



EL MITRA FAMILY  
BOOK 3

THE  
"WICKED"  
*List*

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR  
ELIZABETH LENNOX

# The “Wicked” List

By Elizabeth Lennox

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# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt from “The Sheik’s Temptation”](#)

## Chapter 1

“Yes!” she triumphantly whispered, then glanced around, embarrassed that she’d spoken out loud and praying that no one sitting in the crowded room had heard her.

Unfortunately, her eyes glanced to the hated man across the room and, *of course*, he was staring at her! In fact, the irritating ogre even lifted a dark eyebrow quizzically, almost as if wondering what had just occurred to her.

Ignoring him, Sada defiantly wrote down the next item on her “Wicked List”. Skinny-dipping. Then as an afterthought, she added, “in the moonlight”. Because what’s the point in skinny-dipping during the daylight hours?

Wait a moment...Sada considered that thought. Only skinny dipping in the moonlight? What if she did both? Would it be more interesting to swim naked at night? Or during the day? She shivered, wondering what would happen if someone saw her skinny dipping during the daytime. Didn’t matter, so she added “in the daylight” down as a separate item. Why limit oneself? When dreaming, one should be daring!

She’d read a quote saying, “If your dreams don’t scare you, they aren’t big enough.” That was her new mantra!

She even added an exclamation point to those two items. Flipping the pages back to her “official” notes, Sada calmly folded her hands and lifted her eyes, pretending to listen to the speaker. She really should be paying attention, Sada admonished herself with a heavy sigh.

Unfortunately, she’d completely lost the thread of the speaker’s point. Sada knew that this meeting was important. All the regional leaders were in attendance at this conference. Sada was representing her country, Fahre, in her brother’s absence. Her oldest brother, Tazir, Sheik of Fahre, had refused the invitation, wanting to be with his wife, Lila, as they

anticipated the birth of their first child. Rayed, the second oldest in their family, might have come, but Sada had convinced Tazir to reinforce his stance on women's rights by sending her instead of Rayed. Rayed hadn't fought for the "privilege" to attend, preferring to be with his new wife, Emma.

So, here she was, Princess Sada el Mitra of Fahre, triumphantly sitting in on the most tediously boring meeting in the history of meetings. The current speaker was droning on about...bridges? No, building materials. No...wait...Sada silently groaned. She had no idea what the man was lecturing about.

Her eyes moved over the other attendees and...darn it! *He* was still looking at her!

Sheik Micah al-Marri, Ruler of Batam. Fahre and Batam weren't enemies, however, the two countries weren't exactly friendly either. The competition between Batam and Fahre was intense, both countries vying for prime business investors while their universities competed at research challenges. Their countries considered the competitions to be friendly and Sada knew that her brothers and Sheik al-Marri were on good terms. The men enjoyed getting together, either in Fahre or Batam, under the guise of promoting good will. However, Sada knew that the three men simply played poker and had a great time. They called it "on-going diplomacy". It was merely an excuse to beat each other at yet another competition and drink expensive alcohol.

Of course, all of the regional countries competed with each other. It was simply the nature of the world. Every country wanted to be the best at computing power, energy resources, technological advances, or whatever. But there always seemed to be a sharper edge to Batam's competitiveness. And Batam's ruler!

He was tall, she thought. Probably as tall as her older brothers, but since she'd always vacated the premises during

their so-called diplomacy weekends, she'd never seen Sheik al-Marri standing next to either Tazir or Rayed.

And while her brothers were handsome in a rugged, don't-mess-with-me sort of way, there wasn't anything handsome about Sheik al-Marri. He was made up of lean, hard angles. Even his gaze was sharp and...! Sada gasped, suddenly realizing that she'd been staring at him and quickly pulled her eyes away.

Darn it! She didn't know the man, but instinctively, she didn't like him.

Another mischievous thought occurred to her and she flipped the pages in her notebook. Quickly, she scribbled, "*Have a man at my mercy.*" Smoothing the papers down again, she turned her head, forcing her gaze back to the speaker. Dear heaven, this particular speaker's voice had no inflection to it. Glancing around, she noticed that the others were all a bit dazed, unable to pay attention when the speaker's voice was the perfect pitch for putting everyone to sleep.

Squirming in her chair, she tried to remain attentive. Reminding herself that she was the *sedate, responsible, always polite sister*, Sada lifted her eyes and forced her mind to pay attention.

Unfortunately, or perhaps because Sada was sick of being the "*sedate, responsible, polite sister*," her thoughts kept drifting off to non-*sedate*, completely irresponsible, and outrageously impolite images. She wasn't just polite and responsible. Sada was also...completely inexperienced, she thought with a frustrated sigh. Sexually and in so many other ways. She hated that fact.

All of her friends from boarding school and university were getting married and having babies. Or not having babies, not marrying, but living their fabulously exciting lives in the most outrageous and adventurous ways. She read about their thrilling escapades on social media or via the gossipy emails

they each sent out to the group. Her friends were working hard at fascinating careers and playing even harder.

Meanwhile, Sada lived in a gilded palace, smiled politely for the cameras, wore demure dresses, and politely conversed with politically correct diplomats and world leaders. To the outside world, her life might appear wonderful and exciting. But here she was, surrounded by regional leaders, bored to tears, listening to someone drone on about the advantages of fabricated materials versus natural building materials, the tensile strength of...of...?

What in the world was tensile strength? And couldn't she just read an article about it and not have to listen to this monotone person? His voice would solve insomnia!

Suddenly inspired, Sada flipped the pages again, writing, "Scream with passion" as item number four. The speaker might not be conveying his message about... whatever...very effectively, but her "Wicked List" was shaping up nicely!

Speaking of wicked, her eyes flashed over to Sheik al-Marri. Sure enough, the obnoxious brute was still staring at her. Even as she watched, his thumb moved over his lower lip. Back and forth, his eyes holding hers without mercy. Sada felt her heartbeat accelerate and...had the room suddenly become too warm? She watched that thumb, suddenly mesmerized. What would it be like to have his thumb on her lip? Or even better, his lips on hers? Would his kiss be as hard as his image? Or would he kiss her tenderly? Was he coaxing? Or demanding? Both options seemed incredibly erotic!

As soon as she thought that last word, Sada's mind blinked back to reality. What in the world was she thinking? There was absolutely no possibility of her kissing *that man*! He was rude and obnoxious! How dare he stare at her during a highly important meeting!

Granted, she wasn't paying attention to the speaker either. But al-Marri didn't know that! Rude, obnoxious,



horrible man!

Pulling her eyes away, she glanced out the window, wondering how long this horrible, tedious, “highly important” meeting would last. Surely this speaker was nearly done, right? Seriously, couldn’t he read the room and notice that no one was paying attention any longer?

The sun was starting to set and she wanted out of here. She wanted to breathe in the fresh air and smile up at the moonlight, lift her arms up and feel the breeze on her skin.

Another idea occurred to her and Sada added “*Dance in the moonlight,*” then smiled. Her newest addition to her “wicked” list wasn’t sexual as much as romantic and dreamy. Yes, she desperately wanted a bit of romance in her life.

However, she was trying to break out of her ladylike persona so she also added “*Sex in the shower.*” She’d read about that in a book and it had seemed really hot! She sifted through other sex scenes from the books she’d read and added “*Be on top*” as an action item. Shivering, she smiled.

Then Sada defiantly glanced over at Sheik al-Marri.

Sure enough, he was still watching her. She glared at him for a moment, silently conveying that she didn’t appreciate his attention! But the dratted man merely lifted that dark eyebrow at her as if silently asking, “What are you going to do about it?”

Bastard, she thought in annoyance.

Sada flipped the pages again and underlined “*Scream.*” Yep, Sada was wretchedly sick of being silent. She was tired of protecting everyone else’s feelings by keeping her mouth shut. Sada wanted to scream, rant, and voice her opinions. She wanted to stand up and tell the idiot man still blathering on about...whatever...to shut up!

And yet, she remained politely in her seat. Because of the frustrated emotions roiling inside of her, she pretended to write something in her notebook. The speaker said something

about sand and glue and...she wrote all of that down, as if it were an ingenious idea.

Finally... the speaker concluded his comments. After a moment of polite applause, the audience jumped up, obviously eager to get out of the room. Thankfully, this was the last meeting of the day. There would be a formal dinner tonight and then the regional conference would be over. Everyone would return to their countries. The participants would grant interviews to reporters. They would rave about how innovative, how congenial the conference had been, and how eager they were to implement the ideas in their countries and build new relationships. Blah, blah, blah.

Sada grabbed her belongings and stuffed them into her leather tote bag, relieved to get out of this chair and away from the speaker. Oh, and she was intensely relieved to get away from the too-knowing gaze of an obnoxious ruler with insufferable eyebrows and a thumb she fantasized about breaking.

Sheik Micah al Mari watched as the beautiful Princess Sada hurried out of the meeting room, transfixed by the gentle sway of her shapely hips and long, graceful legs. Unfortunately, he could only see her calves because of the stiff, black suit she was wearing, but...hell, they were great calves! Slender ankles, strong muscles, and...unfortunately, that was all he could see of her legs.

She'd distracted him during the meeting and he was fascinated by the various expressions that had crossed her lovely features. Her lips were lush and full and he could picture her doing amazing, shocking things with those lips. His body stirred, just picturing those "things." And her eyes! Her body language feigned a demure appearance, but her eyes flashed with fire. Every time she looked at him, he could see that fire, the passion, anger and desire in those eyes. Micah was captured!

If he'd been the marrying kind, Micah would have been tempted to contact her brother, Tazir and ask for...what? He wasn't the marrying kind. He'd visited Tazir and Rayed over the years, but their interactions had focused on diplomacy and poker. Sheik Tazir was a tough, but fair, ruler. Perhaps Tazir would be more receptive to an offer of marriage. It would be a good alliance, Micah thought as he watched her escape through the double doors to the conference room.

The only problem with that plan was that Micah wasn't the marrying kind. Yes, he should probably produce an heir. But that wasn't going to happen. Love and marriage was for other people. He didn't believe in that love-crap and there was no possibility that he would allow himself to be trapped into a political marriage. Not even for a pair of soft, brown eyes and a great pair of legs.

Several other leaders interrupted his view of the woman and Micah focused on the short conversations. He shook several hands and nodded his agreement about whatever they were talking about. But with the double doors open, he had a clear line of sight to the woman standing just outside the perimeter.

"Your Highness, I'd appreciate your opinion about..." Micah wasn't listening but he must have made all of the appropriate replies because the man in front of him kept speaking, unaware that Micah's eyes kept shifting over the man's shoulder to the lovely woman.

Princess Sada continually drew his attention. He wanted her. She was a gorgeous woman and...hell, that mouth! He'd love to know what it was like to kiss a woman with lips like hers! He'd love to see her thick, dark hair down too. Hell, he'd love to weave his hands into that cloud of hair, gently tug her head back so that he could expose that long, sexy neck, find all of the places on her neck that made her moan or shiver. He'd love to...!

His body warned him that his thoughts were going to become obvious soon if he didn't focus.

The conversation ended and Micah started to make his way towards the exit, but he stopped suddenly. Something caught his eye. A flash of color where there should be only bland tan or white. Red? A red notebook?

Walking across the conference room, he bent to pick up the notebook. Micah flipped through the pages. Very neat, very feminine handwriting filled the pages.

Princess Sada's notebook! He checked the cover and, sure enough, the initials SEM were embossed on the upper right hand corner.

Excellent, he thought. This was a perfect opportunity to introduce himself. He could offer her the leather notebook as a peace offering. He'd noticed her angry glances during that last session, but no matter how hard he'd tried, Micah hadn't been able to stop staring at her. She was just so lush and beautiful. Her eyes had repeatedly returned to him as well and he'd felt the electric current pass between them whenever their eyes met.

Before he could go find the woman in question, Ambassador Something-or-Other intercepted his hunt. "Your Highness, I was wondering if I could bend your ear on an issue of great importance?"

Micah tucked the notebook under his arm, pressed firmly against his own notebook. His was black and it didn't have his initials on it. He wondered if anyone would recognize his handwriting. Princess Sada's was distinctive, he thought. With just a brief glimpse at the notes, Micah had noticed that her handwriting was just as pretty as the woman. She had a lovely, precise script with small swirls and elegant flourishes. It was delicate and meticulous, exactly like the woman.

What would his handwriting say about him?

The ambassador was gaining steam, but Micah wasn't listening. Plus, he needed to return the notebook to Sada.

Hmm...when had he started thinking of her as simply Sada instead of Princess Sada?

Needing to hunt down his escaping prey, he lifted a hand, stopping the tedious ambassador. "If you'll excuse me," he started, hesitating briefly because Micah couldn't remember the ambassador's name but he compensated his lack of protocol by touching the man's arm briefly, "I need to deliver a package to someone."

"Of course, Your Highness," the man bowed deeply. "I appreciate your time."

The man moved away and Micah didn't give him another thought. He brought the curious notebook up and... something started to slide out. Quickly, he flipped the red notebook around, then opened up the pages, intending to simply stuff the papers back in. He was just about to close it when the words "mercy" caught his eye.

Alone in the room now, Micah scanned through the page. Quickly, he realized that what he was reading was intensely private, but he couldn't stop. In a flash, his body tightened to embarrassing proportions.

This was...! Micah lifted his eyes, finding the woman through the doorway. For a brief moment, he watched her, noted the gentle smile and the delicious way she moved. Her gestures were cautious, but very feminine as she lightly touched the side of her face, almost as if she were brushing something off of her cheek.

Looking down again, he read a bit more, clarifying the meaning of the list. Sure enough, it was a wish list! Or perhaps a to-do list?

He was so turned on by the catalogue of sexual hopes and dreams, he had to lean forward so that he could brace himself on the table. His body was painfully tight, his thoughts whirling with possibilities. And lust! Damn, he wanted to walk out into the next room, throw her over his shoulder and carry her away so they could check off every

damn item on this list. Hell, he even had a couple suggestions that he'd like to add!

She'd never had sex on top? She'd never "rode" a man to her own pleasure? How was that possible? Her previous lovers had been idiots! And she'd never had sex in a shower? That seemed...odd.

Maybe he was misinterpreting this list. Perhaps this was a list of what she *preferred*. Holy hell, the sudden rush of desire nearly swamped him!

Micah took several deep breaths, trying to calm down. He couldn't go out there like this. The aroused state of his body would shock every conference participant!

Closing his eyes, Micah slowly regained control of himself. He was still turned on, but at least now it wasn't as obvious!

Running a rough thumb over the words, he wondered about the list. How long had she been compiling this list? And for some reason, he fiercely needed to know if these were her preferences, or her want-to-try list! It was suddenly imperative that he find out.

Yeah, he'd had a thing for Princess Sada for a while now. He'd first seen her at an event about a year ago, although he couldn't remember which one or who else had attended. He'd also seen her briefly when he'd visited her brothers. In fact, he suddenly realized that his visits to Fahre to speak with Tazir or Rayed had been excuses to catch a glimpse of Sada.

But those glimpses had been too brief and he'd looked for her at other regional meetings. Unfortunately, the elusive woman hadn't been at any of the other events over the past twelve months. Until now!

He wasn't exactly sure how he could use her lost notebook to further his acquaintance with the lovely woman, but it was a tool.

Stepping out into the hallway area where coffee, tea, and other refreshments were being served, he looked around,

his eyes immediately landing on the woman in question.

She was speaking with two men. He didn't know who they were, but she listened intently, her head tilted slightly as if whatever they were saying was of utmost importance.

He took the opportunity to survey Sada. She really was a stunning woman. That dark suit had to go, he thought. She was too beautiful for black. White, he thought. No. Not white. White was pure. White was pristine and cold. His fingers touched the red notebook. Princess Sada...Sada, without the title, wasn't cold. She might appear cold on the outside. But this notebook indicated that she was hot. Hot and yearning for something that she either hadn't experienced, or would like to experience again.

A red suit? Like her notebook? No. As he watched her respond to whatever was being discussed, Sada used her hands as she spoke. A fascinating trait. One he'd like to experience in a more private setting. But red was too bold. Too erotic. He thought about the list. The line items weren't wild or all that salacious. They were normal desires that any warm-blooded woman would enjoy.

"May I get you a drink, Your Highness?" one of the passing waiters asked.

"Beer." He actually didn't want anything to drink. He wanted to be clear-headed when he confronted Sada. This was his moment, he realized. It was just a matter of timing and comprehension.

She felt it too, he realized. She could feel the pull between them. Her words hesitated and she glanced around, not noticing him off to the side. But her hand drifted up again, brushing at her neck.

Sada had a lovely neck. Would she shiver in his arms if he kissed her right at the base of her neck? Or was her ear more sensitive?

He watched her carefully, not concerned about others noticing his interest. He probably should though. If it got

back to Tazir that he was pursuing her, Tazir would demand that Micah marry Sada. He wouldn't, of course. Marriage was definitely not on the agenda.

But the man would demand it. If that happened, the friendly relationship between Batam and Fahre would only stutter. Micah didn't want to create any tensions. He just wanted to make love to the lovely Sada. He wanted to make all of her dreams come true.

He only waited until she stopped her conversation with the elderly ruler from Ponche. He couldn't be certain because he wasn't within hearing distance, but it seemed as if Sada stopped mid-sentence. A moment later, her shoulders tensed and those pretty fingers tried to contain a few stray wisps of that lovely hair. That's how he knew that she could feel the tension between them too. She was just as aware of him as he was of her. It was there, like a silken string, pulling them closer.

"Your beer, Your Highness," the servant announced, presenting the amber-filled glass to him. Micah barely glanced at the glass as he lifted it from the silver tray. He'd just taken a sip when Sada turned her back on him.

Micah laughed softly, nodding his acceptance of her challenge. "Game on, *ly thamiyn*," he whispered.

"Eh...I'm sorry?" someone to his left asked.

Micah turned to a white haired man standing beside him, holding a wafer with some sort of shrimp on top.

Chuckling, Micah drew on all of his self-discipline to stop himself from glancing over at the woman in question. The woman with a mystery that he meant to solve! And resolve! That list...he couldn't stop thinking about her list. It was so incomplete. It didn't matter if the list was made up of activities she wanted to try or a list of things she preferred, there were so many missing items. Actions he wanted to encourage her to add. Activities and sexual positions he preferred. He wished that there were things he hadn't tried,



but...wait! Wasn't there something on her list about being in control? As in...holy hell...as in her being *in control*? He'd never allowed a woman to be in control and, to be honest, it wasn't something that had appealed to him in the past. But to have Sada leaning over him, ordering him to do things to her...! Yeah, that was intriguing.

Hell, the idea of Sada, sweet, innocent-looking, pure, and most-likely uptight Princess Sada engaging in any of the activities on her list was compelling! He could picture her staring down at him, passion in her eyes, her body all soft and naked, her nipples tight, her pink folds glistening with arousal and...!

Groaning, he firmly evicted the provocative images. They were just too erotic for this sedate environment.

The man in front of him was still talking about economic issues, but it took too much brain power to follow the conversation just now, which was pretty embarrassing since he had a graduate degree in economics and loved all forms of math and logic. Combine math and logic with social reactions and normally, he was completely absorbed. He loved the challenge of anticipating human reactions to logical situations, which was basically what economics was all about.

But Sada kept distracting him. Nothing could stop him from glancing around, locating her before returning his attention to the man...uh...there were four men in front of him now. How the hell had that happened? How were they multiplying?

He was immediately distracted again because he noticed some guy, he couldn't put a name to him so he must be someone's personal aide or a deputy ambassador, put a hand on Sada's arm. When she didn't object, but merely shifted so that the man's hand fell away, he made a mental note to tell the ass to keep his filthy hands to himself!

“What do you think, Your Highness?”

Micah ripped his eyes from Sada and turned to the men grouped around him. There were eight now. What the hell had they been talking about?

He reached for a classic escape route. “I think the idea might have merit. Why don’t you send me the details, so I can review it?” A moment later, he nodded sharply to the men around him, not bothering to look at them as he added, “If you will excuse me, gentlemen.”

And with that, he walked away, unaware of the startled glances as he moved through the elegantly decorated room, placing himself and his beer next to the most obvious exit. The cocktail hour was progressing nicely. After nine hours of meetings, including a lecture during breakfast and lunch, the evening would be all about socializing and end with a huge gala tonight before everyone left tomorrow morning. Many of the representatives’ wives would arrive this evening since there would be dancing and more socializing, potential opportunities to embrace...whatever it was one wanted to embrace.

Up until he’d watched Princess Sada enter the conference room for the initial briefing three days ago, Micah had thought to absent himself from tonight’s events immediately after the meal. But now that he had Sada’s notebook, complete with a mysterious list, his plans had changed.

Tonight, he was going to get more information about Sada’s “list”. He wanted details. He wanted to know more. Such as if the list was her favorites or a to-do list. He wanted to know if she just didn’t have any ideas on all of the blanks in between her list and reality, or if...hell, there were so damn many questions!

Sada couldn’t concentrate on the conversation. That horrible, odious man was watching her again! How dare Sheik al-Marri embarrass her like this! Inwardly, Sada bristled at the man’s obnoxiousness. Outwardly, she smiled and nodded,

trying to grasp everything each person around her was espousing. Unfortunately, she didn't understand anything they were saying. She was too distracted by the weight of the gaze from the jerk who was staring at her. And worse, he was blocking her exit! She couldn't leave, couldn't head for the sanctuary of her hotel suite, without passing him!

No way was she going to do that! The man obviously wanted to speak with her and she wasn't going to allow it. Not just because Fahre wasn't on speaking terms with Batam, but also because...well, she just didn't want to! There was something about a man, person...whatever, who tried to manipulate her that only sparked defiance.

She rebelled against anyone telling her what she could or couldn't do. Sada knew that she dealt with enough restrictions all on her own. She didn't need some arrogant, obnoxious man who was too tall and too...whatever, trying to control her.

Besides, if she was going to be ready for tonight's dinner, she had to extricate herself from this tedious post-meeting cocktail party so she could shower and change. She'd chosen a simple cocktail dress for tonight's gala, but she still needed to shower and put it on. It would be wonderful if she could also spend a few, quiet moments alone to regroup, but if that didn't happen, she could just slip out of the gala earlier than anticipated.

With that comforting thought in mind, she excused herself from the group who was conversing about desalination processes and turned towards the exit.

She'd made it five steps before the man in question shifted. For a brief moment, he captured her eyes and her heart pounded against her ribs. But then she noticed his arm. He was holding a red, leather notebook? Red was such an odd...!

Gasping, she whipped open her tote bag that she'd just retrieved. She'd placed it there, always within her sight for

security reasons, but Sada hadn't wanted to have to carry it around during the cocktail hour.

How had he gotten hold of her notebook? How dare he...Sada gulped as a thought struck her. Had he read it? There were notes about the various meetings she'd attended. Ideas and opportunities she wanted to bring back to Tazir as potential solutions to issues in Fahre. But more importantly, that notebook contained her list! The list she'd been adding to for the past several days! The list of actions she wanted to... to...!

Sada couldn't finish that thought. The idea of someone reading that list, of knowing her dark, embarrassing secret, was too much for her to endure.

Had he...?

At his nod and the strange light in the man's eyes, she knew that yes, he *had* read her list. Oh dear heaven! What did that mean? What was he thinking? He had to be thinking that...no, she couldn't even imagine what the man was thinking!

Even as these thoughts flew through her mind, his head tilted meaningfully towards the door. It was an order, she thought. A command to leave the cocktail area and meet him...she had no idea where he wanted her to meet him.

For a moment, she debated ignoring him. But that infuriating dark eyebrow lifted at her hesitation. How could he know? He couldn't! Surely, he couldn't read her mind like that!

And yet, he excused himself from the group of people around him and headed for the exit, not even glancing in her direction.

Oh, if he didn't have her notebook, she would just... just what? What would she do? Ignore him? Absolutely! Tell him to go to hell? With relish!

But she couldn't. What was he going to do with her notebook? Darn it! If only she'd resisted the urge to write

that list! Unfortunately, the meetings over the past several days had been so painfully boring. She hadn't been able to focus on the discussions and her mind had wandered down delicious, salacious pathways.

This wasn't fair! Men fantasized about sex all the time! But the first time...okay, not the first time...she'd thought about sex, but definitely the first time she'd written down her fantasies, she was now in trouble for it.

Lifting her chin in defiance, Sada followed him, determined to reclaim her notebook.

"Good evening, Your Highness," she said, performing a perfunctory curtsy. The gesture was enough to acknowledge the man's rank, but small enough to show him that she disdained his title.

"Good evening, Princess Sada. How are you tonight?" he asked, bowing low. It wasn't a necessary gesture, but it made her feel good. His bow put them on a psychological similar footing and Sada acknowledged the gesture with an equal tilt of her head.

"I'm fine, thank you for asking." She nodded towards her notebook. "I see that you found my notes." She reached for it, but he immediately moved it out of her reach. Her eyes flared and she clenched her jaw. "You're not giving it back?"

"How do I know this is yours?" he asked softly.

She shivered at the sound of his low, deep voice. It was a bit like gravel, but...more mellow. More...enticing! She almost snorted. More enticing than gravel? Was her mind even working?

Not really, she acknowledged.

"You know darn well it's my notebook." Again, she reached for it, but again, he lifted it out of her reach.

She huffed a bit, glaring at him. "You're acting like a juvenile bully!" she hissed, praying that no one in the cocktail area could see them. Glancing around, Sada was relieved to

note that most of the conference participants had already departed. There were only a few people still milling about and they had gathered at the other end of the long hallway, leaning against the open bar.

When she turned back to him, she hissed through her teeth, “Return my notebook. There are important notes that I’ll need to reference.”

He didn’t smile, but she could feel his triumph. “I have questions.”

Her stomach tightened with dread. “I’m sure you do, Your Highness. A bit dense, aren’t you?”

He chuckled softly, leaning forward ever so slightly. “The list, my dear. Tell me about your list.”

Since he held her notebook behind his back, she still couldn’t reach it. The man had quite a reputation, and it wasn’t for being dense. In fact, quite the opposite. He was known as being fair and very sharp, able to connect seemingly unconnected issues in order to understand world events. She’d actually studied some of his economic strategies while at university. The man was considered a genius. Literally, a genius with an IQ far above mere mortals.

She could feign ignorance, pretend that she didn’t understand his question. But that might encourage him to speak of her list out loud. Again, she glanced over her shoulder, then back up at him.

“What do you want to know?”

“What’s the list for?” he asked.

Micah watched the beautiful princess’ cheeks turn a becoming shade of pink. He’d never known a woman who blushed, he realized.

“The list is...personal,” she finished and he almost laughed at her obvious embarrassment.

“Is it a list of your preferences?” he offered, then waited eagerly, needing to know her answer. Micah didn’t fully understand exactly why her answer felt so important. If it was a list of her preferences or a list of things she’d like to try...either way, he desperately wanted to know.

“Give it to me,” she snapped, reaching behind him to try to snatch the notebook from him. He shifted his shoulders ever so slightly, neatly blocking her attempt. When she tried from the other side, he moved again, foiling her plans. He swallowed a chuckle at her growl of frustration.

“Tell me,” he urged. “Preferences? Or wish list?”

She crossed her arms over her chest, which pushed her breasts a bit higher. It didn’t matter. The stiff black suit didn’t give him a clue as to the size of her breasts. As a breast man, the answer should be more important. But he was too focused on finding out what the damn list was about.

“That list is none of your business, Your Highness. Now, please return my property!”

“No.”

She blinked and he was stunned by her lovely eyes. Long, dark lashes fluttered in confusion as she frowned up at him. Her eyes were brown. Not the chocolate brown that others had used to describe his eyes. No, Sada’s eyes were a soft, caramel color. Very interesting, he thought.

“No? Just...no? You’re not going to give me back *my* notebook?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps we could discuss the list in more detail over dinner?” he suggested, offering his arm. “It’s getting late. We should go upstairs to change into our dinner attire, don’t you think?”

He almost laughed out loud at her frustrated expression. The woman was such a delight to tease!

Very delicately, she rested her fingertips on his elbow, careful not to touch him anywhere else. “Yes. That’s exactly

what I'd planned on doing until I noticed you stole my notebook."

He tsked as they walked side by side towards the bank of private elevators. Only some of the conference guests used these elevators. The entire hotel was taken over by the attendees so the hotel wasn't full. But reserving all of the suites and hotel rooms for the attendees, as well as their staff members and security personnel, had necessitated more of the space.

Unfortunately, further conversation wasn't possible since their bodyguards surrounded them as soon as they stepped out of the cocktail area. At the bank of elevators, he pressed the button. "What floor are you on?" he asked.

He could see the answer in her eyes. It wasn't a number. He suspected that her response was more along the lines of "Go to hell."

Jaw tight and anger vibrating off of her, she stared at the elevator doors. "I'm in Penthouse A," she told him.

He pressed the button. "Excellent. I'm in Penthouse B," he told her. They needed to take separate elevators to their penthouses so he nodded to her guards, indicating that they should call the other elevator. "How about if we get changed and agree to meet down here in," he paused to glance at his watch, "say an hour? Will that give you enough time?"

She nodded, but her gaze darted from his face to the red, leather notebook under his arm. When she looked back up at him, he dared her to try to take it from him. He would like that, he realized. Even a small tussle might ease some of the tension that had filled him. He would win, of course. There was zero chance he'd let her have the notebook back until he had more information.

"An hour," she agreed, then turned on her heel and headed for the open elevator. A moment later, she disappeared inside, the doors closing. The glares from several of her



guards announced that they were not happy about her speaking to him, he thought.

The elevators on his side opened and he stepped inside. The whole trip up, he made plans. Handing the red notebook to the head of his security team, he said, "Put this in a secure place."

And then he hurried into his bedroom to get ready for his next adventure.

## Chapter 2

Sada smoothed a nervous hand down the front of her cocktail dress as she watched the other conference attendees flow from the bank of elevators towards the hotel restaurant where the meal would be served.

Was the mauve shade of her dress too feminine? Was the neckline too low? Too high? Did she look too prim and proper? Sighing, she forced her hands to fall against her sides. She was sick and tired of looking like a well-dressed nun. She wanted to live and be daring! She wanted to experience life away from her brother's careful, watchful eye. She wanted...!

Sada's anxious eyes clashed into a darker, sexy pair. Sheik Micah al-Marri.

No, she didn't want him. He was too dangerous. Baby steps, she thought as she forced her feet forward. Immediately, her guards fell back to a reasonable distance so that they could protect her in an emergency, but far enough that she'd have a bit of privacy. Not a lot! Goodness, no! Not too much privacy for the little lady!

Sighing, she rubbed her forehead. That wasn't fair. Tazir and Rayed had bodyguards that were equally vigilant. However, she'd bet a whole lot that their guards simply looked the other way when her brothers seduced a woman. But if she merely glanced at another man, her guards moved in closer, hovering around her like hungry dragons ready to pounce. Zhara, the youngest of the siblings, also had a contingent of guards. Sada made a mental note to ask Zhara if she ever felt...confined by her protection detail.

Speaking of dragons, she thought as she came to a halt in front of Sheik al-Marri. "Good evening, Your Highness," she said, glancing over her shoulder with a small frown. Odd. Why were her guards so far back? Normally, they'd hover nearby when she was so close to a man.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” he replied easily, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips instead of simply shaking her hand like a normal person. “You look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the seat across from him at the table he indicated. “What would you like to drink?” he asked, gallantly helping her sit and pushing her chair in.

Sada knew she should order her normal glass of white wine. But when the waiter arrived, she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t drink yet another glass of tame, boring white wine. Her throat tightened at the thought. It didn’t matter how good the wine, she was thoroughly sick of demure, “appropriate” white wine!

“Martini,” she said at his inquiry. “Straight up with two olives, please.”

She’d never had a martini before, but she’d heard others order it and had always thought they sounded sophisticated. Plus, there was the glass. Yes, a martini glass always looks amazing in a person’s hand. It didn’t matter who held it, there was just something tantalizing about a martini glass!

“That color suits you, Sada,” Sheik al-Marri murmured.

Sada tilted her head slightly. “I don’t recall giving you leave to use my first name, Micah.”

His smile was quick to appear, but for some odd reason, Sada suspected he didn’t get the opportunity to laugh very often. She felt a small twinge at that thought. But as soon as she realized that she was feeling sad for this man, the man who had stolen something very personal, she banished the feeling.

“Tell me about...” he paused when the waiter arrived with her martini, setting it down in front of her on the small table.

“Thank you,” she said to the waiter who immediately nodded and backed away, heading back to the bar. Since it was relatively early in the evening, and the conference attendees were the only people at the hotel, the bar was relatively quiet.

“Now, about that list...” he prompted.

Sada paused to take a small sip of her martini, and... choked! She tried valiantly to hide her reaction, but good grief, it felt like her throat was on fire! The gin and... what on earth was in a martini? It burned down the back of her throat.

He pushed a glass of water towards her, but when she glanced up at him, there was no amusement on his oddly attractive features, only a hint of concern.

Sada took a long sip of water, grateful for the cool liquid on her burning throat.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “It just...”

“You aren’t used to martinis, are you?” he offered when she hesitated, interrupting the fib that didn’t want to come from her lips.

“No,” she replied, her fingers resting lightly on the bottom of the glass and spinning it slowly. “I usually order white wine.”

There was a long, pregnant pause and Sada finally looked up. Right into understanding, dark brown eyes.

“I think that answers my question about the list, then.”

She looked up at him warily, her fingers gripping the delicate stem of the martini glass. “What was your question?”

One corner of his mouth quirked upwards. “I was wondering if the items on your list were preferences, or if they were things you hoped to try.”

Sada gulped and stared down at her drink. She didn’t answer him. He seemed to have all of the answers anyway, so why bother?

“How were you planning to accomplish these items?” he asked, his tone still gentle.

For some reason, that tone did something strange to her insides. Sada felt...mushy and heated at the same time. She shrugged and wished that her sleeveless cocktail dress had more material. For some reason, she felt extremely vulnerable with her arms on display.

Courage, she reminded herself. She was trying to be more courageous.

Disgusted with herself for cowering, if only for a moment, she glared at him. “That’s an incredibly personal question, Your Highness.”

The side of his mouth quirked up in amusement. “I thought you were going to call me Micah. I’ve already begun to call you Sada.” He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table now, which brought his hands dangerously close to hers. Her fingers tingled and she wished she had the courage to touch him. But goodness, that would be a horrible breach of protocol!

Plus, he was her brother’s enemy! Okay, perhaps not enemy. Their two countries had never actually gone to war. At least, not yet. Hopefully, never. But one never knew.

Lifting her chin, she looked him right in the eye as she said, “I think it would be safer if we remain on more formal terms.”

“Is that what you want?” he prompted with another slight smile. “To be safe? To never step outside of your designated role?” He paused, the question hanging in the air between them. “I would have thought that the list, actually writing out all the things you’d like to try, was your way of stepping outside of the role to which your birth dictated.”

Darn it, he made a very good point. “Yes, well,” she paused and cleared her throat. She looked up at him and, for the first time, noticed how incredibly handsome he looked in

his tuxedo. Okay, maybe not handsome, but...attractive. There was an appeal about him that was...magnetic.

“You’ve never kissed a man with passion, have you, Sada?” His quiet question startled her and she gasped, staring into his dark, compelling eyes.

Looking away, Sada swallowed, but her throat was suddenly very dry. To hide her nervousness, Sada took a long sip of her martini and...smothered another embarrassing coughing fit. When she finally looked back at him across the table, she was sure that he would be laughing at her, but the muscles in her back and neck relaxed when she realized that he wasn’t laughing. He was just...watching her. Clearly ready to intervene for...whatever reason. She wasn’t sure why he was watching her so carefully, but it felt...good in a warm, comforting but unfamiliar way. She wasn’t going to examine that reaction very carefully.

“Who were you hoping to get to help you fulfill your list?” he asked, leaning back once again.

The extra space between their bodies was both good and bad. She was able to think a bit more clearly, and yet, she couldn’t deny a sense of...abandonment now that his hands weren’t inches away from hers.

Clearing her throat, she shrugged a shoulder as if the question and answer weren’t important. “I hadn’t really gotten that far into the planning side of the list,” she finally admitted.

One dark eyebrow lifted for a moment, then his serious expression returned. “May I offer a suggestion?”

Her eyes hardened as she glared across the table at him. “Not if you’re going to tell me to ignore the list,” she hissed with an immediate and intense fury. “I’m not!” She leaned heavily back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m so sick of being the good girl. I never step out of line! I can always be depended upon to do the right thing, to say the right words. I’m sick of being boring and respectable. I want some adventure in my life. Just a tiny bit of spice so

that, during those times when I have to be circumspect, I have something to think back upon, something that proved that I was alive!”

She took a deep breath, trying to calm down. It wasn't working! And the unfairness of this conversation, the double standard that she'd lived under for so long, made her almost choke with her anger. “There's absolutely no way you can convince me that my brothers were virgins before they got married. This whole purity culture is ridiculous.” She stabbed the middle of the table with her finger, her anger building to a physical force now. “Women have the same urges, the same needs as men. Telling them to remain chaste until their wedding night is asinine and detrimental to every woman who has to live under the burden of being chaste and pure!”

There was a long silence after that angry diatribe. She stared at him, her breathing heavy as she waited for him to admonish her.

So Sada was stunned when he instead said, “I wasn't going to suggest that you remain pure and chaste.”

That statement completely deflated her anger. “Oh,” was all she could manage now. She braved another tentative sip of her martini. Setting the drink carefully back down on the table, she folded her hands on her lap, then asked, “What's your suggestion?”

His hand was resting on the back of the chair next to him, but as he spoke, that hand lifted slightly, as if coaxing her to accept his next words. “I would be delighted to help fulfill the items on your list.”

This time, it wasn't the gin that took her by surprise and had her coughing. It was his comment and the realization that he was completely, one hundred percent sincere in his offer.

When she'd regained control of her lungs and set the martini glass back down, she stared at him, not sure that she'd heard him correctly. “You!?”

He chuckled and Sada found that she adored the sound!

“Yes, me. Why not?”

She took a long sip of her ice water. When she set it carefully back down on the table, she found she couldn't look him in the eye. “Because you are completely unacceptable.”

“In what way?”

Huh? He was arguing with her? Normally when she used that tone with a man, he immediately backed down, even apologized effusively.

“Because,” she sputtered, then managed to look at him. Really look at him. His shoulders were broad and packed with lean muscles, tapering down to a slim waist and long legs. She couldn't see those legs now, but she remembered needing to tilt her head back earlier to see his face. “Because you won't give me back my notebook!” she hissed. That was a pretty lame response, but it was the best she could come up with.

His laughter sent shivers racing through her. “You mean, I'm not an acceptable candidate because you can't boss me around.”

That too! “No,” she lied. “It's more along the lines of you being an obnoxious, odious excuse of a man.” Good! That reply would put them back on their antagonistic footing. It was safer to be angry with him, and for him to dislike her. Anger and disdain was much more comfortable than this sexual tension. Furthermore, she preferred being angry with him so that he wouldn't use that gentle, husky tone. She didn't like that gentleness. It...whispered to something deep down inside of her. His tone compelled her in dangerous, alien ways.

In other words, she and this man could not be friendly. Nope. Just...no!

“So you object to my participation with your goals because...you don't like me?”



Sada swallowed hard. Had she hurt his feelings? Surely not! And yet, there was a shimmer of pain in his eyes. He looked quickly away, but when he turned to look back to her, there was amusement sparkling those dark depths.

“You bastard!” she hissed, but couldn’t help but laugh along with him. This time, she took a longer sip of her martini, glaring at him. The glare probably wasn’t as effective as normal since she was grinning and shaking her head. Plus, he was chuckling and...good grief, there was an actual smile lurking along the lines of his mouth.

A very sensual mouth, now that she really looked at him. How had she thought him not handsome? In reality, he was devastatingly attractive in that rugged, don’t-mess-with-me sort of way. But Sada was quickly discovering that she kind of liked it.

“We’re going to be late for dinner,” she pointed out, noticing that several of the other guests and their spouses were moving toward the dining room.

“Tell me you’ll let me help you,” he urged, not particularly concerned about being late. Dinner could wait.

“No,” she replied and stood up. “When are you going to return my notebook?”

He stood as well, but he stepped in front of her, blocking her escape. Had he done that on purpose? Or was he really just that overwhelmingly large?

“When you agree to let me help you with your list,” he explained, then winged his arm so that he could lead her into dinner.

Sada looked at the arm carefully. For the past half hour, she’d been conversing with him as a woman. Their discussion had been sexual and challenging. But walking into that dining room meant she needed to shift into business mode.

“You know that I can’t walk into the dining room on your arm, Your Highness.”

“Of course you can,” he countered quickly and even reached down, taking her hand. “You simply place your fingers right here on my elbow and then we move our feet. It’s a simple process. People do it all the time.”

Sada started to pull away, but he placed his own hand over hers, keeping her fingers right where he wanted them.

She attempted to suppress her amusement at his outrageous instruction, but she couldn’t hide her grin. Trying to be serious, she said, “That’s not the point. There are political ramifications of me walking into the dining room on your arm and you know it.”

He sighed, but relented. “Fine. You won’t go to dinner on my arm, but may we walk in side by side?”

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded sharply. “Yes. That would actually be beneficial to both our countries.”

As they entered the dining room, several of the guests immediately turned to stare. Sada knew that there would be rampant speculation coursing through the dinner conversations after this display of political confusion.

“I believe I’m seated at a table over to the right,” she told him.

“And I’m assigned to one situated to the left,” he replied. “We’ll meet to continue our discussion after dinner.” And without waiting for her reply, he went to his table.

Sada ensured that her features were calm and blank as she walked to her seat. Everyone at the table stood and she thanked them as she sat down. The waiters immediately brought in the salad course and Sada looked around, noticing she had a perfect view of Micah from her seat. And sure enough, he was watching her, waiting for her to see him. He tilted his head slightly, acknowledging her and she had to smother a completely inappropriate burst of laughter.

Odious man, she thought, then turned to speak with the man to her right.

The dinner was just as mind-numbing as she'd anticipated, but at least the days-long conference was over. She could head home tomorrow and brief her brother on...no, wait, she *couldn't* brief him. She didn't have her notes!

Darn it! She needed her notebook. Not just because she needed her notes from the various meetings and lectures over the past three days, but also because she couldn't let that list get out! It was in her handwriting, in her notebook! If anyone ever found out that she was thinking about such things, that she was actually making a list of sexual desires and dreams, she would be publicly humiliated!

Resentment and fear made her stomach churn. If a man had made that list, he and his cronies would most likely have a good laugh about it. But in her culture, being a woman meant that the misogynistic "purity culture" was alive and well. Her presence here this weekend had been a huge advancement, showing not just the women in her country, but also around the region, that women should be acknowledged.

And then she'd made that blasted list!

Sada made it through the dinner and speeches, but she desperately wanted to rush out of the room and get away from her imminent humiliation. This was bad. It was so much worse than she'd thought!

When the last speech finished and the applause died down, Sada jumped up and excused herself. Forcing a polite smile, she made it all the way to the door before she let her public expression drop. By that point, she was one of the only people in the lobby and she headed for the bank of elevators, unwilling to face anyone right now. Once she had a plan to get her notebook back, or some way to react if that list was leaked to the press, she'd feel better. Until then...!

A strong hand grabbed her upper arm, slowing her progress. She knew immediately that the hand was Micah's and she wasn't sure if she wanted to jerk her arm away or...or what? What other option was there?

Swinging around, Sada confronted Micah, her dark eyes glaring up at him. “Return my notebook!” she hissed.

“Come with me,” he replied, guiding her out through the doors and into the darkened courtyard that was lit by subtle lights hidden in the plants and along the perimeter of the stone pavers.

“Where are we going?” she demanded, considering jerking her arm away. How dare he drag her out here in the dark! What kind of a wretch pulled a woman into a dark area where...?

“We’re out here so that I can do this,” he explained in a soft voice. A moment later, he tugged her into a small alcove that would hide them from view.

Micah pressed her back against the stone wall of the hotel, then he stepped closer, pressing himself against her.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, trying to glare him into releasing her and backing away. Then Sada realized what she was doing. Was she whispering so that they wouldn’t get caught? Or because his closeness had stolen her voice?

“I’m going to kiss you,” he explained, but his volume was no longer conversational. She could hear the husky quality to his voice now and it sent shivers racing through her.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea!” Her heart raced, pounding frantically against her ribs.

“Why not?”

“Because...” she hesitated, then closed her eyes, muttering several curses under her breath. When she opened her eyes again, she said, “Because I’ve never been truly kissed before.” There! She’d said it. She’d admitted her pathetic truth! She was twenty-five years old and she’d never truly been kissed! She’d experienced the pathetic, slimy attempts of several men during her university days, but those had been brief pecks and nothing like what she truly wanted to experience.

Micah heard the words, but he didn't understand them. For a long moment, he stared down at her, his eyes trying to memorize her features because he wasn't sure if he'd ever get another chance to look at her so closely again. She was so damn lovely! And she felt perfect in his arms. She was about average height, but because he was taller than even a tall person, she barely came up to just underneath his chin in those heels.

Never been kissed? No, that wasn't what she'd said. She'd never been "*truly* kissed". And that was a damn shame! For a woman as lovely, soft, and perfect as Sada to never have experienced a truly passionate kiss...!

"Tilt your head back a little," he ordered, his voice rough with need now. No, this couldn't be defined as "need". He'd 'needed' women in the past. He'd felt lust for his mistresses over the years. This...whatever spell she'd cast on him...was far beyond mere lust. This was...he had no words. This need for Sada was beyond anything he'd ever experienced before and he was certain that he would burst into flames if he didn't kiss her soon. Now!

When she tilted her head back, he could see that her lips had parted. That sweet invitation was all the permission he needed. He kissed her. But kissing with Sada wasn't like anything he'd ever felt before. Just the soft brush of his lips against hers, the feeling of her lips trembling under his made his erection throb.

Deepening the kiss, he wove his fingers through her hair, shifting her head slightly. Slowly, he introduced her to the joys of kissing, showing her, then pulling back to allow her to imitate his movements. It was one of the most erotic experiences of his life. Feeling Sada come alive under his hands was hotter than he would ever have anticipated!

Pressing harder, he deepened the kiss further, pressing his leg between her thighs. She reacted immediately and Micah absorbed the gasp of surprise, pulling her even closer.

The way she shivered at his touch was intoxicating. He could feel her initial hesitancy, but then she clutched at his shoulders, pulling him even closer as she tried to wrap herself around him. She spread her legs for him and he pressed his thigh against her core and almost lost his mind when she arched against that leg, shifting, pressing again and again while his mouth devoured hers.

He gripped her hips, helping her, showing her how to move. Micah had to slow her movements slightly, but as soon as he demonstrated how she could use the pressure of his thigh, she was on her own, finding her pleasure while he moved his mouth to her neck, sucking and licking, nipping at her earlobe.

Micah wanted to cup her breasts, to tease her nipples. But that would have to wait for another day. This kiss had gone much further than he'd expected. He briefly considered pulling back, leaving her without the satisfaction that her body clearly craved. He certainly wasn't going to find his own pleasure tonight. But feeling her, knowing that she was so close, so beautifully close, he couldn't do it. He couldn't pull back and leave her without the culmination that her body was screaming for. This was her moment and he lifted his thigh, pressing harder, his hands shifting her hips even higher to give her what she needed.

Moments later, he took her cry of release into his mouth, kissing her as she rode his thigh to satisfaction. For a long time, forever it seemed, she stilled as her body throbbed against his thigh. Only after long moments did she release the breath she'd been holding and...slowly melted against him. Her whole body went limp and, without his support, she would have dropped into a sated puddle on the stone pavers under them.

Holding...no, cradling Sada, he reveled in the beauty of her climax. Micah could feel her breath caress his neck, wanted to roar to the world how amazing it was to have her climax like this, holding Sada in his arms. She was his, he thought. All his! He'd given her this. He'd helped her

achieve this moment. He'd shown her the beauty of pleasure and she was his, damn it!

"Thank you," she whispered, her breath fanning against his neck. He felt the whispered remnants of her climax as he slowly lowered her feet back to the floor. Somehow, her shoes had fallen off at some point during that interlude and he wanted to laugh, watching her pretty toes feel around for the heels that had fallen around their feet.

"Let me," he murmured, letting his hand trail down her leg as he knelt by her side. He found her shoes and lifted her foot, slipping first one lovely shoe onto her foot, then the other. When he stood up again, she was still as limp as a boiled noodle.

"We're going to do that again, Sada," he warned her. "But the next time, we'll be in a bed and I'm going to show you a hell of a lot more."

She sighed dreamily.

"Are you even listening to me?" Micah demanded, still holding her up.

"Yes," she laughed. Micah tightened his arms around her. She wasn't listening, but that was okay. For the moment, she was all his and no one had intruded on her first taste of pleasure.

## Chapter 3

Sada toyed with the lipstick, unable to get her thoughts organized enough to remember what to do with it. All night, she'd dreamed about those stolen moments in the quiet alcove last night. It had been too much and...oddly, not nearly enough. She wanted to find Micah and demand that he do that all over again. She wanted to climb his body and press herself against him, just as she'd done last night.

Crazy, she told herself. She was absolutely nuts! No way would Tazir or Rayed let her go to Micah just for a sexual release.

And yet, she couldn't stop considering arguments to do just that.

Would it really be so horrible to have an affair with the man? He wasn't truly the enemy. Over and over, she'd heard Tazir say that Batam wasn't exactly the enemy, just the competition. But how intense was the competition between their countries? Was there something deeper? Something she didn't understand?

And if she married him...!

"Stop it!" she scolded her reflection in the mirror. "Marriage is out of the question. And besides, you wouldn't want to marry him anyway! You're just in lust with him!" She tossed the lipstick into her makeup bag with disgust. "This is ridiculous!"

There was a knock on the bedroom doorway and Sada called out, "Come in!"

Her personal assistant stepped into the penthouse bedroom, smiling brightly and with a confidence that Sada wished she possessed.

"I know that you are eager to get home, Your Highness," Ella explained as she lifted something in the air



with her hand. “But this was delivered by one of the hotel staff. He said it was urgent.”

Sada took the package and her heart sank. Without even opening the package, she knew what was inside. Her notebook.

Tucking it into her tote bag, she forced a smile. “Thank you very much for delivering this.”

Ella started to discuss several other issues, but Sada’s mind didn’t absorb any of it. She was still focused on the notebook and on the silent message.

Finally, she lifted her chin and shook her head slightly, staring into the mirror. “I’m fine,” she whispered to herself, ignoring the confused look in her assistant’s eyes. It took her several moments to pull herself together. This was Micah’s goodbye. She’d acted like a promiscuous woman last night and this was his goodbye. He no longer wanted to see her, which was why he’d delivered her notebook.

“Are you okay, Your Highness?” her assistant asked.

Sada pressed her lips together and forced a nod. “Yes.” She breathed in slowly. She’d acted like a whore and he was treating her as such. “Yes. I’m perfectly fine.” She kicked her tote bag, as if that might help ease the pain that was strangling her, and took a final glance around the room. “And yes, I’m ready to leave.” She turned, looking at Ella. “Could you please contact my pilot and ask him to be ready as soon as I arrive at the airport?”

Ella dipped into a curtsy, but she was clearly confused. “Of course, Your Highness. The hotel has informed the airport of everyone’s departure. The air traffic controllers are prioritizing our departures so we can leave as soon as you board the plane.”

Sada swallowed the sob of humiliation and nodded, lowering her lashes. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Ella left the room without another word and Sada knew that her assistant would inform her bodyguards that she

was ready to leave. The hotel staff had already sent someone to pack up her clothing. She'd merely been waiting for a message from Micah. Something that might show her that he wanted to see her again.

But this...she glared down at her tote bag, smothering the threatening tears...this was his message. He was done. She'd gone too far last night and he was ready to move on to someone who was more...circumspect! Being chaste had been drilled into her from her nannies and governesses for her entire life! Intellectually, she'd disagreed. But culturally... she couldn't shake the history of her people.

Sada had let her emotions and feelings rule her for the first time in her life and this was the response.

"Well," she said to the empty room, trying to come to terms with the end of a relationship that hadn't even truly started.

Without another word, she picked up her bag and left the bedroom with her head held high. She'd experimented with a man and...and he'd rejected her. That was...!

Brutal. Yes, brutal was the only word she could think of to describe what she was feeling right now.

"I'm ready to leave," Sada announced as she stepped into the main living area of the penthouse. "Thank you all for your diligence this weekend." She then turned and left the suite, determined to forget all about last night. It wasn't important. It was just...a fling. A silly, fun, passionate weekend fling. Or maybe, it was a fling that didn't fling. A flung?

She wiped a tear away, deriding herself for being so silly.

Walking through the still-quiet hotel lobby, she held her head high and...!

"Princess Sada!" someone called out to her. Startled, Sada stopped and looked around. That's when she spotted Ambassador Marco from Libri coming towards her. "Good

morning, Princess,” he gushed, stopping a couple of feet from her. “I was wondering if you had a moment?” he asked, gesturing to a pair of chairs sitting against the wall.

For a brief moment, Sada considered telling him that she didn’t have time, that her plane was ready and waiting to depart. But then she remembered that her job here this weekend was to make connections to benefit Fahre.

So, she pasted on a polite smile and nodded. “Of course.” Turning to her bodyguards and Ella, she added, “I’ll be just a moment.”

The guards moved to various positions around her, trying to look unobtrusive. Sada sat down on the edge of the chair, ensuring that her body language screamed “very rushed”.

“Thank you so much for this brief opportunity,” the ambassador began. “I have been trying to speak to your brother about several important issues, but I can’t seem to get an appointment on his schedule.” He paused and sighed, shaking his head. “I know that he is an incredibly busy man, but I have some rather urgent matters to discuss with him. Could you, perhaps, speak with Sheik Tazir and ask him to spare me a half hour of his precious time?”

Sada’s jaw tightened. She glanced around, but the only person she saw was a man in a cheap, brown suit coming off of the elevator. She barely glanced at him, assuming he was a member of one of the guests’ staff. He was vaguely good-looking, in a non-descript sort of way. Their eyes met briefly and he seemed to be startled to see her, but Sada turned away and focused on the man sitting next to her.

“To sum up, sir,” she began, not bothering to hide her irritation, “you’re apparently unwilling to tell me about these ‘important’ issues. Probably because I’m a mere woman and, in your opinion, have no power to assist you. So instead, you’d like me to put you in contact with my brother, someone you do consider a person of power. And I am merely a liaison, a means to your ends. Is that correct?”

The man sputtered for a moment, but his diplomatic training kicked in and he regrouped. “It’s not that I don’t consider you important, Your Highness,” he stammered, bowing as deeply as he could while seated. “It’s just that... well, you’re a very beautiful woman. Don’t get me wrong! It’s just that these matters concern high level issues between my government and Fahre.” He smiled patronizingly. “You understand, don’t you, my dear?” He even reached out to pat her hand.

Sada pulled her hand away, more insulted than was probably warranted. “Ah, so you consider my only value to be my appearance and then thought to tack on a patronizing ‘my dear’ to your explanation for my lack of worth in your eyes to soften the insult.” She nodded again and stood up. “Yes. I will definitely relay this conversation to my brother. I will inform him that the men in your country don’t value women. We are an asset only if we beautify the world.” She nodded briefly and turned to leave. “Thank you for clarifying your position, Ambassador,” she said over her shoulder.

And with that parting shot, she walked away.

However, once she was in the privacy of the limousine, Sada’s mind dismissed the patronizing ambassador as she stared blindly through the window at the passing scenery. She replayed last night’s scene and wondered how she might have acted differently. But nothing occurred to her. She’d been completely caught up in the moment and had merely reacted naturally to Micah’s touches, kisses, and the way he’d moved her.

Without warning, Sada was shoved back in her seat as the g-force of the plane’s thrust during takeoff brought her back to the present. Looking around, she wondered when she’d gotten onto the plane and was startled to realize the plane was racing down the runway, gaining speed for lift off. Glancing out through the window, she gazed without interest as the plane escaped the pull of gravity from the earth and gently lifted into the air. Moments later, the pilot flew the plane into the clouds. Light, fluffy clouds.

An overwhelming sadness struck her then, causing her heart to throb with an unfamiliar but inescapable weight. “It’s over,” she whispered to herself.

“I’m sorry?”

Sada started and looked to her right to find Ella sitting beside her. The ever-efficient woman was typing madly away at her laptop. Did nothing slow her down? Ella was always on top of everything that happened in Sada’s life. Did she know what had happened after the dinner last night? Did everyone? Was Micah laughing at her? Was he bragging about how he’d “bagged” the ice queen?

Yes, Sada had heard some of the others at the conference refer to her as frigid and icy. At the time, she’d enjoyed the reference. She’d considered her icy demeanor, her inability to become flustered by whatever anyone threw at her, as a positive.

But now...? Now the phrase felt derogatory as the plane popped up above the clouds. It was sunny now. Down below, the weather had looked like gloom and doom. But up here above the clouds, it was almost as if she could bounce on top of the fluffy clouds.

Sighing, she forced herself to get to work. Her brother would demand an accounting of the conference as soon as she returned to the palace. Pulling the envelope containing her notebook out of her bag, she ripped open the top and, sadly, pulled her notebook out. She’d type up her notes so that she could provide her oldest brother with the highlights of the conference. She’d make notations on the various regional leaders she’d met, excluding Micah, so that he would know who might approach him in an effort to increase their connections to the Fahre government. There had been a great deal of valuable networking at the conference. In fact, one could argue that the connections made were more important than the information imparted by the schedule of meetings and lectures.

Still steeped in misery over her actions and humiliation from the previous night, it was a shock when a small note fell on to her lap from the pages.

Frowning at the slip of paper with the bold scrawl, she wondered if she should read it. Was it a note from Micah? Would the words be rude and imply that her behavior wasn't that of a governmental representative? Or would the words be more benign? More of a "Thanks for a good time" sort of thing.

For a moment, Sada considered shredding the note. But the masochist in her needed to read the words, to see his handwritten condemnation. It would reinforce the lesson.

So she unfolded the single page note. There wasn't any detail on the note to indicate that the message was from Micah, but Sada knew. She could almost feel his presence in the script. The words blurred together for a moment, then she realized that her eyes were tearing up. Blinking, she refocused on the message.

Slowly, the bold handwriting took shape and started to make sense. It took several moments, and she had to re-read the message twice before the words actually registered. But by the time she'd finished reading the message a second time the meaning became clear.

*"Paris. Next Tuesday. More items to check off of your list."*

That was it. No details. Not a question or an invitation. It was an order. Three sentences that literally commanded her to be in Paris in seven days' time.

For a long moment, she simply stared at the note. But slowly, her heart stopped aching. As his message worked its way past the waves of humiliation, she started to realize that Micah wasn't revolted by her lack of control last night. He was actually...offering her more

Her heart thudded and she quickly folded the note back up, sliding it into one of the pockets of her notebook.

Flipping through the pages, she tried to find the list. But when she found the place where the list should be, the only remaining evidence left was a ragged tear in the middle of the notebook.

Where the list used to be!

The dratted man had returned the notebook, but had kept her list!

Oh, she loved him!

Wait! What? Love? No one said anything about love! This...whatever “this” was, it was only lust! She desired the man. There was no other emotion involved. There never could be! The Sheik of Batam and a royal princess of Fahre could never be together. The political repercussions of such a union were unworkable!

Sada glanced at Ella, startled by the direction her thoughts had gone. No, she sighed with relief. This wasn't love. Micah was merely being kind and...okay, lustful...as he helped her explore her sexuality. If she desired anything more, Sada vowed that she'd just tamp down on the “more”, and enjoy the sensuality that she could learn from Micah.

Another thought occurred to her. Was he merely doing her a favor? Was he acting as a mentor but without any desire on his part?

No, that was ridiculous. Micah had been just as voracious as she'd been last night!

She felt her cheeks heat at the memory of that fascinatingly hard part of him and the way she'd...well, how she'd pressed against that hardness. A very large, very impressive hardness! Was Micah larger than other men? She wasn't sure if height was an indicator of erection size. Probably not, she thought and looked out the window of the plane. Unfortunately, there were only clouds outside of her window. Nothing to distract her from the intriguing direction her thoughts had taken.

Leaning her head back against her chair, she closed her eyes. Her emotions over the past several hours had been on a roller coaster ride! Last night, she'd been elated, then embarrassed, then angry and humiliated this morning. And now...? What was she feeling now?

Anticipation!

But what if this note was just a way to trap her? Should she call him and tell him that she wouldn't be in Paris? That she had other plans next week? Surely, she could come up with something. Ella was a miracle worker when it came to setting up hospital openings and meetings with children. Sada read to a group of kindergarteners every Wednesday. She helped out in the maternity ward of the hospital once a month, holding babies whose mothers were too sick to care for them. She played cards at the teen center, tutored elementary school children and visited various other businesses to lend her support to the causes that were important to the different communities.

However, that was the old Sada. Oh, she'd continue to help out wherever she could. But her "wicked" list...that was her brainchild, her hopes of stepping out of the conservative, boring life she'd lived to date. She was twenty-five years old and she'd just had her first real kiss.

A secretive smile played over her features as she added silently; and her first orgasm!

Yes, that had been especially nice. She almost laughed out loud. "Nice" was such a bland term for last night's experience at Micah's hands. She couldn't stifle a snort when she mentally corrected herself. There hadn't been any hands helping her achieve that mind-boggling orgasm last night.

Then another thought occurred to her. What would it be like when Micah used his hands on her? Were different methods of stimulation able to produce different types of orgasms? Different types of onions tasted different. A white potato tasted different from a sweet potato. So, why wouldn't



an orgasm from fingers feel different from an orgasm achieved from a man's thigh? Or from...she wondered about his mouth. And his...erection. Dear heaven, she wanted that! She wanted to experience the differences from each of those possibilities! And she didn't want to wait years until she found a man who would be her husband! Her brothers hadn't been virgins on their wedding night. So, there was no reason for her to keep herself "pure". In fact, it was stupid to wait. Especially when pleasures such as what she'd experienced last night were an option!

No way was she waiting!

She would fly to Paris next week. Sada had no idea where Micah wanted her to stay while in Paris. But she'd fly there and await his instructions. If he was there to humiliate her, then she would go on a shopping spree to make herself feel better. She hadn't gone on a hard-core shopping trip for years.

Even that realization was a bit shocking! When had she stopped loving clothes? When had she abandoned her... looking down at the dress she'd donned this morning, she wondered why she'd shifted to neutral colors. Yesterday, she'd worn a black suit, wanting to be taken seriously. But today she was flying home. No one on this plane needed to be impressed. In fact, no one on this plane was even looking at her. So, why was she wearing a taupe sheath dress with matching shoes?

Blah! Her whole wardrobe was blah! In fact, Sada's whole life had become blah! She had so many appointments during the week, but none of them gave her any pleasure. Nothing she did, none of her volunteer activities were a passion. She knew that her sister had a passion to play the piano. In fact, Zhara, two years younger than Sada, was obsessed with playing the piano to the point of becoming almost a hermit lately. She was lively and energetic whenever she emerged from her private suite, but lately, those appearances were few and far between.

And Tazir? Well, his current passion was his wife and the birth of his upcoming child. Rayed? His passion was making money and competing in the business world. And Emma, his new wife of just a few months. Sada had to include Emma in Rayed's passions. The two of them together were just as cute as Tazir and Lila. But Rayed also loved the challenge of beating out the competition, almost as much as he loved Emma. He was brilliant at expanding the wealth of their family as well as the economic solidity of Fahre. Everyone adored her brothers, but her people barely knew Zhara and... did they even know who she was? Did anyone, other than the people she quietly met each week, even know she existed? Did she care?

Not really, Sada thought. In that, she was a bit like Zhara, albeit without the passion for music.

"We're landing in twenty minutes, Your Highness," the flight attendant announced. "May I take your tea cup?"

Sada's attention jerked back to the present. Looking around, she was startled to realize that everyone else was preparing for landing. She'd been so lost in thought, she hadn't even noticed the passage of time.

"Yes, thank you," Sada replied, sitting up straighter in her chair. Thankfully, she'd never bothered to take off her seatbelt, so at least she appeared to be ready for their landing.

Quickly, she stuffed her papers and notebook into her bag, ensuring that it was deep down in the bottom of her tote. She didn't want that note to be found by anyone. Especially not her brothers. If it accidentally fell out, she wasn't sure how she'd explain a secret assignation in Paris.

Not that the note was signed. So even if it fell out of her notebook, no one would know that it was hers, or who had sent it. Still, it was personal and she wasn't ready for anyone to know that she had a romance brewing.

Romance? There was that odd word again. Was this a romance? Or was it just...a fling?

A fling, she told herself, mentally nodding for emphasis. This was not romantic. Whatever happened in Paris, it definitely wasn't a romance. It probably couldn't even be called a relationship, since she and Micah couldn't openly acknowledge...whatever was happening between them.

And yet, anticipation was humming through her veins. Goodness, she'd gone from abject humiliation and anger at herself for being so wanton, to eagerly looking forward to the next time she would see him!

Relationships were definitely a bit more complicated than she realized. But that was okay. This was what she wanted, what she needed in order to spur herself to live her life more fully.

Micah stared out the window of his plane as he flew home from the conference. He'd missed seeing Sada this morning and had berated himself for not trying to tempt her to his bed last night. After that kiss, he'd pulled back, wanting to give her time to process everything. Even though his body had throbbed with the need to thrust into her, to take her to his bed and never let her leave so that he could show her a dozen different ways to make love that weren't on that enticing list... he'd held back.

Paris. Around midnight, he'd come up with the idea of meeting her in Paris. He knew that Sada was in her mid-twenties and, apparently, still a virgin. So if she'd waited this long to have sex, he wanted to make her first time spectacular. What better way to introduce a bit of romance into the passion that their relationship would become than starting off their affair in Paris?

Had she received the note? Had she read it? She hadn't called yet, so he assumed she hadn't gotten it. Had the note fallen out of that red notebook? Maybe the note had fallen into the envelope and she'd completely missed it!

Hell! He should call her. But what if her phone calls were intercepted? His father's calls had all been intercepted and logged by his assistant. Micah had put a stop to that practice as soon as he'd taken over after his father's passing. He knew that some governments still did that, wanting to track who called and when, usually even noting the topic of conversation for legal purposes.

Micah definitely didn't want his conversation with Sada to be overheard. Plus, if their phone calls were monitored, then someone would hear their conversation. He'd have to get his security team to figure out a way to get a phone to Sada so that they could have private conversations. If they were going to have an affair...and there was no "if" about it, not after last night's kiss...then they'd need a way to communicate more easily.

He found his guards in the back of the plane playing poker. They all immediately jumped to their feet as soon as he entered the space.

Micah lifted his hand. "My apologies," he explained, looking at each of them in turn. "I don't mean to invade your privacy. All of you work so hard to protect me and now I'm taking up some of your much needed down-time."

The lead guard bowed as he shook his head. "We're at your service, Your Highness. How can we help you?"

Micah's mouth twisted slightly. "I was wondering if you could find out if phone calls were monitored by the Fahre government."

The man's features didn't change in any way, but his eyes sparkled with interest. Micah wasn't sure if that was because he'd just received a challenge, or if the man was hoping, like the rest of his advisors, that he was romantically interested in a woman.

"We'll find out immediately, Your Highness," the man replied, bowing again. "And if Princess Sada's calls are

monitored, we can get a private phone to her that isn't monitored, if that is your wish."

Micah didn't want to know how he would manage that. Some things were better left unknown. But he nodded. "Yes, that would be good. Thank you."

With that, he walked back to the front of the plane and stepped into his office, closing the door as he returned to the memories of last night's kiss. And planned more of the same once he finally got Sada alone in Paris. He would make their time together so damn perfect, she'd have to expand that damn list!

Largen Ufstoffsen reviewed the video he'd recorded, his finger poised above the computer controls. Princess Sada el Mitra. She was beautiful. It was such a shame that he would have to kill her. He loved art and this woman was stunning.

However, she'd seen him. No trace, he reminded himself as he flicked off the video feed. Leave no trace and no witnesses to his crimes. As an assassin, he lived by an iron-clad code. Rule number one; he never killed children. Anyone who tried to hire him to kill a child was killed instead. Rule number two; every kill must appear to be either health related or an accident. Rule number three; leave no witnesses and no trace of his presence.

Glancing over at the security guard lying on the ground, Largen sighed, shaking his head with remorse. Turning back to the computer, he turned back to the video feed and, with a few clicks, he created a new "loop" that showed no one in the lobby at the moment he was walking out.

It was his error that he hadn't realized there was another camera installed during the weekend of the conference. He should have double-checked the security feeds before the kill. He should have realized there would be additional security around the hotel. The hotel had been reserved exclusively for the conference attendees. With that

level of security and the number of high level government officials attending, additional cameras should have been anticipated.

Live and learn, he mentally chided himself. Live and learn. He wouldn't make this mistake again.

He leaned forward to examine the security guard and sighed in annoyance. The man looked...too calm. That wasn't good. The point was to make the death look like a heart attack, so, the man needed to look as if he were in pain.

Huffing with irritation, Largen hefted the man carefully and dumped him back in his chair. Thankfully, rigor mortis hadn't set in yet, since the man had died only five minutes ago. Largen carefully arranged the man's hands, head and expression, as well as his feet. Stepping back, he examined his work carefully. Much better. Now, he looked like he'd had a heart attack. That was good since the autopsy would show that his heart gave out.

With a nod of approval, Largen left the office. His client had no idea how much artistry took place during an assassination. But his work here at the hotel was done.

Now, he just needed to deal with the other two witnesses. One would be easy. Ambassador Marco was his next target. Then he'd deal with Princess Sada el-Mitra. He'd save the best for last. There was a special happiness in killing a woman. He didn't understand why he liked women so much. But he didn't deny that there was a joy that suffused him when he ended the life of someone of the female persuasion.

Whistling, he left the security wing, pulling his phone out of his pocket as he went. He had thirty minutes to reach Ambassador Marco before his plane lifted off. It would be better if he didn't reach home. A traffic accident was on the agenda for him. Couldn't have *too* many heart attacks, he thought as he pushed through the front doors of the hotel lobby.

For a brief moment, he wondered why his client had wanted Ambassador Marco dead. But his was not to question why, he reminded himself. He was well paid and that's all he needed to know. His clients were anonymous for a reason; no trace. If he didn't know who his client was, then there was no way to trace the deaths back to either him or his clients.

## Chapter 4

“This came for you, Your Highness,” Ella announced, placing a box in the middle of Sada’s desk.

“What is it?” she asked, picking it up and turning it over. “Was I expecting something?”

Presents to the royal family were carefully accepted through the security office. She rarely saw the presents that people sent to the palace, although she received a list of the items, in case she wanted to keep something. Normally, the items were more along the lines of bribes, so she and her siblings didn’t even bother to read the list, not wanting to be obligated to anyone. There was a three person staff who handled the gifts, as well as the polite responses to the sender.

She turned the box over, her heart pounding. Was this a bomb? No! All packages coming to the palace were scanned for bomb materials as well as biological agents.

“Where did this come from?” Sada asked.

Ella stood in front of Sada’s desk, looking awkward. “It’s from...” the woman stopped and sighed, bowing her head slightly. “It’s from one of Sheik al-Marri’s guards, Your Highness,” she admitted. “While you were in the conference last weekend, I was outside with your guards and his. All of us, well, we were just talking and watching out for you and...” she waved her hand airily, “and the sheik. So when one of them brought this to my house last night, he said it was a phone so that...” Ella paused again, looking over her shoulder, then leaned in close to Sada. “Your calls are logged, Your Highness!” she whispered. “This is a way to speak with Sheik al-Marri *privately!*”

Sada blinked at her assistant, startled she had dared to break palace protocol so thoroughly. And yet, if she hadn’t...!

Sada wouldn’t be feeling this sense of elation at the realization that Micah had resolved their communication



problem!

“Um...well...thank you,” she whispered back, pulling the box closer. “This is very...um...bad...of you,” she felt as if she needed to say that.

Ella lowered her eyes, nodding. “I know. And I’ll take it away if you want me to. I just thought...well, you’ve seemed so...anxious...for the past few days and I thought this would help.”

Sada nodded slowly. Carefully. Trying very hard to hide her excited smile. “Yes. Thank you.”

She had wondered if she’d ever hear from Micah again. Sada had actually considered speaking to Tazir and suggesting that they begin talks to increase diplomatic connections between their two countries.

“Thank you,” she said again and Ella nodded, turned and left the room. Was there a new spring to Ella’s step? Was that because she’d done something good for Sada? Or was there something brewing between Ella and one of Micah’s body guards?

Interesting mystery, she thought as she opened the box. Sure enough, a phone rested in the box and Sada’s fingers shook as she pulled it out. She wasn’t even sure how to turn the thing on. She’d always been handed a phone that was fully charged and ready to go with all of her favorite apps already installed.

Pressing the power button, Sada was a bit startled when the phone sprang to life, lighting up with all sorts of buttons on the touch screen. The most prominent one was the phone app. She tapped it with her finger and the phone app appeared with only one phone number loaded. The name on the phone merely said, “M”, but Sada knew exactly who M was.

She’d been searching for a way to contact him and, darn it, she was envious that he’d figured out a way before she had.

Paris. She was really going to meet Micah in Paris! He still had her list and he wanted to help her! It sounded so decadent, so daring and different from her normal, conservative, quiet self that she shivered with excitement and adrenaline. Good grief, she was going to struggle sleeping this week, just knowing what was coming.

Even as she pressed the phone to her chest, a small chime sounded.

Pulling it away from her body, she stared down at the screen. Micah was calling her! Dear heaven, he was calling her right now!

For a moment, she couldn't figure out how to use the phone, but her trembling fingers finally hit the correct buttons.

"Hello?" she answered, hearing the nervousness in her voice.

"Sada," his deep, rumbling voice growled into her ear. "Finally!"

"Micah!" she whispered back, standing up and walking over to her door, closing it to give herself more privacy. She glanced briefly at Ella and the woman nodded knowingly, understanding that Sada wasn't to be disturbed. "How did you get this phone to me?"

There was a low, rough chuckle and Sada pictured him leaning back in a large leather chair, his feet propped up on a massive desk. What did his office look like? Was it dark and masculine with heavy, antique furniture? Or did he prefer more modern, clean-lined décor?

"What are you wearing today?"

Sada glanced down at her clothing, wishing she'd chosen a more vibrant outfit for the day. "A white dress with black and white shoes."

"High heels?" he clarified.

“Of course,” Sada replied, smiling now. She lowered herself into the chair behind her desk, a white leather chair with a soft seat and no arms. Now she wished that there were arms so she had somewhere to rest her elbows.

“What’s underneath the white dress?”

Sada stilled, shocked that he would ask something like that. “Um...”

“Tell me, Sada,” he said with encouragement in his tone. “It’s just you and me. There are only two people in the entire world who will ever know about what we do together. I vow that I will never repeat any of this to anyone. I’m not recording the conversation. I’m not going to expose your desires to the tabloids. I’m not going to use our relationship to further any sort of connection between our countries.” He paused, letting his assurance sink in. “This is just between you and me. Okay?”

She breathed in a shaky breath, then nodded. “Okay. Thank you.” Of course, he might just be telling her what she wanted to hear, but for some reason that she might regret later on, Sada trusted him. “Just plain, white underwear. Matching bra.”

Micah gave her a deep, heavy groan. “I’m going to get you into something sexier this weekend,” he promised. “Red, I think.”

She snorted. “I don’t own any red underwear,” she shot back.

“Good. I’m going to buy some for you. Then you’re going to text me the next time you wear it, so that I’ll know you’re mine.”

She swallowed, the idea sounded so...seductively appealing.

His voice was lower, deeper as he said, “You like the idea, don’t you, Sada?”

“Yes,” she admitted, feeling her cheeks heat up.

“Good. I like it too.” He cleared his throat and Sada wondered if he was just as turned on as she was. “Paris. Are you able to get away this weekend? I want you in Paris by five o’clock Friday evening. And I’d like it if you could stay through noon on Sunday. Is that possible?”

“Yes,” she replied, not even bothering to check with her calendar. If there was anything scheduled for the weekend, she’d ask Ella to cancel it. This was far more important. “Five o’clock.”

“Excellent. I’ll send you the address so your security team can do their pre-checks.” She was grateful for that. Their bodyguards always surveyed the hotels and neighborhoods, the streets to and from the airport, with contingency plans just in case something happened on the main route and they needed to get Sada out of the area quickly. Threats were a way of life, but her bodyguards were smart about avoiding danger.

“Thank you. I’ll get it to them as soon as I hear from you.”

“Good.” There was a noise in the background, then he said, “And don’t bring any clothes. You won’t need them.” More noise and he sighed. “I have to go, but I’m looking forward to Friday.” A moment later, he hung up.

Sada stared down at the phone, shocked! No clothes? She couldn’t go to Paris without any clothing! It was... unheard of! What if something happened? What if an emergency came up?

She’d pack clothes. But a smile slowly formed on her face as she whispered, “If I don’t wear any of them, then all the better!”

Sada tucked the phone into a side drawer of her desk, then walked over to the door and opened it to find her oldest brother lurking on the other side.

“Tazir!” she yelled, immediately awash in guilt.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” she asked, looking over her shoulder to ensure that she’d hidden the phone away. When she turned back to face her brother, he had stepped closer, peering over her shoulder, clearly wondering what she was hiding. “Nothing is wrong.”

He shifted, preparing to walk into her office, but Sada stepped in his path.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

Sada huffed a bit, trying to erase the guilt from her face. “I’m stopping you from entering *my* office,” she told him, then channeled Micah by lifting her eyebrows in silent inquiry. “What do you want?”

He hesitated, then leaned closer, trying to intimidate her. “I want to go into your office, Sada,” he said, emphasizing every word.

Once again, Sada resisted. “No.”

Tazir was so astounded, he actually pulled back. But his glare was fierce as he asked, “What’s in there that you don’t want me to know about?”

At that point, Lila stepped into the outer area. “Tazir, what’s going on?”

The siblings turned, watching as Lila came forward, patted their new daughter’s bottom through the soft blanket.

“Nothing, love,” Tazir replied, turning to glare at his younger sister. “Just trying to find out what Sada is hiding from me.”

Lila laughed, shaking her head. “Good grief, Sada never hides anything from you, dear.” She lifted onto her toes and kissed his jaw while Tazir took the baby, his big arms cradling his child protectively. “Sada is the one that always follows all of the rules.”

Sada cringed inwardly at that description.

“Zhara, on the other hand,” Lila continued, chuckling as she shook her head. “Well, if we could get her to break a few less rules, maybe come out of her studio once in a while, then that might worry me.”

Sada wanted to speak up and defend Zhara, but Lila was correct. Zhara really did need to come out of her music studio more often. She was getting a bit too obsessed with the piano.

“She’s fine,” Tazir argued. “She just...has a hobby.”

Sada mentally groaned, relieved that Zhara wasn’t around to hear her oldest brother refer to her passion as a mere “hobby”. Zhara’s expertise was unparalleled. She wasn’t *just* a piano player. She should be on stage.

“Let’s leave Zhara’s piano playing out of this, shall we?” Sada asked. “She’s perfectly happy playing in her studio and we shouldn’t admonish her for doing what makes her happy.”

Tazir grumbled something that Sada couldn’t quite hear, but that sent his wife into peals of laughter.

Tazir laughed with her and then turned back to Sada. “Whatever you’re hiding in your office, Sada, it’s fine. You don’t have to hide from me. I know that...” he paused, patting his daughter’s bottom thoughtfully as he searched for the right words. Apparently, the big guy’s bottom-patting was an indicator of his moods. She’d have to remember that. “Well, you can come to me. Whatever’s going on. I won’t judge you. If you have a problem, I hope you feel you can talk to me about it.”

Sada’s gaze sparkled challengingly. “And what if I want to marry someone along the lines of...” she paused, pretending to think about it, then said, “Oh...someone like Sheik Micah al-Marri of Batam?”

Instantly, Tazir stiffened in outrage. “No! Not possible!” He grumbled for a moment, then shook his head again. “I know that he’s a good leader. And he’s a great poker

player.” He patted his daughter’s bottom quickly, obviously agitated. “But not as a husband for you, Sada. If that bastard ever came anywhere near you, I’ll...” he stopped, his jaw tightening. “Has he approached you? Is he the reason why you were so sad when you first landed after the conference? Did you have an interaction with him at the conference last week?” He shook his head, bouncing his daughter in his arms so hard that it was a miracle she didn’t wake up. Her little arms and fisted hands bounced comically along with his movements. “If he did or said anything to hurt you, I will break his damn neck! I don’t care how good of a poker player he is! He’s a womanizer and a bastard, Sada!”

Sada’s heart sank, but she lifted her hands, palms out, in an effort to calm him. “Sheik al-Marri didn’t say or do anything to offend me, Tazir. In fact, I had very little interaction with him during the meetings.” That was the truth, even though it left out a great many details. “Even on the last day of the conference, the organizers ensured that he was on one side of the room while I was on the other.”

The assurance seemed to calm Tazir down, but he still glanced over her shoulder at Sada’s desk, wondering what she was hiding.

“There’s nothing in my office that you would care about, Tazir,” she lied, keeping her features calm. Thankfully, her big brother slowed the bouncing and butt-patting to a more normal rate and the baby’s hands fluttered only slightly. “But that’s *my* personal domain. You’d...clutter it up with your testosterone. It’s my space and I don’t want you in there. Same with my apartment. You know how much I hate you coming into my rooms.”

He glared at her, but that last part was true. Sada protected her personal spaces unlike the other three siblings. She loved her privacy, needed it to survive this crazy world of politics and backstabbing in the palace.

“Go put your daughter to bed,” she urged, patting his shoulder. That’s when she looked over at Lila. The woman

wasn't as easily fooled. She was watching Sada with curiosity. Quickly, Sada smiled at her sister-in-law, trying to reassure them that nothing was amiss.

And that was true, she told herself as she stood in the doorway to her office, watching the three leave. Nothing was amiss. At the moment.

“Should I cancel the flight to Paris?” Ella interrupted Sada's thoughts once they were alone.

“Not a chance,” Sada replied flatly, then turned on her heel and stalked back into her office. “I'm flying to Paris Friday morning. We'll get some shopping done.” Just enough to keep Tazir from suspecting what was really going on!



## Chapter 5

Sada stepped out of the limousine and looked around. This wasn't a hotel, she realized. "Is this really where he said I was to meet him?" she asked Ella.

Her assistant stepped out of the limousine and glanced down at her notes. "Yes, Your Highness. This is the address. Your security team has already coordinated with Sheik al-Marri's team. They've gone over the security measures, done a thorough..."

Ella continued talking, but Sada stopped listening. Her eyes were trained on the tall, impossibly attractive man stepping out through the front door nestled into the lush landscaping of an exclusive house in the seventh arrondissement. The houses here were enormous and looked to be at least a century old, all refurbished to glorify their past splendor.

The house that sat beneath the lacy, trailing branches of an enormous willow tree that shaded an abundance of colorful plants, was three stories high with five enormous windows on each side of the massive, double doors.

"Sada." Just one word, but he took her hand after speaking her name and the one word was so much more. His rough voice and...how had she ever thought him unattractive? Impossible! The man was everything a woman might want in a man, she thought.

"Micah," she replied. She'd been so nervous on the flight to Paris from Fahre, that she hadn't managed to eat anything. Nor had she eaten breakfast or even slept the night before. She'd been too curious, terrified, eager, and shocked about today. And desperate to find out which items he would help her check off on her list. Goodness, she couldn't even remember what was on her list now and had thought about making up a new list, a longer one than she'd come up with last weekend. But her lessons about writing those kinds of

fantasies down had been learned the hard way. She never wanted anyone to discover her musings or fantasies again. One man was enough. This man, she thought.

Micah lifted Sada's hands up to his mouth, kissing the softness on the back of her fingers. She was trembling and he wanted to pull her into his arms. He wanted to reassure her that they didn't have to do anything she didn't want to this weekend. They could just spend time together, talk and get to know one another.

"Come inside," he urged, taking her hand in his and tucking it onto his elbow. He led her along the stone pathway to the house. "How was your flight?"

She smiled up at him and started to lean her shoulder against his arm. But as soon as she realized what she was doing, Sada pulled away, apparently not sure if she could take such liberties.

Hopefully, if his plans worked out, she wouldn't be unsure about their intimacy by the end of this weekend. He wanted to show her so many things. But he'd go slowly. He'd ask her if she still wanted this, if she wanted to slow down, get to know him better. They could meet again in another city at another time before becoming physically intimate.

They stepped into the three story foyer, the marble floors causing his words to echo slightly as he asked, "Would you like to freshen up before we eat?"

Sada pulled her eyes away from the magnificent crystal chandelier that hung, perfectly centered, in the circular foyer with the staircase forming the back wall. She looked up at him, those soft, full lips parting ever so slightly in surprise.

He chuckled. "You thought I'd toss you over my shoulder and take you to bed immediately upon your arrival?" he asked, his words quiet so that the servants and guards couldn't overhear this conversation.

She swallowed and, although she shook her head, Micah could see the truth in her eyes.

“I guess I’m not exactly sure how these kinds of... situations... flow,” she replied, trying to pull her hand out of his.

Sada trembled when Micah kissed her fingers again, pulling her ever so slightly closer. “They ‘flow’ however we want them to flow,” he replied softly.

“Oh,” was her only response. It didn’t sound very profound, but profundity was beyond her just now. Her thoughts were fully occupied with Micah and the way he smelled, spicy with a hint of lemon, and the heat coming from him, the muscles in his chest and arms, the breadth of his shoulders. He was so tall and so...incredible, all she wanted to do was lift up onto her toes and kiss him.

And because she’d psyched herself up to be brave during this weekend, she did exactly that. Before she lost her courage, Sada eliminated the distance between them and laid a kiss on him. If he hadn’t lowered his head, anticipating her, she never could have reached so high.

As soon as their lips touched, the flame that had been simmering for the past week flamed into a wildfire! Sada even heard a small “whoosh” that might have been her light coat falling from her shoulders to the white marble floor, or it might have been her inhibitions flying out the door.

One strong arm wrapped around her waist while one of his hands reached behind her head, tilting her slightly so that he could deepen the kiss and take control. His lips ravished her mouth and Sada loved it. She loved the way he controlled their kiss, slowing things down, then speeding them up when she whimpered her objection. It was too much and yet, not enough, and her hands fisted in his shirt, needing more!

When Sada whimpered, Micah knew that it was imperative that they find some privacy. At once! He bent down and scooped her up, taking the stairs two at a time in his hurry to reach his bedroom before his control slipped too far.

Shouldering his way through the door, he kicked it closed behind them and then strode over to the bed, carefully lowering Sada's feet to the floor.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked, sliding his hands along her waist, feeling her soft curves pressing against him. He was fully erect now, fully on fire for her.

"I'm not exactly sure about anything, Micah," she admitted quietly.

His hands stilled and he started to step back. But her hands tightened on his shoulders. "Don't go," she whispered. "I didn't mean that I wasn't sure about doing...this...with you," she explained. "I meant..." she sighed and lifted her eyes to his. "I'm not sure what I meant. When you're touching me, I can't really think very well."

"Is that a good thing?" he asked, pulling her against him again and stroking her back. With each movement, he let his hands travel lower, enjoying the shivers when his hands finally rested low on her backside.

"Yes. It's a very good thing." She bit her lip as she allowed her hands to slide down his chest. He bit back a groan, not wanting to scare her with the need that was roaring through him. Every time Sada smoothed her fingers against his body only fanned the flames higher.

Slow down, he reminded himself. This is her first time.

"I want to make this perfect for you," he told her, then lowered his head to nibble along her neck. He remembered the way she'd shivered when he'd done that a week ago and wanted that same reaction.

"No pressure," she teased, tilting her head back to give him better access to the lovely column of her neck. "I

just...I want to enjoy this. So, please don't feel like this has to be perfect."

He chuckled and nipped her earlobe. "I want you to enjoy this as well."

"Good. And you too, right?"

He laughed and pulled back, letting his hands move from her back to her side, then to her stomach. Her soft, lovely stomach was covered in silk at the moment. He couldn't wait to get her clothes off of her so that he could see what was underneath. He knew she would look amazing in absolutely nothing!

"If I enjoy myself any more, I'd probably pass out."

She laughed, then leaned forward, attempting to kiss his neck as he'd done to her. He groaned, but thankfully, she was too short, even in her heels, to reach his neck. He loved that she tried though!

"What should I do?"

He grinned, pulling the silk blouse out of the waistband of her skirt. "Nothing. You should let me do this for you."

"I want to know..."

"I'll show you next time, okay?" he promised, his fingers deftly unbuttoning the tiny buttons on her blouse. "This time, I want to touch you and make everything wonderful, okay?"

"Yes!" she hissed, but he wasn't sure if she was answering his question, or telling him that she liked it when he stroked the soft skin of her stomach. Didn't matter, he thought. Slowly, he pushed the blouse off her shoulders, barely noticing the wisp of sound as the silk fell to the floor behind her. Then her skirt...releasing the button and zipper in the back allowed the skirt to fall to the floor around her feet. He lifted her up and laid her on the bed, gazing down at her.

White panties and white bra. Interesting, but he'd take care of her conservative lingerie later.

"These have to go as well, love," he whispered, kissing the soft curve of her stomach as his fingers slipped under the satin panties, pulling them down along her legs. She wasn't wearing stockings and her heels had fallen off at some point.

She crossed her legs at the knees, bending her legs so she could hide that special part of her. He'd get to that later too, he thought. First, the bra.

"Aren't you going to take your clothes off?" she asked.

Micah froze. For a moment, he considered keeping his clothes on. It would be safer that way. If she touched his bare skin, he might just lose control.

Then he saw the worried expression in her eyes and knew that he would do anything to make her feel more comfortable. "Yes. Absolutely." With that, he stepped off of the bed and quickly stripped off his clothes. When he was naked, he stood beside the bed for a moment, letting her look her fill. But when she started to become nervous, he climbed back on the bed and took her hand. "It's going to be fine," he assured her, wrapping her fingers around his shaft. "I don't know if the first time is going to hurt, Sada, but we'll go as slowly as you need, okay?"

He just about embarrassed himself when she stroked him. He hadn't been expecting that level of bravery this first time. But damn, her hands felt amazing! She was a bit clumsy though, so he took her hand, showed her how best to stroke him, what to do with her fingers and hands and...then pulled her hand away. "I can't take too much of that or I'll lose whatever threads of control I have left."

She beamed at that and he felt his chest loosen at the sight. She looked so pretty like this, but the bra had to go. "I want to see all of you, Sada," he whispered, and tugged at the

strap on her right shoulder. When the material loosened, he let his forefinger slide along the upper swell of her breast. He didn't touch the tip, but went back and forth, making her shiver in anticipation. Slowly, he moved his finger closer and closer, pushing the material out of the way as he gently stroked her skin until he reached the taut peak. Dark nipples pressed against that bra and he couldn't stop himself from taking her nipple into his mouth, stroking it with his tongue, tasting her, feeling her shiver. She moaned and he wanted to smile, but the taste of that tight bud against his mouth was too intoxicating. He wanted more.

Sliding his hand lower, his fingers teased her stomach, astounded at how soft she was here. And ticklish! He liked that and it seemed to relax her a bit.

"You're so lovely, Sada," he told her, kissing his way along her shoulder to her neck, then down to the other breast, teasing her until she arched against his mouth, rolling her hips against his hand. He doubted she was even aware of his hand moving down her thighs, teasing the softness there as he coaxed her legs to open for him. He wanted that honey, he wanted to feel the sweetness against his tongue, to experience her climax first-hand.

With that intent in mind, he moved lower, kissing her stomach and feeling her fingers in his hair. She tugged, but he was determined. "Relax, Sada," he soothed, his fingers sliding against her inner thigh. "Just tell me if I'm doing this right for you."

She laughed and he enjoyed the sound. But he needed to taste her, see every glistening reaction to his ministrations. His body was clamoring for release, but he wanted to give this to her, to give her the joy of release before the pain when he broke through that barrier. He was going to make this moment as pleasurable as possible.

Blowing lightly on the soft, dark curls, he spread her wide, stroking and teasing the wet folds with his fingers. She was so wet and hot for him, he wanted to roar with need. This

woman, all of her, was his! Sada was his woman. That thought kept echoing through his mind. *His woman!*

He teased her with his fingers, smiling when she gasped and squirmed against him. He loved that sound, he realized. Micah moved closer, finally tasting her. She was sweeter than he'd thought possible!

He heard several more moans and could feel her body tightening. But Micah wasn't ready to let her climax. Not quite yet. He was enjoying himself too much, so he pulled back, his fingers soothing instead of exciting. He even chuckled when she groaned. He wasn't done, though. Not quite yet. This was his time. This was for her, but also for him because doing this to her was so hot!

So, when his mouth finally wrapped around that nub, his finger sliding in and out of her heat, it was the moment he'd been waiting for! And apparently, Sada had been waiting for it as well, because her body almost immediately tightened and then...she screamed, nearly sitting up as her body clenched with her first climax. Micah held her hips firmly in place as he helped her ride through the beautiful waves of pleasure until she was nearly pushing him away. Only then did he relent and kiss his way back up her body.

For long moments, he lay beside her, his fingers trailing over her stomach as he watched her slowly return to the present. As her lovely eyes opened, her soft, full lips pulled into a wide, surprised grin.

"That was amazing!" she whispered, rolling to her side so that their bodies were touching.

"You enjoyed that?" he asked, pulling her halfway on top of him, then brushing her lush hair out of her eyes.

"Yeah," she laughed.

Sada felt giddy. That climax had been so unexpected and so...powerful...she felt as if her bones had melted. Staring down at him, she wondered how she could thank him



for such a wonderful experience. Then she remembered some of the scenes in the books she'd read over the years. With a determined light, she shifted and gazed down at Micah's hard member. His erection had been pressing against her stomach, but looking at it now, she wanted to get to know that part of him.

Reaching down, she wrapped her fingers around his length, smiling at the hissing noise he made at her touch. But he grabbed her wrist, pulling her hand away.

"Soon, I'll let you do whatever you'd like to me, but right now, I'm too close to exploding. And I'd like to teach you more." He rolled over so that he was on top again. "Is that okay?"

Sada licked her lips and shifted so that she was cradling him more completely with her hips. "Yes!" And she pressed herself against him, intoxicated by the way he felt. He was like a furnace and every part of him fanned the flames of her need.

Suddenly, he reached across to the side table, yanking out the drawer a little too hard. The drawer, and everything in it, fell to the floor and Micah muttered several curses while he shifted and Sada chuckled.

"Oh, you think that's funny?" he demanded, grabbing a condom from the floor. He ripped open the package and rolled the protection down over his impressive erection. Sada's laughter faded as she realized what was to come next. Swallowing hard, she shook her head. "No. Not funny."

She was watching him, his enormous erection and... dear heaven, that wasn't funny at all! He was large. Yes, she'd felt him with her hands, but now that the moment was upon her when he would enter her with that monster-sized erection, she was a little intimidated.

"Stop," he ordered gently, running his hand along her leg. "You *are* going to enjoy this."

Sada swallowed again, still staring at that part of him. “It’s just so...” She forgot what she was saying when his fingers slid higher up her inner thigh. His touch distracted her completely. His hot mouth around her nipple covered her in a delightful haze of desire. He playfully tweaked her nipple while his mouth laved and sucked, teased and suckled. It was so much stimulation! Sada was nearing another climax, just from him touching her nipples? Impossible! And yet, her body kept tightening as he...!

She screamed as her body again convulsed with joyous pleasure, her fingernails digging into his shoulders. Her legs tightened around his waist and she was only vaguely aware of him pressing into her, but Sada was just too overwhelmed to be fully aware.

Then she felt the fullness as he pressed deeper into her body and, there was the smallest hint of pain, but it was gone in a second and...and...and oh my!

Had she said that loud? Opening her eyes, she stared up at the ceiling of the bedroom. For the first time, Sada was aware of the glorious painting on the ceiling, but then Micah nipped at her neck. “Micah,” she whispered, tightening her legs around his waist.

He lifted his head and looked down at her. “Are you okay?”

Sada gasped as he thrust deeply into her and the friction was glorious! Her fingers tightened and she lifted her hips, silently begging him to come back to her, to fill her again because it felt too wonderful, having him deep inside her like this.

“Don’t stop!” Sada gasped out, clinging to him as he thrust into her, driving her higher and higher until...the stars burst behind her eyelids and she screamed, her whole body thrumming with waves of pleasure! It was too much and she felt him still thrusting, vaguely heard his roars of release and then...then it was all over! He collapsed down on top of her,

his face buried against her neck and she couldn't move. She couldn't even blink! Her entire body was just...limp.

He started to move, to shift to the side, but Sada whimpered. She must have tightened her arms around him or something, because he stopped and relaxed against her. There was even a moan, but she wasn't sure if she made the sound or if he had.

A long time later, Sada realized that something was wrong. She couldn't breathe! Go figure! A six foot, three inch, two hundred pound man was lying on top of her.

She must have stirred because he moved, leaning his weight on his elbows as he gazed down at her. They were still intimately connected and she was painfully aware of that. A new soreness sank into her consciousness and she pressed her hands against his hips. "I need a little room," she murmured.

He pulled out of her, shifting to his side before he kissed her lightly on her forehead. It was a sweet, tender gesture. Almost as if he were saying, "I'm here."

"I'll be right back," he promised, and stepped into the bathroom. She heard the water running and smiled dreamily. Sada rolled onto her side, gazing out the window and blushing when she realized that it was still daylight. What had she done? She'd walked into the man's house for the first time and ravished him! Good grief.

A bubble of laughter erupted from her. What was the household staff thinking? She could just imagine and she buried her face in the pillow.

"What's wrong?" Micah asked, sliding onto the bed right behind her. He spooned himself around her, draping an arm over her waist and pulling her close. She could feel his warmth against her back and started to worry about her butt. Was she too...full back there? Was he going to wonder if she needed to lose weight in her butt region?

"Stop it," he growled, nipping at her ear.

She peeked at him over her shoulder, trying to hide her insecurities. “Stop what?”

“Stop worrying.” He kissed her bare shoulder. “I can see how you’re biting your lip. That indicates only one thing.”

“What’s that?” she laughed, feeling surprisingly sexy. Maybe it was because of his large hand sliding over her stomach. When lying on her back, her stomach probably looked nice and flat. Possibly even firm. But on her side, gravity most likely pulled the small pooch on her stomach down towards the bed and wasn’t nearly as sexy.

“You’re worrying about your body, aren’t you?”

She stiffened briefly, but the fluttering of his fingers against her stomach relaxed her again. “Yes.”

“Don’t,” he urged. He pressed his hips against her and she suddenly noticed he was ready for another round. “If this doesn’t prove to you that I find you incredibly sexy, then nothing will. You’re mine, by the way,” he told her, kissing her shoulder again. Those kisses moved down her arm, then back up again before he whispered kisses against her neck. “Are you hungry?”

“For food?” she asked breathlessly.

“For whatever you’d like.”

She smiled, leaning into him. She felt like a cat, ready to purr when he touched her. “I don’t know what I’m feeling at the moment.”

He chuckled softly. “Take your time. There’s no rush.” He shifted slightly. “Are you sore?”

Sada thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, but I’m not sure why.”

“Because you were a virgin until a few moments ago?” he offered. “You didn’t feel anything?”

She considered that, trying to remember. Then she smiled and shook her head. “I felt a tiny touch of pain, but by

that point, you'd already...well, I wasn't really thinking about the pain."

"Good." His hand stroked her outer thigh. "How about a hot bath though?"

She smiled at him over her shoulder. "A bath?"

He kissed her again. "Stay right here."

A moment later, he was out of the bed and striding across the expanse of the bedroom, completely uninhibited by his nudity. She took advantage of the unhindered view, admiring the man's tight backside as he stepped into the bathroom. Unfortunately, he disappeared from view. She heard the water running. Curious, she stood up and, not nearly as confident as he was with her nakedness, took his big shirt, wrapping it around herself, then tiptoed to the bathroom. The man was pouring something that smelled like roses into an enormous bath. He was making her a bubble bath?

That was the sweetest thing she'd ever seen!

He winked at her, his eyes drinking in the vision of her wearing nothing but his shirt. "Are you ready?"

"Absolutely," she replied, feeling a soft, fuzzy warmth seep into her heart at his sweet gesture.

"Good. Take that off," he ordered, standing in front of the bathtub with his arms folded over his muscular chest.

Sada was startled, thinking he'd leave and give her some privacy for her bath. Apparently, that wasn't going to happen. "Don't you have work to do?" she asked, her fingers toying with the hem of his shirt.

"Nope. I've cleared my calendar for the whole weekend," he informed her as he moved towards her. He took the edges of his shirt and tugged her towards the bath. "You're going to be sick of me by the time Sunday rolls around."

She doubted it, but she loved that he wanted to try.

And because he was there, pushing the dress shirt down her shoulders, Sada wasn't nearly as self-conscious as she'd been a moment ago. Maybe because he was kissing her neck again. Or maybe because he wasn't staring at her, making her self-conscious. Either way, she loved that he was there with her, touching her and making her body burn with desire.

"In you go," he ordered.

"Are you joining me?" she asked, missing his lips against her skin almost immediately.

"Absolutely. I wouldn't miss this for anything."

From that, she deduced that he had *plans* for this bath. Her mind instantly flashed back to her list, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember anything on it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, stepping into the circle of his arms.

"Whatever you want," he whispered in a hot, heavy voice into her ear before nipping her earlobe.

She laughed, leaning into him. "Unfortunately, I don't think I have many good ideas."

He turned, taking her hand and helping her step into the bath. "Where did you come up with the ideas for your list?"

She stepped into the steaming, fragrant water and lowered herself carefully to one of the seats, the water coming up to her neck. She watched as he stepped into the water, settling across from her. He lifted her into his arms, setting her down on his lap. She leaned back against his chest and tucked her head under his chin, warm and contented now that she was back in his arms.

"I don't remember where my ideas came from," she admitted.

"Books?"

Sada shrugged, swishing the rose scented water over her arms, enjoying the sensuous feel of it against her skin. “Many of my ideas were from books, yes. But also movies.”

“And...conversations?”

She snorted, shaking her head. “No way. Tazir and Rayed wouldn’t ever speak of sexual things around Zhara or me. They were always very circumspect.” She looked at him with derision. “The idea that women should be virgins until their wedding night is alive and well in Fahre.”

“Ah. I never understood that concept. The idea that women shouldn’t enjoy sex except after marriage seems wrong. Especially when men are encouraged to carouse and enjoy all the illicit activities life has to offer.”

“Exactly.” She looked at him. “That’s so not fair to women.”

“I agree, but I’ll admit I will probably think that way about...” he stopped, looked startled and quickly changed the subject. “So, what kinds of books did you get your ideas from?”

Sada eyed him for a long moment, wondering if he almost said, “my daughter” before he realized where his thoughts were going. And yes, she’d accepted that this was just a fling. However, his immediate rejection of the possibility of having a daughter, with her, hurt. A lot more than she’d expected.

Pushing the hurt aside, she focused on his question, idly swishing the water around in front of her as she thought.

“I read just about any kind of book I could get my hands on. Being a royal princess in boarding school meant that I was ostracized a lot. It hurt but Zhara and I lost ourselves in books.” Her mouth twisted slightly. “Well, *I* lost myself in books. Zhara read a lot, but her primary escape was playing the piano. She’d get lost in the music and I’d have to go find her, remind her that it was time for dinner or classes or...whatever.”

“What kind of music does she enjoy?”

She felt his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs pressing deep into the tense muscles there. Sada let her head fall backwards, enjoying the pressure that slowly eased the stress she hadn't realized she'd been carrying. How had the tension built up so quickly? She'd been a noodle only five minutes ago!

Zhara, she thought. And their past. Their older brothers. Those subjects always created a great deal of tension and she carried it in her shoulders.

“Everything,” she told him. “Mostly, she plays classical music, but when she's in a weird mood, she'll switch over to classic rock. She has an impressive ability to play anything she hears just once. So if she hears a song on the radio, even a song that's just come out, Zhara can figure out the notes to that song. She might mess up once or twice on the initial attempt, but she figures it out by the second time she plays the song.”

“Is that annoying?”

Sada smiled softly in remembrance. “It used to be.”

“Or were you annoyed that she found solace in her music, pushing you away?”

Sada was surprised that he'd identified her pain so easily. “How did you know?” she asked before she realized what she was saying. “I mean...well...Zhara is...She's my sister and I love her but...”

“But her ability to lose herself in her music meant that she pushed you away pretty often, didn't she?”

“Yes.”

“And your brothers are significantly older than you, right?”

His hands smoothed down her back. She felt several small kisses along her shoulder again and shivered, despite the warmth of the water.



“They are actually only my half-brothers. Same father, different mothers.”

He looked at her carefully, his eyes narrowing. “Why does that bother you so much? Is it because your mother came second?” he asked. “Men marry second wives all the time. Especially powerful men like your father.”

Sada shook her head and turned, her hands resting on his shoulders now. “My brothers are wonderful people. They never, *ever*, made either of us feel as if we were a different family.”

“And yet, you were sent away to boarding school.”

She shrugged. “So were my brothers. It’s just the way of things in our world, isn’t it?”

She didn’t add that there was absolutely no way she would send her children away to boarding school. It was a sad, lonely existence. And the mountains of Switzerland made it even more difficult to deal with the loneliness of being separated from her family.

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” he replied, his hands settling on her hips now. He looked at her face, not at her breasts, which she’d been hoping would distract him. She wasn’t quite able to lift herself free of the bubbles, so maybe he couldn’t see them clearly.

Shifting again, she tried to turn so that she was facing him. Unfortunately, her attempt at a sexy shift on his lap turned into a slip and slide, almost landing her under the water in an ignominious heap. If it weren’t for him helping steady her, securely placing her right where she wanted to be, it would have been a very...awkward...moment.

“Now that you’ve managed to distract me,” he teased, a smile lurking at his mouth and his hands heavy on her hips, “what’s your plan?”

She had no idea. None at all!

Biting her lip, she stared into his dark eyes for a long moment, ideas flitting through her mind. She recognized the challenge in his eyes and wanted to do something. So instead of asking him for suggestions, she decided to wing it. Wasn't one of her list items to have sex in a shower? This was pretty darn close, wasn't it?

She let her hands slide from his shoulders to his chest, sifting her fingers through the dark hair there. It wasn't nearly as rough as she'd anticipated. It felt nice. Sexy. The hair tickled her palms. She was also aware of his hands moving to cup her bottom. A part of her wanted to reach around and move his hands from there, but another part of her wanted to know what he might do with those hands. She wanted to be daring and adventurous.

"I think that...?" she trailed off when her fingers slid over his nipples. His eyes widened briefly and he relaxed under her fingers. He liked that? She'd thought that only women's nipples were sensitive. Exploring that possibility, she stroked her fingers over his nipples again and he groaned this time. When she did it again, she slipped from his lap, but he pulled her between his legs. This was an interesting position, she thought and moved closer. The water was relatively deep, so she could just kneel between his legs while keeping her chin above water and...explore. With her hands, and then her mouth, she explored his chest, his arms, the muscles along his shoulders. She didn't feel like diving under the water to explore other parts of him, but her hands were available.

She remembered earlier when he'd shown her how to touch him. Her fingers were light at first, tentative. When he didn't pull away, when he groaned with her ministrations, she grew bolder, her hand wrapping around his shaft while her other hand explored the soft parts of him lower down. Just like before, he reached down and gave her silent instructions. But as soon as she became more proficient, he released her hand, cupping her head as he brought her mouth up for a kiss.

Without removing her hands, he pulled her closer and she was suddenly rubbing herself against both his shaft as well as her fingers. Gasping in surprise, she froze.

“Don’t stop, love,” he urged, using his hands to guide her hips so that she was tantalizing them both. He even took one of her hands and pressed it against herself. “I showed you what I like,” he whispered against her mouth. “Now you show me how you like to be touched.” He extended his hand, but pressed her hand against his finger. So, one of her hands was gripping his erection, sliding up and down the shaft while her other hand covered his and pressed his fingers against her, the nub throbbing with the need to be touched. “Harder,” he urged.

She wanted to tell him the same, but the word wouldn’t come. So she showed him, her hand pressing his fingers more firmly against her body. “Oh!” she gasped, her back arching. Her other hand moved faster, which moved her hand covering his faster. And faster! Her body shifted, unable to remain still as she showed him what she liked. Faster and faster, she closed her eyes, her mouth unconsciously falling open as...! “Yes!” she whispered, her body shattering as she climaxed from just his fingers against her nub. In the back of her mind, she heard him groan, felt his hand cover hers as he moved her hand against his shaft until he found his release as well.

Shocked by the erotic moment, she opened her eyes, not sure how to react to something so blatant. But he groaned and pulled her in closer, kissing her ravenously. “Thank you!” he whispered against her mouth.

Sada laughed into the kiss, still shocked, but also feeling liberated and wonderful all over again. Yes, an orgasm is so much more effective than a massage!

## Chapter 6

“This is nice,” Sada whispered, leaning her head against Micah’s shoulder. They were walking hand in hand through a small park in the moonlight.

Micah’s fingers tightened around hers and he gazed up at the moon. “It’s an item on your list, isn’t it?” He looked down at her and their eyes met. “A romantic walk in the moonlight?”

She grinned and shook her head. “Not quite.”

His eyes widened for a moment, then he nodded. “Right. Your wish was to *dance* in the moonlight,” he corrected. A moment later, he pulled out his phone.

Sada leaned her head against his shoulder again and kept walking, feeling happier than she’d ever thought possible. But before she could actually finish that thought, soft, romantic music seeped into the air. Sada looked around as Micah walked over to a nearby bench. There, he set his phone down, then turned to hold out a hand to her. “May I have this dance?” he asked.

Sada’s heart melted and she blinked back sudden tears. Offering a small curtsy, she beamed up at him. “I would be honored, sir.”

Their hands touched and she felt a jolt of electricity arc between them. Immediately, she wanted to beg him to take her back to his house and make love to her. But in the next moment, he pulled her into his arms and they were dancing. Under the moonlight! A walk in the moonlight had been wonderful, but this...this had been on her list!

“You’re more romantic than I would have thought, Sheik al-Marri,” she teased.

“And you,” he paused to kiss her tenderly, “are an excellent dancer.” His grip tightened around her waist before

he spun her expertly. Sada twirled under his arm, smiling up at the moon as she spun. They swayed together, the night sounds adding to the soft music and the humid warmth of the night making them feel like they were in a cocoon protected from the realities of the world.

*Just a fling*, Sada reminded herself firmly for the millionth time. “Where did you learn to dance so well?” she asked, trying to distract herself. There were so many thoughts and emotions swirling through her head right now and she was struggling to process the flood.

“I had a dance instructor. Isn’t that how you learned?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “It was *so* tedious. My dance partner was Rayed and he liked to step on my toes on purpose.”

“Sounds like a typical brother.”

“He’s an ogre sometimes, but a good man.”

“You know that my father was enemy number one in your brothers’ minds, right?”

She smiled sadly. “I know. But it’s different with you, right?” She tilted her head, looking up at him. “You’re not the tyrant that your father used to be.”

He grimaced, but said, “I hope that I’m not the same kind of ruler, but that doesn’t negate the fact that I’m very competitive as I try to repair the damage my father did to my country.” He swung her around, holding her tightly against him. “And I’m very competitive.” Another sashay, then he said, “Tazir and I are working on our alliance, but it’s still... tentative sometimes.”

“I don’t really understand the relationship between you and my brothers.”

“It’s simple. I want to win contracts and bring companies that will invest in my people. Your brothers want that for Fahre. In the international commerce arena, my country battles yours to be first at everything.”

She grinned up at him. “You don’t always win. Nor does Fahre.”

“That’s true. So far, we’ve come out pretty evenly in the commercial competitions. But that means I’m just going to try harder to stomp on his efforts as often as I can.” He twirled her again. “But I respect your brothers. They are good men. Very intelligent and fair.” He dipped her and she clung to his wonderfully broad shoulders. “And I love beating them at poker whenever we get together.”

She smiled. “That’s a very unusual sort of diplomacy.” She tilted her head slightly. “Why is that? I’ve never heard of poker diplomacy before.”

He shrugged, putting one leg between hers and she inhaled sharply as her desire spiked. “I don’t know,” he told her with a growl. “It’s sort of worked so far. And to be honest, right now, I don’t care. I don’t want to discuss your brothers, my dear.” He shifted again, their bodies creating that delicious friction that always sent their passion into the stratosphere. “I want to talk about you and what I want to do to you as soon as I get you back to my house.”

“Yes?” she whispered, her voice breathless now. “What’s on your lascivious mind now?”

He chuckled and kissed her softly, nipping lightly at her lower lip. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

The song ended and he pulled away, pausing to kiss her fingers as a formal “Thank you” for the dance. He retrieved his phone and tucked it into his pocket. By mutual, unspoken agreement, they turned and headed back to his home. Back to his bed.

They barely made it into the house before he kissed her again. Hard! He pressed her against the wall of the foyer, staring deeply into her eyes. “I want you right here,” he growled, his voice low because there were servants around.

“Upstairs!” she whispered to him, gripping his shoulders tightly. “Now!”

He hauled her roughly up the stairs, only putting her down when his foot hit the top step. Then they raced down the hallway to his bedroom. As soon as the doors closed behind them, clothes went flying everywhere.

Before their clothing even had time to hit the floor, Micah had a condom on, and he slid a taunting finger into her heat, obliterating all thoughts from her mind.

“You’re mine!” he growled, pressing her back against the wall and...he entered her just like that! Sada gasped, relaxing her inner muscles to accommodate him as she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He shifted his hold, putting one of his arms under her knee and that lifted her higher, but the new angle also opened her up to his thrusts.

“Yes!” she cried out, not sure if she was confirming his claim or if she was yelling her agreement for his movement. Both were valid, but in this moment, she could only think about how good he felt as he thrust into her.

This position was different. It was hotter, more urgent after their leisurely stroll outside. It was as if their patience was gone and they needed to find that release with each other. Their movements were almost frantic and Sada cried out with every thrust. Was she already climaxing? Yes! Dear heaven, yes! Over and over again, her mind screamed, “Yes!”

She heard his groans and then his body stiffened, his climax hitting him just as hard and he tightened his hold on her. “You’re mine,” he whispered again.

Sada’s response was to kiss his neck, wishing with all of her heart that she could be his and his alone!

## Chapter 7

“We can’t do this!” Sada hissed.

Micah laughed and laced his fingers through hers. “We can and we are,” he assured her, tugging her through the doors of the lovely boutique. “You don’t need to do anything,” Micah assured her. He led her over to one of the silk covered chairs. “Just sit there and behave.”

Micah waited until she was seated, adding in a sweet, heavy kiss, then turned to the waiting sales person. “I need red, black, and pink.”

The salesperson’s smile brightened, obviously eager for an easy and very lucrative commission. “We have several beautiful pieces in those colors,” she assured him, leading Micah through the tables of lacy bras and barely-there panties. “Do you have a style in mind? And do you have a fabric preference?”

Micah glanced over at Sada, smiled evilly, then returned his focus to the salesperson. “Different styles. Different materials. The sexier, the better.”

Once again, he glanced over to where Sada primly sat on the edge of the chair. Damn, she was beautiful! And so incredibly passionate, he felt his body react just at the sight of her surrounded by all of the lacy, decadent pieces. She’d been too sheltered and her underwear reflected that conservative outlook. He was going to change that, he vowed.

He sorted through the pieces that the salesperson showed him, discarding some and nodding his agreement to others. The store was closed to other shoppers so that his and her security teams could more adequately protect them. So, he chose quickly, not wanting to disrupt the store for longer than necessary.

By the time they left an hour later, Sada’s cheeks were beet red and he wanted to do it all over again, just so he could



tease her about her embarrassment.

“You’re going to look so hot in that little black piece,” he whispered into her ear a moment before she dove into the back of the limousine.

“You’ll never know,” she replied back, crossing her arms over her chest.

He laughed as he followed her into the back. “Think so?” he teased. Micah wasn’t sure what she mumbled under her breath, but she just looked too adorable to resist. As the limousine moved forward, he pulled her onto his lap. “We’re going to enjoy the rest of the afternoon,” he vowed.

And they did! She only tried on one of his newest purchases though. Because as soon as she came out of the dressing room in a black lace bra and panty set, he ravished her right there on the floor in front of the dressing room. They didn’t make it to the bed for the first round, but the following round, they enjoyed a more leisurely exploration of each other’s bodies.

Sunday morning, Sada woke before him and slipped out of bed. He heard her in the shower, but before he could join her, the water turned off. So instead of going to her, he propped several pillows behind his head and waited.

The image of Sada coming out of the bathroom stunned him. She had a towel in one hand and she was pressing her hair dry with it. It wasn’t the towel, or even her wet hair that captured his attention though. He’d bought her a satin robe, never thinking she’d have time to wear it. But when Sada walked out in that pink satin robe, he nearly roared with the need to have her. The minx noticed his erection...it was hard to miss...she tossed the towel away and sauntered... yes, Sada was confident enough now to saunter...towards him.

“Don’t take it off,” he ordered when he saw her reach for the robe ties. Her smile widened, but she let her hands drop. She climbed up onto the bed, then “climbed” him. His

beautiful temptress straddled his hips, the shimmering satin revealing her already hard nipples. His hands smoothed over her body as she kissed him. Everywhere! Micah was shocked at the way her mouth caressed his shaft. And he loved watching her enjoy herself. But before he climaxed with just her mouth, he wanted to be inside her. So he lifted her up, rolled a condom down over his erection, and pulled her on top of him. Slowly, painfully slowly, he watched Sada take him into herself, one inch at a time.

Then he showed her how to give herself pleasure from this position. He was again astounded by her ability to learn quickly! She had them both gasping for air in minutes. Too fast, he thought, but Micah couldn't slow her down. Her nails dug into his shoulders and her eyes drifted closed as she moaned with pleasure. Only then did he roll her onto her back, the satin ruffled around her as he thrust into her, finding his own release moments later.

By the time Micah kissed her goodbye on Sunday afternoon, he knew that Sada needed a break so her body could recover from the sexual marathon that he'd put her through over the weekend.

And yet, as she walked away, all he wanted to do was drag her back into the house and never let her go.

Just a fling, he reminded himself. He'd said those words about a thousand times over the past week.

Why wouldn't his heart agree with him?

## Chapter 8

Sada blinked back tears as the limousine pulled away from Micah's beautiful house. She wanted to scream at the driver to stop, to demand that he take her back for one more kiss. Just one more moment in Micah's arms.

But he was a busy man, she reminded herself. During breakfast, he'd seemed distracted, as if he was ready for her to leave so that he could get back to work.

A stray tear escaped, sliding down her cheek. Angrily, she wiped it away. She'd checked off just about every item on her "wicked" list this weekend. Definitely the "screaming in passion" had been checked so often, her voice was raw. Not even the ginger-lemon tea she'd sipped this morning over breakfast helped.

Smiling, she thought about all the times that he'd made her scream. The passion between them hadn't diminished over the weekend. In fact, the more they'd learned about each other by exploring and talking, the more intense their desire had grown.

At least, that's how it felt on her side of the "fling".

Fling. She was starting to hate that word. Taking a deep breath, she glanced out the window again and...!

Why was there a man hiding in the bushes? No, surely she was wrong. Or if there was a man there, he must be walking his dog. It was a beautiful day and Paris was always a lovely place to meander. Especially through this neighborhood. The houses were large and lovely while the landscaping was lush and perfect, carefully groomed by teams of gardeners who lovingly cared for each bush, tree, and flower.

So, why did it feel like the stranger was watching her motorcade from behind those sunglasses? Why did the man seem to be pulling deeper into the shadows created by the

landscape? Almost as if he didn't want her to see his face? And...even more disturbing...why did his face seem so familiar?

Shaking her head, she looked away. It had to be her imagination, Sada told herself firmly. She was exhausted after being with Micah over the weekend and her mind was playing tricks on her. Sada reminded herself that she hadn't been to Paris in...years! So the possibility of recognizing someone here in one of the most exclusive Parisian arrondissements was stretching the possibilities.

Plus, she met dozens of people every week. One person's face was going to look familiar simply because... well, she wasn't sure why. Her mind wasn't working properly yet. She'd think about it once she'd gotten more sleep.

Because she certainly hadn't gotten much sleep this weekend! Micah wasn't human, Sada decided with a secret smile as the limousine picked up speed and she and her bodyguards headed back to the airport. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the back of the limousine but she didn't want to fall asleep. She had several issues that Ella needed her to review before she could relax and get some much needed sleep. She'd wait until she'd gotten through the issues on the plane before allowing her brain to shut down.

Despite her exhaustion, Sada smiled at the memories. If she never saw Micah again, she would still lo...appreciate what he'd done for her this weekend. It wasn't love, she vowed. But what they'd done together, the confidence he'd helped her achieve, was dazzling.

Opening her eyes, she looked around at the passing traffic, fighting to stay awake. Slipping her sunglasses on, she shifted in her seat, surprised to find that she was still tender in all of those secret places. Well, not so secret anymore!

Smiling, she shifted again, the limousine merging into another lane and...was that the same man? He was driving an SUV but...? No, she must be seeing things. The man who

had been hiding in the landscaping of the Paris neighborhood couldn't be driving alongside her on the highway!

Sada snorted and shook her head.

"Are you okay, Your Highness?" Ella asked, her hands pausing over the tablet she had on her lap.

"I'm fine," she replied with a self-deprecating chuckle. "I'm just seeing things." She waved a hand negligently towards the SUV that was now two lanes away. "My mind is playing tricks on me. I thought I saw that man in the bushes outside Micah's house."

She didn't want some stranger to diminish her happiness at the moment. So when the guard in the front seat leaned back to glance at her, then glance at the quickly disappearing SUV, she smiled. "I'm losing it," she assured him. The guard settled back, but he glared hard at the traffic, trying to see something that wasn't there.

Thirty minutes later, Sada sleepily stepped into her private sleeping quarters of the plane, peering longingly at the big, soft bed. But Micah wouldn't be in it, so the appeal wasn't as strong.

She cringed, then wondered if she should take advantage of the few hours of quiet to get some sleep.

"No," she whispered, remembering all of the things she needed to review. "Thing to do!"

And yet, she still walked over to the bedside table and flipped open the box she now carried with her everywhere. Inside the box was her secret phone. She wanted to send Micah a message, just something flirty to let him know that she was thinking of him.

But was that too much? Was it too soon? She'd just left him in Paris. The man needed to concentrate on work.

Sighing, she tucked the phone back into the box and returned to Ella. For the rest of the flight, she and her assistant brainstormed on the schedule for the next week. But in the

back of her mind, Sada wondered when she'd see Micah again.

As soon as they arrived back at the palace, Sada went in search of her eldest brother. She had a plan. It might not be a good one, but she was going to see what her brother thought of it.

Standing outside of his office doorway, she watched him concentrate on something. Softly, she knocked, hoping she wasn't interrupting anything too important. "Tazir, could I speak with you for a moment?"

Tazir turned, his eyes narrowing as she approached his desk. "You enjoyed your trip to Paris?" he asked, leaning back in his big, leather chair. He laced his fingers over his flat stomach, appearing surprisingly relaxed. But Sada knew that Tazir rarely relaxed unless Lila was around. The man was a workaholic and his mind was always churning with information and ideas.

Sada tried to hide the blush staining her cheeks as memories came flooding back. "Yes," she replied, folding her hands in front of her. She'd donned a cream sheath dress this morning and the light-weight wool was still unwrinkled, even after hours of wear in a plane. "The trip was very successful."

"Anything new on the designer front?" he asked, shifting the papers on his desk.

"I didn't find any new outfits that were truly exciting," she admitted, which was the absolute truth. She didn't feel the need to add that she hadn't looked at any of the designer boutiques. She and Micah had spent most of their time at his house. Naked.

Tazir's response was a small grunt as he came around to the other side of his desk. Before Sada could say anything, there was a noise behind them. Their other brother, Rayed, stepped into his office.

"What are you doing here?" Tazir growled when he spotted Rayed leaning against the doorframe.

Rayed lifted a dark eyebrow, glowering at his older brother. He started to say something, but then noticed Sada standing next to him and snapped his mouth shut. "I put the latest reports on your desk," was all he said. "How was Paris?" he asked of Sada.

She smiled, hoping that her cheeks didn't look as heated as they felt. "It was beautiful, as usual."

He grunted again. "Next time you go, would you mind taking Emma? Every time I take her...well, we don't get enough shopping done."

Sada's smile widened, thinking that she finally understood the allure of Paris. The romance of the city really was conducive to quiet dinners alone on a balcony or walking through a tranquil park in the moonlight. Not to mention all of the other moments that had been shockingly romantic and passionate.

"Will do," she promised. "Even better, why don't you just ask the designers to send her clothes that she might prefer? She can pick and choose what she likes and send the rest back. Or if Emma is too worried about making choices, have Marci pick out clothes for Emma. She's brilliant," Sada offered, referring to the personal shopper who normally purchased outfits for Sada's wardrobe.

"Marci is great, but I want Emma to feel free to shop in Paris. I think she'd enjoy the experience. Unfortunately, she won't choose enough outfits for her wardrobe. Something about not spending money that isn't hers," he grumbled.

"Gotcha," Sada laughed. "I'm on it. Next time I go to Paris, she'll come with me and I'll ensure that she returns to you completely decked out with a new wardrobe that will dazzle you and all of the members of the press corps."

"Thanks." He turned to Tazir. "Techaltra is up fifteen percent and Coso, that stock I invested in last year, is up forty percent. I'm trying to get them to build their next annex over

on the southern border. There are several cities that have the infrastructure to handle their business needs.”

“I agree,” Tazir replied, rubbing his forehead. He dropped some papers on his desk and turned to Sada. “What did you need to talk about?”

“Ambassador Marco,” she replied, crossing her arms over her chest. “At the conference, he approached me about... why are you shaking your head?”

Rayed filled her in. “Ambassador Marco of Libri?” he asked, continuing when Sada nodded confirmation. “He’s dead. And the technology that he was working on was reportedly stolen from his lab in Sweden.”

“Dead?” Sada gasped. “How? When?”

Tazir’s eyes narrowed. “I would have thought you’d have heard about it by now. But apparently not.”

Her other brother walked deeper into Tazir’s office.

“You did seem preoccupied when you returned from that conference,” Rayed added.

Sada shook her head, unaware of how her hands were fisted by her sides. “How did he die? Give me details!”

Tazir shrugged one of his obnoxiously massive shoulders. “No one knows how he died. He said that he felt ill in the morning, was rushed to the hospital within fifteen minutes of feeling sick, and died that afternoon.”

An unfamiliar, but strangely menacing, image popped into her mind. That morning Ambassador Marco had stopped her...! He’d asked her to speak with Tazir and...the man! Brown suit and bland features.

Slowly, Sada looked at her brothers. “Was he murdered?”

Both men stopped, staring at her curiously. “Why would you ask that?”



Her dark gaze went from Tazir to Rayed, then back again. “What aren’t you telling me?” she demanded, leaning forward slightly. “What’s going on?”

Tazir glanced at Rayed, both of them sending a silent message to each other. “There were actually two odd deaths at the conference. Ambassador Marco and a security guard. Both died of heart attacks.” Tazir crossed his arms, watching her carefully as he continued. “Marco had a history of heart disease, so his death wasn’t a complete surprise, although he was on medication to help control his condition. But the security guard...his death was completely unexpected. His wife suspects that he just pushed too hard with exercise, but the authorities are investigating the situation.”

“Marco is dead,” she whispered, her eyes wide as she thought back to that last conversation with him. “I spoke with him at the conference. In fact, he was the last person I spoke with.” Instantly, she remembered how distracted she’d been. “You mentioned that he didn’t feel well in the morning and died by the afternoon. When, exactly, did he die?”

“About two o’clock that last day of the conference,” Tazir replied, his eyes narrowed on her.

She was even more stunned. “I spoke to him around six o’clock that morning, perhaps a bit earlier. He looked fine when I chatted with him. There was no indication that he wasn’t feeling well.”

Tazir’s eyes sharpened. “What did you discuss?”

Sada thought back, trying to remember what he wanted to talk with her about. But she’d been upset about Micah and hadn’t listened intently. “I can’t remember, but I was irritated with him,” she replied honestly. “I was eager to get on the road. The conference was over and I was ready to come home.” All of that was true, but now that she knew that the man had become ill right after that conversation, she felt horrible that she couldn’t recall his last words. “I should remember,” she said grimly. “I’ll try to think back on the conversation. It might be important, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Rayed replied. But his eyes narrowed. “However, the story that has been batted around through the diplomatic channels was that Ambassador Marco was in his room all morning. Until he was rushed to the hospital later in the afternoon, there wasn’t any video of him being outside of his room on the day that he died. Nor at any point during the morning. According to the information I read about the incident, there was no one in the lobby that morning.”

Sada’s eyes widened and a feeling of dread washed over her. “I was definitely in the lobby that morning,” she confirmed, looking from Tazir to Rayed. Her voice went low as she continued, “And I definitely had a conversation with Ambassador Marco. So he wasn’t in his room all day long.”

Her brothers shared a meaningful glance. Sada impatiently rolled her eyes. “Neither of you are going to tell me what’s going on, are you?” she snapped and angrily shifted on her feet. Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared up at them. “You are trying to protect me from everything in life that might be dangerous, but that’s annoying and insulting!” She shook her head, exasperation heavy. “I’m not a child!” she snapped, glaring at them. “Not telling me what’s going on only puts me in more danger. And it’s humiliating that you think I’m too stupid to handle the realities of the world. You can’t even trust me with the truth!”

Both sets of eyes widened at her outburst. But she ignored them and continued. “I’m not a hothouse flower, you know. I’m pretty sure that I can handle real life. It’s not like I’m going to faint at the knowledge that something nefarious happened during the conference.” She shrugged. “There was extra security. There were about fifty conference participants and an additional one hundred security and staff members present. The hotel can handle up to five hundred guests.” She stared at each of them pointedly. “Do you really think I’m so stupid that I can’t understand why the whole hotel was booked by the guests in order to minimize the possibility of security issues? The sheer number of dignitaries that attended that

conference was astounding. Of course there were security concerns!”

Both men realized what she was saying at the same time that Sada finished her sentence.

She gasped as something new occurred to her. “If the men were killed during the conference, then the murderer must have pretended to be a member of someone’s staff. Or possibly a conference participant!” Sada snorted and shifted her weight as her mind worked through all of the possibilities. “It might have even been someone I spoke with.” She lifted her head, glaring at both of her brothers. “So by not telling me, you’re putting me in more danger because I might speak with that person again.” She leaned closer. “And by not telling me what’s going on, you’re admitting that I’m too stupid, too immature, and too defenseless to make logical decisions. And that,” she poked Tazir in the chest, “is insulting.” She poked Rayed in the chest too.

The implications hit them all at the same time.

After a long moment of silence, Tazir spoke up first. “I’m sorry. I always thought it was my job to protect you and Zhara from the harsh realities of the world. It never occurred to me that we were insulting you.”

Rayed rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “And we definitely didn’t think we were putting you in more danger. But you’re right. The murderer might have been someone you interacted with. We need to find out who was there. Everyone. Every name on each person’s staff.”

Tazir nodded. “I’ll get the security team on it.” He turned to Sada. “Can you think back to the guests? Was there someone who didn’t belong? Someone that didn’t seem to fit in? It would be a person who—

Her eyes sharpened, thinking back to the man she’d seen in the lobby. “That morning, there was a man walking through the lobby. He wore a cheap-looking, brown suit, “ she remembered. Sada closed her eyes, thinking hard. She’d been

upset, but...the man's odd glance had caught her attention. Nodding, she kept her eyes closed as she pictured the man in her mind. "He was about five feet, nine inches tall wearing a brown suit." She crinkled her nose and looked at both of her brothers. "I hate brown suits. They somehow always remind me of one of those old fashioned private investigators from the Hollywood movies, so that was probably what caught my eye."

"That's very good, Sada," Tazir replied, about to turn back to his desk.

"Don't be patronizing," she replied in the same tone.

Both men were shocked at her tone, then started laughing. "Point made. We won't patronize if you can come up with more details."

Sada headed for the door, very aware of the reason she couldn't remember. She'd been a bit preoccupied by a man who had stolen...no, a man who had recovered...a very naughty and potentially embarrassing list for her.

"Where are you?!"

Sada read the angry text message, her heart pounding in her chest. It was the tenth text message today. She'd also missed nine phone calls. The text messages hadn't started out angry. Nope, the first one was only "*Text me when you get home, love,*" and she smiled as she read through the others. An hour after her scheduled landing, the messages became urgent. Four hours after her plane had landed in Fahre, the messages were frantic. "*Are you okay? Please tell me that you're okay!*" "*I need to hear from you, Sada.*" "*My security detail is tracking your plane. I know that you landed safely, but I haven't heard from you. Are you okay?*" And several more.

She didn't bother to check the voice mail messages on her secret phone. She simply dialed the preprogrammed number and waited. Micah answered on the first ring.

“Are you okay?” he demanded, his voice ragged with concern.

“I’m fine,” she replied quickly.

“Why the hell didn’t you text me as soon as you’d landed?” Before she could answer, he asked, “And again when you’d reached the palace? I need to know that you’re safe, Sada!”

Sada smiled, her heartwarming with his concern. Even his anger was understandable.

“I’m sorry, Micah,” she whispered, then heard a long hiss of air. She pictured him running a frustrated hand through his hair. “I didn’t text you because I didn’t think that you’d want to hear from me again.”

“Not...!” There were a few mumbled words that she couldn’t hear, then he came back to say, “Of course I care that you arrived home safely! You were with me all weekend! At what point did I ever indicate that I don’t care about you?”

She bit her lip, smiling at his anger. “I’m sorry, Micah,” she repeated. “You’re right. You were very careful about both of our safety and well-being. And I appreciate your efforts towards that end. I should have contacted you the moment I arrived and that was bad of me to leave you to wonder and worry.”

There was another long silence and Sada smiled, cradling the phone against her ear. “Don’t let it happen again!” he growled. “When is the next time that you can get away to see me?”

“Again?” she asked, sitting up straighter on her bed. “Is there going to be a next time?”

“Hell yes!” he snapped. Then another pause before he added, “Unless you don’t want to see me again. If that’s the case, just be straight with me, Sada. If this past weekend...if you got me out of your system, then just tell me. I won’t bother you again.” His voice was low and gravelly when he said that last part.

She gripped the phone tightly, then dared to say, “I want to see you again, Micah. I just...I didn’t think that you’d want to see me. This is just a fling.” She paused, the pain ripping through her “Right?” Now why did it hurt so long as she waited for him to reply.

He didn’t reply to her question. Instead, he declared, “Rome. I want to see you in Rome. Two weeks. Can you manage that?”

She noticed that he didn’t confirm if their relationship was just a fling. For some reason, Sada wanted that to be important. She wanted to mean something to him other than just a woman who needed lessons in sexual enjoyment.

“Yes,” she confirmed, unconcerned with her schedule. She had no idea if she was free in two weeks. Whatever was on her calendar, she’d cancel it. Or she’d squeeze the events into other times so that she’d be free for that weekend. “Yes. I can be in Rome in two weeks.”

“Good. I’ll send you details.” And with that, he ended the call.

That abrupt ending might have hurt Sada, if her phone hadn’t buzzed immediately. “*Sleep well, jamali.*”

For a long moment, Sada hesitated on what to say in return. Finally, she texted, “*You too!*” She wanted to say more, but wasn’t sure what to say that would be the right “note” of lighthearted flirtatiousness while her heart pounded with...feelings.

“What’s wrong?” Rayed demanded when his older brother stepped into his office.

Tazir tossed a thick file folder onto Rayed’s desk. “Remember after that conference a couple of weeks ago when Sada said that she’d been in the lobby talking with Marco?”

Rayed tossed his pen onto the middle of his desk and leaned back in his leather chair. “Yeah, what of it?”

“Well, when our security team checked the video, she wasn’t on the feed.”

Rayed picked up the file and started flipping through the pictures. “We already knew that. Maybe Sada was in a blind spot in the lobby. Not in the chairs she mentioned.”

Tazir frowned at his brother. “I’d go along with that if we were talking about Zhara. If it doesn’t play music, she’s oblivious. But Sada, she’s always cautious. She’s always the one that watches where she’s going, never stepping out of place. She’s too careful.”

Rayed ran a hand over his face, nodding his agreement. “Yeah. I get where you’re going with this.” He sighed and picked up the file. “So, what are you saying?”

Tazir nodded to the folder. “I had my guys pull street cameras for that time period. I thought there might be a slim chance that perhaps someone would be leaving the hotel at the time Sada mentioned.” He flipped the pages until he came to the picture of a blurred individual leaving the hotel.

Rayed’s eyes widened as he stared down at the grainy, fuzzy picture. “This guy came out?”

Tazir nodded with a heavy sigh as he crossed his arms over his chest. “The time stamp fits the timeline Sada mentioned.”

Rayed examined the image more closely, nodding as if another piece of the puzzle was finally fitting into place. “And he’s wearing a brown suit. Exactly as she’d described.”

“Exactly,” Tazir grumbled, pacing back and forth in front of Rayed’s desk. “There’s more.”

Rayed groaned and flipped the folder closed. “I don’t want to know if Sada is in danger.” Tazir grunted and Rayed grimaced, leaning back in his chair. “Okay, I don’t want to know if Sada is in *additional* danger. She’s too young to counter threats.”

“She’s stronger than you think,” Tazir argued. Then braced his hands on the desk.

“Thing is, if this is the man who targeted Marco, and went on to kill the hotel security guard, then this guy is pretty damn good.”

Tazir nodded grimly, running a hand over his rough features.

Rayed recognized that there was more. “What else?”

Tazir sat down in one of the leather chairs set in front of the desk. “Our guys went back and started researching mysterious deaths of supposedly healthy leading figures, both corporate directors and political leaders or representatives.” He shook his head slightly. “Even if only *some* of the surprising heart attacks are attributed to this guy, he’s killed over one hundred people.”

There was a long silence as they absorbed the ramifications of that news.

Finally, Rayed asked, “Where is he now?” in a low, angry voice.

Tazir shook his head. “We don’t know. No one knows.” He tapped his finger on the unfocused image. “He’s a ghost. Until we got those details from Sada, no one had even seen this guy or knew what to look for.” He paused for a moment. “We didn’t even know that he existed!”

Rayed and Tazir were silent for a long moment. Sada was the only person who could identify the man. She was in danger!



## Chapter 9

Largen threw the knife across the room, unconcerned that it impaled a priceless painting. He was livid that he hadn't managed to tie up the loose ends of his last job. Largen knew he couldn't take on another commission until he'd resolved the problems he'd created by his lack of attention to detail on the previous job.

Not that he ever needed to work again. He'd accumulated a great deal of wealth over the years. His job, as well as the way he went about his job, was incredibly lucrative. He could command high commissions because he never messed up.

Until now!

He'd followed that damn woman all over the world! And why the hell was she traveling? His research had told him that Princess Sada el Mitra usually stayed close to home. She was good about lending her name and presence to important charities within the kingdom of Fahre, which was why he'd focused his efforts on getting rid of her in the capital city! He'd managed to set up circumstances in which an accident could be neatly managed. The ancient intersections had high walls and slender alleys, not to mention the turreted buildings around the palace were perfect for manipulating traffic problems. He'd set up five different situations that would have caused an accident around the palace. But the damn woman kept hurrying off unexpectedly! She hadn't driven outside of the palace in so long! The damned woman had abandoned her normal schedule and was becoming the thing he hated most: unpredictable!

And why the hell wasn't she organizing these expeditions in advance? Her security team was running on fumes lately, barely managing to keep up with her last minute travel plans!

He paused as a new thought occurred to him, the knife in his hand lowering to his side. Maybe, the travel plans weren't last minute but his contact inside the palace wasn't high enough in the administration to know what was going on in advance.

Yes, that was probably it, he decided.

He'd have to cultivate better contacts. He threw the current knife across the room, smiling as it embedded itself in the crotch of the pathetic royal figure that had been captured in oil paints several hundred years ago. With a chuckle, he whipped another knife out of his pocket and let it slice through the air, the sound of the whistling sound a comfort to him. Fortunately, this knife went into the wall and not another priceless painting.

Breathing in slowly, Largen forced himself to calm down. He could manage this. He could still get to Princess Sada. It was just going to take a bit more finesse. This latest glitch was merely a challenge, he told himself as he sat down at his computer. His fingers flew over the keyboard, ready to put his next scheme into place.

This was yet another lesson, he told himself. He'd cultivated a source within the palace that hadn't garnered him the information that he'd needed. Largen should have eliminated that resource after the first failure. He didn't allow failures in his endeavors. Why would he accept failures in the sources that take his hard-earned money?

Shaking his head in disgust, Largen mentally planned out a very painful demise for the source that had repeatedly failed him over the past several weeks. This death would be blamed on a street thug which would allow Largen to explore other means of a person's demise. One that wasn't as pretty as what he normally provided to his victims.

## Chapter 10

Sada slowly walked down the stairs that had been pushed up against the plane, looking out at the bright, sunny day. Paris. Back to their original city. She'd met Micah in several beautiful places over the past several months, but Paris would always be the most special.

She loved Paris, but Sada doubted she'd ever be able to come back here. Not after this weekend. This visit wouldn't be nearly as wonderful as the last time she and Micah had spent a blissful few days together. No, this trip...Sada hiccupped as she accepted what was going to happen.

She had to end this. There was no way that their relationship could be anything more than this, stolen weekends when their schedules allowed it, no emotions other than passion and desire, and...worst of all...no future.

Those had been the unspoken rules for their time together.

And yet, she hadn't been able to keep her emotions from growing. This...fling...she truly loathed that word now...had grown into something more, something significantly more important. Micah had become more important.

She reached the bottom stair of the plane, was just about to step onto the airport tarmac, when a limousine sped across the tarmac, coming to a stop right at the bottom of the stairs. A brief moment later, Micah stepped out, putting on his sunglasses as he stood up. He smiled at her, but Sada couldn't respond to his smile. Her heart was shattering because of what she had to do.

He must have seen the look in her eyes because he rushed over to her. "Sada, what's wrong?" he demanded, reaching out to take her hands. "Tell me what's wrong!"

“I can’t stay,” she whispered to her shoes, unable to look at him. “I can’t...!”

There was a long silence as Sada tried to pull herself together. But it was impossible. “I asked my pilot to standby.”

“Your pilot should head to the hotel,” he snapped, reaching for her hands so that he could gently guide her towards the limousine.

Sada pulled back, shaking her head. “No. I can’t...” she tried to pull her hands out of his, but his grip was firm. “Micah, please, you know what will happen if I get into that limousine with you.” She sniffed, blinking her eyes to try and stop the tears. But it was no use. The tears tumbled over her lashes despite her admonition not to reveal how emotionally devastated she was right now.

Blinking, she knew that her chin was trembling, but she forced the words out. “I can’t...I can’t do this anymore.”

Micah felt panic surge inside of him. She was pulling away! For too long, he’d wanted Sada all to himself, but he’d been making do with having her with him almost every other weekend. But it wasn’t enough. He now knew that nothing would be enough, short of forever. And even that might not be enough to get his fill of Sada!

Had she seriously flown all this way just to tell him that she was ending things? He couldn’t believe that. He *wouldn’t* believe that!

“Sada, let’s talk about this. But not here. Not where everyone can hear our conversation.”

“Micah, please don’t do this!” she sobbed. Her eyes pleaded with him to release her as she blinked back tears.

He moved in, going to kiss her, needing to soothe whatever was harrowing her soul. But she turned away and his kiss landed on her cheek. “What the hell is going on?” he

growled, angry now. Surely she wasn't going to break up with him right here on the tarmac of the private airfield! She wasn't that kind of a person.

"I messed up, Micah!" she admitted, one slender finger lifting to wipe the tear away.

He looked down at her, trying to make sense of her words. "Messed up? How the hell did you mess up?" Sada never messed up. She was careful and precise, always cautious. She was the epitome of cool under pressure. She was an amazing woman and every time they were together, every time they talked or argued or debated an issue, he... respected her more.

"This..." she waved her hand between them and sniffed, pulling her hand away so that she could wipe her cheeks. But as soon as she finished, he reclaimed her hand. "This was supposed to be just a fling," she whispered, bowing her head, forcing him to lean in close to hear her. "I wasn't supposed to fall in love!"

She took in a deep breath and looked off to the right. He heard someone gasp and wanted to curse out loud. They should be in private, damn it!

"But I couldn't stop myself, Micah. I fell in love with you! I fell hard and I can't...!" There was a slight sound of distress, but she wouldn't look at him. "I love you too much. Every time I have to leave you, it feels like my heart is breaking." Her shoulders were shaking now. "I can't concentrate while we're apart. I wait, hoping desperately that you'll send me another message asking me to meet you somewhere. And you do!" she gasped, a small smile breaking through her pain. "You always send another message with another city, another blissful weekend in your arms... for a couple of days."

This time, she straightened up, her chin firming. "Every time, you make love to me as if I were precious to you, and every time, I fall a little bit more in love with you! And then I have to leave you again, and my heart breaks all over

again.” She paused now, the tears flowing uncontrollably. “I know that you can’t understand what that feels like, but it’s horrible!” She sniffed and stepped back. He couldn’t stop her this time because he was frozen with shock!

She stopped and looked at him, her body tense. “I love you, okay? That’s why I can’t do this anymore! I can’t keep walking away! I just can’t do it. It’s too painful for me to walk away.” She sniffed again, wiping away more tears. “It isn’t just the departures that are too painful. I can’t start my day until I get a message from you! I wait around, like a silly fool, waiting for your morning text message! Your sweet words every single morning help me start my day. I pace around my apartment, waiting, wondering what wonderful words you’re going to send to me that morning. And when I get them, I beam like an idiot!” She stomped her foot and paced away several paces. “And sleeping!” she yelled, throwing her hands up in the air. “It’s getting to the point that I can’t sleep without you! That’s so frustrating! I’m exhausted all the time now! I’m tired and cranky because I’m not getting enough sleep!”

She stopped pacing and took in a slow, deep breath, closing her eyes in a valiant effort to calm herself. But he noticed that the tears were still streaming down her cheeks. Sada had given up trying to stop them now. They were flowing too hard and she was losing the battle.

“So,” she continued, turning to face him again. “I knew the rules going into this relationship, Micah. You’ve done nothing wrong and,” she hiccupped, “everything, absolutely *everything* right!” She laughed and blinked rapidly, but the tears continued. “You’ve shown me so much beauty, in bed and out, and I love you. I love you so much that it hurts.” She hitched her purse higher onto her shoulder and nodded as if mentally bracing herself. “Thank you for everything. You have been the perfect lover. And I will love,” her voice cracked on that word and she had to pause again and remind herself to breathe, “...I will love you forever.”

With that, she turned resolutely on her heel and headed back to the stairs of the plane, literally running up the stairs.

“Marry me!” Micah called after her.

She froze, one foot on the top stair. He thought he heard an odd sound, something that didn't make sense. But Sada slowly turned around, her face stunned and...hopeful?

He started talking, desperate to weave a spell to keep her there. “I can't live without you either, Sada. I fell just as hard for you.” He climbed the stairs so that he was one step below her, their faces at the same level. “Not just at the beginning of our relationship, but before that. The first moment I saw you at that conference. And every moment in your company has only made me adore you more. I love you, woman! Say that you'll marry me and we'll figure out the rest. We'll do everything...” he paused as she threw herself into his arms. Sada sobbed as she buried her face against his neck, shaking like a leaf as he held her tightly.

Micah was so relieved and, dare he say it...? Happy! Yes. He was happy! Sada made him feel like a king. Okay, so he literally was king, but she made him feel powerful, like he could take on the world and win!

“I love you, Sada,” he repeated softly, gathering her more securely into his arms. “I love you so much!”

She groaned and he wanted to laugh. But then she went limp. Pulling back slightly, he was about to tease her but...something was wrong. Something...her face wasn't flushed with embarrassment for tripping on the stairs. Her features were...slack!

Shifting her weight, he looked around. For the first time, he noticed that the flight attendant looked as if he were about to collapse as well. Even as he had the thought, the man fell onto the tarmac, knocking his head on the ground. That's when he noticed the something sticking out of the man's shoulder.

He looked back down at Sada for a moment, trying to make sense of what was happening. There was a small, metallic ping and Micah looked down, not sure what the small, pointed object was that rolled down the metal stairs. That's when he spotted a drop of blood. Sada's blood? No! He looked at her again, her head lolling against his arm.

"She's hurt!" he bellowed. "Get them into the limousine!" he yelled.

His guards were halfway to meet him before her security team realized something was wrong. His team moved quickly, surrounding him and Sada. One of them raced over to the flight attendant and hefted the man over his shoulder. Micah never took his eyes off Sada. He dove into the limousine with Sada cradled in his arms and it started off before the door closed behind him.

Shifting her weight on his lap, Micah tenderly brushed the hair from her deathly pale face, trying to figure out what had just happened.

From several yards away, hidden in the airport hangar, Largen muttered several epithets, watching the scene unravel. He'd missed the first time, hitting that man standing behind her. He'd considered just driving away, trying to kill the bitch some other time. But they'd find the damn dart and realize that it wasn't just a random attack. So, he'd taken another shot.

If the couple had followed their usual routine, Largen would have shot her when Sheik al-Marri bent to kiss her in greeting. So, why the hell had they just stood on the stairs talking to each other? He'd taken his shot – and missed. He'd taken a third shot – and gotten her, but because she shifted at the last moment, it was only a glancing blow.

Still, he'd gotten her. He'd just have to hope that enough of the poison had gotten into her system to do the job. Thankfully, the dart contained his own special recipe. Largen



had commissioned a chemist to make the poison several years ago. Within twenty minutes, the poison would have done all the necessary damage to the heart and dissipated. By that point, it was untraceable. And because the doctors wouldn't know exactly what the poison was, they wouldn't be able to create an antidote.

It was the perfect weapon.

Until now.

Because of the increased security, he'd had to aim at her from a distance, hence the dart instead of the usual syringe. It was so much easier when he could merely brush by a person and inject the poison at close range. It was more fun that way too.

However, it had been several weeks and there was no way to get that close to Princess Sada.

With a sigh at the sloppy work, Largen stepped out of his hiding place and looked up at the sky, mentally patting himself on the back. The job was sloppy, but finished. She was the final loose end.

Largen efficiently disassembled his rifle and packed it up into the small carrying case. The case was no larger than a small backpack, so it never raised a red flag. He pulled the ripped knit cap lower over his hair, tugged the denim jacket on over his faded tee shirt and stood up. He paused only long enough to casually survey the area, ensuring that he'd left nothing behind. There were a few footprints because of the rain, but those would fade quickly. Still, he scuffed out the prints, eliminating even that piece of evidence. There was nothing else to indicate that he'd ever been here.

Turning, Largen whistled as he strode down the stairs, then joined the milling crowds on the sidewalk, sunglasses ensuring his privacy as he melted into the crowd.

In the distance, he heard an ambulance siren, but Largen didn't even glance in that direction.

## Chapter 11

Micah watched as nurses and doctors worked quickly to stabilize Sada. She looked so...lifeless! So vulnerable and small on the stretcher. Someone put a tube down her throat. Another nurse inserted an IV. There were wires attached to her chest, her arms, her head...the emergency department doctors were doing everything possible to ensure that Sada survived.

He was mildly aware of another team of doctors working to save the life of the flight attendant. The words “induced coma” were called out, but Micah’s focus was on Sada.

She couldn’t die, he thought. He couldn’t lose her! He’d been such an idiot for so long, pretending that she was just another lover, another mistress. The reality was that Sada was his life! She wasn’t just a lover, she was his love!

What’s more, she loved him in return! This beautiful, wonderful, amazingly passionate and stunningly intelligent woman, who could debate politics, economics, and social issues with world leaders and ambassadors, and then turn around and give him a smile that set his body on fire! She was such an incredible combination of beauty and intelligence, of passion and compassion.

Another doctor, just as frazzled and frustrated as the rest, separated from the team working on Sada to approach Micah. “Sir, what happened?”

Micah shook his head, not bothering to explain his role or title to the man. “We don’t know. From what we’ve been able to determine, it’s a poison of some sort that causes a normally healthy person to have a heart attack,” he explained. He rubbed the back of his neck, his frustration building. “It dissipates quickly in the system, but we haven’t completely broken down the compounds yet. It’s a designer mixture created by an assassin.”

Micah could feel the man's awe, but he couldn't deal with it right now. He needed the doctor to save Sada's life!

The doctor adjusted his glasses and turned to watch the medical team working on Sada. "The good news is that she didn't get as large a dose as the man. But she's still in critical condition. We're going to take excellent care of your wife." He touched Micah's upper arm, then disappeared, relaying the information to the others. They all seemed to pause and, one by one, glanced over their shoulders at Micah. They had no idea who he was, nor had he told them. He didn't tell them who Sada was either. He suspected that the captain of her guard team was speaking to the head of the hospital. The man was probably calling Sheik Tazir right now.

There was going to be a storm as soon as the man realized where his younger sister had been disappearing to over the past several months. But he'd deal with Tazir's wrath later. Right now, he didn't have the mental capacity to worry about anyone other than Sada.

One of the nurses came over, compassion in his eyes. "Would you like to relax in the waiting room, sir? We'll take very good care of her."

"I'm not leaving her," he replied with a voice filled with authority. There must have been something more in his tone, or perhaps it was the bodyguards surrounding Sada's hospital bed, the nursing station, Micah, and the entrance to every door within the emergency department...whatever it was that warned the nurse to let it go, he was grateful.

One of his guards came over and whispered, "Prince Rayed is on his way, along with Princess Zhara, Your Highness."

Micah nodded, not really concerned right now with the rage Sada's family would bring down on him. It would take them several hours to fly across Europe, then another hour to drive from the airport to the hospital. So for the next several hours, he still had Sada all to himself.

Suddenly, the doctors returned and there seemed to be a slight lessening of the tension in the room. Micah didn't understand what was going on, but one of the doctors noticed his confusion and came over to explain. She smiled reassuringly up at Micah.

“We've stabilized your wife, sir,” the doctor began, pausing when Micah reached out to steady himself with a hand on the wall. “We're going to continue to monitor her for another thirty minutes, then we'll take her to the intensive care unit, where she'll get more specialized care. We're monitoring her heart and have a machine standing by just in case her heart decides to slow down again.” She patted his arm soothingly. “It was brilliant luck that you were able to get her to us so quickly. Another few minutes, or if she'd gotten a larger dose of that poison, and she wouldn't be here right now.”

Lucky? Micah remained silent, but as he stared at Sada, still struggling for her life, he doubted that she'd feel lucky. Hell, he didn't feel lucky! Although, he had to admit that the relief over the news that she was stabilized helped enormously.

Micah should be reassured that there were only four nurses and one doctor surrounding Sada's bed now instead of the seven or eight that had been working on her moments ago. However, there was a great deal of mumbling among the various doctors. Two shook their heads, another continued to argue.

The orderlies whisked Sada off to the intensive care unit, Micah following closely alongside her bed, unwilling to take his eyes off her for fear that she might slip away from him. He could still remember the sensation of her slumping limply in his arms. He remembered the horror of seeing that dart falling to the stair, a stain of blood from her arm dripping from the tip.

As soon as he'd realized what was going on, what had happened to his precious Sada, Micah had ordered his assistant to get a cardiac specialist to the hospital. The best cardiac

surgeon in the country would arrive within the next twenty minutes, he'd been told. Once he had examined Sada, then Micah might believe the prognosis.

One of the nurses appeared at his elbow. "You can talk to her, sir," she explained. "She can't respond and it looks like she's sleeping. But she can hear you."

Micah didn't know what to say. Sada looked so lost, so pale and vulnerable. He was afraid to touch her. And yet, he was also afraid not to touch her, not to feel her hands in his one more time.

Walking over to her bed, he carefully stroked her hand. It was cold and he wrapped his hand around it, hoping to coax some warmth into her fingers.

Talk to her? The nurse had advised that Sada could hear him, understand his words, but what could he say? What words could he give her that would help her? How could he fix this?!

After stumbling silently for a long moment, not sure what to say, Micah finally just allowed the words to flow.

"Sada, stay with me, love," he whispered to her. "Don't leave me. I love you, Sada. And I have so many other things to put on our list. So many things that I can show you, teach you." He kept whispering to her, ignoring the beeps and pings of the machines that surrounded her. There were so many machines beeping and he wasn't sure what any of them were for. Were they keeping her alive? Or were they all just making sure that her body could do it on its own?

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her fingers and then her wrist, wishing he could do more. Needing to do anything, other than just sit here next to her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and hold her, protect her from this harm. But he hadn't done that earlier today, which was why she was here, lying on this hospital bed and fighting for her life.

Micah wasn't aware of how long he sat by Sada's bed, talking to her about anything he could think of. He wasn't

sure he believed the nurse about Sada being able to hear him, but if talking to her would help, he wouldn't stop!

When the cardiac specialist arrived, Micah interrogated the man even before the poor doctor had time to review Sada's medical chart. "What else can we be doing?" he demanded.

The doctor pushed the wire-rimmed glasses higher onto his nose and sighed, glancing at Sada, then at her medical chart. "The doctors here have done an excellent job, Your Highness. Her vitals are stabilized and her potassium levels are perfect, her heart rate is in a good range, and all of the indicators of a healthy heart are there." He went on to discuss a bunch of medical terms, none of which Micah understood. But he nodded along while keeping his eyes glued to Sada's pale face.

There was a sudden commotion in the hallway. Micah turned, resignation a heavy weight on his shoulders.

Sure enough, Rayed and Zhara burst through the doors of the intensive care unit.

"Get the hell out!" Rayed snarled as soon as his gaze landed on Micah.

"No!" he growled right back, not flinching from the fury in the other man's eyes.

"You have no right to be here!" Micah barely registered the lovely woman at Rayed's side as she put a calming hand on Rayed's arm. It didn't calm Sada's brother down, but Rayed finally lowered his voice.

"I have *every* right!" Micah shot back, but kept his voice low as well, not wanting to disturb Sada. "She's my fiancée and I'm not leaving her side!"

That stopped the siblings in their tracks, but the fury on Prince Rayed's face was truly a sight to behold. Micah waited for the man's head to explode, but the woman by his side squeezed his arm again and he sighed.

Realizing that there was finally a calm in the storm, he turned to the woman, extending his hand. "I am Sheik Micah al-Marri. It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess Zhara. I'm sorry that it is under these circumstances though."

Zhara smiled and started to reach out to shake his hand. But Prince Rayed stopped her, grabbing her wrist and pulling her hand out of reach. "Don't even acknowledge the bastard." Rayed put an arm around Zhara's shoulders, pulling her close. "Tazir and I thought you were different from your vicious father!" he snarled. "We were wrong!"

Unable to argue with the man, Micah sighed, and glanced down at Sada. "She's stabilized," he explained. "She's fighting the poison, but..." he paused, nearly choking on his next words. He cleared his throat, then continued. "The doctors don't know what kind of damage was already done. We got her to the hospital within minutes of the dart hitting her. And because the poisoned dart only grazed her arm, she didn't get a full dose, which is probably why she's still alive." He moved to her side and took her hand again. Reaching out, he touched her hair, then her cheek. "She's fighting though. That's the most important thing. She's fighting."

There was silence behind him now. He didn't know if the other two were still in the room, nor did he care. The only person that mattered was fighting for her life. And his! He pulled one of the vinyl chairs over and sat down, still talking to her as he waited for a sign.

His conversation with Sada wasn't significant. Micah pulled facts and anecdotes from his memory, telling her anything he could think of, just to keep her mind focused on coming back to him. He kept her hand in his, the tips of his fingers resting against the pulse on the tender side of her wrist. He needed to feel her pulse, to know that she was still fighting. The beeping announcing her heart beat didn't help him. The fluttering under his fingertips was what he needed to feel.

A long time later, a gentle hand touched his shoulder. “Why don’t you go get some sleep?” a feminine voice offered. “Or maybe something to eat?” He started to protest, but her grip tightened on his shoulder. “I’ll stay with her. I’ll hold Sada’s hand and be here if she wakes up.”

He wouldn’t sleep, not with Sada in peril. And the thought of food made his stomach churn. But he could use a cup of coffee. Coffee would help him stay awake, just in case Sada needed him.

“Only if you promise not to leave her side?” he asked, then waited for her to agree.

Zhara’s surprisingly strong fingers tightened on his shoulder again, reassuring him with her touch as well as her words. “I’ll be right here. I won’t go anywhere until you get back.”

He hesitated for another moment, then nodded. Coffee would be good. Sada would need him to be alert when she woke up. She’d need his strength and he’d be useless if he fell asleep as soon as she woke up. And she *would* wake up! There was no world in which Sada wasn’t alive and by his side.

“Fine. Just for...I’ll get some coffee and will be right back.”

“Good. I’ll be right here.”

He nodded again, then stood up, carefully placing Sada’s hand in Zhara’s. Sada’s sister settled carefully into the chair, mindful of the tubes and wires.

He lingered at the foot of the bed, watching Sada for another moment. Did she look less pale? Was that a flutter of her lashes?

He sighed, rubbing his face with both hands.

“Come with me,” a firm, male voice commanded. Micah recognized the voice as that of Rayed. He moved with the man, unable to do anything else. His bodyguards followed



them out and Micah walked beside the bastard. All the angry words from before were forgotten. Micah couldn't blame Rayed for the verbal attack. The man loved Sada almost as much as he did. Besides, if Micah truly loved Sada, which he did, that meant that he'd need to forgive the brother. Maybe even let him win at their occasional poker games.

No, that wasn't going to happen. Micah knew himself well enough to acknowledge that he'd never throw a poker hand. Not for anyone. Not that Micah won all the time. Tazir and Rayed were formidable players!

However, whatever thoughts might have crossed his mind, whatever concessions to polite conversation were flitting through his head, were obliterated as pain shot through his face. When he opened his eyes, his sleep-deprived brain realized that Prince Rayed had hit him. Hard! The man was a freaking brute and had an excellent left hook!

Micah stared up at the devil that Sada called a brother, considering his options. But before he could form a response, Rayed explained, "That was for putting Sada in the position of having to lie to us for the past several weeks. And for putting her in danger." Rayed glared for a moment then offered Micah a hand up, nearly ripping Micah's arm out of the socket when he accepted the help.

Micah rocked his jaw gently, grateful that nothing was broken. He glanced around, glaring at his bodyguards, all of whom were silently watching the perimeter. He suddenly realized that they were standing outside in the sunshine! How the hell had they gotten outside the hospital? Had he been that out of it? Apparently. The left hook and pain throbbing in his jaw were additional evidence that he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. He never would have allowed someone to hit him if he'd been fully aware.

"You need food." Rayed announced. They were equal in height and brawn and Micah considered punching him. For vengeance. But...hell, this was Sada's brother.

Micah supposed that the bastard was allowed one good shot. Just one!

“I love her,” he explained.

Rayed glared, hands fisted on his hips. They glared silently for a long moment. Then Rayed nodded sharply and they all walked back into the hospital building. “I’ve ordered some food to be brought to us. No way in hell am I eating the crap that’s served in the hospital cafeteria.” He tried to shove Micah into a conference room, but Micah was aware of things now and didn’t allow himself to be manhandled. However, the room was full of food and coffee. Fresh, fragrant coffee. Not the sludge that the hospital offered, but the good stuff. Just the smell of it perked up his mind and he poured himself a large dose, ignoring the pain in his jaw as he gulped the scalding hot liquid.

When he looked up, Rayed was still glaring at him. But Micah gestured to the food and the coffee. Grudgingly, he nodded his appreciation. “Thank you for this,” he snarled, only conceding to a point.

Rayed continued to glare, hands still fisted on his hips. “What the hell have you been up to with my sister?” Rayed demanded, ignoring the comment about the food. When Micah hesitated, Rayed snorted. A half-second later, he picked up a plate, piled it high, then slid it across the table to Micah. “Eat some damn food while you explain. If Sada really does love you, then you’d better be healthy enough to help her while she recovers.”

Micah hesitated, staring at the food as if he didn’t understand what it was. But he finally picked up the fork and started eating as quickly as possible, eager to get back to Sada.

“Well?”

Micah took his time chewing, then swallowing. He didn’t mind making Rayed wait for a reply. But once he’d

swallowed a few bites, he put the fork down and returned Rayed's glare with equal intensity.

"Sada and I met at the regional economic conference several months ago," he finally admitted, not mentioning Sada's notebook or her intriguing list. No, that would be their secret.

"And?" Rayed snapped when Micah didn't immediately continue. For a brief moment, Micah considered telling him to go to hell. But then he remembered Sada, lying in that bed, fighting for her life. She would win. She'd get healthy again and they would be married. He'd spend the rest of his life protecting her and doing a hell of a better job than he'd done so far!

"And..." he started again, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, "...we continued to meet over various weekends. We've gotten to know each other and I'm going to marry her as soon as she recovers."

Dark eyebrows lifted in an arrogant expression. "Is that so? Do you have permission from our family to marry our sister?"

Micah bristled at that threat. "Sada isn't a possession! You don't own her!" he snarled, wanting to reach across the conference table and choke the bastard. "She's a human being and can make her own decisions. In this case, she will be my wife!" He didn't say that she hadn't technically agreed to marry him. He ignored that issue. She simply hadn't had a chance to agree to his proposal. But as soon as she woke up, she would. And he'd marry her right there at her bedside just so this bastard couldn't spirit her away and hide Sada from him!

"True enough, but I can influence her against marrying you."

Micah tensed, ready for battle. Then he remembered the look in her eyes just before she'd collapsed against him, the way she'd rushed down the steps and...okay, so she hadn't

thrown herself into his arms intentionally, but that was what had happened. She might not have said the words, but he'd recognized her agreement. She was his fiancée, damn it!

"No, you can't," he said with absolute conviction. "Sada loves me and I'm madly in love with her. We *will* be married," he emphasized. "And there's nothing you can do to stop that." He set the plate down, bracing his hands wide as he glared at his adversary. "However, we could figure out how to get along. For Sada's sake," he added.

Rayed glared back, the muscles in his jaw working as he chewed on that suggestion. But in the end, he conceded, albeit grudgingly.

"You *really* love her?"

"With all my heart," Micah promised.

"And you'll protect her?"

"Hell yes! With everything in my power, I will protect her." His face turned into a mask of rage as he added, "And I will find the bastard who did this and crush him!"

Rayed nodded. "Fine." He held out his hand. "Welcome to the family."

For a moment, Micah was too startled by the abrupt offer of friendship to move. But as he stared into the prince's eyes, there was acceptance there. Slowly, he extended his hand, ready for whatever trick might come. His jaw still ached from the sucker punch.

But Rayed simply shook his hand firmly. They quickly released the shake and stepped back. Rayed nodded towards the abandoned plate of food. "Finish your breakfast and we'll get back to Sada." He pulled his cell phone out and started dialing. "I need to update my brother and speak with my wife. Tazir and I couldn't both come. Tazir had to stay behind to run the country."

Micah nodded his understanding and, because he knew it was the right thing to do, he lifted the fork again and

started eating. Breakfast? Hadn't Sada arrived after breakfast? Surely it must be...? He glanced through the windows of the conference room, startled to realize that the sun was just starting to peek through the windows. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since Sada had been attacked.

Quickly, he finished the food and turned to nod his thanks to the catering staff standing by the food tables. In the doorway, he paused, gazing at the large amount of food. "What will you do with the rest of the food?" Micah asked, not really caring as he headed towards the doorway.

"I'll ensure the hospital staff caring for Sada are well fed," Rayed replied immediately, following behind as they took the stairs to the intensive care unit.

Zhara wiped the tears from her cheeks and squeezed Sada's fingers. "Please don't die," she whispered. "I promise that I'll pay more attention to you! I've been a horrible sister and I just...I've ignored you and fallen into my own interests, relying on my piano to...well, just relying too heavily on music." She leaned her forehead against the side of the bed. "I promise I'll be a better sister!" She lifted her head, her eyes pleading. "Just don't leave us, okay? The man you're engaged to...I didn't even know that you were seeing someone...but I like him. He seems very nice. I know that we disliked Sheik al-Mari's father when he was in power, but you saw underneath Micah's inscrutable demeanor, didn't you? You did what none of us were willing to do, Sada and I'm so impressed with you. Always! You're my hero and I can't lose you!" She sniffed and tightened her grip on her sister's hand. "The man loves you. He loves you so completely and, if you don't get better, if you don't come back to us, he'll be an absolute mess! He has always been grumpy before, but if you don't recover, then he'll be an absolute menace!"

She was silent for a moment, trying to think of something more to say, something that would encourage Sada

to come back to them. But Zhara's mind was blank. She couldn't think of anything as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Then she felt it. There was just a slight movement in Sada's fingers, but it was there!

Zhara froze, searching Sada's features. But nothing in her sister's face moved. Everything was still and...? She felt the small flutter in her hand again.

"Sada? Are you...?" Again, Sada's fingers tightened around hers. "Sada! Do it again!"

A nurse must have heard Zhara's change in tone because she rushed into the room. "What's happening?"

"I felt her fingers tighten around my hand!" Zhara whispered. "Sada? Can you hear me? Are you coming back to us?"

Sada's eyelashes fluttered slightly, but she didn't open them. From Sada's lips came a faint whisper. "Need Micah."

"He's here!" Zhara urgently whispered back. "I'll go find him! I'll be..."

"I'm here," Micah announced as he rushed into the room. Zhara moved out of the way, standing in the corner as more nurses and a doctor filled the room. Pressing her shoulders back against the wall, she tried to become invisible. Not wanting to be told to leave, she tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. It wasn't easy since the relatively small room was pretty crowded.

Slowly, as if it took all of her energy, Sada opened her eyes and saw Micah leaning over her. "Yes!" Sada whispered, then closed her eyes again. "Yes."

Micah tightened his grip around her fingers, thinking she was falling back into unconsciousness. But she squeezed his fingers again, her eyelashes fluttering.

Micah's heart soared! She was winning! He wanted to laugh, but there was something choking out the sound. "Just get better so that I can follow up on that 'yes', my love," he ordered, adding the "Voice of Authority" to the command.

For an undetermined period of time, doctors and nurses came and went. The nurses changed the intravenous bags. Doctors added notations to her medical chart, but not much else. Sada slept and woke up, looked around, but as soon as she saw Micah, she went back to sleep.

Micah didn't care. It was enough to sustain him for the next several hours. He never left her side. The intensive care nurses tried to tell him to leave so that she could rest, but he refused, using his position and power to force the hospital to break the rules for him. He refused to leave her side. Not for anything!

It helped that, every time the nurses started to order him out of the room, Sada's heart rate picked up, the monitors beeping faster until Micah explained, very firmly, that he wasn't leaving. Then he'd feel her fingers tighten around his hand. "I'm not going anywhere, Sada," he assured her. The nurses saw the change, knew that he was her anchor, and relented.

By the following morning, she woke up and smiled. "Good morning," she whispered to him, her lips cracked, but her eyes alert.

Micah watched blearily with wonder as she gazed back at him. "Sada!" he rasped, lifting her hand to his cheek. She still looked weak, but there was a bit of color in her lovely cheeks now. Her hair was a mess, the hospital gown was rumpled, and her makeup was long gone. But she'd never looked more beautiful!

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Her smile was still weak and her head turned slowly on the white, hospital pillow. Her eyes sparkled, her hand lifting to cup his cheek. "Better than you." She closed her

eyes briefly, then opened them again. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Anything,” he assured her, pressing her hand against his skin, needing to feel her touch.

“Sleep,” she whispered and immediately fell sleep herself.

Micah ignored the strong hand that landed on his shoulder. But when that touch softened, squeezing gently, he looked up at Princess Zhara. “Will you please go to the hotel and sleep? I’ll stay with her again.”

He noticed the dark circles under Zhara’s eyes and hesitated. “When was the last time *you* slept?” he asked, suddenly concerned for her.

She laughed and the sound was sweetly melodic. “Oh, I got a few hours this morning.”

He looked out the window and realized that it was morning again. He’d been awake for the past forty-eight hours. With that realization, he stood up and nodded. “I’ll only sleep for a few hours and then I’ll be back.”

“She’s going to be fine,” Zhara assured him. “I’ll stay with her while you rest. And Rayed will be here as well. Sada won’t be alone.” She smiled at him, her eyes shining with her relief. “I promise, she’s going to survive this. She’s so strong and she’s not going to let you go.”

They smiled into each other’s eyes with agreement. “Yes, she’s going to be perfectly fine,” he agreed.



## Chapter 12

Micah returned to the hospital, feeling slightly more aware of his surroundings. He'd gotten five hours of sleep, showered, and shaved. He probably could use another ten hours of sleep by now, but he doubted his thoughts would slow down enough to allow him to sleep anymore today. Not while Sada was still in the hospital.

One of her bodyguards met them at the entrance to the intensive care area. "She's been moved to a private room, Your Highness," he explained with a slight bow. "This way." And they went up the stairs to the new room to find Sada with her eyes closed, but with fewer machines surrounding her bed. She was still attached to an IV and heart monitor, but the machine was beeping at a regular pace, indicating that Sada was still alive.

Zhara stood up as soon as he entered the room. "She's much improved," she explained with a bright, relieved smile. "As are you!"

Micah would have chuckled at her teasing, but Sada opened her eyes, distracting him. He rushed over to the bed and took her hand. "How do you feel?"

She sighed, her lips still chapped and her hair limp, but she was awake and alert. That was better than anything, he thought. "Everything aches, but I didn't die." Her voice was a mere whisper, but he heard the triumph in her tone.

They talked as he encouraged Sada to eat, but the exertion took all of her energy. She fell asleep again and Micah pulled up one of those odd reclining hospital chairs stayed by her side, holding her hand. He wasn't aware of falling asleep until he was startled awake by a soft sound behind him. He opened his eyes to find a nurse coming in with a syringe.

The nurse smiled at Micah. “How’s she doing?” he asked.

Micah nodded, pushing himself into a sitting position. “Better,” he said. “What’s the next step to her treatment?”

The nurse laughed, waving his hand dismissively. “Oh, don’t worry about the next step. The doctor will be doing her rounds in a bit and she can explain in more detail.”

Sada’s eyes fluttered open. That’s when the nurse did something odd, turning away slightly as he prepared the syringe.

He heard a small sound from Sada and glanced down at her. Her eyes were wide, her face colorless as she shifted her eyes towards the nurse.

Something was wrong, he knew...but what? Sada was scared? Of a nurse?

Suddenly, a flash back to someone he’d seen at the conference several months ago flashed into his memory. A guy, medium height, handing something to a hotel employee. The man had laughed, which was the only reason Micah had noticed the man.

His suspicious gaze sharpened on the man and suddenly, everything fell in to place. Sada’s terrified expression, the man’s odd posture, the syringe when the doctor hadn’t ordered any new meds in the past several hours and...!

Micah grabbed the nurse by the shoulder, spinning him around. By the angry expression in the man’s eyes, Micah knew his intuition was right, this wasn’t a nurse!

“What the hell?” he hissed, then wished he’d been louder. The syringe was probably filled with the same poison that had almost killed Sada ! And she’d only gotten a scratch.

Instantly, he understood! This was the assassin! The person who had killed two people at that conference! Sada had seen his face and now, the assassin had to eliminate all witnesses that could identify him!

Just as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, the man lunged at him and Micah twisted, avoiding the needle by a hair's breadth! Once he regained his balance, Micah spun again, trying to kick the man's feet out from under him. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Sada searching for something on her bed, but focused on the man trying to kill him.

Unfortunately, the man stumbled, but didn't go down. Micah twisted the man's arm around, desperately trying to avoid the needle. The nurse was stronger than he appeared, but Micah had a good forty pounds of muscle and at least half a foot on him. He spun the man around, keeping hold of his wrist. A moment later, he heard a loud snap and a muffled exclamation of pain.

Micah knew he'd dislocated the attacker's shoulder. But the bastard still didn't go down. If it had been a knife, Micah could have fought more aggressively. However, since that needle contained a poison that could probably kill an elephant, he had to be careful. The two of them circled each other, watching each other intently.

Behind him, Micah heard a feminine exclamation and assumed that it was a nurse coming to check on Sada. Sweat was beading on the attacker's forehead and Micah suspected that he was in an enormous amount of pain. But the guy wouldn't give up! That was impressive determination, he thought as he considered several moves.

Unfortunately, Micah's vengeance wasn't meant to be. The nurse must have alerted his bodyguards, because they raced into the room and tased the man, who immediately dropped the syringe and fell to the floor in a trembling mass.

Micah took a breath, willing the shaking in his limbs to stop, rage and adrenaline pounding through his veins. His bodyguards slapped handcuffs on the attacker and hauled him away. Another guard collected the syringe, tucking it into an evidence bag. Micah knew that they were on French soil and the assassin should be taken to a French jail. But he doubted

that his guards would allow it. The man would probably be shoved into a vehicle and taken back to Batam. He'd just tried to assassinate Micah and would be punished in a Batam prison for the rest of his life.

He spun around to check on Sada. "Are you okay?" he asked, hurrying to her side and taking both of her hands.

"Yes!" she gasped. "Thank you!" She pulled him closer and he didn't even try to resist the urge to kiss her. She was sobbing as she kissed him back, then punched his shoulder. "Don't you ever put yourself in danger like that again! Don't you ever do that to yourself!" she ordered, pulling him down for another kiss. With a lightning speed subject change, she whispered, "You proposed to me and I accepted. I think. Right?"

"I did," he assured her. Then he smiled as he continued, "And you did," he asserted firmly. "We're going to get married, Sada."

"We are!" she whispered back, still holding him tightly. "I love you! And if anything were to happen to you, I...!"

He stopped her worry by kissing her softly, then pulling away. His eyes were soft as he grumbled, "How do you think I've felt over the past several days?" Micah squeezed her fingers slightly, to emphasize his point. "Don't you *ever* leave me, Sada! I love you, damn it! I love you so much that, if anything were to happen to you, I would be lost!"

She laughed, shaking her head. "I love you," she whispered again.

"I love you too."

## Epilogue

“Happy anniversary, my love,” Micah said as she stepped into the breakfast room.

Sada kissed him as she made her way around the table to her place, then paused. An envelope was resting on her plate beside a box wrapped up with a pretty, red bow.

She tapped the envelope with a finger as she lifted quizzical eyes to her husband.

“What is it, Momma?” her three year old daughter, Jasmine asked, spoon in hand and a smear of strawberry juice across her cheek. The child adored strawberries!

“It’s a list,” their five year old son, Jace, explained, rolling his eyes at his younger sister as if she should have known what was in the envelope.

Micah lifted a dark eyebrow in challenge. Sada merely laughed, then tossed her own envelope onto his lap, then sat down in her chair. She lifted his envelope, knowing that the contents would be much more interesting than whatever was in the small box.

“Open the box!” Jasmine urged, almost bouncing in her chair as anticipation thrummed through her. “We want to see what Daddy gave you!”

Sada heard his knowing chuckle and ignored him. “You’re right,” she replied, smiling at her adorable daughter. “Let’s see what Daddy gave me for our anniversary.” She pulled the satin bow and let it drop to the table. Then she opened the box to reveal... a pair of beautiful diamond earrings! “They are lovely!” she whispered, beaming across the table at her husband.

He winked at her. “Are you going to read the letter?”

Instantly, her cheeks stained with pink color and she shook her head. “Not at the table. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“What’s on these lists that you give each other every year, Momma?” Jace asked, not overly interested. He wasn’t particularly impressed with the diamond earrings either. They were just rocks, he thought.

“Oh, the lists that we give to each other are just something that we do as a special sort of memory,” she told her children with complete honesty. “Sort of a checklist of activities we’d like to do together over the next year.”

Neither Jasmine nor Jace were impressed with the idea of a list. But Sada’s cheeks turned a brighter shade of red as she watched Micah tear open his envelope. He quickly read through the list she’d made for him.

A moment later, the paper was folded closed again and he looked around. “Where’s your nanny?” Micah demanded urgently, startling Jace and Jasmine.

The nanny instantly stepped into the dining room. “I’m here, Your Highness.”

“Excellent,” he replied, then grabbed Sada’s hand and towed her out of the dining room. Obviously, he liked her list!

*A message from Elizabeth:*

*I really struggled with the title to this story. The premise of a woman wanting to explore her sexuality shouldn’t be considered “wicked”. That promotes the purity culture and I’m trying to avoid any connection to that ideology. However, I felt that putting the word in quotation marks helped. Did it? When you saw the title, were you tempted or cautious?*

*As always, your feedback is wonderful! If you wouldn’t mind, could you leave a review? Here’s a [QUICK LINK](#) to the review page – and I thank you!*

*As usual, if you don’t want to leave feedback in a public forum, feel free to e-mail me directly at [elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com](mailto:elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com). I answer all e-mails*

*personally, although it sometimes takes me a while. Please don't be offended if I don't respond immediately. I tend to lose myself in writing stories and have a hard time pulling my head out of the book.*

*Elizabeth*

*Want to read a short excerpt from the next book in this series? Keep scrolling for a quick look at Zhara and Drago's story. I'd originally used the name "Jafar" as Zhara's love interest. But my editor said it made her think of the movie and I didn't want that comparison. Plus, "Drago" felt like a better name for the character.*

## Excerpt from “The Sheik’s Temptation”

Release Date: April 14, 2023

Click [HERE](#) to get Zhara and Drago’s story!

The music transfixed him. He hadn’t ever considered music to be something beyond...well, beyond something nice, perhaps as pleasant ambiance in the background. *This* music, however, was startling. It wasn’t just the melody that was enchanting. There was a vibrant, almost painful passion between the notes, a melancholy sadness that flavored the rhythm, a somber, trailing hope, the crushing defeat and heavy...disavowal? Surely a song couldn’t “disavow” anything!

Shaking his head, Sheik Drago al-Hassan continued walking. This music was making him fanciful.

Mentally shaking himself, Drago reminded himself that he had work to do. He didn’t have time to listen to a pretty song! There was always work waiting on his attention.

The thought stunned him, momentarily pausing his forward momentum, because he’d never considered his position as ruler of Simar to be a burden. Was his job a problem? When had he started to resent his role and responsibilities?

Before he could answer that question, the music distracted him once more. The sounds dramatically lightened the tension in his chest and shoulders that he hadn’t even realized was there.

Still, he didn’t have time to stand here listening to a pretty song. He needed to work on his strategy. Drago knew



that today's negotiations with Sheik Tazir would be difficult and challenging. He needed an edge against an opponent that had very few weaknesses. Drago didn't have many either and he refused to concede anything during these discussions. So why was he here? Why were two stubborn, angry men meeting to discuss an issue that neither of them would be willing to give way on?

Again, the music filtered its way into his angry thoughts, melting them away as the tension in his shoulders magically eased. The notes and sweet, wistful sounds relaxed him more effectively than a massage!

Startled, he looked around, hoping his mental roller coaster wasn't evident to anyone else. Music wasn't "relaxing"! Music couldn't disrupt his mood and alter his temper! Impossible, he told himself. Music simply wasn't *that* powerful!

And yet, the music called to him in a way that he hadn't realized was possible. The power behind the music was shocking. He looked at his guards and recognized the same stunned reaction and relaxed. If they were feeling it as well, then he wasn't losing his mind.

As he shifted, prepared to turn and find the source of the music, Drago was again immobilized as the sound changed. The hope was getting stronger, becoming the dominant aspect of the music. The song grew stronger, more powerful, then waned. He took a breath, only to hear the music crescendo, the feelings becoming stronger again and... damn, the music made him feel like he was having sex! The sudden rush of passion threatened to overwhelm him.

But that was impossible!

Drago frowned, looking around. His guards wouldn't look at him and he would have laughed out loud if...no, he couldn't make a sound that would disrupt the music. It was shifting to another crescendo and...he held his breath as the music built higher and higher, strumming his emotions as

easily as a guitar. No, not a guitar. A harp, he mentally corrected.

And still, the music built higher, the passion and...? Anger? How could there be anger when everything inside of him was filled with the hope? The hope had faded into the background, he suddenly realized. That damn hope was...why couldn't the person playing the music just accept that life was hard!

Drago wanted to roar with abrupt fury! He wanted to hunt and stab, to...the music again tempered the sudden rage, soothing him as if someone were now rubbing his back with a silken mitten. He wanted to purr and...?

*Ealayk allaena*, this was insane!

Drago told himself to walk away, that he didn't have time for nonsense! He was here to meet with Sheik Tazir and negotiate a trade deal. He wasn't here to have an orgasm in a damn hallway! Or to murder small animals!

But he couldn't move. The music swelled. Hope was winning out. Hope was building, the notes creating a crescendo of power that overpowered the sadness and anger. And then...he held his breath as the music hesitated...!

Nothing!

The music...ended?

*Bihaqi aljahim!* Drago felt like roaring! Looking around, he noticed that his guards appeared on edge as well. He'd never experienced anything like that with mere music before.

But he couldn't apply "mere" to what he'd just heard. The sounds from that piano were powerful, passionate and...overwhelming.

He didn't like being overwhelmed. Drago was ruler of all of Simar, a vast country with complicated regional challenges that would haunt him if he let them. But he was in control. He wasn't going to allow vying forces...or

enthraling, haunting music....to get in the way of peace. Hell no!

He looked around, stifling the growl that threatened to erupt at the lack of an ending to that piece of music. Whoever had turned off the stereo should have their hands chopped off. One just didn't do that!

"Your Highness?" He heard the unspoken question and spun around, ready to lash out at the speaker. His assistant stepped back, wide eyes startled, and Drago forced himself to take a slow, calming breath.

"Yes, you're absolutely correct," he replied smoothly, anticipating what the assistant was about to say. "I'm late for my meeting with Sheik Tazir." He glanced around and took another steadying breath. "And we probably shouldn't linger in this part of the palace either."

He'd wandered down the long, dimly lit hallway simply because he'd woken up too early and hadn't had his usual workout to burn off the restless energy. Then his goal of creating a powerful strategy had been sidetracked by that damn music, as well as the lack of an appropriate ending to the song, had increased his edginess. He'd have to remind himself that slamming his fist into Sheik Tazir's annoying face wouldn't promote a productive conversation towards a beneficial trade negotiation.

Zhara stared at the white and black keys, her heart pounding against her ribs. Every time she played that song, she felt too much. But the ending...it was a rare day when she could actually finish the song. It was too...too...*something*. She couldn't figure out why her emotions roiled so intensely when she played that song. She always felt the notes of her music echo deep inside of her soul. She tried to push those emotions out of her body through her fingers, to exhume every speck of sadness, hope, and betrayal that resided within her heart, to cleanse herself of those emotions through the music. She didn't want this passion. She didn't want to feel. She

wanted to be hollow inside because...well, her life was hollow. Her life was a never ending...!

“Stop it!” she hissed and stood up, carefully closing the piano. “You just miss Sada.” Her sister had married last year and every day was a challenge lately. She ran loving fingers along the shiny black top of her precious grand piano. It was the love of her life, she thought.

“And all I’ll ever love,” she whispered resentfully, before turning her back and leaving the room.

Every time she played that song, she felt a deep aching...strangeness...for days afterwards. It was a horrible sensation!

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