.

"How did you mess up the videos today?" he asked, taking the seat next to her. A moment later, she pushed off with her toe, sending the wooden bench swinging back and forth. Astir watched Rachel's features, trying to discern the truth even through the dim light filtering in through the leaves from the moon.

"Oh, let's see. I spilled flour all over the floor and, since I try to keep the kitchen as pristine as possible, I had to stop and clean that up, then re-do the whole process. Then there was an olive oil incident."

"Olive oil?"

She laughed softly, nodding as she lifted the bottle of beer to her lips. He watched, fascinated as those soft, full lips circled the rim of that bottle and Astir realized that he was actually jealous of the damn bottle!

"Yes. Olive oil. On the ceiling!"

He stared at her for a moment, chuckling. "How did olive oil end up on the ceiling?"

She smiled, shaking her head and added a heavy sigh for drama. "Well, it had something to do with remembering your shoulders."

“My shoulders?” He’d lifted his beer to his mouth, but paused with that announcement.

She shrugged, adding a nod for emphasis. “Yes. I’m a shoulder woman. I like broad shoulders on a man.”

“And my shoulders...?” He had no idea where she was going with this conversation.

She grinned slightly and he felt her gaze lower to his shoulders. “Yeah. Yours are pretty nice.”

He laughed, charmed by her honesty. “And this caused an olive oil stain to form on the ceiling?”

She chuckled and lowered her beer, toeing the swing again for another boost. “I guess it’s a bit more complicated than that. But suffice it to say, the olive oil slipped out of my hands and, when I reached out to catch it and stop it from falling onto the floor, which I’d just cleaned, if you’ll remember, well, the olive oil sort of just...arced upwards, spewing onto the ceiling.”

He stared at her for a long moment, then threw back his head, laughing at the image of a bottle of olive oil slipping out of her hands and somehow getting the contents onto the ceiling.

“Yeah, you can laugh, but you’re not the one who was standing on a ladder trying to scrub a paste of baking soda and warm water into your ceiling!”

He laughed again, shaking his head. “I wish I’d been there to witness all of it. That would have been much more interesting than the meetings I sat in on all day.”

“What kind of meetings?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

Astir hesitated for a mere moment. The meetings were to discuss the purchase of military equipment, but he couldn’t tell her that. It was a top-secret transaction and only about five people knew about it. “Just boring meetings. I wanted to pay less for some pieces of equipment and the person sitting across the table from me wanted me to pay more.”

“Who won?”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “I got the equipment for the price I wanted.”

She grinned at him, nodding. “Congratulations. I’m sure that you’re a very worthy opponent.”

He shrugged slightly. “I can hold my own. Although I’ll admit that it wasn’t as interesting as getting oil out of walls.”

“Ceilings,” she corrected, then took another long sip of her beer. “And I’m pretty sure that whatever kinds of equipment you purchased, it was much more exciting than olive oil and building materials.”

“Where do you post your videos? And how to you get more followers?”

Rachel described her marketing efforts, unconsciously rubbing her forehead, telling him with her body language that she wasn’t very comfortable with marketing. She might be brilliant at the videos and coming up with content, but he knew that was only half of the recipe for a successful business. It didn’t matter how great of a product one created. If no one knew about the product, it wasn’t going to be a success.

The pizza arrived and it was even more delicious than he’d remembered pizza ever being. Perhaps it was the night air. Or maybe he was simply more enchanted with the company. He watched as Rachel laughed while she explained the learning curve she overcame when she’d first started vlogging, the technical issues that had challenged her and the silly things she’d accidentally done over the years.

“And in the end, you’ve grown your business into a huge success,” he commented.

Even in the darkness, he knew that she was blushing. She was such a mixture of confidence and...demure shyness. Every movement, every delightful facial expression intrigued him even more.

“No, I’m not a success. I earn enough through advertising to pay my bills and put a little bit away into a retirement account each month. But by no means could my small little channel be considered a wild success.” She lifted her chin, shaking her head slightly as if she needed to shake off the insecurities. “But it will be. I can do more. I can be more creative and more resourceful. I’m making a name for myself. It’s a slow process, but eventually, I will become the success I envision in my mind.”

“I suspect that you’ll be the next Martha Stewart,” he replied.

Rachel’s burst of laughter surprised him. He understood when she said, “Hopefully minus the illegal stock trades and prison sentence!”

He chuckled, shrugging slightly. “Yes, perhaps you could eliminate that portion of her life story when replicating it in your own.”

“No ‘perhaps’ about it!” she affirmed, lifting her head. “Prison is definitely not in my future!”

“Good to know.” He reached out, touching her hair. “You’re a very beautiful person, Rachel,” he told her, his words soft in the darkness.

Her soft mouth parted and he knew that her breathing had stopped. Good. He was relieved to know that he wasn’t the only person struggling with this intense attraction, although he doubted she felt it as painfully as he was at the moment.

Restraining himself from lifting her up and pulling her onto his lap so he could explore her body in more intimate detail, he pulled his hand away from her hair. Rachel wasn’t ready for the intensity of his need. Not yet. He sensed, however, that he could get her there. If he was very careful and showed her that she could trust him, slowly, he could bring her to the same need that he was feeling.

“I should go,” he said, his voice rough with the need and desire pulsing between them.

Rachel heard his words, but they didn't make any sense. Go? He was about to leave? But...wasn't he going to kiss her? For a moment, as he'd twisted a lock of her blond hair around on his fingers, she'd been sure that he'd felt the tension in the air between them too. The night air felt thick with the sexual awareness, but perhaps that had only been in her mind. Perhaps he didn't feel the same aching, desperate need that she was currently feeling.

Pulling back, she stood up from the swing, relieved that she could accomplish that feat without falling over. "Yes. It's late. Thank you for...!" She stopped and looked around, then watched as he stood up next to her. "You bought the pizza!" she gasped. "I need to reimburse you for the pizza!"

Immediately, she stepped forward, intending to grab her purse, wondering if she had any cash left from her grocery trip. "Let me just look for my wallet."

But as soon as she took a second step, a strong arm stopped her, slipping around her waist and bringing her back so that she was once again standing in front of him.

"You're not going to pay me for the pizza, Rachel," he told her firmly, his voice deepening as he looked down at her.

"But...you're my guest," she asserted.

"No," he countered. "I will never allow you to pay for our meals."

She heard his words and thought about arguing with him. There was no way she'd let a man pay her way in the world. Not in this lifetime!

"I'll..."

"You supplied the beer," he said, interrupting her next argument. "In a way, we both paid for dinner."

Rachel thought about that for a brief moment, then nodded her head. "Fine. As long as it is even," she told him.

He moved closer and Rachel's head went a bit dizzy as the incredible scent of him filled her mind. It was woody

and male and...incredible! He touched her, his large hand cradling her jaw, his fingers sliding against her neck. The feel of his big hand against her skin made her feel...a bit crazed with the need for more.

“I’m not going to kiss you, Rachel,” he murmured, even as his thumb slid along the edge of her jawline.

“You’re not?” she asked, her voice breathy.

“No. I can’t.”

“Can’t?”

He shook his head, his lips a mere breath away. “If I kiss you, I probably won’t be able to stop.”

There was a long moment as both of them realized the implications of his statement. As soon as Rachel’s mind caught up with his words, she shivered, delighted by the anticipation. “Oh!” was all that came out of her mouth, even though she desperately wanted to be one of those sophisticated women who knew exactly what to say and how to say it, as well as the confidence to lead him inside the house and straight to her bedroom.

Unfortunately, Rachel wasn’t made that way. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to look herself in the mirror tomorrow if she had a one-night stand.

“Will you walk me to the door?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered back. She might not want to have sex with the man...correction, she didn’t want to have sex with him *tonight*...! Well, she *did* want to have sex with him tonight, but she also knew that she’d feel horrible tomorrow if she did that tonight. Walking him to the door was the sensible thing to do. The right thing to do.

Even if her body wished, begged and pleaded with her to lead him to her bedroom instead of the doorway.

Astir dropped his hand from her cheek and her whole body felt suddenly cold. But then he took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. “What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked as he led the way through the darkened backyard. How

he could see the pathway in the dark was a mystery, but she followed, feeling treasured and loved at this moment.

“Tomorrow...” she struggled to think of her schedule for the next day when everything inside of her was telling her not to let this man leave tonight.

“Will you re-shoot the video that didn’t get done today? Or do you have something else scheduled?”

The reminder of this morning’s messed up filming schedule startled her brain back into function mode. “Yes. I suspect that tomorrow will be a pretty busy day since I’ll have to double up on the filming. Since today’s video wasn’t ready for editing and I’ll have to re-shoot most of the video, then I’ll have to do two videos tomorrow to make up for lost time.”

“What time will you be finished?”

Rachel had been staring at the buttons on his dress shirt, but as soon as he asked that question, hope spiraled inside of her. “Finished? Tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Astir replied sliding his arm around her waist and pulling her closer.

“Um...I should be finished by four or five tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good. Will you let me take you out for dinner again tomorrow night?”

Happiness burst through her and she couldn’t hide the bright smile from him even if she’d tried, which she didn’t. “Yes!” Rachel laughed slightly, then bounced on her toes. “Yes. I’d love to have dinner with you tomorrow night. Actually, why don’t you let me cook tomorrow night?”

He looked behind her at the light shining out through the windows of her small cottage home. When he looked at her again, Astir shook his head. “No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“You don’t think I can cook?” Rachel demanded, trying to hide the touch of hurt in her voice.

He laughed and she felt his fingers tighten around her waist. “I tasted your cupcakes, Rachel. I’m well aware that you are a superior baker and I’m guessing that you are just as adept at any cooking efforts.” He kissed her forehead and she felt a burning sensation on that spot. “No, the reason I don’t think it would be a good idea is because if I am alone with you in your house, a bed is too close and too much of a temptation. Even now, I’m battling with my need to pull you closer and ravish you. It would be best if we went out, where temptation is at least tempered by inconvenience.”

Rachel smiled up at him with a bright, hopeful expression because his words made her feel giddy. “Fine. We can go out for dinner. I’d enjoy that.”

“Good.” He kissed her forehead again. “Now I’m going to leave you, but I want you to go inside and lock the door before I leave.”

“Why would...”

“Just humor me, Rachel. I need to know that you are safely inside your house before I can leave.”

Again, his words made her feel special. Cared for. “Fine. Good night and thank you for the pizza. It was delicious.”

“Good night, Rachel.” He stepped back this time, his hands dropping from around her waist. “Don’t forget to lock the door.”

“I won’t,” she promised, then turned and walked into her house, flipping the lock on her front door so that he could hear it from the other side. She then went through her house, turning off the lights as she headed to her bedroom. As she closed the door to her bedroom, Rachel was painfully aware of Astir standing outside her front door. How did she know that he was still there?

Perhaps it was simply her imagination, but...no. He was there. Astir’s energy, his vitality, was too intense to ignore. She could feel his presence even from her bedroom.

Sure enough, a moment later, she heard an engine turn over, then the gravel crunching along her driveway as he drove off down the street.

Jeffrey muttered a curse about the intense heat in Silar as he watched the trucks while they made their way into and then out of the various caves that they'd drilled into over the past two days. Empty trucks went into the cave on the left and trucks filled with rocks and dirt came out from the cave on the right. Glancing at his clipboard, he calculated that they were two days ahead of schedule, although he was a bit concerned about the underground supports that had been installed yesterday. He'd examined them last night and again this morning and they didn't look very strong. He'd have his team check them again tonight, but there wasn't any additional money in the budget for reinforcing supports.

He turned away, intending to drive over to the mining site, which was just south of the small farming village, when a glint off in the distance caught his eye.

"What the hell was that?" he growled, turning to the three men standing behind him.

Ned Afrehoster, a hired goon and one of the meanest men Jeffrey had ever seen, narrowed his eyes as well. He'd seen it too, Jeffrey realized. He glanced over at the others. "Deal with it!" he snapped, not to anyone in particular. He didn't care who fixed the issue, he just didn't want news of the mining operation to get out. That bastard Neville had assured Jeffrey that the local law enforcement idiots were taken care of, but he didn't trust the man. Nor did he trust anyone in this overheated, desert hell! It was currently one hundred and twenty degrees. At that temperature, it didn't matter that the humidity was around the eight or nine percent range. It was freaking hot! His body might be sweating, but the air was so dry that the sweat simply evaporated as soon as it was emitted from his body.

Ned immediately moved off, but that left Petro Zinhaden, a former KGB agent, and Scott Roland, still

standing behind him. Petro was one of those freaks who scared the hell out of everyone who came into contact with the man. His eyes conveyed that Petro had done things that no human should ever speak of.

Scott was...well, he was an idiot. Jeffrey wasn't afraid of that man. Scott drank too much at night and didn't have any special skills, other than his lack of any sort of ethical compass.

At least Jeffrey had a compass. He might ignore it when the money was good enough. But it was always there, niggling absently in the back of his mind.

Turning away from the two men, he continued towards his truck. He had measurements to take and dirt samples to analyze. He wasn't going to lose that bonus money, damn it!

Chapter 4

Over the next two weeks, Rachel wasn't sure if she was in a nightmare...or a dream. Every night, Astir picked her up for dinner. He'd take her to one of the beautiful boutique restaurants in Middleburg, places that she'd only read about over the years, but hadn't ever had the money to enjoy. The Salamander Resort was her favorite so far. The scallops seared in curry butter and the pastries were...well, she was jealous! She had no idea how to make pastries that flaky and buttery!

But the real problem wasn't the inequity she felt after Astir paid for every meal. It was the pain she felt after he left her every night. After their second evening together, he'd left her with a sweet kiss at the door, then stepped back until she went inside. Just as he'd done that first night, he waited until she'd locked the door before driving away.

Unfortunately, every night, their kisses became more intense. He never entered her house, but last night, she was literally climbing up his body as he pressed her back against the door, kissing her as if...as if he wanted so much more! And Rachel was desperate for more as well. She wanted to experience everything with this man!

Plus, she was so tired from lack of sleep. When she did manage to sleep, she dreamed about him making love to her. That resulted in Rachel waking up early every morning, the sheets tangled around her legs, her breathing ragged as she tried to calm down from those crazy dreams!

So when he came to pick her up for dinner that night, Rachel didn't dress up. She wasn't going out with him. Tonight, she was going to seduce this man!

Pacing the small area in front of her doorway, she gripped her hands, waiting for the doorbell to ring. When it finally did, Rachel walked over, opened the door and simply glared at him as he stood on the front step. She didn't step out and pull the door closed as she normally would. Not tonight!

“You’re not ready?” he asked as his eyes moved up and down over her figure, then stepped back. “I will wait for you in the car.”

Rachel caught his hand, stopping his retreat as she stared up into his dark eyes, lit up only by the light next to her front door. “I’m not changing clothes, Astir,” she told him firmly. “We’re not going out for dinner tonight.”

He looked a bit stunned for a moment, but then his lips compressed and he stepped back again. “I’ve pushed you too far. Our kiss last night scared you.”

Rachel heard his words, but they were the exact opposite of the truth so she laughed, shaking her head. “Get inside, Astir!” she told him, dropping his hand, then turned around and walked into her kitchen, leaving the door open for him.

She was pulling a casserole dish out of the oven when she heard the front door close. There was a long silence afterwards, and Rachel wondered if perhaps he’d left.

Rachel carefully set the hot casserole dish onto the countertop and looked up...only to find Astir glaring at her, his hands fisted on his lean hips. He still had his jacket and tie on, looking for all the world like he wanted to lift her up, sling her over his shoulder and carry her out of the house.

“We can’t eat here, Rachel,” he told her firmly, glaring at her across the expanse of her living room and kitchen.

Rachel watched him and tried to understand his resistance. That’s when it hit her. Just like her, Astir was on the edge, ready to scream if they didn’t proceed beyond the not-so-innocent kisses that they’d been sharing at the end of every evening.

That knowledge gave her power and instead of the nervousness she’d been feeling moments before, a sense of calm settled over her. There was a sense of rightness as well. Yes, this was the man she wanted. Needed!

“We’re eating here, Astir,” she replied, then turned and poured the red wine that she’d opened about half an hour

earlier. She poured two glasses, then lifted them both and carried both over to him. “To tonight,” she said, clinking her glass against his.

Astir stared down at Rachel, needing to...hell, he needed to make love to her! He needed to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off to the bedroom. There, he would make love to her in so many ways, she would be walking funny tomorrow!

No, he stopped and shuddered. He would never hurt her! This woman, she was special! He had to be careful! He had to be gentle!

“We’ll have a glass of wine, then leave. We’re dining at the Salamander Resort again. That was your favorite place so far.”

He’d given the order, but Rachel didn’t seem to understand the amount of authority he possessed. She walked away. Was there a new sexy swing to her hips now? Yes, he thought, his eyes transfixed by the gentle sway as she padded barefoot over to the stove. He watched as she stirred something in the pan, her soft hands and beautiful fingers a temptation that he’d thought about, dreamed about...*aljahim*, he could almost feel those fingers wrapped around his shaft, stroking him, her gorgeous, blue eyes watching as she stirred his body to unbearable levels of lust.

“How was your day?” she asked softly.

Astir felt the throbbing low in his body as his eyes moved over her luscious bottom, his hands clenching the wine glass more tightly in an effort to stop himself from walking over to her and grabbing her, feeling every inch of her body and exploring all of her amazing curves. She was a woman, he thought. A woman with all of the delectable curves, curves that made a man drool! Curves that made a man ache to possess her and pleasure her.

“That bad?”

Huh? Her ass wasn't bad! It was one of the finest backsides he'd ever seen! It took every ounce of his self-control not to toss the glass of wine against the wall and walk over there to...!

"My day was great!"

Great? What the hell was she talking about?

"I woke up early and started working right after my shower. I forgot to put on the fake eyelashes, but that was probably a good thing."

"Why is that?" he asked, knowing that he needed to contribute something to the conversation.

"Because my hands were trembling. I was nervous." She looked at him over her shoulder. "I've been working off of nervous energy all day today."

That caught his attention. She'd been nervous? Was someone saying something bad? Did she have technical problems? Spurred by the need to fix whatever was bothering her, he moved forward, setting the glass of wine on the counter as he moved next to her. "What happened?" he asked softly. At least, he meant for the question to come out softly. He suspected that the tone was more of a growl than anything soothing. But he couldn't help it. Standing this close to her, feeling the warmth from her soft body and smelling that intensely feminine scent of her was making him crazy!

"I couldn't stop thinking about seducing you tonight," she admitted, looking up at him.

Those wide, blue eyes stared at him as if she'd said something...*Aljahim almuqades!* She was planning to seduce him? Tonight?!

"No!"

Those blue eyes blinked and he could have kicked himself. Rubbing a hand over his face, he sighed, shaking his head. "Rachel, I want you. Don't ever doubt that." The relief in her eyes made the throbbing intensify. "But you're not ready."

“I’m not?” she asked, then she did something extraordinary. She put a lid on whatever it was that she was stirring on the stove, turned off the heat and turned to face him. “Would you care to elaborate on why you think that I’m not ready?”

“You’re...!” he stopped because she placed her hands on his chest. The touch was light, but *aljanat aleaziza*, it felt so damn good!

“Every night,” those soft hands slid lower while her big, blue eyes looked up at him, “you leave me with a kiss at my door, Astir. And every night, I fall into bed, my whole body aching to feel you touch me.” She paused, taking his hands and placing them on her hips. “I want this,” she told him, moving closer. “I want this so badly, it’s making me crazy. I’m losing sleep and messing up at work, then I’ll go on a crazy work binge and produce dozens of weird crafts, none of which I can actually reveal to my viewers because they make no sense.” She leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss against the middle of his chest. He wanted to look down at that spot, to find out if there was any skin left. The spot felt as if it were on fire.

“You feel this need?” he asked, finally moving his hands. Now that he’d released himself from the prison of lust, his hands moved up and down her back, along her waist... anywhere that he could touch her and not scare the hell out of her.

“I feel this need,” she whispered back, then took his hand and placed it over one of her breasts.

He stared down at his hand, at her breast and could feel the nipple through the thin material of her soft sweater. Hell, he could even feel the lace of her bra and he almost lost control right then and there.

Instead, he groaned and, with a swift move, lifted her into his arms, carrying her out of the kitchen and into her bedroom. It was dark in this room, but as he lowered her feet to the floor right by her bed, he bent over and turned on the light, suffusing the room in a soft, yellow glow of light.

“Now,” he said, ripping his tie away and tossing it out of his way. He then unbuttoned the top several buttons on his dress shirt before taking his hand and placing her fingers inside his shirt, needing to feel her fingers against his bare skin. “Touch me,” he ordered, gritting his teeth as she moved her fingers across his overheated skin. “Don’t stop touching me!”

Rachel smiled, then did that soft kissing thing again. But this time, her lips were against his bare skin and it felt so much better than anything he’d ever imagined! Those fingers unbuttoned more of his dress shirt and he thought he’d died and gone to heaven. Her touch was blissful. And painful! Everywhere she touched, it felt as if she were burning his skin.

“I have to get you naked, Rachel!” he groaned, pulling her hands away. “I have to know!”

“Know?” she asked, stepping back. Then she lifted her sweater over her head, tossing it onto the floor.

He held his breath as his hands curved and lifted, cupping her breasts. His thumb reached up, sliding against the nipple pressing against the material and he couldn’t stop himself from leaning down and taking that nipple into his mouth, tasting the raspberry bud. “I have to know all of you,” he growled, lifting her up and placing her on the mattress. Leaning over her, he kissed her, his mouth hard and demanding now. There were no more soft kisses. Those were in the past. Maybe in the future he’d have a bit more control, but at this moment, everything was about taste and texture and feeling her, feeling her reactions to his touch and knowing what caused her to tremble, what made her cry out. Every reaction, every inch of her incredible body, he had to know and explore.

Moving over her, he kissed her neck, her collar bone, smiling when she moaned. His thigh pressed between her legs, spreading her wide so that he could press himself against her, to feel her heat even though there were several layers of clothing between them. He’d eliminate those layers, piece by

piece until there was nothing separating them. Nothing to hinder his knowledge of everything about this woman!

“Spread your legs for me,” he urged, pressing against her through the leggings she still wore.

When she complied, Astir pressed between her legs, allowing her hips to cradle his erection. With small, precise movements, he shifted against her until she started to move as well, mimicking his movements. Ripping off his shirt, he ignored the buttons scattering across the room. He’d worry about that later. Right now, all of his attention was focused on Rachel and making sure that he pleased her.

Lowering his head, he nibbled on her neck while his hands moved against her breasts, cradling them, weighing them and discovering that they were the perfect size for the palms of his hands. Not too big and not too small. Perfect. His thumb and forefinger teased the distended tip, eliciting cries of delight and frustration from her. When the cries turned to whimpers, he moved over to the other tip, his mouth covering that one, tasting and feeling the bud in his mouth and with his tongue. There were more sounds, but Astir ignored them, needing to focus or he’d lose himself in those whimpers of pleasure.

Rachel lost herself in his touch. His mouth and hands were everywhere and he touched her in places that were so private, so sensitive, she wanted to scream at him to stop, but everything felt too good. She was lost. Completely lost to the sensuous pleasure that he wove with every touch of his mouth, his tongue and his fingers.

When he pressed her legs wider, she had no will to resist him. All she wanted was for him to give her that release, something that might give her back a small bit of the control she’d lost when she’d admitted that she was going to seduce him tonight. The reality was that the seducer had become the seduced. From the first moment she’d met Astir, she’d known that the man was in control of his life and his world and his

surroundings. But she hadn't realized how much so. She hadn't realized what he could do with his formidable control.

And now, she had none. She was at his mercy. He kissed her stomach, her hips, her inner thighs. Then, when she needed him to kiss her in that most intimate of places, he skipped over that and kissed her knees. How had her knees become erogenous zones? She'd never found pleasure in her knees before! Nothing could have prepared her for this kind of...she might have described it as pleasure, but she wasn't feeling very pleased right at this moment. In fact, she wanted to hit him. She wanted to scratch his back and bonk his head and...oh dear lord! He kissed her there! Just a short, sweet kiss, but her whole body froze with anticipation. Every nerve ending inside of her waited, her body primed as she waited.

"You are not allowed to climax, Rachel," he said, lifting up onto his arms and kissing her lips.

"I'm not?" she whimpered, trying to close her legs. If he wasn't going to let her climax, then she didn't want...!

"Oh, no. I'm going to kiss you thoroughly," he warned, laughing as he pressed his shoulders between her legs.

Rachel tried to pull away, to wiggle higher. But his hands wrapped around her thighs, holding her in place as his mouth kissed and teased, licked and nuzzled.

"I don't think I can hold back," she told him, then hissed as his mouth moved closer and closer, teasing her, sucking and licking. One long finger inserted itself inside of her and Rachel lifted her hips, shocked at how good he felt. But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough! His touch was light and frustrating, making her crazy with need. "You have to stop!" she gasped.

"Not stopping," he warned, adding in an evil laugh. "Not yet."

Rachel swung her head back and forth, unconcerned about her tangled hair or the pillow that thudded to the floor. She tried to reach down and push his head away, but his

dexterous hands merely caught her fingers pulling them away so that he could resume his sensual torture unhindered.

“Astir!” she groaned, arching backwards, but that movement only pressed her core against his mouth, giving him better access. “I can’t...I can’t...!”

He pulled away immediately, swiftly moving higher over her as he kissed her, his tongue mimicking the sexual act as his body pressed against her.

But Rachel was beyond the ability to make sense or be shy or hold back on what she needed now. Pressing against his shoulders, Rachel followed him down, straddling his hips as she continued to kiss him while her hands roamed over his chest, surprised by the power in his arms. He was all muscle and power, strength and steel. And he had too many clothes on!!

“Please,” she whimpered, moving down lower, her fingers fumbling with the belt buckle that stopped her from shoving his slacks off. “I can’t...”

“Here, let me do that,” he told her, then shifted so that he was completely naked. “Now, what was happening before you so rudely interrupted me?”

Rachel was too busy staring at his magnificent erection to understand the warning. So it was a bit of a shock when his hands wrapped around her knees and, with a flick of his wrists, twisted her so that she was once again flat on her back. His head once again started kissing his way back down her inner thighs, kissing one side, then the other. Rachel whimpered again, actually afraid of the teasing that was heading for her with his goal.

“I can’t take anymore, Astir!” she groaned, her hands stopping his head. His hands came up, wrapping around her wrists.

“Of course you can. I believe in you.”

Rachel might have laughed, but the sound came across as more of a whimper. Then her back was arching once again as his tongue licked and teased, those lips wrapping around

that nub and sucking until she was screaming out his name. She wiggled away, almost sobbing with the need to climax. But he was relentless. So Rachel decided to be the aggressor once more and pushed against his shoulders. When she was once again straddling his hips, she smiled triumphantly. “Okay, now for a bit of payback,” she whispered, kissing his chest, his sternum and that sexy indentation right at the base of his ribs. His stomach muscled flexed as she kissed and nipped with her teeth while his hands dove into her hair, his strong fingers massaging her scalp.

Those fingers should have given her a warning. But instead, she was too intent on her goal, kissing lower and lower on his stomach. But moments before she was about to reach the ultimate prize, he jackknifed up and somehow pulled her so that her knees were now straddling his shoulders instead of his hips. Rachel looked down, shocked at their new position. She shook her head, immediately trying to wiggle away from him. But his hands held her in place as his mouth once again found that nub and started teasing.

This time, Rachel was too far gone and she couldn't hold back as his tongue flicked rapidly against that nub, then those lips wrapped around her and sucked while that tongue continued to flick. Rachel's hands smacked against the wall, her fingers curling into small fists as her climax burst throughout her body, her hips rocking back and forth against his mouth, unconcerned or even aware of the potential for suffocation. All she knew was that her body was pulsing with the most outrageous pleasure she'd ever experienced.

There was a falling sensation, but Rachel wasn't aware of anything other than her body that still throbbed, pulsed and shivered. She felt strong arms wrap around her, cradling her and soft kisses against her neck and shoulders, but she couldn't make sense of anything. All she could do was curl into that warmth, her fingers wrapping around Astir's upper arms as if she didn't want to ever let him go.

When she finally opened her eyes, Astir was staring into her eyes, a smug, triumphant look in his eyes. “You okay?” he asked.

Rachel tried to smile, but her heated cheeks dashed all hope of trying to appear sophisticated and casual about what had just happened.

“I’m fine,” she finally replied.

Astir’s eyes moved down over her still naked body, nodding. “You’re more than fine, Rachel. That was hot!”

Rachel lifted her hand, pressing her palm against his mouth. “Let’s just...move on, shall we?”

He threw back his head, laughing at her embarrassment. “Not used to climaxing that hard?” he asked, shifting to nibble on her neck and shoulders again.

She didn’t tell him that she never, ever, climaxed during sex. But he lifted his mouth and stared into her eyes, grasping the truth without her needing to confirm it. “You don’t ever climax with another person, do you?”

If he’d stopped his question with just “You don’t ever climax,” she might have admitted the truth. But since he added on “with another person”, that implied that she...well... did it all alone. And that simply wasn’t anything she could share with this man who was sophistication and power and sensual knowledge.

Of course, Astir had an annoying habit of discerning the truth without her needing to say anything. And of course, he laughed softly at her pinkened cheeks. “I think that’s hot too, Rachel. And maybe someday, you’ll let me watch you do that to yourself.”

Once again, she slapped a hand over his mouth. “We were going to move on, right?” she urged. Then she bent her head, kissing his chest. Then, because he’d done this to her so thoroughly, she moved over to his nipples, kissing them briefly. But his groan encouraged her to continue, so she nipped and teased and kissed his chest. When she heard a sharp intake of his breath, Rachel knew a sense of power unlike anything she’d ever experienced before.

“Rachel!” he groaned, his hands sifting through her hair. “Damn it, I can’t...!”

“Oh, no!” she whispered as her mouth moved lower. Lower! “You have to take it just like you made me!”

He laughed, but that’s when she licked the tip of his shaft. At that moment, something exploded inside of him and he rolled over so that she was pinned underneath him. “If you do that, then everything is going to be over very quickly!” he growled, lifting her leg up so that it was wrapped around his waist.

A moment later, Rachel gasped when he entered her. It wasn’t a fast thrust, more of a smooth glide into place. As if he were coming home and it felt so perfectly, amazingly right and wonderful! Arching her back, she took more of him into her body, feeling the pressure fill her, making her whole. Rachel hadn’t ever thought that there was something lacking in her life. Not until this moment.

“Don’t move,” she whispered, gripping his shoulders with her hands and his waist with her legs. “Just...for a moment,” she begged, arching and wiggling, savoring this perfect moment.

For several seconds, Astir remained still, but she could feel his body shaking, his muscles tight and drawn as he tried to remain still.

“I can’t hold back much longer, love,” he warned, lowering himself down to nibble at that soft spot behind her ear. “I have to move!”

She smiled, turning her head and kissing him. “Okay. Go ahead and...!” Rachel gasped when she felt his first thrust. She’d thought that this was comfortable? Nope! The friction created by that one shift was...! Her fingers tightened and Rachel was unaware of her nails digging into his skin.

“*Allaena*, you feel so perfect!” he sighed, thrusting slowly, but filling her completely.

“Don’t stop!” she whispered up to him, moving her hands down over his back. Rachel didn’t realize what her hands were doing, but Astir noticed and it made his mind blank as he felt her pretty hands against his butt, pressing him

into her, guiding him with those fingers. Shaking his head, he tried to clear the lust, but he couldn't stop it.

Thrusting faster, he pressed into her soft, sweet body again and again, pushing deeper and faster with every thrust. Every time she did that thing with her hands on his butt, he was a little more gone.

When she shifted her hips, doing that cute little wiggle thing every time he shifted into her, Astir lost it. It might have been lost a long time ago, but every wiggle was just...it was too much. He moved faster and faster, shifting into her tight sheath, his hand moving lower in order to bring her over the edge. When he felt her body shudder, he released his control, letting himself thrust into her again and again as the waves of pleasure hit him harder than he'd thought possible.

Collapsing down on top of her, he tried to protect her, but there was no energy left in his body. Sliding to the side, he pulled her closer, draping her over the top of him, still intimately connected, needing that connection for just a bit longer.

Rachel stared at the pillow laying on the floor, her mind unable to function. Every cell in her body seemed to be vibrating with happiness. And yet, all of her muscles were just...mush. Absolute mush!

“Are you hurt?”

His deep voice broke through the stunned silence surrounding both of them. Rachel turned her head, looking into Astir's concerned, dark eyes. “Hurt?” she repeated. That word was so far away from what she was feeling, it was almost laughable.

In fact, before she could form a response, she couldn't stop the laughter from bursting out of her. It was just a giggle initially. She slapped a hand over her mouth, took a breath and...more laughter erupted from her and she turned, trying to bury her face against the pillow. But his chest was in the way and it was a much more enticing form of suffocation. As the

laughter continued, she felt his arms wrap around her, pulling her close as he buried his face against her neck.

When the laughter finally abated, he lifted his head, looking down at her. “I guess that answers my question.” His hand slid lower, curling around her waist. “I wasn’t too rough?”

“No,” she replied, then lifted up onto her elbows to give him a quick kiss. “Not too rough. You were perfect.”

Astir rolled over, pulling her even closer. “Perfect, huh?” he teased, looking down at her with a smug expression to his handsome features. “I could get used to ‘perfect’.” He lowered his head, nuzzling her neck.

She laughed again, pretending to wiggle away from him. “Maybe perfect was the wrong word.”

“No, I like being perfect,” and he bit her earlobe, eliciting a squeal of outrage that quickly turned into a moan.

“I take it back.”

“There are no take-backs,” he warned.

“I have to.” She leaned back, looking into his dark eyes. “If you are at perfect now, then what will you strive for next?”

Astir’s smile drifted away with her words. Or perhaps it was the gentle touch of her fingers against his cheek. He shifted, leaning into her touch, needing that touch more than anything else at the moment. “You’re beautiful.”

Rachel laughed slightly. “My hair is probably a mess by now. And I have no more lipstick on. And now you think I’m beautiful?” she scoffed.

He turned, his teeth nipping at the palm of her hand. “I’ve thought you were beautiful ever since you saved that damned skunk, Rachel. But at this particular moment, you’re...”

“Don’t mock Jasmine,” she warned.

Astir stopped, trying to figure out who the hell she was talking about. “Jasmine?”

“The skunk you were about to shoot the first time we met?”

“Jasmine? Seriously? I thought you were kidding!” He stared at her, then laughed. “You named the skunk?”

She nodded. “Yes. She’s a sweet little lady. I thought I’d mentioned her name that first time.”

He shrugged and rolled over, bringing her along with him. “You probably did, but I was too fascinated by your ass,” and his big palms settled over that portion of her anatomy.

“My butt?” she replied, stunned even as she tried to wiggle away from his hands. “My butt is my least favorite body part.”

His hands smoothed over the body part in question. “You can hate it all you want. I’ll admire it enough for both of us.”

Rachel laughed, delighted with this teasing, laughing man. He’d been so serious with her before now, but in bed, he was...amazing. And yes, perfect.

Adele glanced at the clock, then pulled her cell phone out, irritated that both time pieces showed that it was well after midnight. Where the hell was he? Surely, Astir, a freaking sheik, wasn’t still hanging out with that stupid nobody in that tiny little house! It was inconceivable that Astir del Taran, a man who could literally have any woman in the world if he merely flicked his pinky finger in their direction, would want a chubby, drab woman with a pathetic little craft business. Especially when he could come home to her! Adele put the crystal glass of brandy down as she looked at herself in the mirror over the dining room bureau. Carefully, she cupped her breasts, turned to the side and compared them to her tiny waist. Yes, she was still stunning, she told herself.

So where the hell was Astir?! And why wasn’t he here with her? Any other man would be drooling at her feet

by this point! And yes, she could have any man she wanted as well! So why wasn't the man she wanted here? With her?! Why wasn't he buying her massive jewels and paying off her credit card bills? Adele had perfected the "silly little woman" routine that always got her lovers to pay off her bills, even though she was a perfectly good businesswoman. Granted, she tended to spend too much on her clothing and accessories. But her appearance was part of her image. And it was part of their image as well. Men loved having her on their arms! She made them look good.

So why the hell wasn't she on Astir's arm right this very second? Why wasn't he gently tugging her along to his room to make love to her?!

Not that she liked sex. Sex was a tool. She used it to manipulate the men she'd chosen. She knew all of the newest tricks and the sounds one should make during sexual exchanges. Adele was an expert at making a man think she was climaxing over and over again, when in reality, she never did.

Tapping a manicured nail on the table, she tossed the excellent brandy back, her temper increasing with every passing second.

Astir was with *that woman!* Accepting that fact, Adele glanced at her reflection in the mirror one more time. This situation was absolutely intolerable! Adele didn't have time to wait anymore. She needed to reel Astir in. He was the biggest catch she'd ever fished for, and Adele didn't like to lose!

So...Astir seemed to be spending too much time with that stupid bitch, that only meant that it was time to take the other woman out of the competition.

Walking through the newly decorated rooms, she didn't see the elegant beauty of her decorating efforts. She was an excellent decorator and everything in Astir's new country home was at the height of fashion for the moment. She was well aware that styles changed and she'd have to re-do the décor in about a year or two. But Astir was one of the

wealthiest men in the world. He could afford her. Especially since she planned on being his wife!

She needed a plan. Adele moved from one room to the next, contemplating her options. Being in the design field, she'd come to know many people from several different worlds, people with varied expertise. She had resources and knew things. Being in a person's home meant that she knew their dirty little secrets, and over the years she'd used that knowledge to her benefit. Plus, she'd carefully cultivated friends in both low and high places.

Perhaps it was time to get in touch with some of her more unsavory acquaintances.

Yes, the chubby bitch needed to be taken out. Whatever her name was, the woman had to be dealt with. Adele didn't have the time or the patience to wait for Astir's interest to wane. Nope, credit card bills were coming due.

"Your Highness," the man said, bowing as he stepped into the conference room. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

Astir stared at the odd fellow, leaning back in his chair. The awkward man pushed his glasses higher onto his nose as he clumsily dumped an armload of papers onto the table. Astir's eyebrow lifted a fraction, but he didn't comment. The man might be a klutz, but Astir had been told that the fellow was a brilliant scientist. A volcanologist. Why the hell had he been urged to listen to a guy who studies volcanos? There were no volcanos in Silar.

But his assistant had insisted that the man had some important information, so here he was in the conference room of his US headquarters. That was another issue. Why the hell was he here in Arlington, Virginia instead of at his home in Middleburg?

Right. Adele. Mentally sighing, Astir made a note to fire Adele. She was actually living in his house now. The decorator had actually moved into his house! How the hell

had that happened? *'Unthaa alshayton!* The woman was the devil! She was also the reason he was here instead of at his house for meetings. He couldn't stand running into her again!

"I apologize, Your Highness," the man finally spoke. Once again, he adjusted his glasses on his nose and straightened up. "As I mentioned to your head geologist," the man pulled a piece of paper out of the stack and slid it across the table. "Five years ago, I created a new type of seismic monitoring device that I installed all over the world. We're trying to detect various vibrations and..."

"You installed these new devices in Silar?" Astir interrupted, his eyes narrowing on the scientist.

The man's nervousness increased and he nodded. "Yes. But only with permission from your Agency for Geologic Integrity, Your Highness."

Astir relaxed with that news and once again leaned back in the leather chair. "Proceed," he said with a nod, not bothering to look down at the chart. It was a bunch of squiggly lines without any data.

The man rubbed his hands together and bobbed his head up and down several times before he finally got his thoughts back in the right direction. "Yes. Uh...right." The man sighed and looked down again. "Right." Another adjustment of his glasses and then he took in a deep breath. "I apologize for my nervousness, Your Highness. I've never addressed anyone so high up in the government. However, this really is an odd occurrence."

Astir wasn't sure if he wanted to chuckle at the man's obvious discomfort or get up and walk out of the conference room. He had more important issues to deal with.

The man took another deep breath, then looked down at his notes. "Well, here's the thing...my devices have detected small, but obvious shifts in the ground, tremors actually, near this small town." He opened up a map that covered most of Silar. "This is strange because we hadn't detected anything prior to two weeks ago. The tremors are

almost rhythmic, and yet, there doesn't seem to be any reason for the tremors.”

Startled with this news, Astir leaned forward, picking up the chart as he examined the line. With context, the line now made sense. “Are you saying that there is a fault line developing in Silar?” If that were the case, his mind started making a list of preemptive tasks that would need to be put in place to protect his people.

“No!” the scientist assured him. “Tremors in the earth's fault lines would be more sporadic.” He pointed to the chart. “This doesn't make any sense. Your head geologist asked me to brief you. He's sent investigators to the area, but they have merely disappeared. The local law enforcement in that area have assured the agency head that the men arrived, looked around and drove away.”

Astir's eyes sharpened. “But you think something is going on in this area.”

The scientist nodded. “Yes, Your Highness. Although I can't explain what that ‘something’ might be. It's very mysterious.”

Astir nodded his head and stood up. “Thank you for this. I'll investigate this issue immediately. Please continue to monitor the area with your devices and let me know if you get any additional information.”

With that command issued, Astir walked out of the conference room, his mind trying to make sense of what he'd just heard. Unfortunately, he had several more meetings that day, much more pressing than mysterious tremors.

Chapter 5

“What are you doing tonight?”

Rachel read the text message and smiled, a warmth spreading through her body. Despite her promise to focus on work this morning, she picked up her cell phone and responded to Astir’s message. *“Hopefully making you dinner!”*

She set her phone down again, turning to her computer to finish editing the video she’d recorded this morning. It was dessert day and there was a pan of brownies on the counter. They were not just ordinary brownies though. Nope, these were marshmallow brownies with peanut butter swirl! They were cooling at the moment, but she’d warm them up again before serving them to Astir for dessert.

Of course, she wouldn’t mind if he had *her* for dessert tonight! Smiling, she clicked on the editing buttons in order to spruce up her latest video, splicing and dicing, adding music to the background, deleting a couple of scenes and softening the lighting with the handy-dandy editing tools. A half hour later, she loaded up the video!

“Done!” she sighed with happiness. After that, she answered e-mails, smiled when she received a message from a new company asking to advertise with her videos, replied to several viewer questions, then turned off her computer so that she could work on the craft idea for tomorrow’s video. She was going to paint bird houses. But these bird houses needed to be different somehow. Sitting down at her craft table, she contemplated several options until she heard that special ding, letting her know that she had another message.

“Will I get a brownie for dessert?” Astir asked.

Rachel’s mouth fell open and she glanced over her shoulder at the computer. *“You’ve already seen the video?”* Her fingers trembled as she typed out the question.

“Absolutely!” came his almost immediate response.

Delighted, Rachel typed back her reply. *“I’ll make sure that you have two brownies then!”*

“I’ll be there by six,” was his reply.

There was a new spring to her step as she picked up various craft pieces, trying them onto the bird house in an effort to make the project more unique, interesting and easy to accomplish by her viewers. By four thirty that afternoon, she put aside the oddly elaborate bird house and rushed to the shower. Time to get ready to see Astir!

Astir stepped out of the SUV and stopped on the stone pathway leading up to Rachel's house, his senses on high alert. Something was wrong.

"Your Highness?" one of the guards closest to him prompted.

Astir looked down at the bouquet of roses in his hands, wondering if his senses were warning him of something other than danger. This was Rachel, after all. Everything felt different when he was around her. He felt lighter, more powerful, and the world had possibilities instead of the normal crushing routines of meetings and decisions that everyone relied upon him to make.

"Just a moment," he replied to his guards, lifting his eyes to look around. Unfortunately, there was nothing but thick, impenetrable darkness. The chrysanthemums beside her doorway were shining in the soft light of the moon while the rest of Rachel's oddly delightful yard was hidden in darkness. The sun had only set about a half hour before so the world hadn't settled into the stillness of late night. The day creatures had all retreated to their nests and burrows while the night creatures were still waking up, preparing to forage for their next meal. It was a strange kind of moment. Not a silence exactly. And definitely not a stillness. There was still an energy pulsing through the air. But definitely...a vibration.

Astir mentally shook himself. There was no danger. Not here. Not in Rachel's small corner of the world. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if the forest creatures popped out to sing and clean for her, like in the old style movies!

Perhaps that was what he was feeling or sensing. It was merely the positive energy that seemed to surround this house. There was an almost magical feel to Rachel's world. Intellectually, Astir knew that what he was feeling with Rachel was merely the dopamine effect of a new relationship. But he'd never felt this eagerness, this overwhelming need to be with a woman until Rachel. All of the women he'd been with in the past were forgotten. Nothing he'd felt with them

compared to the sensations that washed over him when he was with Rachel. Or on his way to see Rachel. Or when he was leaving Rachel's proximity.

"Sire?" another guard prompted, moving closer to Astir. Looking around, Astir almost chuckled at the tense awareness of his guards. Everyone was on high alert, and it was all his fault. This sensation was merely his anticipation at seeing Rachel. After last night, he intended to keep her in bed for the next several hours. Sexual anticipation was humming through his body. That's all. This feeling of danger was... ridiculous. No one knew about Rachel. No one knew where he was except for the household staff at the new house. And who would they tell? This sleepy little Virginia town wasn't a hotbed of intrigue.

"It's nothing," he finally replied.

Still, his eyes moved to the dark corners of her yard, into the dense line of trees as if he could somehow see into the thick darkness. There was no movement. No sounds. There was nothing to indicate a danger.

And yet...he could feel it. Astir could feel that something was wrong. With every step he took along Rachel's stone pathway, he could feel the danger increasing.

He saw several of his guards shift positions and he moved with them, changing directions, trying to not be predictable.

He was just about to lift his hand to press the button for the doorbell when he felt it. Call it instinct, or perhaps he and all of his guards heard something, but before his finger could reach the doorbell, he ducked. A split second later, his body was crushed to the ground.

Astir grunted as he opened his eyes, trying to determine what the hell was going on. He looked up to find that two of his guards had tackled him to the ground.

"Man down!" he heard one of his guards shout out. "Shots fired!" came next. Seconds later, Astir stood up,

looking around. All of his guards were on high alert, forming a tight perimeter around him.

“Get him to the car!” his lead guard bellowed.

Astir looked down to see that one of his guards was still on the ground. Bending, he grabbed the man’s hand and, with a flip of his body, pulled the man onto his shoulder. Moments later, the whole cluster around him hustled to the SUV. Astir grunted as he stepped into the back of the SUV with the man still over his shoulder. Before the door had even closed, the driver was moving off, gravel shooting out from the tires as the entourage sped away.

“Get to a hospital!” Astir barked, shifting the man’s clothing to see if there was a wound.

“No!” the wounded guard snapped, coughing as he shifted. “I’m fine. Just bruised. The bullet hit my body armor.”

Astir breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, it was his guards’ job to protect him. But he didn’t want anyone to die during that effort!

“Good job!” Astir said, patting the man’s shoulder. Then he looked around, realizing something. “Rachel!” he snapped. “Rachel is in danger!”

“No, Your Highness,” his lead guard replied. “As you ordered, we have several guards protecting her but they have stayed hidden. She is still safe, Sire.”

Astir relaxed slightly, then rubbed his face as the impact of what had just happened hit him. “I put her in danger,” he whispered, sitting back against the leather seat of the racing SUV. “It’s because of me that she was almost shot today!”

The guards around him didn’t respond because they all knew the truth. He was always a target and they all knew it. It was because of this reality that they were employed, so it was pointless to deny that anyone around him would also be in danger.

“Make sure she is safe!” he ordered. “I want confirmation that she’s okay!”

Immediately, one of the guards spoke into his microphone. Seconds later, he turned, nodding his head. “She’s fine, Your Highness,” he assured her.

“That’s good,” Astir sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. A moment later, he froze, remembering his approach to her doorway earlier tonight. “The flowers!”

“Your Highness?” someone asked.

Astir leaned his head back against the headrest, closing his eyes in frustration. “The flowers. I’d brought her flowers tonight.”

Once again, the guard spoke into his microphone. Again, he turned to relay the information. “The flowers were trampled, Your Highness. I’ll arrange for someone to bring her a new bouquet of roses.”

Astir didn’t bother to acknowledge that offer since it wouldn’t matter. The roses were trampled and...damn it, he couldn’t see Rachel! Not yet. Not until he figured out who was trying to kill him!

Rachel heard something outside her door and quickly turned down the heat on the stove. She was rushing over to the doorway, excited to see Astir again tonight and hoping that...she blushed as she remembered the previous night’s activities. Yes, she was definitely hoping for a repeat of those events!

“Woah!” she whispered, looking down at herself. Stopping, Rachel quickly untied her apron. It was incredibly practical but not particularly pretty. However, Rachel didn’t want to be “practical” around Astir. She wanted to be pretty and sexy and daring and all of those wonderful attributes that she’d always admired in other women but hadn’t ever considered herself to be. And yet, she felt beautiful whenever Astir was nearby. He looked at her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. Hence, the apron had to go!

Tossing the ugly apron into the hall closet, she hurried over to the door. Pausing, she listened as she smoothed a hand over her hair and glanced at the mirror off to the side to make sure that her lipstick looked good.

Perfect, she told herself, smoothing her hands down over her too-full hips. “Stop it!” she told herself when she realized the negative thought fly through her mind. “Astir loved my hips yesterday! He’s going to love them today!”

She moved back to the doorway, but she hesitated with her hand on the doorknob. Unfortunately, the outdoor sounds had stopped. “Did I just imagine hearing him?” she said out loud.

There was no answer. Still, she pulled the door open and...!

“What in the world?” she gasped, seeing the trampled chrysanthemums on both sides of her stone pathway. “Why?” she whispered, looking around to see if the culprit would show themselves. “Why would someone stomp on my flowers?”

Sadly, Rachel looked at the battered blooms, stepping out into the chilly night air. That’s when her eyes caught on something else. Bending down, she lifted what had previously been a beautiful bouquet of red roses! They were no longer beautiful, she thought as she lifted the bouquet into her arms. The blooms had also been crushed and were now limp and heavy with dirt and leaves.

Looking around, Rachel tried to see into the darkness, trying to find answers. But there was nothing. Actually, the stillness around her was almost eerie and she quickly backed into her house, closing the door with the crushed roses still in her hand.

“Creepy!” she whispered and walked back into her kitchen, tossing the damaged blooms into the trash can. She stirred the béchamel sauce she’d been making before she’d heard sounds outside, trying to shake off the sensation that something was seriously wrong in the world.

A half hour later, Rachel was worried. “Where is he?” she demanded, looking at her phone. Unfortunately, there was still no response to Rachel’s previous three text messages. Sending a fourth would be weird and stalkerish, so she tossed her phone onto the sofa and resumed her pacing.

At that moment, a text came in and she hurried to her phone, picking it up to read the message. “*An emergency came up. I’m sorry, have to cancel plans tonight. Will contact you soon!*”

Rachel breathed a sigh of relief. “Just an emergency,” she thought. “He has a lot of business issues to deal with.” She considered her next words, wondering how to respond without sounding desperate. “*Hope you are okay,*” she finally decided was the right tone. Not too needy, which was good.

She’d abandoned the dinner she’d cooked so eagerly earlier this evening and was now staring unseeingly at the television, fighting back tears. “I’m not going to cry,” she vowed, pressing a button on the remote to turn up the volume. “I won’t cry!”

Around midnight, she turned off the television, padded barefoot into her bedroom and curled up underneath the covers, not bothering to even change her clothes or wash off her makeup. It didn’t matter anyway. Astir wasn’t here, so she didn’t need to try and be beautiful for him.

That’s when the tears started. Was this the end? Was it over between them? Rachel didn’t know. Astir was a different kind of man than anyone she’d ever met in her life. And she ached at the idea of not being able to see him tonight.

Chapter 6

“What have you learned?” Astir demanded harshly, furiously walking through the entry of the palace towards his office.

“There is some...” his head of security started to say, but he was interrupted by two women running down the hallway towards him.

“What happened?” Ayla, his youngest sister demanded as she threw herself against his chest with a thud, her slender arms wrapping around him.

“Nothing happened,” he lied, holding her steady as he looked over Ayla’s head at Calista. Eighteen months older than Ayla, Calista was more reserved, but the concern in her eyes was there and he felt a pang of regret for his siblings’ worry. It was going to be difficult for them over the next few weeks while the security team searched for the assassin.

“You were shot at!” Ayla argued, lifting dark, tear-filled eyes to look into Astir’s similar gaze. “We heard that someone tried to kill you!” She backed up a step, wiping the tears from her eyes. “One of your guards took a bullet for you. We’ve already visited the man’s family to reassure them that he is unharmed other than a few bruises.” Her eyes changed from worried to accusatory. “Don’t try and hide the problem from us, Astir. If anyone is going to kill you, it’s going to be me!”

Astir rolled his eyes and resumed walking towards his office, but he put an arm around Ayla’s shoulders, then took Calista under his other arm as well. “I’m fine,” he assured both of his sisters. “Tell me what’s been happening here.”

Calista’s soft, calming touch stopped him and the three of them formed a loose triangle as she looked up into his face.

“You’re not fine,” she argued gently, her soft eyes looking into his. “Something happened.” Her dark eyes searched his features. A moment later, she shook her head

again. “Something more than the shooting.” She put a hand on his arm. “You’re in pain.”

While Ayla was energetic and enthusiastic about everything in life, Astir was always startled by Calista’s quiet ability to see into another person’s soul. She also had a tender way of getting people to do what she wanted. It was almost as if the universe needed to protect her gentleness, preserve it somehow, and so everyone did her bidding.

In this instance, however, his need to see Rachel was too strong, too raw. He couldn’t talk about her now.

He touched Calista’s shoulder and shook his head. “I’m fine,” he lied, then pulled away from the two ladies and headed towards his office. Normally, he would have done anything to ease the worry from his sisters’ lives. They were held to an almost impossible standard, being in the public eye and unable to do any real work. Their weight, makeup, hair and dress styles were critiqued after every public appearance. Their facial expressions were analyzed, and anytime they looked or spoke with a male, speculation was rampant.

Being single and royal was a pain in the ass, he knew. He’d do anything to help make their lives easier.

But right now, Astir didn’t have the mental capacity to help his sisters. He could barely help himself because he missed Rachel too much at the moment. So when he walked into his office, the first thing he did was open up his laptop and check the latest videos from Rachel.

“Nothing?” he grumbled, shocked because Rachel prided herself on uploading videos on a regular basis so that her followers could count on whatever new advice she might convey.

“Picking up his phone, he dialed the security office. As soon as they answered, he turned to look out at the garden in the courtyard as he asked, “What’s going on with Rachel? Is she safe? Is she hurt?”

“Your Highness, she’s safe and unharmed. My men have surrounded her house and gardens.”

And yet, Rachel hadn't posted any videos in the last twenty-four hours! "Is she eating anything? She hasn't posted a video today. What's she doing?"

There was a pause and Astir pictured them glancing in through her windows. He gritted his teeth at the invasion of her privacy, but that issue was overridden by his need to protect her, to ensure that she was safe.

"She's sitting on the sofa eating something, Your Highness."

Astir ran a hand over his face as frustration built. "She's not well," he ground out.

"Your Highness, she's fine. She's..."

"If she's eating something on the white couch, she's not fine!" he roared, then brought his temper back under control. "I apologize," he growled on a sigh. "That damn sofa is white. She doesn't sit on it because it's part of her video backdrops. It's more of a movie set than her home."

Another silence as the guard absorbed that news. "Your Highness, she appears to be eating some brownies. We can go in and question her, get a closer look to determine her mental state, but she might not answer the door."

Brownies? Mentally, he thought back to the video of her making the brownies that she'd posted yesterday. "Why do you say that? What's wrong?"

"She hasn't come out to get her mail, nor has she gone around to water her plants as she usually does each morning."

He rubbed a hand over his face, frustration making the acid burn in his gut. "Is someone taking care of that for her?"

"Yes, Your Highness. We've stepped in at night or done the small chores early in the morning before she wakes up."

"Groceries. She needs food. Have someone head to the grocery store and deliver the food to her. I don't want her having to worry about anything."

“Yes, Your Highness,” the guard replied back, his tone assuring Astir that she’d be taken care of.

Astir picked up his phone to send her a text message, but the call he’d been waiting for came through at that moment. Two hours later, the news wasn’t good and he ended the call. He then bellowed to his assistant.

Yosef stepped into the room almost instantly. “Yes, Your Highness? How can I help you?”

“The house in Middleburg, Virginia,” he started out.

Yosef’s pen poised over his notebook. “Yes? The one that was just renovated?”

“Yes. Have the property ownership transferred to Rachel. Make sure that the taxes are paid on the property every year. And I want a maintenance person to come by once a month to ensure that everything is taken care off. Make sure that the landscaping company is paid as well. And I want a cleaning crew coming through to help with the interior.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the man nodded, writing frantically. “I’ll make sure that this is all taken care of.”

“Good. And make sure that the security team gives me daily updates on the...” he hesitated, looking at Yosef. Astir didn’t finish that statement, understanding that his staff was worried.

He sighed, rubbing his face with frustration. It was midnight back in Virginia. He couldn’t send her a message now because the ping would wake her up. Dammit, he needed to see her! He needed to be with her! But being with her put her in danger, so he’d eliminate the danger, then go back and...and what?

He looked at his assistant. “I just need to know that Rachel is protected,” he finished, his tone softer as he thought about Rachel sitting on her pristine sofa eating brownies. “And I need to know that no harm comes to her.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Yosef replied, scrambling to take notes.

Astir knew that the man was startled by the gesture, but he didn't care. Astir needed to know that Rachel would be taken care of in ways that only he could provide.

Jeffrey tossed the clipboard across the room of the abandoned house that they were using for their office and sleeping quarters, then fisted his hands on his hips as he took in slow, deep breaths. The effort still didn't calm his fury.

A moment later, the door behind him opened and closed, but Jeffrey didn't bother to turn around as he growled, "Why the hell is he back in Silar?"

Scott Roland shifted on his feet, not sure what the hell was going on. "I have no idea," he finally replied. "I have an informant in Virginia and she assured me that he would be well occupied for the next few weeks."

Jeffrey turned, glaring at the man. "Well, I don't think that your informant is very accurate! Perhaps you should find an alternate way of gaining information. Perhaps *more accurate* information!"

Ned and Petro stepped into the house, remaining silent as they took in the temperature of the two other occupants.

Jeffrey wanted to punch the other two men, but knew that Ned, the former gang member, and Petro, the former KGB agent, would probably slice him up and feed him to the animals. They wouldn't even break a sweat! Jeffrey hadn't ever met two more heinous men, and he prayed that he never would.

Taking another deep breath, he turned around, facing the three men. "Okay, we have a problem." He glared at Scott. "Our informant didn't give us accurate information on the movements of the esteemed leader of this overheated desert!" He ground his teeth for a moment, noticing that both Ned and Petro glanced speculatively over at Scott. Not the right time for vengeance, he told himself. He'd punish Scott later for this annoying error. "So we need to speed up the digging timeline."

“The supports aren’t...” Ned started to say.

Jeffrey lifted a hand, impatiently waving that issue out of the way. “I’ve calculated the risk. If we shift the digging and go up three more feet, we can increase the underground supports and still get to the efiesium deposits, but we can get there faster. Digging higher will decrease digging time by sixteen point three percent.”

Petro crossed his arms over his chest, causing those revolting muscles to bulge against the material of his t-shirt. “You’re not getting me down in that pit with so few supports,” he announced. Ned nodded his head as well, leaning a shoulder against the wall.

Jeffrey rolled his eyes. “I don’t need either of you down in the mines,” he snapped. “I need you to have a few more conversations with the local law enforcement officers. We’ve had two investigators show up from the capital. I know you both took care of the previous investigators,” he closed his eyes, picturing a beach with white sand and a beautiful woman in a skimpy bikini bringing him a cold beer, then he sighed, opening his eyes as he continued. “Find out why new investigators came by. We’re missing something. If the local police didn’t alert the Silar mining department that something is going on down here, then someone else did. I need to know who is tattling on us and I need to know fast!”

Petro and Ned both glanced at each other, then they nodded, their cold eyes sending shivers through Jeffrey’s body. Thankfully, they’d already turned and headed out of the house to do his bidding so they didn’t see his reaction. Strength, he reminded himself. He had to portray strength in order to get this damn job finished and meet that asshole’s delivery schedule.

Just keep picturing all of that lovely money and the beach, Jeffrey told himself as he turned and looked at his desk where a map was laid out. He’d figured out where the efiesium deposit was located. Unfortunately, the largest portion of that damn mineral was smack dab underneath the heart of the village.

Sighing, he banished the guilt over potential problems with mining underneath a town. The residents wouldn't even know they were mining in the area for ten or more years. By that time, he'd be long gone.

Chapter 7

“I’m sorry, but...I don’t understand.” Rachel stared at the lawyer sitting across the table, baffled by what he was telling her. The mysterious meeting request had been emailed to her last week. Even with the explanation for the meeting, the man’s words still didn’t make any sense.

“The Manor House has been gifted to you,” he repeated patiently, shifting a few papers needlessly on his desk.

Rachel stared at him, then looked around. The office was expensively decorated and in the heart of Arlington, Virginia. It had taken her over an hour to drive here from her home in Middleburg and she wasn’t in the mood to be punked. “Is this a joke? Are there hidden cameras somewhere?”

The man, a lawyer for one of the largest firms in Washington, D.C. had explained on the phone yesterday that he just needed her to come in to sign some papers but wouldn’t give her any more information. At the time, Rachel had been so sick, she would have agreed to anything in order to get off the phone. But now...now all she wanted to do was drive home and get back to work. This meeting was a joke and a waste of her time!

“I guarantee that this isn’t a joke, Ms. Dubois. My client, who wishes to remain anonymous, has gifted the house to you.”

Shifting in her chair, she stared dubiously at the pompous lawyer. “What’s the catch?” she asked, rubbing a hand over her stomach as small twinges of nausea started to reappear.

“There’s no catch, Ms. Dubois. The house is yours, free and clear.”

She stared at the man, then looked down at the documents in front of her. “There has to be a catch. People

don't just gift a house to a stranger.”

The man hesitated for a moment, then forced his lips into a pinched smile. “It is my understanding that the person in question is someone of your acquaintance. But that’s all I can say.”

Rachel leaned back, ignoring the documents that the man wanted her to sign. Something didn’t make sense. Why was the image of Astir flashing through her mind again? The first few weeks after that night when he hadn’t shown up at her house, he’d texted her something about an emergency, that the situation would be resolved soon, but he wouldn’t give her any details. So Rachel had just stopped asking.

She’d gotten over him! She’d forced herself to move on with her life! If she wasn’t sleeping very well and felt sick whenever she thought about him, well, that was just one more reason why she should keep on moving forward. She just had to ignore all of the memories that popped into her mind.

“I have things to do,” she told him and stood up, grabbing her purse. “Thank you for the coffee,” she said, her eyes barely glancing at the untouched cup of coffee that some assistant had put beside her at the beginning of this meeting. “Good day.”

Rachel continued to walk out of the room, waving briefly to the man before exiting as fast as her legs would carry her. She didn’t like this place. It was too posh, too...out of her league! Besides, someone just “gifting” her a house was weird. People don’t do that! At least, none of the people she knew. Her friends might buy each other a cup of coffee, but never a freaking house!

Besides, she knew that house! It was massive! And some fancy interior designer had done a big layout in one of the magazines showing the latest décor. “Adele” something or other had been tall and beautiful, exactly the kind of woman who belonged in a house that size. The glossy pictures of the woman smiling into the camera with dark, sultry eyes and professionally done makeup, designer clothes and a confident smile had really pissed Rachel off!

That was the kind of woman who belonged in that huge house with the tacky, outrageous décor. The light hanging over the dining room table was so out of place and the velvet sofas...? Who liked velvet sofas? Rich people, she thought. People who had professional cleaners. People who didn't eat brownies, she thought, running a hand over her round hips.

No, Rachel belonged in her little cottage with her bohemian style backyard and English garden front yard. She loved her little house. It was completely chaotic, but it was hers. All hers!

Granted, the bank was the one that really owned the house, but the bankers generously allowed Rachel to live in the house as long as she paid the mortgage every month.

She laughed at the reality that she was renting her house from the bank who held the mortgage. Yes, maybe she could do something with that for her next video. Although... seriously, what was she thinking? A whole video about mortgage payments? Not really her niche!

Rachel sighed as she slid into her car and...stopped. A wave of dizziness hit her and she grabbed the steering wheel. "Woah!" she whispered as a chill surrounded her. She couldn't turn her head to pull the car door closed, too afraid that any movement might make the dizziness worse.

"This is getting worse," she said to the empty car, keeping her eyes wide open as she looked around, trying to maintain her focus on...the street sign, the parking lot, the blinking lights of...whatever that was off to the right.

When the dizziness subsided, she reached out and closed the door, a wave of sadness hitting her. Astir. Rachel knew that she kept him out of her thoughts most of the time, keeping him out of her mind and out of her heart. Despite her best efforts, there were still moments when she was vulnerable and her mind let the memories slip back through.

Sighing, she pressed the start button on her car, listening to the comforting sound of the engine. "You're going

to be fine,” she said out loud. Sometimes the words were all that she needed in order to feel better. More in control.

An hour later, she pulled into the small space beside her house and wearily walked inside, feeling as if her whole body was weighed down by something heavy. She couldn't seem to shake this fatigue! Every afternoon, all she wanted to do was curl up on her bed and sleep for an hour. Or more!

“No time for naps!” she mumbled to herself, carefully hanging her purse in the closet. She flipped her shoes off and discovered her slippers hiding under the sofa where they'd ended up when she'd hurried out of her house several hours ago. Instead of heading to her bedroom where her nice, comfy bed could give her a few hours of happiness, she walked over to her computer. She had three videos to edit this afternoon and she didn't have time for...!

The dizziness was worse this time around and, unfortunately, she couldn't seem to stop herself from falling. The ground just sort of came up faster than she could stop it!

Chapter 8

“The economic gains from the project won’t keep up with...,” Astir stopped mid-sentence when Yosef stepped into the room, his features bland, but Astir noticed the tension surrounding his mouth. Everyone sitting around the table paused. They watched as Yosef came around to Astir, handing him a note, then stepping back.

Astir opened the note and read the message twice before its meaning clicked. When it did, he stood up so abruptly that the chair toppled over. Astir didn’t bother to offer any explanations as he walked out of the room, his long, powerful legs eating up the distance so fast that Yosef was literally running to keep up with him.

“I want to be in the air in thirty minutes. Tell my guards that...”

“Your pilot is standing by, Your Highness. The team awaits you outside and police have already cleared the roads all the way to the airport. You can be at the airport in less than five minutes and in the air moments later.”

Astir grunted, not bothering to go to his quarters to pack a bag. He didn’t give a damn about clothes or toiletries. Rachel was in the hospital after falling and hitting her head on the floor. She was in pain and he needed to get there, damn the potential consequences! The danger...it would simply have to wait. He’d trust his guards to keep him, and Rachel, safe until he could get her back her to the palace.

Even as he thought it, he wondered why he hadn’t brought her back here already! Why hadn’t he thought of that? Because Rachel was independent. She wouldn’t like being told what to do.

Well, she’d just have to get used to it because Astir vowed to protect her despite her silly independence.

Calista stared as her older brother ran down the hallway, panic on his normally inscrutable features. “What’s going on?” she asked of her assistant.

The woman’s eyes were just as wide as she shook her head. “I have no idea, Your Highness.”

Calista folded her hands in front of her, trying to portray a calm exterior. Guards were rushing about and the door to the main conference room was gaping open, the occupants slowly standing up to try and discover what was going on.

Calista smiled, lifted her chin and walked into the room, closing the doors behind her.

“I apologize for the interruption, gentlemen,” she said and looked around, glancing at each individual slowly, as if she had all the time in the world and there wasn’t a crazy world leader running through the hallways. “My brother has been called away on a personal issue. If you would like to continue, perhaps I can offer insight into the challenges and provide guidance?”

The men all shuffled, looking around as if she’d just announced that she could spread her wings and fly each of them to the moon. Several of them muttered and whispered to each other, but every one of them had checked out of the meeting since Astir wasn’t here to guide the proceedings.

Mentally, Callista sighed, irritated with these old men who didn’t consider a woman to be anything more than a baby machine and a pretty bauble to make them appear more macho.

The man to Calista’s left patted her hand, his tone condescending as he explained, “These are complicated decisions, dear. We’ll just wait until your brother has more time so that he can adequately contemplate the options.”

With that, all the men stood up, murmuring to each other as they gathered their papers, turning to head out through the opposite end of the conference room.

Calista stood as well, smiling calmly at each man as they greeted her and laughed at their queries as to what happened. Anytime one of them asked, she simply laughed softly and waved their concerns aside, saying, “Everything is under control,” then patted their hand, mirroring their condescension. Unfortunately, they were all too self-important to realize what she was doing.

When all of the men had finally left the conference room, Calista turned and walked out of the room through the doors she’d entered, looking around for her assistant. Ayla stepped forward, smiling at Calista’s relieved expression. “Everything go okay in there?”

Calista sighed, shaking her head. “They wouldn’t continue the meeting with a woman in my brother’s place, but I was able to calm their anxiety. I think,” she added, looking around. “Has our brother left the palace?”

Ayla nodded. “Yes. I got word that his plane took off a few minutes ago.”

Calista turned, heading towards her own office. “Any word on what happened?”

“Something about a woman in Virginia. That’s all I’ve gotten so far.”

Calista smiled, excitement briefly lighting up her eyes. “Oh, that would be great! Maybe it’s the same woman he met during his last visit!”

Ayla shrugged. “Anything is possible. I just hope that he doesn’t come back from this trip as angry and wounded as the last time.”

Calista silently agreed, trying to hide her worry as she presented a calm demeanor to the other occupants of the palace.

Chapter 9

Rachel opened her eyes and...everything was white. White ceiling, white sheets and...she hissed sharply when she moved her head. It felt as if a dull knife was slicing through her skull!

“Ow!” she grumbled, lifting her hand and...looked at the IV coming out of her arm. “What...?”

“You fell,” a deep, masculine voice explained. A familiar voice. The voice that she’d worked so hard over the past two and a half months to forget.

“Astir?” she whispered, turning her head slowly to find out if he was really there or if her mind was playing tricks on her. Sure enough, as soon as she looked to the right, he was there, moving towards her and looking just as handsome, exotic, and virile as she remembered. And more powerful! Goodness, there was such an aura of strength and confidence surrounding him as he walked towards her.

“I’m here,” he said, taking her hand.

For a brief moment, Rachel savored the touch, wishing that he’d kiss her and touch her and...and explain why she was in a hospital bed!

But then she remembered that Astir had only wanted her for a short period of time. He’d been so sweet and gentle, laughing with her and talking during their time together. Apparently, she’d been a challenge and not even much of that to him! Had she held out longer than the other women from his past? Had they held out for three weeks? Six weeks before falling into bed with him? Her jealousy at that thought was two-fold. First, they’d had more time with Astir, more time to bask in his attention, to get to know him and love him and enjoy the small intimacies with him. But she was also jealous that the other women had been in his bed, had experienced the same bliss that she’d experienced.

Closing her eyes, she pulled her hand away.

“You can go now,” she told him, not bothering to look at him. “I’m sure there’s an emergency somewhere within one of your businesses that you need to take care of.” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm and pain out of her voice.

There was a long silence after that, the tension broken only by the soft, beeping sound of some machine. Rachel pressed her eyes closed, trying desperately to hide the sudden rush of tears as well as the heartache that had thrummed just below the surface of her consciousness over the past several weeks. She’d pushed it down, ignored the pain of his disappearance. But now, with him standing beside her hospital bed, she couldn’t ignore it any longer. And that infuriated her!

“I’m not going anywhere,” he countered. “We’re going to...”

“Get out!” she snapped, opening her eyes to glare at him. When he didn’t move except for a slight lifting of one, dark eyebrow, her temper flared. “Get out of here! I don’t need you here, Astir.” She tried valiantly to hide her pain behind an angry façade, not wanting Astir to know how deeply he’d hurt her. “I was just an easy lay for you! You got what you wanted, then came up with a lame ‘emergency’ excuse to beat it out of town.” She took a slow, calming breath, then continued in a softer, but still angry, voice. “You got a few nights of crazy sex and you moved on. So we’re through. Challenge accomplished. Now get away from me!”

“Is that what you...?” he started to say, but the rest of what he might have said was interrupted when the doctor pushed through the door.

“Good morning, Ms. Dubois,” the doctor greeted, but she was looking down at Rachel’s chart, apparently oblivious to the tension throbbing throughout the hospital room. “You are one lucky woman!”

Rachel shifted on the bed, feeling...exposed and vulnerable. She suddenly realized that she didn’t have any clothes on other than the hospital gown. “I’m not really sure why I’m here,” Rachel commented, taking a moment to glare

intently at Astir. But the sudden movement of her eyes caused the dull throbbing in her head to spike so she forced her neck and eyes and every muscle in her body to relax. Slowly, the pain abated and she could hear what was being said.

“...but there was no harm done to the baby,” the doctor was saying to Astir.

“Baby?” he snapped, his head jerking towards the doctor. A fraction of a second later, his accusing gaze landed on Rachel and she cringed. Once again, the movement caused a sharp pain and she sighed, closing her eyes in an effort to relax.

“I’m not...” she stopped, her mind thinking back over the past few days. The dizziness. The fatigue! The nausea! “No!” she gasped.

Astir shifted, his arms crossing over his chest as he glared down at her. “You didn’t know?”

Rachel opened her eyes and stared at him, then over at the doctor who appeared uncomfortable. Slowly, the doctor’s surprise shifted to a warm smile and she nodded. “Yes, Ms. Dubois. Apparently, you are approximately ten weeks pregnant.” She smiled up at Astir, but his fury was almost palpable.

“Ten weeks?” he snarled. He leaned over her, bracing his fists on either side of her head. “We were together eight weeks ago, Rachel. Care to explain?”

The doctor cleared her throat. “Uh...sir, we count the weeks from the first day of a woman’s menstrual cycle. So we would say ten weeks, when the reality is that there are approximately two weeks where she wasn’t...actually...well, pregnant.” Her voice faded and the doctor backed up a step. Astir’s expression had morphed from furious to...triumphant! “I’m guessing that neither of you were aware of your wife’s pregnancy?”

“I’m not his wife!” Rachel replied, grasping onto the only words she could comprehend. Pregnant?

“Yet!” Astir interjected, then pulled back, his triumphant expression actually increasing. He also seemed to have increased in size in the past few moments, seeming to be larger and even more powerful than before.

Rachel glared right back at him, but when she understood that he had higher glaring capabilities, she turned to the doctor who was still standing at the end of her hospital bed, looking both curious and uncomfortable.

“Yes,” the doctor replied when Rachel lifted her eyebrows. “Right.” The doctor looked down at the chart. “It’s a good thing that you were found last night after you fell. Concussions can be a tricky thing. The nurses here took good care of you.” She flipped the chart closed. “I’m going to sign your release papers and get you out of here, as long as you promise that you won’t be alone for the next twenty-four hours.” She waited for Rachel to respond, but Rachel wasn’t sure what to do. Her friends worked during the daytime hours and couldn’t easily leave their jobs simply to come to her house and watch over her.

“I’ll be there for her,” Astir announced.

Huh? No way! Astir wasn’t a good option either!

Trying to hide her panic, she turned to the doctor. “I’ll be fine!” she countered, giving the doctor a firm nod, then turning her head to look up at Astir. “And no, you won’t be there for me,” she snapped, thinking of how he hadn’t shown up for dinner that night months ago. Hell, he hadn’t even taken the time to call and let her know that he wouldn’t make it! He’d merely texted her an “emergency” excuse.

She turned to look back at the doctor. “I have friends who can come and stay with me. Just let me know what they should be looking for as warning signs and I’ll be perfectly....”

“Give the list to me, Doctor,” he told the woman, whose head was turning back and forth between Rachel and Astir, almost as if she were watching a tennis game. “I will watch out for her along with my staff.”

Rachel pressed her lips together, not bothering to argue with his assertion. And what in the world did he mean by “my staff”? He had a staff? Staff besides weird men who hid in the trees whenever he came to her house for a visit?

Once again, her eyes moved over his suit, noting the expensive details and the crisp white dress shirt. Okay, so perhaps he was a bit wealthier than she’d thought initially. He kinda, sorta looked like a man who had “staff”.

She didn’t like that realization. It made him even more inaccessible. Which was a silly reaction since he obviously didn’t want to be “accessible” to her.

“I’ll just...” the doctor backed away, glancing nervously between the two of them. “Right!” and she turned, heading out of the hospital room hurriedly, leaving the two combatants to figure out who was going to take care of Rachel.

“You’re not taking care of me,” she said to Astir, then looked down at the IV in her arm. She started to reach for the needle, but she wasn’t angry enough to pull it out on her own. She’d seen actors on television and in the movies do that and it always seemed so...icky!

“How do I call one of the nurses?” she grumbled, looking around for that magic call button. Wasn’t there supposed to be a button? Something that would allow Rachel to call a nurse in an emergency?

“Why?”

She glared at him, ignoring the almost constant throbbing in her head now. The pain thudding against her skull was nothing compared to the pain in her chest. She had to get away from him, to get him out of her life forever.

He leaned over her, bracing one hand on the mattress over her head and the other on the metal bar next to her. “Rachel, I’m going to take care of you. I know that you’re...”

“Just get one of the nurses!” she burst out, stopping whatever he was going to say because she simply couldn’t handle his words right now! “I need to...I need to get out of

here!” Traitorous tears snuck over her lashes but she brushed them away, furious with herself for appearing weak.

“Rachel,” he soothed, moving closer and putting a hand over hers, needing to convince her to stop trying to pull the tape away that was holding the IV in place. “Rachel, stop! You’re pregnant and you must not do anything to harm the baby!”

Rachel’s whole body froze and she stared down at the tape, her eyes blurring as those stupid tears once again threatened her composure.

“Please, I need you to leave. I need to be alone.”

He didn’t leave. In fact, he moved closer, leaning over her bed as he looked into her eyes. “I can’t leave, Rachel.”

She closed her eyes as a pained sob broke through her barrier of control. “You did once,” she whispered, wanting to hurt him. She wanted to punch him or throttle him, wound him in the same way that she was wounded.

“Not because I wanted to,” he told her.

“Ah!” she replied, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “Well, that makes it all better. At least you didn’t *want* to leave! Emergencies have a way of getting in the way of one’s fun, right?”

“I know,” he sighed, putting a hand over hers again. But Rachel pulled her hand away, unable to endure his touch. “I was wrong. I should have phoned to explain. But Rachel, you must know that I didn’t want to leave you.”

She sniffed and stopped picking at the tape holding the IV to her arm, but she wouldn’t look at him now. “I don’t know anything Astir,” she countered. “The only thing that is very clear to me is that I don’t want you in my life. You need to leave.”

“I can’t leave, Rachel. We need to discuss the baby.”

Baby. Pregnant! Oh, dear lord, she was pregnant! The tears burst out of her with that reminder and she

shuddered as the reality came crashing down over her. She was pregnant? She could barely take care of herself! She'd finally reached a point in her career that she could put a little bit of money away each month for savings, but now all of her success was going to be wiped out. The expense of having a child, of taking care of and raising a child was going to...oh dear heaven! How was she going to do this?

Astir stood there, looking down at Rachel and wondering what the hell he was supposed to do. Was she crying because she was pregnant? He tamped down on his own excitement at the prospect of her carrying their child, needing to soothe her in some way. But how could he fix this? How could he soothe her worries when he didn't understand what they were?

"Rachel," he groaned, sitting down on the mattress next to her and he took her into his arms. She fought him for a moment, but he suspected that the effort caused pain to lash at her from the lump on the back of her head. He didn't care why, all he cared about was that she finally allowed him to comfort her. He wanted to pull her fully into his arms, to wrap his arms around her and give her a bit of his strength. But she was attached to too many tubes and wires, most likely at his insistence. He'd come into the hospital last night, acting like a roaring lion, demanding to speak with the doctors and nurses who had attended Rachel when she'd been brought in by his guards. He'd insisted that she be given an IV, just in case, and he'd stood by her bed, watching as the nurses came in every hour to wake her up and ask her questions.

And right now, he couldn't seem to pull away from her even though she abhorred his touch.

"I'm sorry, love!" he soothed, stroking her hair while avoiding the nasty lump on the other side of her head. "I'm so sorry that I wasn't there for you, that you've gone through all of this hell alone!" He kissed her forehead, her cheek, her ear and, when he couldn't resist any longer, he brushed his lips against her mouth, feeling her trembling response. He didn't kiss her more deeply, even though he wanted to wrap her

tighter in his arms, to feel her against his body and cradle her on his lap. He wanted to protect her and spoil her and show her how deeply sorry he was! He'd left her that night after some assassin had tried to kill him! He'd left her in order to protect her and now, she'd fallen and hurt herself because he'd been so stupid! He hadn't protected her adequately, but he'd do better in the future!

He kissed her again and again, light touches, but it was enough. For now, it was enough.

"Stop!" she whispered, but he could feel the trembling in her body.

Astir pulled back, but he didn't release her. Keeping his arms around her, he looked into her eyes. "You didn't know that you were pregnant?" he asked, trying to keep his voice as gentle as possible. Despite his soft tone, he was mentally going through all of the issues that a pregnancy created. The security risks alone would be huge. He needed to tell his security team so that they could arrange for additional protection. But even more than that, there would be monumental changes to their priorities. Rachel and the baby must be protected.

She pulled back with a gasp, glaring up at him. "You!"

"Me?" he teased, feeling generous now that he knew they would be married.

"You're the one that tried to give me that ridiculous house!"

He was stunned for a long moment, then he laughed softly, not wanting to make noises too loud for fear that it might hurt her head. "I don't believe I tried to give you the house, Rachel. The house is in your name. You are the legal owner."

"But...!" Her mouth opened and closed as her mind processed that news. "But...why?"

"Because I needed to know that you were protected, that you always had a place to live."

She bristled at that news. “I have a house!” she snapped, pushing at his arms.

Astir stood up even though he wanted to keep her in his arms. He wanted to continue kissing her, but...her head. And the baby. Damn, he had to tread lightly here now.

“I needed to know that you were okay, Rachel.”

Carefully, she folded the white sheet and tan, cotton blanket at a precise line. “So, giving me that house, that *enormous* house,” she emphasized, still glaring at him, “was similar to what you might have done for the other women you slept with.” It wasn’t a question, but her eyes searched his gaze, pleading with him to deny her charge. “You give each of your lovers a trinket and...and then you don’t feel guilty about leaving them anymore. Is that it?”

Since that was exactly what he’d done in the past, Astir couldn’t very well deny it. “I have given women small gifts at the end of our liaisons in the past, yes.”

He watched as her chin trembled slightly. “So giving me a house, a freaking house, Astir...” she paused, letting him know that he’d done something crazy, “was your way of paying me off.” Her lips trembled now. “I get it.”

Paying her off? What the hell was she talking about? “No, it wasn’t a payoff, Rachel. It was...”

What was it? What had been his intentions? “I’d always intended to come back to you, Rachel. We weren’t through.”

She snorted, shaking her head slowly. “Oh yes. We are so definitely through!”

He laughed, brushing a hand along her cheek. “Oh no,” Astir countered. “We’re definitely not through.”

Before Rachel had a chance to argue with him, he turned and walked out of the hospital room, needing to speak to her guards. For the first time in over eight weeks, Astir felt as if the world was right and good again. Damn, he felt great. A baby! He was going to be a father!!

Chapter 10

“I’m going home, Astir,” Rachel told him as she stared out the passenger side window of the limousine.

Astir only chuckled, patting her knee.

Rachel slapped at his hand, glaring over at him. “Don’t you dare!”

“Don’t I dare...what?” he asked, startled. He’d never been treated with such abject disdain before. And certainly no one, not even his nannies or his tutors, had ever smacked his hand. As the crown prince growing up, he’d always been treated with absolute respect. Even his younger sisters hadn’t ever been smacked!

It was a unique experience and, perhaps, he should be offended. Maybe he should explain who he was and how he should be treated. But at the moment, he was curious as to why she’d actually smacked his hand.

“Don’t you dare patronize me!” she growled.

It took all of his effort not to chuckle. But seriously, Rachel looked absolutely adorable at the moment. She was soft and cute and cuddly, even if all of her porcupine quills were vibrating with anger.

“I didn’t realize that I was coming across as patronizing,” he replied. The limousine was zipping down the sleepy streets of Middleburg, away from the hospital. They were heading to her house, the one he’d given to her, and he was interested to see her reaction to the décor. His designer had come highly recommended, but he was interested to see how Rachel liked it.

Of course, Astir wanted to bring her back to Silar. But when he’d mentioned flying her back to his home, she’d almost lost it. The frantic, almost panicked look in her eyes as she’d clutched the sweater he’d brought her to change into had stopped his insistence that he fly her back to his country. He

had compromised, telling her that he'd take her back to her house.

"Where are we going?" Rachel asked, sitting up straighter as she watched the limousine drive past the turn for her house. "You just missed the turn."

He shook his head, looking out the windshield. "No. We're not going to your old house," he told her. "We're going to your new house."

Rachel turned her head, looking straight at him. "Is that right?" she asked, then leaned back against the cushions of the seat.

Astir watched her carefully for a long moment, wondering what was going through her mind. She was planning something. He could see the wheels turning. Unfortunately, he didn't know her well enough to figure out what direction her plans might take. That meant he couldn't circumvent her plans.

Damn it. This was so messed up! He should have been here for the past two months, working with her, talking with her! He should have gotten to know her better before they'd...!

No, he couldn't regret the memories of their night together. Not for anything. He remembered the softness of her skin, the sweet sighs when he'd found a place on her body that turned her on. He remembered the way she'd touched him, the way her fingers slid over his skin, the tender touch of her lips against his chest and his arms. She hadn't ventured lower, but only because he'd stopped her that night.

Now he had something to look forward to. Yes, he thought as he relaxed back against the seat of the limousine, his drivers and guards on the lookout for danger, he was going to make love to Rachel again. And it would be soon, he thought with increasing anticipation. It would have to be soon because his body couldn't take much more of this denial. It had been hard enough when he'd been back in Silar, thinking about her, remembering everything about their night together but knowing that his presence in her life had put her in

danger. However, it was something completely different now that she was next to him, looking at him with those big, beautiful eyes of hers. And her body! Damn, her body was even more lush than he'd remembered! She was...a goddess!

The driver pulled up to the front door, parking on the circular drive. A split second after the driver turned off the engines, a small army of servants spilled out from the house.

"Where are we?" she asked again, blinking at the enormous manor house.

"This is your house, Rachel," he explained as he came around to the other side of the vehicle, standing next to her as she stared up at the elegant mansion. It was a graceful stone structure, three stories high with twelve windows on the top two floors and ten on the bottom. The double doors and stone portico took up the space where two windows might have been on the bottom floor.

Trying to see the house from her perspective, he wondered if she liked it. But Rachel's features didn't change in any way. She simply stood in front of the stone building, looking from one side to the other. Then she walked inside, ignoring the line of servants who were lining up, ready to greet their new mistress.

Astir nodded to the housekeeper, effectively dismissing her and the rest of the staff. They moved back inside, and he had the distinct impression that they were relieved for some odd reason.

Turning, Astir consulted with his lead security guard, asking about the arrangements that had been made. It was November, so the sun was warm despite the slight chill to the air as the servants pulled luggage out of the back of several SUVs.

Rachel had no idea what to do about all of the servants milling about. She'd never had servants, not even a maid who came in to clean her house. She wasn't sure how to greet them, what to say to any of them. So, she followed her

instincts and simply smiled politely, then walked through the front door.

The house was...massive! Seriously, what did one person do with all of this space? She remembered looking at pictures of this house in the magazine several weeks ago. She hadn't liked the décor then and, seeing it in person, didn't make her like it anymore.

The foyer was larger than her living room and kitchen combined, with a polished table right in the center underneath a massive chandelier that glittered. Why had someone put such a gaudy chandelier in the foyer? It looked like a massive star explosion! What was wrong with a simple, elegant chandelier? It would have been more in keeping with the style of the house. But this wasn't her house, even if Astir kept trying to convince her that it was. He'd just have to take it back, she thought and looked around, trying to find a pathway to the back of the house.

Turning to the right, she discovered a pretty parlor type room. The soft blues and cream coloring in this room were nice enough. The antique furniture looked expensive and completely in keeping with the historical nature of the house, but it also looked uncomfortable. In Rachel's mind, furniture should be something one could sink into. Sofas should be soft enough that one could relax and read a book for several hours.

This space...it was too formal. The sofas were...well, they should probably be called something more formal. The sides were straight and cushioned and the backs...where were the pillows? What did one prop one's body upon?

Okay, again, not her house! This was Astir's house and the woman who had decorated the spaces had kept Astir's preferences in mind. Not her own.

So much for the lauded reputation of the designer Rachel had heard about! This place was...odd. And uncomfortable. It was intimidating and shockingly cold! She didn't like the décor at all.

Thankfully, Rachel wasn't planning on sticking around to experience the stiff sofas and tacky chandeliers. She

was going home to her cozy cottage. She knew that it was just a short walk to her place and she simply needed to find the path entrance. That might be a bit tricky since she was used to coming out of the path towards this house, but she knew the woods around this area pretty well, having walked along the pathways often in search of craft ideas and supplies.

As she walked through the rest of the enormous house, Rachel felt...sad and vulnerable. And resentful! Plus, her head hurt, she felt nauseous, and she still couldn't believe that she was pregnant! Yes, she needed time alone. She needed to figure out what in the world was going on with her life! She couldn't do that here in this glorious mausoleum filled with expensive furniture and...good grief, a crazy number of servants, all of whom were looking at her as if she were some sort of interloper.

Obviously, the fancy team of lawyers Astir had hired hadn't conveyed that she now owned this house. So, was it even true? None of this made sense! People didn't gift someone a house! Astir was a liar!

“What the hell are you doing here?!” a female voice snapped.

Rachel stopped, stunned by the angry voice. As she'd gone through the house, searching for the back door, she'd encountered several members of the housekeeping staff, but none of them had been outwardly rude to her. Curious, yes. But yelling at her? Challenging her? Good grief!

Rachel turned, taking in the glorious beauty standing in front of her now. That rich sable hair with soft, subtle highlights and low lights wasn't natural, Rachel thought with increasing ire. And the woman's breasts seemed...oddly high and firm. Nope, not real either! The length of the woman's eyelashes was freakishly long and there was something unnatural about her chin and cheekbones.

Rachel stopped her perusal of the woman and lifted her eyes back up to a scathing gaze. This new stranger seemed vaguely familiar, but because of the pounding in Rachel's head, not to mention all of the other revelations, such as

coming to terms with the fact that she was pregnant...she couldn't concentrate well enough to place the woman.

The stranger huffed out her fury, her manicured nail slicing through the air. "It doesn't matter why you are here, just get out! If you are a member of the housekeeping staff, then get into uniform and...!"

The oddly beautiful woman stopped speaking, her glossy lips opening and closing, as if she were some sort of fish that might be gasping for air.

Rachel had no idea what had just occurred to this woman, but her dark eyes widened, causing those freakishly long lashes to appear almost comical. A split second later, her face paled underneath the heavy layer of makeup and her body language changed from confrontational to...something else. Whatever it was, the moment merely added to Rachel's impression that she was in an alternate reality.

"It's you!" the stranger hissed, stepping closer, pointing at Rachel with one of those vicious looking fingernails.

"Me?" Rachel replied, putting her hand on her chest and pulling back slightly. Her own hands weren't manicured and definitely weren't perfectly covered with glamorous nail polish! Phfft! Nail polish? It would never last through some of her craft projects! Her nails were short and clean, but that's about all she could say about having nice nails.

"Yes! You're that bitch who thinks she's going to take Astir away from me!"

Rachel blinked, startled by the fury in the other woman's eyes. "I am?"

The woman came closer, revealing that she towered over Rachel! The platform spike heels she wore added at least three inches to her height, allowing her to look down her nose at Rachel as she approached.

"Don't try it!" the oddly made-up woman whispered furiously. "I will destroy you! Astir is mine!" The last

sentence was said with a whisper and a furtive look around, probably to ensure that no one overheard the conversation.

Rachel took another step backwards, shaking her head. “I have no idea who you are, but you’re welcome to him. Just...leave me out of your romantic issues.”

The stranger looked startled. “What the hell are you playing at? Astir is...he’s the biggest prize and I’m going to marry him. You don’t stand a chance at winning him! I’ve got all of this,” she said, then made a sweeping gesture down over her impressive figure. She even moved her hands upwards, cupping her firm breasts. “I’ve made myself into exactly what he wants. There’s no way I’m going to let some nobody like you interfere with my plans! Now get out!”

If her head wasn’t pounding so painfully, Rachel might have laughed. Since it was, she kept her amusement in check, not even shaking her head because the movement would increase the throbbing and it was already causing her stomach to roil as the pain lashing at her increased.

“Have at him,” Rachel said, lifting a hand to her forehead, trying to ease the pressure. But nothing worked. She vaguely remembered the doctor prescribing medicine for the pain, but Astir had given the prescription to someone else and Rachel had no idea how to get one of those pills.

Home, she thought. “I have to go.” With that, she turned and once again started her search for the back door. She found it about five minutes later by going through the kitchen. There was a large, white kitchen with stainless steel tables for food preparation. The space looked like it would be the perfect preparation area for large gatherings, but Rachel didn’t bother to stop and explore. She wanted to get home, find some pain relievers, and lay down. She’d already lost... she wasn’t sure how many days she’d lost of work. Nor could she worry about that at the moment. All she could do was wind her way through the tables and culinary machinery to the back door.

Outside in the fresh, chilly air, she felt better. Perhaps the pain lessened simply because she wasn’t inside the ugly,

ostentatious house, but whatever the reason, she could once again open her eyes and...thankfully, find the break in the woods for the path.

From there, it was an easy walk through the woods, only about a mile to her house. Once there, she realized that she didn't have her purse.

"Darn it!" she whispered, then started kicking the small rocks until she found her spare, hidden key. "Thank you!"

Unlocking the door, she almost tripped inside. She righted herself, closed the door, then headed straight for the bathroom medicine cabinet. She didn't care if the pain reliever didn't get rid of all of her pain. She just needed to ease it slightly so that she could get some sleep.

But as soon as she spilled two pills out into her hand, she hesitated. Was it okay to take ibuprofen while pregnant?

"Oh no!" Rachel put the pills back into the bottle and stumbled to her bed. Maybe just laying down and closing her eyes would help. Grabbing a tissue, she wiped her tears and curled up on top of the bed, not bothering to take off the sneaker-like shoes that Astir had mysteriously produced for her to wear home from the hospital since her own clothes had been cut off of her in the emergency room.

"Where the hell is she?!" Astir demanded of his lead security guard. The man's fingers flew over the keyboard, his eyes surveying the video screens showing images of the various rooms in the house. Shaking his head, he continued to flip.

"She's not in the house, Your Highness."

Astir ran a hand through his hair, furious with every member of his staff at the moment. And himself! He'd vowed to take better care of Rachel, to protect her! Not thirty minutes after arriving here at the house, her house...the house she hadn't even stepped foot into until today...and he'd lost her!

“Are there any places in the house where someone could have taken her? Any blind spots?”

The man continued to flip through the screens, but now he was rewinding the video feeds, starting with the moment Rachel stepped out of the armored limousine. “There are places within the house where we can’t monitor. Bathrooms are off limits. There are a few corners in the house where we were about to put up cameras or other security measures, but after you gifted the house to Ms. Dubois, we determined that those additional measures were no longer necessary.”

“They are necessary now!” he roared, his hands fisting on his hips. “Rachel is going to become my wife! She is carrying the future Sheik of Silar! She has to be protected!”

Every guard in the room stopped at that news, startled and shocked. But moments later, there was a renewed energy as everyone searched the video feeds. “There she is getting out of the vehicle,” one of them called out.

“I have her going through the living room!” another one announced.

“I’ve got a confrontation with your decorator, Your Highness!” another guard snapped.

“I have her six minutes later going through the kitchen!” a third guard called to the group. “She exited the house through the kitchen doorway.”

“She’s heading towards...” Yet another guard started to say, but by then, Astir knew where Rachel had gone.

“She went back to that damned cottage!” he snarled, turning and heading out of the security office, determined to find her and spank her luscious bottom. How dare she put herself in danger like that?! How dare she scare him! Damn it, didn’t she know how important she was? Didn’t she understand who she was now?

No, he thought as he dove into the back of the SUV as several other guards also jumped in, even as the vehicle started moving, wheels squealing as the driver punched the

accelerator in order to speed down the long driveway. No, he hadn't told her how important she was. Not simply because she carried the next crown prince, but because he hadn't told her how important she was to him! He'd merely left her alone and inadequately protected. If he'd done things correctly, Rachel never would have been alone in her house and they would probably be married by now. She would have known that she was pregnant weeks ago and he would have insisted that she see a doctor to make sure that she was okay. And the baby. Yes, he had to keep reminding himself that the baby was important, but at this particular moment, he only needed Rachel. He needed to know that she was safe and unharmed, that she was...that she was safe. That was his current priority.

And then he'd spank her adorable ass!

The driver came to a skidding halt in front of Rachel's front door and everyone jumped out, surrounding Astir while another guard opened the door. Every man and woman here were painfully aware of what had happened the last time he'd been on this stone pathway heading towards the doorway and Astir waited while the guards secured the area before he moved forward. Three guards stepped into Rachel's house, weapons drawn and fully prepared to take out any threat. Their eyes moved carefully around the sun-filled space, scanning for threats.

When they all turned and nodded to Astir, he walked into the house. "Where is she?" he demanded curtly.

"In the bedroom, Your Highness," one of the guards replied.

Astir moved swiftly through the small rooms, feeling as if he'd finally come home after a long absence. There was just something about Rachel's house that felt warm and inviting, comfortable but still clean and homey.

He turned the corner and...that's when he saw her. Rachel was laying on her bed, one hand clutching a tissue while her other lay limply over her head, as if she were trying to ease the pain somehow.

He turned, addressing the first guard he saw. “She needs the pain medicine from the hospital.” The guard nodded sharply, then disappeared to find the missing prescription.

Astir moved into the room, taking off his jacket and tossing it over one of the chairs. He didn’t look at the chintz covered chair, his eyes holding on Rachel’s soft, warm body as he toed off his shoes and pulled her into his arms.

“Hush,” he whispered when Rachel made a small sound of protest. He then kissed her forehead as he pulled her closer, gently shifting her head onto his chest. A moment later, she was sound asleep, her ragged breathing of moments before smoothing out to a soft, even sigh of contentment.

Astir closed his eyes, ignoring the throbbing need in his groin as he held Rachel. This...this was enough. For now, just holding her was enough. Knowing that she was safe was what he needed and even her snuggling against him soothed the angry beast that had been hounding him for the past several weeks.

Never again would he walk away from this woman. He knew that he should. His team needed time to figure out who had shot at him. But since nothing had happened since that evening, he suspected that the bullet might have been a stray shot from a hunter.

Astir ignored the fact that the bullet had been shot in the darkness, at a time when hunters wouldn’t be out. It was a good enough reason for him to ignore the danger. He needed this. He needed Rachel. How he was going to explain the situation to her without scaring her, he had no idea. But holding her like this, he knew that he couldn’t let her go!

Chapter 11

“You’re an idiot!” Adele snapped as soon as she stepped into the warehouse.

The man sitting on top of the crate lifted his dark eyebrows, apparently not bothered by the woman’s comment. “How so?” he asked, taking another tug at his cigarette.

“Benny, two months ago, you shot at the wrong person!”

Benny, also known as Benny the Bean Counter, a nickname he’d given himself because he loved collecting his payments and counting out his cash, laughed softly, shaking his head as he pulled deeply on his cigarette. “Yeah, I pulled the trigger moments too soon. Sorry about that.”

Adele turned and stared at the man, her anger increasing exponentially. But instead of showing it in front of this man, she smothered her fury deep down inside of herself, intending to take it out on the guy once he’d done the job she’d hired him for.

“Two months ago, you failed. But the woman is back in the way. She’s become an even bigger obstacle so,” she smiled brightly, “now you have another chance to fix your mistake!”

Benny stared at her for so long, Adele wondered what he actually saw. It suddenly occurred to her that she was an extraordinarily beautiful woman and she was alone in a warehouse late at night with a killer. Not the smartest move she’d ever made, but the place of this meeting couldn’t be helped. There was no way she could be seen with this man, hence the out of the way meeting location.

Still, she should conduct her business with him and get out of here. It wasn’t safe. Not the area, and definitely not the man.

“Relax, lady,” he scoffed. “You’re not my type.” He jumped off of the crate and walked over to his computer,

opening it up and typing in some information.

Adele huffed at his words, offended when she probably should be comforted. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? I’m every man’s type!”

Benny looked over his shoulder at her, then shook his head. “Lady, I like my women to have at least some natural attributes.” He looked back down at his computer. “You’re about as fabricated as they come.”

Adele sniffed, running her hands over the black skirt covering her slim hips. “I’ve had some work done,” she replied dismissively. “I like ensuring that I’m as close to perfection as possible.”

Benny didn’t bother looking at her this time. He continued typing on his laptop.

“Are you listening to me?”

He shrugged. “Sure,” he replied, then sighed and turned around. “Okay, is this the chick you want shot?”

Adele’s eyes narrowed as she looked at the woman in the picture. It was her, whatever her name was. Racine or Rachel or whatever, carrying groceries out of the store and putting them into the trunk of her car. “Yes,” she confirmed, crossing her arms over her perfect breasts. They were high and firm, exactly what any man would want! Well, maybe not this heathen who had no idea what feminine beauty was all about! “Yes, that’s her. How soon can you make this happen?”

Benny shrugged again. Adele was really getting sick of the man being so casual about something that was going to change her life. Didn’t he understand how important this was to her? Seriously, the man had no customer service skills. But what should one expect from a contract killer?

He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit up another one, making her wait while he inhaled deeply. Finally, he looked up at her, his head tilted slightly sideways as if that might make him more intelligent. “First of all, my last attempt created a firestorm.”

Adele's eyes narrowed on the slimy man. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Benny shrugged. "I'm not sure. What I know is that after I took the shot, there were a whole lot of people who wanted to know who pulled the trigger." He tilted his head slightly. "I'm not really interested in meeting those people. They are an element that neither you nor I could handle, if you understand my meaning." When Adele's eyes narrowed, Benny sighed. "Whatever, lady." He shifted on his feet, flicking his cigarette onto the cement floor. "You need it done faster?" he asked.

That question infuriated her! She moved closer, poking the air with her red-tipped finger. "I needed it done two months ago! There's no 'faster' about it."

"Hey, you're the one who told me that everything was taken care of the last time. I was willing to stick around and make sure that the bitch died. You called me off."

"Because you shot at the wrong person!" she yelled, then forcibly reined in her temper, breathing in and out in order to calm down. "You shot at the man I want to marry, Benny! Not the woman who was distracting him!"

He laughed and the sound grated on her nerves. "So, all of this heat I'm dodging, it's all because the cutey is your competition?"

Adele wanted to slap his face. "She's not cute! She's fat and homely!"

Benny chuckled. "Didn't look fat to me. She's soft and..."

"Stop it!" Adele yelled, slicing her hand through the air. "I don't want to hear about all of your ridiculous opinions. I just want the bitch dead! Can you accomplish that?"

Benny stared at her, the dim light of the warehouse making him look a bit more sinister. "Sure. I can make that happen. But like I said, someone really wants to know who took the shot two months ago. There's a lot of very dangerous

people asking some pointed questions,” he explained. “So,” he paused, letting the word hang in the air between them as he smiled, “it’s going to cost you double.”

Adele sputtered, furious that he would dare. “The people asking questions are probably the security personnel of the person you almost killed! Since you’re not going to shoot at that man again,” Adele paused, giving the man a stern, don’t-mess-up-again look, “then you’ll be fine! Besides, you didn’t get the job done correctly the last time for the original price. How dare you double your fee now!”

He laughed, turning to flip his laptop closed. “Hey, that’s my price. If you don’t like my terms, feel free to find someone else to fix your problem.” He shoved the laptop into a computer bag and slung the strap over his shoulder. “And the people asking questions aren’t the guy’s body guards.” He chuckled again. “These people...they aren’t the kind that anyone should mess with.” He looked down at the cement floor for a moment, then shook his head. “Come to think about that, I’m not sure I want this job. I like my arms attached to my shoulders and these people,” he shuddered, “they like to use the human body like a Mr. Potato Head doll.”

Adele stared at the man, her mouth hanging open as she tried to comprehend what was going on. “You can’t just... stop! You have a reputation! You have to finish the job! For the original price!”

He shook his head, walking towards the exit. “I don’t have to do anything at all. And as for my reputation, who are you going to tell?” he laughed at her horrified expression, walking slowly towards the exit as his boots echoed on the cement floor.

Adele watched the man, her frustration increasing with every echo of his boots. She hated him, but did she have an alternative? It’s not as if she could advertise for a killer on the internet. Well, there probably was a way, but she had no clue how to do it. This guy had been recommended to her by one of her more unsavory clients. She was out of options.

“Fine!” she called out. She’d figure out how to get the money to him. She didn’t have it right at the moment, but she’d get it. After all, once she was married to Astir, she’d have plenty of money at her disposal! Maybe then she could hire someone to kill this man. Oh, the beauty of her plan was just...marvelous!

Benny turned and tipped a finger to his forehead. “I’ll get right to work on your project, ma’am!”

So much for the “dangerous elements asking questions” Adele thought with a disgusted snort. “It has to look like an accident though! Or a break in. Like someone robbed her place. You can’t just shoot this woman from a distance like the last time. It has to come out looking like a crime had been committed.”

Benny shrugged. “Fine. I’ll let you know when the job is done.”

Adele breathed a sigh of relief when the man walked through the steel door. She looked around, shivering. “I need to get out of here!” she whispered, grabbing her purse and heading for the same door through which Benny had disappeared. As she slipped into her car, a surge of relief hit her. This was going to work, she thought, driving out of the back parking lot of the warehouse. Yes, this was going to work out perfectly!

“Any news?” Jeffrey asked, not bothering to look up from the computer. He was trying to calculate depth and pressure for the massive drills. Too deep and they’d miss the efiesium deposit. Too shallow and the enormous drills would poke right up through the surface, exposing their operation to anyone passing by and seeing a huge drill coming out of the earth.

When the guy didn’t answer, Jeffrey looked up from his calculations, glaring at the man standing by the doorway.

Ned grunted. “Apparently, some woman paid a contract killer to take out another woman.”

Jeffrey paused, looking up, stunned by this news. “Are you kidding me? This mess is all because some bitch was jealous? Sheik Astir was forced to come back to Silar simply out of some woman’s fit of jealousy?”

Ned shrugged. “Apparently.”

Jeffrey rubbed his hands over his face, fatigue an almost constant irritant lately. His team had gone from being three days ahead of the delivery schedule to being a full week behind, all because he’d had to slow down drilling after the leader of Silar had returned from a trip! With the sheik gone, there wasn’t nearly as much tension within the law enforcement world and people had looked the other way. Now, everyone was more than slightly nervous, even though the sheik had left once again on some mysterious trip.

Now he was finding out that all of his problems were due to some stupid female who was jealous, causing the Sheik of Silar to fly home ahead of schedule, which caused him to stick his nose into all sorts of issues?

“Want me to take both the contractor and the client out?”

Jeffrey contemplated that. It might help if both were gone, eliminated from the situation. But the more he thought about it, more questions came to mind. Finally, he shook his head. “No. It might bring more attention to the issue. The guy is out of the country now. My sources say that he’s going to be out for a while.”

“The same source that told you the guy would be gone before?”

The man had a point, Jeffrey thought. Crossing his arms over his chest, he considered his options. He still concluded that more deaths would only cause more speculation.

“Don’t get rid of them yet. But keep track of the woman, at least. If we need a distraction, then maybe she’ll take some of the heat away from our operation.”

Jeffrey wasn't sure if that would pan out. He didn't know who the bitch was, so he had no way to know if her death would distract the leadership of Silar. However...hell, he had no idea. Jeffrey wasn't good at this kind of chess game! He knew dirt and minerals! He knew how to mine the hell out of whatever needed to be dug up. This whole cloak and dagger stuff was just a pain in the ass!

Chapter 12

“We have to get married.”

Rachel felt as if every interaction with Astir these days was filled with confusion and shocking statements. Staring up at him, she tried to figure out if he was...kidding? Teasing her? Smoking something?

Looking down, she carefully folded her hands on her knees, took a long, slow, deep breath, then lifted her eyes back up to look at Astir. “That’s an interesting statement. Would you please elaborate?”

Astir smiled briefly, but shifted on his feet, his hands sliding into the pockets of his slacks. He then lowered his head as he started pacing back and forth across Rachel’s living room.

“The thing is...” he stopped and looked over at her and Rachel had the distinct impression that he wanted to say something but changed his mind.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?”

Okay, that was an easy one. “Yes. You’re Astir. And you’re an arrogant ass.” With that said, she stood up and smiled at him. “If there’s nothing else, I really need to get back to work.” Rachel ignored Astir’s stunned expression as she turned and walked back to her desk, but there was no way she could ignore his deep laughter. Turning back to face him, she waited as he gripped the back of one chair, bending over with his mirth.

When his laughter finally faded, he looked up at her and Rachel lifted her eyebrows in inquiry. When she did that, Astir’s amusement began once more and he walked over to her. Before Rachel understood his intentions, his arms were already wrapped around her, his lips teasing the sensitive skin on her neck.

“Damn, Rachel. You like to humble a man, don’t you?”

She stiffened, but his teeth nipped at the skin along her neck and Rachel wasn't strong enough to resist that sensation. Shock and desire raced through her body and it took all of her control not to press herself against him, to relinquish all resistance to him and give in to what her body wanted. What her body needed!

"Why don't you want to marry me?" he asked, his voice like liquid sex, setting all of her nerve endings on fire!

She closed her eyes, trying to remember why she needed to stop him. "Because..." He nipped at her earlobe and she couldn't think for a long moment. When he moved his mouth to her neck again, giving her small, tiny nibbles along her neck right down to her shoulders, Rachel shivered. "Because...!"

"Tell me, Rachel. Let me fix it. I can make everything all better."

Oh, if only that were true!

"Astir, this isn't...it isn't fair!" she groaned, trying to pull back from him. But it was no use. Her hands were weak while his arms were incredibly strong and muscular and...oh, how she missed having him hold her like this! She remembered all of the nights before they'd had sex, the nights when he'd pull her into his arms and kiss her goodnight, leaving her aching, unable to sleep because she wanted him to come back and make love to her. Goodness, she wanted that so badly!

But she couldn't let this happen again! The pain after he'd left her...it had been devastating! He'd never given her any explanation other than the vague text messages about some emergency. One day, he was gone from her life. Months later, he just shows up, giving her orders?

"Astir, we can't do this," she told him, trying to make her voice sound firm and commanding.

"Why can't we?" he asked. "We're going to be married. Soon. This will be a normal activity so we should practice until we get it perfect."

The comment was so outrageous, Rachel couldn't help but laugh. "You're ridiculous," she told him as she pulled out of his arms. "But seriously, we can't..." She stopped when he stepped closer. Rachel stepped back. "What are you doing?"

"Stalking you," he explained, his eyes never leaving her face as he took another step forward. For every step she took backwards, he eliminated that distance until her back was against the edge of the counter.

"Wh...why are you doing that?"

"Because you keep trying to run away from me," he explained in a conversational tone. "And I don't want you to run away anymore."

"But..." she gasped when his hands lifted her up, setting her down onto the counter. "Astir! You can't do that! I'm too heavy!"

He shook his head, but he was no longer looking at her face. His eyes were focused on her blouse, on the buttons, to be more exact. "You're perfect," he countered. "I love the way you look."

"You can't love the way I look!" Rachel batted his hands away, but he only ignored her attempts and continued to unbutton her blouse. "I'm too..."

Astir didn't want to hear her tell him that she was fat or soft or whatever ridiculous adjective she wanted to apply to her beautiful body. So to stop her words, he took both edges of her blouse and ripped, barely registering the pings of buttons as they scattered around the room. Finally, his eyes were allowed to feast on her breasts, both of which seemed to be overflowing from the meager confines of her bra. "You're absolutely perfect, Rachel." His hands lifted, cupping her breasts and he heard the soft hiss as his thumbs stroked her nipples through the thin material. "Absolutely perfect!"

"I'm not," she whispered.

He pressed her legs apart, pressing his hips against her core, showing her what her beautiful body did to his own.

“You’re perfect for me,” he explained, bringing her hand down to cover his straining erection. “No other woman can do this to me, Rachel. No one! You’re the only woman! I’ve been going crazy without you over the past two months. Now,” his eyes dropped to her breasts again, “now it’s my turn.”

He heard her whimper, but there wasn’t any “no” in the sound. So he proceeded, pulling her hips closer, pressing her core against his throbbing erection as he lowered his head to kiss the top of her breast. Slowly, he shifted his hips against hers and heard another delicious whimper. Going slowly, giving her time to tell him to stop, he pushed the material of her blouse off of her shoulders. Then with great delight, he tugged the strap of her bra over that lovely shoulder, revealing the tight, delicious peak.

“You’re so beautiful!” he said, lifting that breast, cupping it in his hand and enjoying the weight of it as his thumb slipped over the tip. As he watched, the nipple tightened even more, lifting the tip, begging him for additional attention. As a gentleman, he had to give the lady what she wanted. So he lowered his head, softly teasing that nipple with his lips and tongue, experimenting with the various ways to tease that bud until he found the touch that elicited the most moans and hisses. Only then did he move to the other one. Going through the experiment again was no hardship. He was more than willing to test his theories, work up to the main goal.

This, he thought as he nipped her nipple very softly, was what he missed. The touching and the soft whispers, the way she arched her back to him, her soft thighs pressing against his waist, being surrounded by her softness and those whispered moans of pleasure or frustration.

Her fingers in his hair pulled his mouth away and he looked down at her. “Did you want me to stop?” he asked, sliding his hands underneath her knit skirt, teasing the softness there. Higher and higher, his hands slid the material out of his way. “Because all you have to do is say the word and I’ll stop.” He looked down at the skin he’d revealed, unconsciously licking his lips as the small triangle of cotton

was revealed. "I'm going to get you the most beautiful lingerie, Rachel," he vowed.

Spreading her thighs wider, he slid his forefinger down over the cotton of her panties, feeling the heat and sensing the need in her. She needed this just as intensely as he did, he knew. He could feel the energy of her need and it increased the desire inside of him.

"Ah, I love the scent of you!" He lowered his head, kissing the softness of her inner thighs, inching closer and closer to his goal. "Lean back and let me pleasure you."

She shook her head and he laughed. "Astir, this is..."

Her words stopped when his finger slipped underneath the edge of her panties. She almost jumped at the touch and Astir smiled, relishing every sign of her pleasure. His thumb slipped closer and closer to that nub, spreading the moisture around as he explored every pleasure sensation, watching her eyes since the cotton of her panties hid her soft pink folds from him.

Back and forth, he explored and teased, doing the same thing here that he'd done with her breasts. Finding the right place, the right touch and pressure, finding the right speed, the right caress that caused her to shift her hips. When she closed her eyes, her hands braced behind her, he knew that he was on the right track.

"These have to go," he told her, tugging the cotton panties down. She barely lifted her hips for him, but he knew that was only because she was confused, too far gone to speak. He loved this about her and would have smiled, if he weren't right there with her.

Tossing her panties off to the side, he slid his fingers over her nipples again, moving over her stomach, her hips and along her outer thighs. Her legs pressed wider, inviting him to pleasure her again, but he held off, letting his fingers move over her outer thighs, inner thighs, watching her body shiver with need as she spread her legs even wider.

He kissed her thighs, nibbling and teasing the skin there. She whimpered, almost crying now.

“Please, Astir!” she whispered.

Astir looked up at her, saw that her eyes were closed, her jaw tight with the effort to hold back, to control her desire.

Oh, no, he thought, mentally shaking his head. “Tell me what you want, Rachel,” he urged, his thumbs teasing her by brushing against her skin, closer and closer to that nub.

She shuddered when his thumb brushed ever so lightly against that nub. “That!” she whispered, then bit her lip, stopping the words from flowing.

“That?’ What exactly is ‘that?’”

Her eyes flashed open and he saw the anger there. Did she have any idea how hot that was? Probably not!

“You can’t do this to me!”

“I can’t?” he replied, pretending to be calm in the face of her fury when, in reality, he wanted to thrust into her, to feel her inner muscles clench around him, tighter and tighter as she came closer to her release. He wanted to slam into her as deep as she could take him, until he didn’t know where he was, until he didn’t know anything other than the beauty of her luscious, beautiful body surrounding him!

“Damn it, Astir!” she groaned, then started to pull away.

“Not going to happen, love,” he said, his fingers tightening on her thighs. “If you want this, lay back against the counter!” he replied, his voice stern. “I want you completely at my mercy.”

Rachel hesitated for another second, but his thumb rubbed ever so lightly against that nub and her head fell back, her body tightening. Oh, this was going to be delicious!

He didn’t think she’d do it, didn’t think she’d lean back and let him have his way with her, but with another light brush, she released another one of those delightful whimpers

and...slowly, leaned back against the cold granite of her counter.

Spreading her legs wider, Astir traced her stomach, her thighs and her hips, relishing her soft body spread out for him. She was his feast and he intended to dine on her until she couldn't scream any longer.

“Put your leg over my shoulder,” he ordered, but didn't wait for her to comply. Instead, he did it for her, then opened her wider, and his mind boggled by all of the possibilities.

And then he couldn't resist tasting her any longer. He had to taste her, to feel her body with his tongue. Feeling her trembling response as he moved carefully over her made him almost lose his control. But he'd thought about doing this again for so many months, he didn't want to hold back any longer. As soon as his tongue flicked against that nub, Rachel almost climaxed. But he felt her trembling response and pulled back, unwilling to give this up too soon.

When he pulled back, she lifted her head, glaring at him. “Why are you stopping?” she sobbed.

“Because I like this,” he told her, soothing her by sliding his hands over her stomach again. “Now let me have my way. Just relax and enjoy this.”

Astir laughed when his pretty woman growled. Actually growled! What a delightful sound! He wanted to hear that again. So he brought her right to the edge of release, then pulled back, soothing her again but holding her hips in place when she tried to wiggle away.

When she lifted her head this time, her eyes were pleading with him. “Astir, I can't...this is too much. I just...”

“Relax, Rachel,” he soothed, rubbing her stomach.

Once again, she leaned her head back, but her body arched, inviting him to tease her once more. This time, when he knew she was right on the edge, he slipped a finger inside of her, teasing that nub from the inside. Almost instantly, her

body convulsed around his finger, the trembling under his tongue making him throb with need as she twisted and turned as her climax exploded throughout her whole body.

The sight was heady and erotic! She was a sexual goddess! As soon as she calmed down, Astir pulled back, stripping off his clothes. He pulled her even closer to the edge and...this time he thought about using a condom but...his eyes moved over her stomach where their child was nestled in her womb. The reality of her pregnancy struck him once again. Rachel was pregnant with his child! With their child! It amazed him that this woman who had made him so crazy was now carrying a child that they'd made together. Made in a haze of lust unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. And now...now she would be his!

As he leaned over her, he felt her fingers tangle in his hair, increasing his lust. Just the softest touch from Rachel threw him into a frenzy of need. He didn't understand why, but he reveled in it.

Taking her hips, he kissed her breasts and her shoulders as he positioned himself. Then, because she was carrying his child, he pressed into her slowly instead of slamming into her wet heat as his body craved.

"Don't go slow," she begged, lifting her legs to wrap around him. "I'm fine," she promised.

"The baby," he countered.

She smiled gently at him, then sat up and pulled herself closer. "She's fine."

Astir wanted to argue with her, but he couldn't form words. Not when his erection was sliding into her heat, filing her up. With a grunt, he lifted her into his arms, keeping her impaled with his shaft as he carried her over to the sofa. She wrapped her arms around him but every step was like a bit of torture for him as her body vibrated around his shaft. Sitting down on the sofa, he pulled her closer, his hands on her hips.

"You're in control now," he told her.

Rachel's eyes widened as she settled against him. But that wasn't enough and he lifted her hips, showing her how to move. Rachel took to the new position quickly and was soon lifting and shifting against him, finding her own pleasure. And with every small or long wiggle, Astir lost more of his control. He couldn't hold his head up any longer as she did that thing with her hips, felt her inner muscles tense a bit more.

As she moved faster, it was harder for him to hold back. He opened his eyes to watch her and he knew that she was close. Every small thrust, every wiggle of her delectable body was making them both a bit more crazy.

Finally, he couldn't hold back any longer so he reached down and, with his thumb, rubbed that nub and watched her body tighten even more. Mere seconds later, her head fell backwards as her body climaxed once more, every part of her shuddering with a release that was hot and sexy! Astir released his control, flipping her over so that she was on her back, one of his legs on the floor for leverage as he thrust into her, faster and harder, prolonging her release as his own body pounded against her until his body shuddered with his own orgasm.

Rachel's fingers slid through his hair over and over again, tangling in the soft strands. It was shocking how soft his hair was when there was nothing else that was even remotely soft anywhere else on his body. Even now, in a post coital bliss, the man's muscles were hard and rippling. She let her fingers slide down over his back and shoulders before traveling back into his hair. He was...magnificent!

He groaned and lifted his head and Rachel stared at him, her heart pounding in anticipation of him saying something that would mess this up.

"Please," she whispered, putting a hand over his mouth. "Don't say anything. Just...let me enjoy this moment for a little while longer, okay?"

"Are you worried that I'll say something wrong?"

She didn't smile at his teasing comment. Instead, she merely nodded.

His phone buzzed, letting him know that someone needed his attention.

Rachel closed her eyes, dread filling her. Dread and remorse. She shouldn't have let this happen. She shouldn't have given in to the temptation he offered her. Rachel's only excuse was that she was lonely. She'd gotten used to having Astir around for those short weeks. Then he'd left her. Without any word or explanation as to what she'd done wrong.

The beeping was persistent. An outside intrusion into this small space in time. A time of peace and happiness. A time when her heart wasn't aching for him.

But all good things must come to an end. "You need to get that," she said, then shifted, wiggling out from underneath him. Rachel looked around, needing something to cover her nakedness. But her clothes were draped around the floor near the kitchen and that was five feet away. So instead, she grabbed the lap blanket, dragging it over her chest. It wasn't adequate to cover her whole body, but it was something.

"Rachel..."

"Don't," she interrupted, stopping whatever explanation he might give her this time. "Just...go. Do what you need to do." And with that, she walked out of the room, heading towards the shower. She didn't want to see him leave. She didn't want to hear his excuses. She didn't want... any of this!

Rachel just wanted to be left alone so she could start the healing process all over again. Oh, and she'd need to figure out what she was going to do about this baby. As she flipped the dial on the shower, her hand fluttered down over her stomach. A baby! Good grief, a baby!

Stepping under the warm water, she tried to ease the sudden tension. Wasn't sex supposed to relax a person?

Perhaps. But then the rest of the world didn't have a man with one foot out the door. Again!

She closed her eyes, pushing her face up to the water as she fought back the tears. But it was no use. The tears were there, right under the surface. It had been a horrific period, what with her dizziness and head injury and...and discovering that she was pregnant! Good grief. And now... today should never have happened.

The sadness was almost overwhelming and she leaned against the tile wall as the sobs wracked her body. Just as she was really getting into a pity party, strong arms pulled her against a deliciously hard chest. Those arms caused the damn to burst and she let loose, unable to hold back the pain lashing at her heart. Sobbing out her fears and terror at...well, everything, she leaned into Astir, burying her face against the warmth of his neck as the water streamed down on both of them.

"Feel better?" he asked when the tears and sobbing subsided.

"No," she whispered.

His gentle hands reached for the shampoo and he poured some into his hands, then massaged her scalp as he shampooed her hair. Rachel hadn't meant to take a full shower, but the pressure of his fingers against her scalp was pretty nice. He then took the soap and cleaned her all over. He was very thorough, and extremely gentle, causing her to blush as he reached all of the soft, tender places that had so recently given her such pleasure.

Unfortunately, she felt his rising interest and pulled back, stopping herself from...from touching him just as he'd been touching her, even though her body ached all over again for another dose of that bliss.

"I can't," she told him.

"I don't want anything Rachel. I just..." he sighed and kissed her forehead, pulling her into his arms again. "We need to talk."

She laughed, but the sound came out sounding more like a hiccup. “Yes. Talking would be good.”

He reached around her and shut off the water. “Let’s talk after we’re dressed.” His eyes roamed down over her figure, then rubbed his face. “If I don’t get you dressed fast, our conversation will be delayed.”

With that warning hanging in the air along with the steam, Rachel quickly grabbed a towel, covering herself. She’d actually forgotten that she was naked, which was a pretty astounding realization! “Good grief,” she muttered as she stepped out of the shower. She quickly handed him a towel as well, smiling as he wrapped the hot pink terry cloth around his waist. The color against his muscles was... fascinating. Okay, perhaps it was merely the muscles that fascinated her, but regardless, she let herself look.

“If you keep that up, our conversation is definitely going to be delayed another hour,” he warned.

Rachel pulled her eyes away from his body, reluctantly stepping out of the bathroom. She felt him following her, but she didn’t look back at him. Stepping into her bedroom, she closed the door, needing just a few moments to herself.

Closing her eyes, she leaned against the door, forcing her lungs to breathe in and out, slowly inhaling, holding her breath for the count of five before slowly letting it out again. She did that several times, but the relaxation technique didn’t work very well for her.

“Rachel?” Astir’s voice called out to her.

Jerking away from the door, she forced her feet to carry her to her closet. “Just a moment,” she called back, not wanting him to worry about her. Since she’d already fallen once, an event requiring overnight accommodations at the hospital and super-duper pain pills, it wasn’t an unreasonable concern.

She quickly pulled on underwear and a bra, then found the thickest, bulkiest sweater she could find, adding a pair of

black leggings and thick socks. When she looked at her reflection in the mirror, she saw that her cheeks were still flushed and her hair a bit wild. Instead of even trying to cover up the color or tame her hair, she pulled the locks into a band, telling herself that it was better to look a bit rough prior to him walking out on her this time rather than trying to appear beautiful. Why waste the effort when the results will be the same?

When she stepped into the spacious living area this time, she felt armed against his appeal. But taking one look at Astir as he paced back and forth across the space, she knew that there was no armor against this man. He was just too... male. And amazing. Even from across the room, she could feel his strength. It wasn't just his muscles either. There was something about him, something that called to her in an elemental way.

“You're okay?”

Rachel crossed her arms over herself, shrugging in answer. “We're going to talk?”

“Yes.”

“What do we need to talk about?” She perched on the arm of one of the chairs, unwilling to move closer to him or to settle into one of the seats. She needed to maintain the ability to walk away quickly if this conversation became too difficult or painful.

“We need to marry, Rachel.”

Biting her lip, she looked down at her hands clasped in front of her knees. “Right. Because I'm pregnant?”

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yes, because of the baby. But also because of who I am. And who that baby will become.”

Rachel stared up at him, not sure she completely understood. “Who will this baby become?”

Astir moved so that he was sitting on the coffee table right in front of her. His position meant that she was looking down at him. Did he do that on purpose? Did he realize that

she was feeling vulnerable and needed a small measure of power?

“I am Astir del Taran,” he started off, then paused, waiting to see if she recognized his name. When she merely shrugged, he continued. “Sheik of Silar.” He waited another heartbeat. “That child you are carrying inside of you is my heir.”

Rachel didn't say anything for a long moment. She simply stared down at him. In her mind, she repeated the words. Heir. Sheik of Silar. That meant...he was ruler? The Ruler of Silar? That was a big freaking country! And...well, powerful! He was...Rachel had always thought that he had a look of power about him. Hadn't she just thought that moments ago? Sooo...he was a freaking ruler! Of Silar.

Opening her mouth, she felt as if her world had...had what? Died? Turned upside down? She didn't understand all of this.

“So...you're...?”

“Ruler of Silar. And the babe in you now will be the next ruler of Silar.” He paused, his eyes serious as he waited. After another heartbeat, he continued once more. “This is why we must marry. And you must be protected.”

Rachel looked up, staring through the windows. It was afternoon now, so the sun was shining through the windows. The guards. There were always men surrounding him!

“You're...the ruler...of...?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, nodding his head. Astir reached out, gripping her hands. For a moment, he rubbed them, trying to infuse them with a bit of warmth. But Rachel wasn't sure that it was working. She didn't think she'd ever feel warmth again. He was a ruler. She'd known that he was a powerful man, but she'd thought he was only a businessman. Someone who was wealthy, to be sure, but only due to his prowess in the business world.

This...ruler...this was a whole new level of power!
This was...he was dangerous!

“Are you going to...hurt me?”

His startled gaze lifted, looking into her own. “Hurt you?” He shook his head. “No! I’d never hurt you! In fact, I want to protect you. I want to do everything within my power to make you happy, Rachel!”

Rachel jerked her hands out of his grip and stood up, backing away from him. “Happy? How can I be happy when I don’t even know who you are? Why didn’t you tell me who you were before? Why did you have to keep your position in the world a secret?” Absently, her hand moved lower, covering her stomach where their unborn child rested.

A few days ago, she hadn’t even known that this baby existed. Then yesterday, when the doctor had revealed the reason for her dizzy spells and nausea, a pregnancy hadn’t been real to her. Even this morning, nothing was real. It was all too...surreal!

But now...now with the knowledge of Astir and his position...somehow, everything felt very threatening! Her maternal instincts, which hadn’t even existed yesterday, were roaring to life now!

“You’re not going to take this baby away from me!” she told him. “If this child needs protection, then I’ll...!”

“Rachel,” he interrupted, standing up and coming towards her. “You can’t protect this child. Not from the very real threats in the world.”

“I can!” she asserted, not bothering to ask him what “real threats” might come her way. “I will!”

Fisting his hands on his hips, he watched her carefully. “Rachel, that child, and even you, are in danger from people who would try to harm you.”

She stared at him, trembling and wishing that he would wrap his arms around her. “Who?”

“My enemies. My friends. People who disagree with me on any number of issues. Business associates who want to bring me down because I am their competition...there are any number of threats, Rachel. There is also the very real need for that child to have the protection of my name.”

She stared at him for a long moment, feeling her heart pounding as fear hit her harder than she'd ever thought possible. “You're in danger?” she asked, reaching out to touch his cheek. “People try to hurt you?”

“Yes,” he replied with urgency, needing to make her understand. “And now you are in danger. I need to protect you, Rachel. I need you-”

“You need marriage. But...”

“There are no buts here Rachel. It has to be marriage. I have to protect you as well as our unborn child.”

Perhaps if he'd yelled at her, Rachel's stubborn streak might have reared its ugly head. Perhaps if Astir had come across as arrogant, she might have scoffed and told him no way. But the quiet sincerity, the determination and honesty in his voice warned her that his words were real, the threat was real, started to convince her.

“It can't be that bad,” she whispered back, her eyes pleading with him to tell her he was just kidding. To tell her... anything that might ease the terror that was starting to well up inside of her.

“It's that bad, Rachel.” He reached out and took her hand, his strong fingers, the same fingers that had brought her such pleasure such a short time ago, now gave her reassurance when she most desperately needed it.

“But...!” she pulled her hand away from him, not wanting that reassurance. Not wanting anything from this man! “No! I'm not...” she stood up, her fingers running through her still-wet hair. “This isn't right!”

“I know,” he replied, his voice still calm despite her rising panic. “It isn't right. It isn't fair. But...”

“But?” she prompted. “Is there a ‘but’? Is there a way to stop this?”

He sighed, standing up. “No, my dear. There’s no way to avoid this. We need to be married. And there isn’t time for you to even get used to the idea.”

Rachel swallowed, trying to tamp down the terror. She looked into his eyes, silently pleading with him to tell her that he was only teasing her. But he merely looked back at her with eyes that warned her that he was completely serious. “Astir, this can’t happen!”

“It has to happen,” he countered smoothly, but with a finality to his voice. “What’s more...” He paused and, from the look in his eyes, Rachel knew she wasn’t going to like whatever came next. “I need you to come with me.”

“Come with you? Where?”

“To Silar.”

There was a long silence after that. Come with him to Silar? To a foreign country where...where...what? What would happen when she was there?

“I can’t do that!” she replied, her voice wispy and unsure. “I can’t...this isn’t...I just...can’t!”

He moved closer to her, once again taking her hands in his, but this time, he didn’t let her pull away. “Rachel, we must...”

She was so sick of hearing what she “must” do. Jerking backwards, she shook her head as she moved away from him. “Stop it, Astir! I’m not going to Silar. Not with you or anyone else.” Her hand fluttered over her stomach. “So just stop right there. I’m not going anywhere. All of my stuff is here. All of my crafts and my home and...and everything I need is here.”

He didn’t follow her this time. Instead, he remained in place while Rachel paced, looking around at her home.

“How about a compromise?” he offered.

That question brought her attention back to him at a time when she was trying very hard not to let his physical presence affect her. He was a powerful man and that power pulled to her. It was such a strange sensation to want to go to the man and ask him for comfort, when he was the very person who was creating the discomfort!

Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him. “A compromise? I’m sorry, but aren’t you the man who left me after having sex with me?” She lifted an eyebrow as she waited for his response. “And since we just had sex, isn’t this about the time when you disappear?”

Rachel had thought that her jab would put him in his place and give her the upper hand. Instead, he shook his head as he looked calmly back at her. “I was here,” he replied. “That last night.” When she continued to look at him with confusion, he continued. “We were supposed to have dinner together, the night I disappeared.”

Rachel blinked, surprised by his statement. “You... were here?”

“Yes.”

“But you left?” When he nodded, she shrugged. A cold slice of pain was sliding into her. She didn’t understand how, but she knew by the look in his eyes that she wasn’t going to like what he told her next. She didn’t want to even ask, but...she had to know.

“Okay, so...you left later than I thought. What’s your point?”

“I left,” he emphasized, holding her eyes with the dark power of his gaze, “because someone shot at me. There is a bullet hole in the trim of your house where the bullet missed me by mere inches.”

Rachel’s whole body went cold with that news and she shook her head, not wanting to believe him. But the steadiness of his gaze kept her from denying his words. Her eyes moved over his body while, at the same time, her mind thought back to his naked form. She didn’t remember seeing any new

wounds. There were several old scars, but they had all seemed to heal properly.

“Were you...?”

“No. One of my guards took the hit. Thankfully, it hit his body armor, so he came away with a severe bruise but not a bullet wound.”

She breathed a sigh of relief at that, but then she looked up at him again. “This threat you mentioned...it’s... real?”

His eyes never left her gaze. “Yes. Very real.”

Now she wasn’t sure what to say. Someone had shot at him. They’d missed but...someone had actually tried to kill this man! This vital, amazing, powerful, gentle man!

Turning away from him, she shook her head, trying to push those thoughts out of her mind. “I can’t just...abandon my life here, Astir! I can’t go with you!”

She felt his arms wrap around her waist and pulled away, not wanting to be swayed in this way. When he touched her, her mind didn’t think properly. She couldn’t focus.

Astir watched Rachel’s reactions carefully, needing to understand her better. They’d spent so little time together, but he knew, deep down inside of him, he knew that Rachel was the woman he wanted by his side for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t figure out how to convince her of that. Because they didn’t know each other well enough, he doubted she’d come to him simply because his instincts were screaming at him that she was the woman for him.

“Live with me at the manor house,” he offered, trying to figure out a compromise that would allow both of them time to get to know one another. “Let me show you that we could make it work.”

She didn’t turn to face him, so he couldn’t see the emotions clouding her eyes. Instead, she kept her hands

braced on the countertop while her mind worked through the thoughts were racing through her mind.

Unfortunately, the only thoughts going through his mind were how much he wanted to pull her right back into his arms. Or how desperately he wanted her to be out of this house, to be in a place where he knew she would be safe!

“Why the manor house? Why can’t we live here?” she asked, lifting her head, but not looking at him.

“Because the manor house has my security team located there. They have installed cameras and a state-of-the-art security system. The doors and windows are all bullet proof.” He moved closer to her, unable to stay away. Not when she looked so enticing standing there, all soft and feminine.

Moving behind her, he pressed his chest against her back, feeling her stiffen for a brief moment, before she finally melted against him. Her soft sigh told him that she felt it too. Although, he couldn’t really define what “it” was. At least, not at this point in time. And not with her pressing against him. But her sigh as well as her acceptance of his arms around her told him something more important. She accepted him. She might not accept him consciously, but her body knew him and trusted him.

That meant that it was only a battle for her mind. That might be a bigger challenge than he anticipated, but he wasn’t giving up. He couldn’t give her up! Not just because she was pregnant. But because...he needed her. If the past several weeks was any indication, he needed Rachel. She was like a drug for his body. Without her, he was grumpy and cantankerous. Without her, he was merely a shell. Rachel filled him up and gave him strength.

“Come back to the manor house,” he whispered in her ear, kissing her neck because he knew that she liked it. “Let me protect you, Rachel. Let me prove to you that you can trust me.”

Another sigh. Then she lifted her hand, pressing them against the back of his where they rested on her waist. “I can’t

trust you, Astir. You left me without any explanation several weeks ago.”

“I know. And I hurt you.”

She stiffened and he already knew what she was going to say. “I wasn’t hurt!”

He smiled, grateful that she couldn’t see his expression. “Okay, you weren’t hurt. You were...distrustful. Is that a better description?”

Her body relaxed once again and she nodded. “Yes.”

“So you’ll come back to the manor house?”

There was a moment’s hesitation, then she shook her head. “You don’t have an outdoor swing,” she argued.

He almost laughed. But then he remembered sitting on that swing in her backyard at night, the night air chilly and she’d snuggle up against him. That memory, and dozens of others, were precious to him. And her words meant that they were special to her as well.

“I’ll have your swing moved over to the manor house this afternoon. We can sit in the swing tonight after dinner.”

She peeked at him over her shoulder. “I’m not sleeping with you,” she warned him.

Again, it took all of his concentration to stop himself from smiling. Did she really think that they could keep their hands off of each other? Did she realize where she was? That his arms were around her right at this moment?

“Okay, you’re not sleeping with me,” he agreed. That left a lot of other possibilities, he thought.

With another sigh, she leaned her head back against his shoulder. “You turned my life upside down the last time.”

“And now I’m doing it again,” he finished, understanding what she was trying to tell him.

“Yes. And I don’t like it.”

“But you like me,” he countered.

She didn't reply and he squeezed his arms slightly. "Let's go back to the manor house." He released her, then turned her around.

"I need to pack some things for..."

"My staff will do that for you." He took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. "Lesson one – I'm going to spoil you, Rachel."

"What if I don't want to be spoiled?"

"Tough," he replied, then pulled open the door to the SUV that had been waiting outside.

"What do you want?" Jeffrey sighed, rubbing his forehead. His calculations were off, and he wasn't sure why. He'd gone over everything several times, but there was a mistake. He could just feel it!

"My sources say that Sheik del Taran is occupied."

Jeffrey stared at Ned, wondering why he was conveying that information. "And?" he prompted impatiently.

Ned's eyes narrowed at Jeffrey's sharp tone. "And," he emphasized, "it has come to my attention that there was an assassination attempt a couple of months back that failed."

Jeffrey gritted his teeth, digging deep for patience. "I'm not sure why this is relevant. I didn't put a hit out on anyone. I just want Del Taran to stay away for a while."

Ned's features didn't change in any way, but he continued with exaggerated patience. "If there's a hit on any member of the royal family, or a potential member of the royal family," he emphasized, referring to the news that Del Taran and a lady were involved, "then he might rush back to the palace. And I just happened to have overheard that there is another contract out on a member of the royal family."

Jeffrey's blood turned to ice in his veins. "Damn it!" That was just what he didn't need! With Del Taran out of the country, no additional investigators had arrived! But if Del Taran came back here, he would start to pay more attention to

the details of running the country instead of leaving things to his subordinates! “Who is behind this latest hit? Who’s paying for someone in the royal family to be killed?”

Ned’s lips curled into a snarl. “My sources say that your little birdie, the spy you paid to keep tabs on Del Taran, has hired someone to take out the competition.” Ned almost laughed, which Jeffrey considered would be truly horrific. Men like Ned Afrehoster only laughed when bad things happened. That man was truly sadistic!

“Adele hired a hit man?” Jeffrey gasped. “What the hell?”

“Is Adele your decorator friend?”

“Yeah!”

Ned snorted and pushed away from the wall. “Tell her to call off the hit!” he snapped. “If anything happens to anyone in that household, even a servant, then Del Taran will be back here in a heartbeat! He didn’t hesitate to fly halfway across the world when he heard that the video woman had been hurt. If anything happens to anyone, then...” Ned smiled, shrugging one shoulder. “It won’t be pretty.”

With that, he walked out of the make-shift office, unconcerned about the gust of heat that swished into the room when he left the front door open.

Jeffrey didn’t take the time to close the front door. He was too busy dialing a number. Unfortunately, the stupid woman didn’t pick up the phone! What the hell was Adele thinking?

Chapter 13

Rachel walked through the darkened hallways. The house was somehow bigger than she'd originally thought, the rooms massive and so elaborately decorated that it felt wrong to touch anything. The furniture was ten times more expensive than anything she owned, which made just sleeping in that massive bed feel odd.

She ran her finger along an antique sideboard, her eyes glancing upwards. "Where are the cameras?" she whispered to herself, feeling an itchy sensation come over her. The idea that someone was watching her at every moment of the day was...freaky! Could she live like this?

Perhaps the bigger question was if she could live without Astir for the rest of her life.

Yet again, she berated herself for demanding to sleep in one of the guest bedrooms. If she hadn't been so stubborn, she could be in Astir's arms right now. He would know that she wasn't asleep and she could talk to him. Talk and make love and feel the beautiful pleasure wash over her once more.

Sighing, Rachel rubbed her tummy. It wasn't flat, but the roundness wasn't caused by her pregnancy. Not yet anyway.

She walked towards the door that would lead out into the backyard. True to his word, Astir had ordered some mysterious team of helpers to move her swing from her backyard to his. Peering out the window, she spotted the swing, the moonlight illuminating the pillows and soft blanket. It was so tempting, Rachel couldn't resist. Walking over to the doorway, she reached for the knob, then hesitated. Would alarms sound off if she opened the doorway?

A shadow moved and Rachel almost screamed. But when the man stepped into the light of the moon, she recognized him as one of the guards she'd been introduced to earlier in the day.

“I apologize, ma’am,” he said, bending slightly. “I just wanted to let you know that you can go outside if you want to.”

She blinked, looking out through the glass panes of the door, then back to the man with suspicious bulges underneath his jacket. “Um...thank you.” She felt awkward and silly standing here in her pajamas and slippers. “I was just...I couldn’t sleep in that bed.”

The man’s features didn’t show any emotion. “It’s always hard to sleep in a strange place,” he commented.

Rachel didn’t get the feeling that he had trouble sleeping in strange places, merely that he was agreeing with her to be polite. She smiled weakly and turned, praying that he couldn’t tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“I was thinking about going outside to swing for a few moments. Just to relax my mind.”

The man nodded, gesturing with his hands, indicating that she could open the door and go out. Rachel wasn’t so sure that she wanted to swing anymore, but she really wanted to get away from this stranger who was looking at her with a completely blank expression. She didn’t like that, preferring to at least suspect what another person was thinking while she spoke to them. This strange blankness was...weird!

Since she couldn’t figure him out, she opened the door and stepped out into the chilly air. It was pretty cold right now, but she knew that the blanket was thick and cozy. Walking towards the swing, she pushed the man out of her mind as she grabbed the blanket, snuggling under its warmth. With a push of her toe, Rachel set the swing in motion and relaxed against the cushions, staring up at the moon as she willed her body to relax.

The dark shadow stepped out of the closet where he’d been hiding for the past several hours. He’d arrived at the house in a flower delivery truck with one of his friends. The friend could be trusted to be at the designated meeting point

tomorrow morning. Right now, the man moved silently across the thick carpet, mindful of the cameras. Thankfully, there weren't any in this bedroom, so it was a simple task to slip his knife out as he walked towards the bed. He'd heard movements earlier in the evening, but the bitch was silent now, indicating that she'd fallen asleep. With practiced stealth, he moved closer and closer, his ears alert to any noise that might indicate that a guard approached.

Silence.

He paused. It was too quiet. When someone was sleeping, there was usually breathing, snoring, sniffing and a bit of movement, the rustling of one's body against the sheets. But at this moment, there was nothing. Not a sound.

Fury erupted inside of the man. In a rage, he hurried over to the bed and whipped back the covers. Empty! The bed was empty! He thought of all the hours lost during the afternoon, hiding in that damn closet, pissing into a cup and ignoring the gnawing hunger in his belly. The anticipation of the money he'd earn when the job was finished had kept him quiet.

Now, with his prey not where she should be, his rage erupted and he took the knife, stabbing it through the pillow. Moments later, feathers puffed up, flying all over the area. Upon seeing the mess, the man knew that he'd messed up.

He considered cleaning up the mess, but there was no way he could catch all of the damn feathers! They would be everywhere and, in the darkness, he'd definitely miss some of them! Better to just leave the pillow, let the staff think that the woman had done this. Stepping back away from the bed, he looked around. How to get out of here? His plan had been to stab the bitch, then shimmy down the gutter outside of her window.

He could still do that. But he wanted to know where she was! How had she messed up his plan?

Footsteps coming down the hall warned him that he needed to get back into the closet. Rushing across the room, he stepped into his hiding place mere moments before the

bedroom door opened. A brief moment later, the door closed again. He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs and adrenaline rushing through his body. The danger, the intense, almost sexual release after every job was why he loved his vocation so much.

Still, he didn't like the idea of getting caught. So as soon as the door closed and the footsteps faded down the hallway again, the man stepped out of the closet and, snipping the wires for the alarm system, pushed the window open. With speed and stealth, he shimmied down the gutter, grateful that the house was so well maintained. He'd done gutter climbing before and the screws connecting the gutter to the house had pulled away. Too often, cheap bastards didn't maintain their gutter system, making his job harder.

Moments later, he was on the ground and sprinting through the shadows towards the meeting point. Twenty minutes later, he spotted his buddy, car idling, at the meetup point. He dove into the passenger seat, pulling the balaclava off of his head and taking his first breath of fresh air.

"Everything go okay?" his friend asked.

"No!" he growled. "The bitch wasn't in the bed!" Frustration built up inside of him and he rubbed his face, then turned to look out into the inky blackness outside of the vehicle. He'd have to go back. The amount of money involved was too tempting. Next time, he'd just have to be more creative.

The following morning, Adele smiled as she stepped out of her car, feeling fresh and alive and ready to tackle her goal of winning a disgustingly rich husband once again. Now that the bitch was out of the way, Adele could work on enticing Astir into her bed. She'd chosen a tight skirt and low-cut blouse with that goal in mind, hoping to entice Astir now that the chubby interloper was gone.

Adele reminded herself to be sweet and concerned when she heard the news of the woman's gruesome demise. Adele had practiced generating tears last night and had even

used waterproof mascara this morning, even though she hated the crap. It was too hard to get off and it messed up her fake eyelashes. But one needed to sacrifice for their goals, she thought as she skipped up the stone steps of the manor house. It would all be worth it in the end.

Before she reached the door though, a guard stepped in front of her. “His Highness is not expecting you, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” she repeated, offended by the term. It made her feel old, for some reason. Plus, she didn’t like that the guard, a mere employee, had blocked her pathway. “You know me! I work here. I have rooms to finish decorating.” She didn’t, but it sounded good. “Are you seriously stopping me from finishing the work that Astir hired me to do?”

She loved using his first name instead of his title. Granted, Astir hadn’t given her that right, but she used it all the time when he wasn’t around. Especially with her coworkers. They were painfully jealous that she had won this job and Adele liked to rub it in their noses all the time, preening because she’d won such a lucrative and prestigious commission.

“Your services are no longer needed, ma’am,” the guard explained, folding his hands in front of him like a shield.

Adele’s mouth dropped, horrified at the guard’s words. “No longer needed? But...! I’m not done!” she whined, then pulled her shoulders back and gave the man a cold glare. “I need to speak with Astir. Get out of my way.”

He didn’t move. The man didn’t even blink, damn him!

“His Highness is not accepting guests today.”

Her mouth fell open before she could rebound from that dismissal. “I’m not a guest! I work here! He hired me to decorate his house! I demand that you...”

“Ma’am,” another voice called out, this time from behind her. Adele spun around to find three more guards standing on the gravel drive at the base of the stairs. “We need

you to leave,” one of them explained with a voice that warned that his patience was thinning.

Adele wasn't going to take that from these guards! She'd ordered them around when she'd been working inside the house! They were just the help!

“I'm not leaving until I speak with Astir!” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, pressing her breasts up higher. They were men, after all!

Unfortunately, the movement and exposure of more of her breasts didn't cause any of them to bat an eyelash. Damn them! They weren't normal!

“Ma'am,” one of them stepped backwards, gesturing with his arm to her vehicle. “Please don't force us to remove you physically.”

Once again, her mouth fell open and she stared at the men, livid that they would treat her in this manner!

She stomped down the stairs, more furious than she had been in years! “Oh, you are so going to get in trouble for the way you are treating me!” she growled. Grabbing her keys, she walked around to her car and sped away, making sure to kick up some of the gravel.

When she reached the highway, Adele slowed down, trying to calm herself down. Tapping her fingernail on the steering wheel, she contemplated her next move. But when she reached her exit, a happy thought occurred to her. Maybe the reason they wouldn't let her in the house was because a terrible tragedy had occurred! Maybe the bitch was dead and they couldn't let anyone inside until the investigation was gone and the body removed!

Oh, happy day! With that thought, she started practicing her speech in the car as she drove back to the office, trying out different tones to figure out which sounded the most sincere. She would need to be at her best to get back into the house so she could offer Astir the comfort that she was so good at providing!

Chapter 14

“Good morning.”

Rachel blinked her eyes open, wondering why the sunshine was so bright. Had she forgotten to close the blinds last night?

Then she realized that she was outside. Looking up as Astir came towards her, she sighed and tried to orient herself. “I fell asleep on the swing again, didn’t I?” she asked, sitting up and looking around. That’s when she realized that this wasn’t her backyard. Memories of the previous day came flooding back to her and she sighed, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “I’m not supposed to do this anymore, I suppose?”

Astir sat down next to her, lifted her feet and sat down on the swing. When she started to pull away, he set a heavy hand on her legs. “I’m glad that you found a place where you are comfortable, Rachel.” More relieved than he’d thought possible. The discovery of the destroyed pillow early this morning had put the entire security team into hyper focus, everyone trying to discover how someone had gotten into her bedroom last night. The guards explained that she’d wandered outside around two o’clock in the morning and, thankfully, they’d surrounded her, even if Rachel was completely unaware of their vigilance. Her need to be in a familiar place, the swing, had saved her life.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, rubbing her toes to warm them up.

“Yes,” she replied, pushing her blond hair behind her ears. “Did anyone worry about me being out here?”

He didn’t mention that they were all frantically worried, and relieved that she was out here and not in her bedroom. “Not at all,” he replied. “What are your plans today?”

Rachel tilted her head to the side, nibbling at her lower lip. For some reason, he found that endearing.

“I need to get back into my routine, Astir,” she told him. “I need to post videos. With the accident and missing two days of work, I’m behind. I’m starting to get messages from my followers, asking me where the latest videos are. Plus, there are the regular questions and I need to come up with new ideas and experiment with craft techniques and...”

She stopped when he lifted a hand, palm out.

“All of your craft supplies were delivered to this house yesterday. Why don’t you change clothes and meet me for breakfast? After you eat a healthy meal, I’ll show you to the rooms where our staff have stored your supplies and each of the projects that were in progress.”

She smiled slightly, feeling a strange warmth flow over her. “That was very kind of you. I can work at the other house though. I get a bit messy when I’m doing my crafts. And your house is...” she paused, trying to find the right word. “Elegant. My stuff will only mess up the décor.”

“Our house,” he emphasized. “We will be married at the end of the week,” he warned her, pushing a lock of hair out of the way after it fell over her eyes. “After that, everything that I own will also be yours.”

He watched, amused, when Rachel turned to look at the house. Her reaction was slight, but he caught it. “You don’t like the décor?” he asked, reading her mind.

Rachel’s eyes moved quickly back to him and she shook her head. “It is lovely.”

“But too formal for your preference?”

She shrugged. “I’ll get used to it.”

He noticed that she hadn’t denied that they’d be married. That seemed like significant progress. “I’ll have the decorator come out again. You can give her...”

“No!” she rushed out, sitting up straight. Then she realized how her voice had sounded and tried to relax. “Sorry,” she whispered, doing that lip biting thing again. “I met your designer and I’m not sure that...”

“I will have several other designers stop by to show you their styles. You can choose any decorator that will help you feel more comfortable here.”

She shook her head. “No, really Astir. That isn’t necessary. I’ll be fine. It’s not as if we’ll be here very often.”

Astir stared down at her, seeing the pain and sadness in her eyes. “Talk to me, Rachel,” he urged softly. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Rachel sighed, looking around at the beautiful landscaping and enormous house filled with beautiful furniture and “accent” pieces. Sighing, she shrugged slightly. “This just...it isn’t me, Astir,” she explained carefully. “I’m not the kind of person who lives like this.”

“Like what?” he asked gently.

She swept her hand through the air, then pushed her fingers through her ruffled hair. “Like this! I’m the kind of person who makes brownies and contemplates whether to swirl marshmallows, peanut butter or raspberry jam into the mix!” She turned slightly. “I’m the kind of woman who...” she paused, biting her lower lip. She’d come to this conclusion last night while staring up into the stars. Finally, she took a deep breath and turned to face him. “I’m the kind of woman who falls in love with a man and wants to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

Astir stared at her, his heart pounding at her words. Finally, he shifted on the swing, taking her hands so that she couldn’t move away from him. And because he needed to touch her. “You love me?”

She shook her head, wishing she could wipe the tears away. But he kept her hands tightly in his own. “No, I fell in love with the man who tosses his jacket over a chair before eating pizza.” She sniffed. “I like the beer drinking Astir. I don’t even know the man who rules an immense country and has bodyguards, staff and...and I don’t even know what else!”

He sighed and lifted her hands, kissing her fingers lightly. “Actually, you’re the only person who knows me,

Rachel. You're the only person I've ever felt comfortable showing the real person. Everything that you know about me is real. The other stuff," he said, waving his hand in dismissal. "The guards and the staff and the other stuff, that's just my job. When we close the doors at the end of the day, it's not the ruler that you'll see. It's not the sheik that you'll share the events of your day with." He moved closer. "It will be me. The person that no one else knows about."

The thought warmed her right down to her toes. "Really?" she whispered.

"Yeah," he confirmed with a chuckle. "You're the one I want to share my life with, Rachel. You're the one that I feel comfortable enough to reveal the person I am when the cameras aren't clicking, or when the political demons aren't battling for position."

"But I don't even know how to be your wife!" she whispered, leaning her forehead against his chest. "I don't know all of the stuff I should or shouldn't say."

He wrapped his arms around her. "You run a successful business, Rachel. That means that you probably already know the diplomacy stuff. If you know how to charm people into watching your videos, you know how to speak with world leaders." He laughed softly. "Trust me, they're just as human as everyone else."

"But they know things!" she replied. "They've probably read all of the great works ever written and know all about economics and geopolitical whatevers!"

He chuckled. "No, they have advisors that summarize everything for them. And most of them haven't read the great literature, but they've probably read the Cliff's Notes for everything." He kissed her neck, nibbling on that spot that never failed to make her groan. "I know several of them who wouldn't have even gotten into university if they hadn't cheated on their entrance exams."

"No way!" she gasped, pulling away to look up at him. "You're lying!"

“I’m not!” he replied, and she saw the truth in his eyes.

“That’s awful!”

“That’s the real world,” he corrected. “Most of the world leaders have excellent staff. Those people are the knowledge behind the decisions that change the world.”

Rachel’s eyes widened with that tidbit! “How... rude!” she replied, then laughed. Sobering a moment later, she looked at him. “How can someone like me fit into your world, Astir?”

He kissed her, but it was just a brief kiss. “You can tell me that you love me every day.”

She snorted. “That’s not going to ingratiate me to...”

“And I’ll tell you that I love you.”

Every other thought flew out of her mind as she stared into his dark eyes. Finally, she said, “You do?”

“I do,” he confirmed. “With every fiber of my being, I love you!”

“But...you left me!”

“I left you because someone shot at me and I thought my presence put you in danger, Rachel.”

“That’s...!” she started to tell him that his concern was crazy, but she remembered that he’d told her that there was a bullet in the trim of her front door. A bullet! “Someone really tried to shoot you?”

He nodded, not saying anything more.

“And you...left me? Because you thought that someone was trying to shoot you and might have missed, hitting me!”

He nodded again.

She continued to stare at him for another long moment, then she threw her arms around his neck. “You do love me!” she whispered with heartfelt joy!

Astir was astonished by her words, as well as the way that she threw herself at him. It took him a moment to catch himself, but as soon as he had her in his arms, he knew that he'd never let her go.

"I really do!" he replied, then bent his head to kiss her.

Astir was just about to lift her up again and carry her up to his bedroom, where she should have been all night, but someone cleared his throat, interrupting his plans. He turned, protecting Rachel from whomever had interrupted them.

"What?" he demanded.

It was his head guard and he simply handed Astir the phone. "There's a crisis in one of the southern villages, Your Highness," he explained.

Astir almost groaned, but then Rachel leaned against him, her soft, full breasts distracting him as he held the phone to his ear.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Your Highness, but something happened in the small town of Timaria. There's been a cave in."

Astir tried to make sense of the call. "A cave in? What the hell could have caved in?"

"We're not sure, Your Highness. Investigators are already on their way, flying down to the village to find out what was going on."

"How many people are hurt?" he asked, taking Rachel's hand as he led her back into the house, then straight out through the front door. The SUVs were already there, waiting for Rachel and Astir to duck into the back seat. As soon as they were settled, the SUVs took off, speeding down the road to the small airfield where his plane would take off.

Jeffrey stared at the buildings. Or the remnants of the buildings! None of the village was standing! Even the emergency personnel were struggling to get out of the cave in.

How the hell had this happened? What had gone wrong? He'd known that some of his calculations had been off, but he hadn't realized that they'd been this off! The whole village, every single building had collapsed, the earth simply giving way underneath the weight of the buildings and roads and cars and people!

He turned, surveying the catastrophe, astonished to see such chaos!

Jeffrey knew what he had to do. He turned on his heel and dove into the truck he'd been using during the mining operation. Without a backward glance, he drove away, his tires squealing as he sped down the highway. To hell with his bonus money, he thought. He'd be lucky if he avoided prison after this!

Chapter 15

“Dear heaven!” Rachel gasped as soon as the SUV stopped at the edge of the village. Yesterday, the whole town had fallen into what appeared to be a sink hole. People were moving around, trying to figure out what to do. Astir’s Emergency Services personnel were arriving, along with trucks filled with supplies. Food, water, temporary shelters, and blankets were all arriving, but it would take days to get everyone settled.

“This is a mess!” Astir growled, surveying the damage next to Rachel.

“How do sink holes happen like this?” Rachel asked, lacing her fingers through his as she leaned against him, trying to support him. She could feel his anger and outrage. There was no way to soothe his fury, but she could be here with him as he looked upon the wreckage that used to be a thriving village.

“This wasn’t a sink hole,” he told her, thinking about the scientist who had given him data about odd tremors in this area. He’d sent several investigators here to figure out what was happening, but none of them had reported back. He’d ordered a larger investigation just three days ago, but that had only been in the planning stages since they all suspected that the problem was bigger than an earthquake in the wrong part of the world.

Now Astir knew that this was much bigger and he was going to get to the bottom of this mess!

“Tell me what’s happening,” he ordered, turning to the geologist that had come in with the initial crew to find out what had happened.

In jeans and a loose tee-shirt, Rachel stared at the mess, wishing she could do more to help. Turning, she watched the truck that was unloading a large tent which would house people who had lost their homes. One of the tent poles

was rolling away and she rushed over, grabbing it and hefting it into her hands. She walked over to the other workers, not sure what to do. “Where should this one go?” she asked.

The worker glanced at her, then pointed to the site. “Take it over there. That’s the center support beam.”

Rachel carried it to what looked like the center of the outlines of what would eventually be a tent. She then walked back to the truck, ignoring the intense heat of the sun overhead and grabbed another pole. She carried that one over to the place the man pointed to. Again and again, she helped unload the tent poles. When they were all in place, she helped haul the massive tent into place. It took less than two hours, but with the help of some heavy machinery, the tent was lifted into place, staked down and then secured. Moments later, the stunned remaining villagers were helped into the shaded interior of the tent.

Rachel found the bags of ice that had just been brought in and started carrying those into the tent, setting up a water station. When she noticed three kids huddled over to one side of the tent, their eyes huge with fear and confusion, Rachel grabbed three waters and brought them over to the kids. “I’ll get you something to eat very soon, okay?”

The kids nodded, guzzling down the water. Rachel could tell that they were still thirsty so she brought more water, then went out in search of food.

The food trucks were next. At the moment there were only prepackaged meals and she found several, carrying them over to the three kids, then went in search of anyone else that might need some reassurance. Rachel couldn’t imagine what these families were going through. Their entire town had... collapsed! In their minds, she doubted that anything made sense!

She helped unload the large tables that would be set up to serve meals. She broke three fingernails trying to get the stupid metal legs to snap into place, then scratched her arm when she tried to flip the table over. The next table, she

learned to set it onto its side, then tumble it over until it was upright.

The food service preparation was next. The bags of food were heavy, but she helped with the unloading “train”, a line of people who shifted the bags of food from one person to the next until it was all inside and ready to be prepared.

While the food was being served, Rachel moved to the main tent and helped set up the sleeping cots, making sure that each cot had a pillow and blanket. She was hot and hungry but refused to slow down. These people didn’t have a home. This would be their beds and their home for the foreseeable future! They had nothing! Literally, nothing at all.

“Rachel!”

She stopped when she heard her name, looking around. Astir stood off to the side, looking as exhausted as she felt.

“Are you okay?” she asked, moving over to him and literally slumped into his arms when he wrapped them around her.

“I’m fine. How are you doing?” he asked, smoothing her hair back from her face.

“So much better than everyone else here. They’ve lost their homes and everything, Astir!”

“Not everything,” he promised her. “I’ll help them rebuild their homes. But you,” he looked down at her. “You look exhausted. Have you eaten anything today?”

Rachel blinked, trying to think back. Everyone was slowly moving towards the cots, finding spaces to sleep. Families were huddling together, the shock wearing off as their minds shifted from shock to anger and grief over everything that they’d lost.

“How many people died?” she asked.

“One person died and several others were wounded, but none of the wounds are life-threatening,” he told her.

“Goodness,” she sighed. “This is horrific! But it could have been so much worse.”

“It could have,” he agreed. “But with your help, everyone here will have a place to sleep for the night.” He kissed her. “Thank you for everything you did today.”

Rachel leaned her head against his chest. “I didn’t do much.”

Astir didn’t argue with her. He simply put an arm around her waist and led her away. “We need to give them some privacy now,” he told her softly as they walked out of the tent. They ducked into the SUVs and drove away, but Rachel kept glancing back towards the tent, wondering what more she could do for them.”

“Prefabricated houses are already on their way to the village,” Astir promised her. “It will take some time to get enough houses down here, but there are also tents and more food heading their way as well.” He took her hand and kissed her fingers. “I’m taking care of everyone.”

Rachel sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. “And who did this? Why did it even have to happen?”

“A mining company,” he gritted out, taking her hand and bracing it against his thigh. “Someone was working an illegal mining operation that went directly under the village.”

She stared up at him in the dim light. “That’s awful! Why would they do that?”

“Apparently, they were searching for a mineral that can be used in computers to make the microchips. There are several large deposits in this part of the world and one of the biggest was right underneath the village.”

Rachel’s mouth dropped open. “Seriously? This was all about computers and money?”

“Yeah. The thing is, we’ve known about that mineral deposit for several decades now. It just isn’t the best way to build the microchips, so no one has bothered to dig it up. I’ll find out who did this and they will be punished!”

“Good,” Rachel replied with a yawn, leaning her head back against his shoulder.

Chapter 16

Rachel woke up with a start. For a long moment, she couldn't figure out where she was. The bed was enormous and was draped in sheets that felt like satin. There was bright sunshine streaming in through the long windows and...!

“Good morning!”

Rachel jerked around, finding Astir coming towards her wearing only a pair of low slung, loose pants and nothing else. His chest was completely bare, and he looked... magnificent!

“Where are we?” she asked, waiting for the morning sickness to kick in. But for some reason, she felt...fine. Good actually!

“We're in the palace. You were exhausted last night and barely woke up when I put you in bed and undressed you.”

Vaguely, she remembered Astir teasing her as he pulled off her clothes. “I fell asleep on you?” Then she remembered the villagers. “What's going on with the...?”

“Everyone is fine,” he assured her. “Four more tents were put up overnight. A hot breakfast is being served as we speak, and my emergency assistance people are already on the scene. They are helping everyone get organized and file paperwork for government sponsored loans and insurance claims.”

“That's...good!” she sighed, then leaned back against the pillows. “Why are you smiling?”

He handed her a tablet and waited. Rachel looked at the images, her eyes narrowing as she realized she was staring at the village. Or the rubble that used to be the village! And then her eyes noticed...herself! “Is that me?” she asked, stunned by the picture of herself. This was the news, she realized. The international news!

“Yes,” Astir replied, sitting down next to her on the bed, his hip resting against her thigh. “That’s you. International public opinion has declared the future Queen of Silar to be a saint.” He lightly kissed her lips. “And you told me that you didn’t know how to be a world leader,” he teased, tsking at her as he shook his head. He pointed to the pictures. “That’s how one becomes a leader, Rachel. By caring. By doing what’s right.”

She sighed, tossing the tablet to the bed. She didn’t want to see her image in the news. It made her stomach do some oddly uncomfortable flips.

She lifted her blue eyes to him, trying to remember why she was angry with him. But her heart simply wasn’t there anymore. She’d seen the concern in Astir’s eyes yesterday. She’d felt his anger over what had happened to his people. She loved him. Pure and simple, she loved him!

“Can we go back to help out today?”

He shook his head. “No, we’ll just be in the way. Right now, my personnel are organizing the relief efforts and, if we show up again today, the reporters will arrive in droves. The villagers need some peace to recover.”

“Oh,” she whispered, feeling sad that she couldn’t help again. Her fingers plucked at the soft comforter, not sure what to do now.

“When will you marry me?” he asked.

Rachel’s eyes widened as she lifted from the comforter, staring into his dark eyes. “I thought you’d already declared that we would be married by the end of the week.”

He sighed, running his hand along her outer thigh. “I know I said that. But,” he lowered his head for a brief moment, then looked into her eyes. “I want you to want to marry me.”

Her heart soared with his words! “And...marriage is what you want as well? Not for political expediency or because I’m pregnant?”

Instantly, his features relaxed. The hope in her voice was apparent. “Yes,” he teased. “That’s the logical next step after two people declare that they are in love.”

She shifted on the bed, feeling odd. “We don’t...!”

“Yes, we do!” he replied, placing a hand over her stomach as he anticipated her comments. “First of all, I want to marry you. I love you and marriage is the best way to keep you in my life forever. Plus, marriage allows me to spoil you and make you the happiest woman alive,” he continued when she started to protest. “Then there’s the issue of ensuring that our child is recognized as my legitimate heir. I don’t want any doubt about this child, Rachel.”

She didn’t like the second reason, but his first reason for marriage was pretty good. “You want to marry me?” she whispered, needing to hear it again.

“Yes,” he replied with feeling. “I love you, Rachel. I said it before, but obviously, you don’t believe me so I’ll keep saying it until you believe it.” He paused, letting that statement sink in before he continued. “Over and over, you’ve proven to me that you are a beautiful person. I love you because of that.”

She laughed. “Not because of my body?”

His eyes heated up and he looked down at her. She’d fallen asleep in just the thin tee-shirt she’d worn yesterday. “Well, there are many enticing delights, since you’re asking.”

She laughed again, charmed by his teasing and thinking to punch him playfully, but instead, her hand lifted to cup his cheek. “I do love you, Astir. Not because of who you are, but because of the goodness deep inside you. You’re a good man,” she whispered, then leaned forward to kiss him.

For several long moments, they remained like that. Then he pulled away. “You’re not going to distract me. You have a dress fitting in,” he glanced at the time, “five minutes. And I need to be updated on an investigation.”

“Five minutes?” she gasped, jumping out of the bed and hurrying over to the bathroom. “Why didn’t you tell me

sooner?”

Astir watched her bottom, appreciating the cute roundness of her derriere in the skimpy panties. Yes, he was definitely going to have to select lingerie that was more... revealing, he thought.

Unfortunately, that delectable process would have to wait. While Rachel showered, he had things to finish up. Walking out of the apartment, he nodded to his guards, then walked down the long hallway to the security briefing room. As soon as he sat down, he nodded to his intelligence commander. “What have you discovered?”

The man smiled and pressed a few buttons on the keyboard in front of him. “Over the past several hours, we’ve tracked down the man in charge of the mining operation. Even at this moment, he’s trying to board a flight to the Philippines.”

“Why the Philippines?” Astir demanded, watching the screen at the opposite end of the conference room table. It showed a live feed as several men dressed in black, armed to the teeth, made their way through the long hallways of the international airport. Several other passengers noticed and their faces lit up with interest, but Astir focused on the agents as they moved into position.

It was quickly apparent who the culprit was. The man was sitting in one of the black, airport gate chairs, a baseball cap pulled down low over his face. The man pretended to flip through a magazine, but as soon as the agents came around the corner, the guy knew that he’d been caught.

He jumped up, trying to rush through a perceived gap in the agents. But the men quickly tackled the guy to the ground.

“What’s he saying?” Astir asked.

The intel chief increased the volume. “It’s not my fault!” the man at the airport yelled. “There was something wrong with the calculations! It wasn’t my fault!”

When the culprit was being hauled to his feet, his words announcing his guilt, the intel chief clicked off the video feed. “There are others involved and we’re quickly rounding them up. We’ll get more information from them as soon as we are able to interrogate them.”

“Good work,” Astir replied, nodding his head for emphasis.

“The mining operation was digging too close to the surface and too near to the village for safety. The investigators that were sent down to look into the issue at your direction were found, but...” he didn’t finish the statement.

“Have their families been notified?” Astir asked, tamping down on a new wave of anger over the deaths of the people he’d sent in to investigate.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the chief replied.

“Good. I’ll make a personal visit to each family as well.”

“I’ll arrange that.”

“Anything else?”

“No, Your Highness,” the man replied.

“Good. Then I’m off to convince a woman to marry me,” he said, feeling a sense of rightness slip through him. Married. To Rachel!

Epilogue

Astir smoothed a hand down over the front of his formal uniform. He wore all of the insignia that announced his station, but none of that concerned him. He needed to see Rachel. Was she okay? This was awfully rushed, but Astir wanted this finished! He wanted to know that Rachel was his wife, not just the woman carrying his child. Although, that was pretty amazing. He still couldn't believe that he was going to be a father!

There was so much that needed to be done. The villagers needed more permanent homes, they needed fresh water and food and reassurance that their lives would eventually return to normal. There was a meeting of the regional leaders next month and the topics that needed to be finalized. Oil leases were waiting on his approval. Military decisions needed to be made. There was a new hospital plan to approve. There was...!

"Rachel!" he breathed when she stepped into the room filled with his council and their families. For a spur of the moment wedding, there were flowers everywhere, a priest waiting to perform the ceremony and the palace chef had created a feast. But all he could think about was how beautiful Rachel looked in her ice blue dress and diamonds. She wore a diamond tiara on her head, chandelier earrings and a necklace worth more than a king's ransom around her beautiful neck. But it was her eyes that he loved. Those blue eyes stared right back at him and he loved her more than ever! She was such a beauty! And in a moment, she'd be his!

"Hello," she whispered when she reached him. Astir took her hand and pulled her closer.

"Hello," he replied back softly. "I love you."

Those beautiful blue eyes sparkled. "I love you too!"

Two weeks later....

Adele glared at the pictures. The woman was...okay, so she wasn't fat. But she definitely wasn't thin. She ran a hand over her flat stomach, wondering why Astir had chosen that woman when he could have had her!

A squealing noise pulled her attention away from the pictures and she came out of her office. Several of the other designers in her office were hugging Lilly.

"What's going on?" Adele snapped, crossing her arms over her stomach. She knew that the movement pushed her breasts up, showing them off to better advantage.

George, the firm's owner barely glanced at her as he brought a bottle of champagne out. "Congratulations, Lilly! This is huge!"

"What's huge?" Adele demanded, irritated that her initial question was ignored.

George glanced in her direction, an impatient look on his handsome features now. "Lilly won the contract to redecorate Sheik del Taran's Manor House." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Apparently, his new wife hates the current designs. She wants something more comfortable, and Lilly submitted the winning design!"

Adele's whole body tightened with fury. That Rachel woman had stolen her man and now she dared to humiliate her by hiring someone else to redesign the Manor House! How dare she!

"But...I just finished that design a couple of months ago!" she hissed. "It was perfect!"

George popped the cork on the champagne then started pouring the bubbly liquid into paper cups. "I guess it wasn't as perfect as you'd hoped." He laughed and Lilly giggled. The woman actually giggled!

Adele rolled her eyes as she swished her hair behind her shoulders. "The woman has no taste!"

Silence descended on the room but Adele was too furious to find out what caused the change in the party atmosphere. If she had, Adele might have been warned, but

she simply huffed a bit as she turned to walk into her office again.

“Adele Mossimer?” a male voice called out.

Adele turned, trying to paste a smile to her features. Any man calling her name was a good thing and gave her a surge of power. However, the uniformed police officers weren't smiling back at her.

“What's going on?” George asked, lowering the bottle of champagne as everyone turned towards the officers.

“I'm Adele,” she called out, enjoying being the center of attention once again. “What can I do for you, officers?” she asked, shifting her hip to better show off her figure.

“I'm arresting you on the suspicion of attempted murder for hire,” the officer explained. “You have the right to remain silent...” He read Adele her rights even as he slapped a pair of metal handcuffs over her wrists.

Adele was too stunned for a moment, trying to grasp what was going on. When her brain finally snapped into gear, she pulled away. “What the hell are you talking about? I didn't murder anyone!”

The officer's grip tightened on her upper arms, but she tried to jerk away.

“Ma'am, this will all be explained to you at the station.” And he hauled her out of the room. The officer tipped his hat as he said, “Sorry for the interruption. Please continue,” and he winked at Lilly, who blushed at the handsome officer.

As soon as Adele was outside, the group holding forgotten cups of champagne moved over to stare out the window so they could all watch Adele being placed into the back of a police car. When the police cruiser had disappeared, everyone turned, looking at each other. No one was sure how to react. One person smiled. Then another giggled. More laughter erupted and...moments later, the whole group cheered and lifted their champagne up in the air.

No one was going to miss that obnoxious woman!

A message from Elizabeth:

Thank you ladies! It's always a thrill when I know that real people are reading my stories. Before digital books, I wrote only for myself and this is so much more thrilling!

Here is my normal plea; I'm asking for reviews. They are so urgently needed and I read all of them. 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. 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 fun excerpt from next month's "The Sheik's Rescue"!)

Excerpt from “The Sheik’s Rescue”

Release Date: May 13, 2022

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Smothering a curse, Calista turned her head away, not wanting to watch as the tall, handsome man stepped up onto the stage. The applause was almost deafening, the crowd cheering for the man. But Calista didn’t get it. She didn’t understand why these people loved him so much. Point of fact, she hated him.

Unfortunately, she was also engaged to him.

Oh, he was handsome enough, she thought, turning back to look at him as he greeted the speaker, shaking the other man’s hand and commenting on whatever the speaker was saying to him. Goran was the epitome of “tall, dark and handsome”. Add in charisma that was off the charts and, intellectually, Calista could understand why everyone loved him.

Everyone else, she corrected!

She watched with her professional, polite mask firmly in place when the crowds continued to cheer, even standing up as if the man had done something extraordinary.

Calista sighed, trying hard not to rub her temples as a headache started to make itself known. She was just tired, she told herself. As soon as she left here, she could head to the airport and go home. Or maybe she should take a moment to tell her fiancé that she wasn’t going to marry him before she boarded the flight home. Yes, that was probably a wise thing to do. Better to end this annoying engagement before she left. That way, she could go back home and leave all this tension behind.

Why in the world had she agreed to such a farcical engagement in the first place?

Oh yeah. He'd kissed her. After her brother's wedding, the man had asked her to dance. And that dance had led to a quiet, tingling stroll through a moonlit garden and... then he'd kissed her. A week later, through phone calls that had almost felt like a diplomatic negotiation, she'd agreed to his proposal.

A proposal over the phone should have been her first clue, Calista thought.

But she'd kept remembering that kiss in the moonlight!

That kiss had been...wow! She'd kissed men during her college years. But when Sheik Goran el Istara, proud and powerful leader of Skyla, had kissed her, she'd seen sparks flying through the air, even though her eyes had been closed. It was almost as if she'd come alive for the first time in her life with that kiss, her whole body tingling and enervated, wanting...wanting something she'd never even known existed!

Even now, she could remember the tingle of her lips, the sparks in her fingers and toes as he'd kissed her that day so long ago. She'd remembered thinking, "Yes! Finally! This was the man!"

Unfortunately, there hadn't been any additional kisses since that magical night. Every interaction since then had felt...clinical. Passionless! Even worse, every conversation with Goran had felt like an interview, as if he were somehow testing her intelligence and ensuring that her opinions aligned with his own. Those conversations had been difficult as she'd tried very hard to remain diplomatic while still being true to her personal beliefs. All of those conversational struggles had angered her because...well, she'd felt as if she'd failed somehow. She could see the disappointment in his eyes. She'd felt his frustration, even if he didn't touch her again.

Sighing, Calista focused on the man now standing at the podium. The excited crowd resumed their seats and

Calista sank gratefully into the chair on the stage. A hush fell over the crowd as everyone waited to hear what the great Sheik Goran was going to say next!

Knowing that the press was in the back of the room, their cameras clicking away and video recording every expression, every movement of her body which would eventually be analyzed later, Calista pasted a polite smile to her face, shifted her knees towards Goran and demurely crossed her legs at the ankles. Feigning interest, she lifted her chin, trying very hard to listen to the words. Unfortunately, the speakers were facing towards the audience. Calista only heard every third or fourth word so she wasn't sure what the man was saying!

When she'd first met Goran el Istra, Calista had thought that the man was dashing and daring and...and he'd taken her breath away! They'd talked several times and then...goodness, that kiss! One kiss and she'd melted against him! When he'd asked her to marry him, she'd understood that they didn't really know each other. He was a powerful ruler and she was the sister to another powerful leader. Goran didn't have time to court a woman, to have endless conversations and take her out to dinner. He didn't have the time for all of the dates and rituals that would give them time to get to know one another. But after that kiss, Calista had believed that they could work out any issues. She'd believed! So she'd entered into the engagement thinking that her life would be filled with interesting adventures.

The reality was that her life was now filled with formal dinners and boring conversations with tedious diplomats and dreary world leaders, pompous business executives and mind-numbing social events. It was filled with rules and decorous protocols and monotonous efforts to...to get away from the man! Good grief, Calista had become an expert at coming up with reasons to avoid the man!

Unfortunately, tonight had been one of those events she couldn't escape. Tonight, Goran's assistant had called Calista's assistant, asking if their schedules would allow a joint public appearance. Hence, her presence here on the

stage, wearing a sedate...uh, boring...ivory suit and boring ivory heels, her hair pulled back into a sedate chignon designed not to offend anyone. There would be no hand holding, no brief touches and absolutely no kissing during this trip to Skyla. Everything was strictly...yawn...business.

Calista didn't want this. She didn't want to be the public wife of a man who didn't want to touch her. She didn't want to be the woman who walked by his side, never truly loving her husband.

She'd seen how her older brother, Astir, loved his wife Rachel. Those two were sweetly, madly in love. They couldn't seem to stop touching each other and Calista couldn't count the number of times she'd caught those two in some alcove making out or asked if her oldest brother was available, only to find that his office door was locked, with Rachel inside. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what they were doing in Astir's office!

Damn Astir! Damn him for showing her what she would be missing if she married a dud like Goran! She didn't want to be constantly smothering a yawn during her marriage. She wanted...passion! She wanted excitement! She wanted to be challenged by her husband and to challenge him back! She wanted...someone other than the powerful world leader who seemed more interested in his next economic policy than in her!

Would Goran even notice if she just...puff... disappeared? Would he even care? Probably not, she thought as Goran shifted on his feet, his speech continuing. For a moment, she wondered what he would say. What was this conference even about? Calista had no idea. Her assistant had put this event on her schedule without asking, then had apologized profusely when Calista had grumbled about the obligation. Granted, it had been over a year since she'd agreed to the engagement, so it was time for them to set a date for the wedding. But every time someone mentioned setting a date, Calista felt as if she were being sentenced to a prison term!

Hence, why Calista was going to tell Goran that she couldn't marry him. Today! Before she got on that plane to

fly home, she would be a single woman again! No way would she subject herself to a lifetime of his boring conversations about economic policies or military spending or...or whatever yawn-worthy topic he brought up during their next meal together.

And yeah, a formal dinner was on the agenda tonight. Alone. With him!

Little did he know that she was going to dump him! She'd be very kind and tell him it was "all about her" and that she couldn't see tying him down with her, with someone who had "issues". She wasn't sure what those issues were, other than the need to not be bored out of her mind for the next fifty years. But she'd come up with something. Something horrible. Maybe a disease? Yes! Yes, a wasting disease that couldn't be cured. Of course, in a few months, or maybe a year, she could announce that she'd been cured. No, she'd have to wait until after Goran's wedding to someone else before she was cured.

Tuning out his words, she couldn't bear to listen to yet another speech about building another university or bridge or hospital or...whatever. Those were all very necessary, wonderful accomplishments. But did she really need to be here? Or even better than her absence, wouldn't it be amazing to be part of the planning and implementation stages of those accomplishments?

Goran finished his speech and turned, looking at the woman sitting primly on the stage behind him. How the hell had he been so wrong about her? Calista was...uptight. After that one kiss they'd shared so many months ago, he'd had high hopes for their marriage. But she carried that "don't touch me" attitude around with her, no matter where they were. They could be completely alone or in a crowd of people and Calista's body language screamed "Don't touch me!"

She was a stunningly beautiful woman with dark, silky hair that he knew would cascade over her delicate shoulders...if she ever lightened up enough to release it from

the tight knot she put it into every time he saw her. He also knew that she had a lust-worthy figure. He'd felt her curves, experienced that body shivering against him during that one kiss.

But every time he saw her now, she was wearing stiff, formal jackets that masked her curves, hiding every delectable inch of her from his view. All he could see were the lovely cat eyes and soft, full lips that he imagined kissing...except that every time he looked at her, she seemed to be pulling away from him, those full, kissable lips in a frown that warned him off. Even today, he was definitely getting the "hands off" vibe from the lovely Princess Calista.

Walking over to her, Goran wondered what she would do if he reached out and messed up her perfectly coifed hair. Or if he kissed her? Would she shudder with revulsion? Was it just him that she didn't like? Or was it all of humanity? He'd wondered briefly if she might prefer women, because every time he almost touched her, Calista backed out of the way, silently announcing that she wanted nothing to do with him.

Tonight though...tonight he was going to tell her that their engagement needed to end. He was going to tell her that...that it wasn't her, that he needed to focus on the business of running his country and he didn't want to put her into a situation in which she felt less than...whatever. He didn't care if she believed him or not, he wasn't marrying a woman who didn't want him. There was no way in hell he wanted to live the life of a monk!

Calista was a startlingly beautiful woman, he'd grant her that much. Her soft, creamy skin and her long, dark hair... hair that was always contained with pins and hairspray so that nothing, not even a hurricane, could mess up her style. And her clothes? Her outfits were the epitome of an ice queen! That ivory suit she'd chosen to wear today...what the hell? The color suited her creamy skin, but it also made her look... frozen. It didn't help that her facial expressions barely moved!

No. Just...no way in hell was he marrying this woman! Their one kiss had fooled him into thinking that

Calista was a passionate woman. But after that, she'd silently warned him that there was nothing passionate, or even warm, about her. Every conversational gambit he'd offered had been shut down with polite, politically correct answers and a politely cold smile. He had no idea who the real woman was underneath all of that ice.

She was cold and emotionless, with none of the spirit or spunk that he'd been hoping was beneath that startlingly beautiful exterior. She couldn't even converse about... anything other than politics! Oh, she was well versed in many of the political issues both of their countries were striving to handle right now. But there was more to life than politics! What did she think and feel and dream about? What was the real Calista like? And why the hell did she constantly bring up those tedious conversational topics when there was so much more that they needed to discuss?!

Tonight, he told himself. Tonight, he'd break off their engagement. He'd let her tell the press anything she wanted, just as long as he didn't have to live with her for the rest of his life!

Sitting down in the chair next to her, he gritted his teeth when Calista shifted her legs to the right, as far away from any part of him as possible.

Just to irritate her, Goran stretched his arm out along the back of her chair, keeping a blank expression on his features when her body tensed.

He didn't care. This would be their last public appearance together. Of course, he'd have to talk with Astir about the issue. Sheik Astir wasn't just Calista's brother. He was also Goran's friend. As leaders of neighboring countries, they'd had disagreements over the years, but they'd always remained friends and had been able to work out their differences.

Goran hoped that this wouldn't be the issue that dissolved their friendship. Goran had been the best man at Astir's wedding. He would talk to his friend and explain the

situation. Goran wanted a marriage just like Astir's and he wouldn't settle for anything less.

He definitely wouldn't settle for the cold, emotionless relationship that, apparently, Calista had been anticipating.

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