



EL MITRA FAMILY
BOOK 1

THE
SHEIK'S
*Marriage
Contract*

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ELIZABETH LENNOX

The Sheik's Marriage Contract

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 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt from “The Prince’s Secret”](#)

Chapter 1

“What have you done now?” Lila whispered, as her uncle’s features crumbled. His desolation didn’t move her. Not this time!

“I didn’t mean to!” he sobbed, hiding his haggard features in his hands. “I tried to stop!”

Lila bit back her impatience with difficulty. Shifting on the worn carpet, she glared at the bent-over figure of a man. “Uncle Ibid, if you don’t start explaining, then I can’t fix this.” She kept her tone soft, trying to be comforting. But the man drove her nuts! The man seemed to find himself in one bad situation after another. “What did you do that you couldn’t stop?”

Drugs came to mind first. Was he doing drugs? His ashen pallor suggested illegal drugs were definitely a possibility. “Alcohol?” she offered, hoping...praying...it wasn’t drugs. His bald head glistened with sweat. From his efforts to convince her that he was repentant? Or because he was coming off of a “high”? Tensing, she waited impatiently for his explanation.

“Gambling,” he whispered, not bothering to look up so the words were still muffled. The man even managed to add a slight wobble to that word, as if he hoped to gain her sympathy for his humiliation.

Gambling. Oh dear heaven!

“How much did you lose?”

There was no sympathy for the man. None! Rage? Oh yes. Lila had plenty of rage towards her wretched uncle!

He named a sum that made her stomach churn. He peeked at her through his fingers, and nodded when he took in her stunned expression. “I know! It’s a lot!” When she didn’t scream at him, Ibid pulled his chubby fingers away from his face and straightened up. Sweat still beaded his forehead and upper lip, but his dark eyes were hopeful as he waited for her response.

Lila nodded slowly, trying to absorb the enormous amount and not exactly sure what to say. Claspng her hands in front of her, she took in a

slow, deep breath. Okay, gambling. A lot of gambling! There had to be a silver lining in this problem.

A silver lining was...?

Shuddering, Lila tried, and failed, to come up with something positive. It was hard since she was still reeling from the amount Uncle Ibid had just said.

At least it wasn't drugs, she told herself. Yes, that was the silver lining. It wasn't drugs. However, gambling was still an addiction. From the amount he'd just stated, it was an out of control addiction.

"How long have you been gambling?" she asked her uncle.

He shrugged, leaning backwards against the chair in her office to stare at the ceiling. However, she suspected his eyes were closed. He'd never liked to face the world, or his problems, so closing his eyes was one solution. Not a particularly effective one, she mentally grumbled. But everyone had their own coping mechanisms.

"A while," he admitted in a tiny voice, rubbing his grubby hands over the wrinkled linen of his very expensive slacks. "Off and on for years now." He tried to look her in the eye as he adjusted his collar. "But I've kept it under control! I swear to you!"

Lila lifted a dark eyebrow, stunned by his ridiculous assertion. "You owe a significant amount of money, Uncle Ibid," she pointed out. "I highly doubt that your addiction has ever been 'under control'."

He huffed a bit, clearly offended by her accusation. His jowls jiggled with indignation as he insisted, "I am not addicted to gambling! I dabble in the sport a bit, that's all!" Ibid smoothed a hand over his rounded belly, but his linen shirt was too sweat-stained and wrinkled to look anything other than pathetic.

Lila rolled her eyes. "Uncle, you owe more money than most people pay for an entire house. And you've already said that you can't stop. That's the very definition of an addiction."

"No!" he roared and stood up, pacing around her office. "I'm *not* an addict. I had everything under control!" He sliced his hand through the air

as if that might validate his claim. “It’s just...well, things got out of hand a few months ago, and...” he sighed, shaking his head so hard that his jowls jiggled. He was obviously too tired to even stand up because he stopped his pacing and leaned heavily against the sage green wall of her small office. He extended his fleshy hands, pleading with her to understand his predicament and give him sympathy instead of her anger and scorn. “I started winning, don’t you see? I won huge amounts!”

She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. “Then why do you owe so much money? If you’re winning, then shouldn’t the gambling establishments owe *you* money?” Her stomach tightened, sickened by the man and not wanting to hear his defense.

Ibid mumbled something under his breath that sounded vaguely like, “Bastards cheated.” But he turned to the window, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I kept going back. Gambling is...exhilarating, you see. The thrill of winning was just...!” He looked at her now, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled to help her understand. “When I was winning, it was the most glorious experience I’d ever enjoyed! The thrill and the rush of triumph! It was so exciting.” He grinned, but his features were so pale, so haggard and sweaty, that there was no joy in the smile. “And the women were all over me.” He chuckled, looking down at his feet as if remembering the glory of the women in his mind. “I felt like a king!”

Lila shuddered, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared at him. “You mean you paid for sex?”

Ibid’s head lifted swiftly and he glared at her. “Absolutely not!” he growled and huffed again. He threw his hands in the air impatiently. “The women in my past were ladies! If I gave some of them a portion of my winnings, that was a gift and doesn’t make them prostitutes!” He sighed, his shoulders curling in slightly. “Why are you making this sound so tawdry?”

Lila shrugged, unimpressed with his gesticulations and anger. “Because it *is* tawdry?” she offered with a wry tone.

Uncle Ibid straightened his shoulders, offended and valiantly trying to regain some dignity. “I came to you for help!” he snapped, dark eyebrows furrowing over equally dark, if blood-shot, eyes. “Not judgment.”

Lila chuckled, adding a small, one-shouldered shrug. “Well, I’m able to multitask. I can offer you judgment as well as help, once I get the whole story.”

“I didn’t pay for sex!” he asserted again, his puffy lips pressed tightly together.

“Okay, so you didn’t pay for sex. Beautiful women always fawn over men who are a hundred pounds overweight.” She shrugged. “Go on. Tell me what happened next.” She didn’t really need to hear his explanation. She knew what he was going to say next.

After a small hesitation, his indignation collapsed. He seemed to deflate, even his head dropped as the weight of his problem returned. “I lost it. All of it,” he admitted quietly, slumping down into the chair again. He gripped the arms of the chair that Lila had found on the side of the road, stuffed into her tiny car, and brought home to lovingly refinish and re-upholster. The beautiful chair looked brand new now and Ibid had no idea that he was abusing a project that had taken her weeks to finish.

Ignoring the chair and focusing on Ibid’s problem, she uncrossed her legs and leaned her elbows onto her desk, lacing her fingers together as she watched her uncle carefully. “And more,” Lila pointed out. “You lost all of your winnings, and then continued to lose.”

Ibid started to argue, opening his mouth. But his whole body froze in that position, then deflated once again. “Yes.”

She sighed, wondering why he’d come to her. “Okay, so what do you want me to do? I have about a thousand dollars I can offer to help you pay off the amount.” She didn’t offer a ‘loan’. If she gave her uncle money, Lila knew that she’d never see it again.

His eyes widened, those rough-beard-covered jowls jiggling as he shook his head. “That’s not enough! That won’t even cover the interest on our debt for this week!”

Immediately, she shook her head and she unlaced her fingers, pointing at him emphatically. “Let me be clear, Uncle Ibid. This is *your* debt. Not ‘our’ debt. I didn’t gamble away a fortune. *You* did. So whatever mess you’re in, leave me out of it.”

He leaned forward, his red-rimmed eyes wide now. “That’s the thing! I think I know how to get us out of this mess.”

The man was incredible! Had he even heard a word she’d said? “Get *you* out of this mess. I’m not in a mess,” she told him firmly.

Once again, the man ignored her assertions. “If you could just...go to the palace and ask...”

She lifted a hand, palm out, as she closed her eyes and turned away. Lila already knew what he was going to say. “NO!” she interrupted. “Not a chance!” Just the thought of returning to the palace was a non-starter. Tazir, Prince Tazir...no, wait! He wasn’t a prince anymore. His father had passed away last year. He was now Sheik Tazir el Mitra, Ruler of Fahre. He was the most powerful man in the country! And the amount of power he wielded in the world was...well, she couldn’t even fathom that level of power

There were a couple of leaders in the neighboring countries that were just as powerful, but she didn’t know them. They were strangers.

Tazir...he wasn’t a stranger. He was...well, she mentally shook herself, banishing the image of the tall, gorgeous man from her thoughts. Tazir was out of her reach. Had been for years now!

“Lila, you owe me this!” Ibid vigorously asserted.

Her uncle’s words brought her back to the present. She stared at him for a long moment, unaware of her mouth falling open. “*I owe you...why?*” she demanded, her tone icy even as she tried to suppress her fury.

He licked his lips nervously, then shrugged, as if the answer should be obvious. “Because I raised you, Lila! My wife and I raised you!”

She laughed, shaking her head. “No, Aunt Mona raised me. You were always off doing whatever it was that you did. Aunt Mona is gone.” She paused, the pain of her loss still a fresh wound. The remembered pain and the current loneliness only came back when she was vulnerable. All other times, she was good. She was confident and...well, she was fine. She missed her aunt terribly. Lila’s beautiful Aunt Mona had raised Lila from a baby after her mother died in childbirth. Aunt Mona had been a wonderful, amazing, incredible woman.

“I was there!” Ibid argued, pushing the painful memories away. “I just worked in the background.”

Lila sighed, her patience running thin now. She rubbed her forehead, trying to find the last vestiges of her patience. “Uncle Ibid, I can’t just go to the palace and, what would be the point anyway? Aunt Lizl passed away as well,” she explained, referring to Aunt Mona’s older sister who had been married to Sheik Tazir’s father for a brief period. But that had been several years ago. “We don’t have any familial connections within the palace at this point.”

Uncle Ibid scooted forward, perching his wide, fleshy hips precariously on the edge of the chair. “That’s the thing! When my sister became the previous sheik’s wife, you were always visiting, playing at the palace.”

“Not always,” she interjected, trying to be honest.

He waved her interruption aside. Uncle Ibid didn’t bother with details that didn’t fit with his script, no matter how true they were. “The thing is, you are friends with Prince Tazir!”

Lila’s chest tightened as she started to see the direction her uncle was heading. “He’s Sheik Tazir now. His father passed last year.” How could he not know that? There had been a massive celebration when he’d ascended to power!

Ibid’s eyes widened with delight. “Even better!” he exclaimed, chuckling as he clapped his hands together. “My beloved sister was Tazir’s step mother! And you used to play with Princess Sada and Princess Zhara. Surely you are still friends with the princesses. They were so cute and adorable. The three of you got along extremely well!”

Lila didn’t comment on his “beloved sister” claim. Ibid hadn’t ever spoken to his sister unless he needed money. “I’m still friends with the princesses,” she admitted. “But we’re not close anymore.” That was her fault, but she couldn’t explain to her friends why she’d had to stop coming to the palace.

His slight grin widened with that news. “Still, you were friends with Tazir, right?”

Lila kept her expression completely blank, unwilling to let her uncle know about her still tender feelings for Sheik Tazir. When he'd been a mere prince, her feelings for him had been inappropriate, if unrequited. But the crush she'd had on him during her teenage years hadn't ever gone away. Talk about an addiction!

Shuttering her gaze, she leaned back in her desk chair, picking up a pen and toying with it nervously. "I barely know Sheik Tazir."

Uncle Ibid licked his lips, clearly getting into the idea now. "But you *know* him. You have that connection with him. That's the thing. Maybe if you just...asked him for help? He might offer you the money! I would pay him back. You know I'm good for it."

She didn't know that. In fact, she'd wager that he'd never paid anyone back. He had never been a good example of moral rectitude.

"He always liked you," her uncle asserted, probably sensing her uncertainty.

Lila's traitorous heart turned over. For a moment, she wondered if that were true. But no, she watched the news. Good grief, she was a political analyst with a popular blog site! She knew the news in depth, she analyzed it, and, because she kept abreast of the latest information coming from the palace, she also saw pictures of Sheik Tazir with an array of lovely ladies on his arm. There had been dozens over the years, all of which gazed up at him with adoration.

Thinking of those women, all of the tall, leggy, stunning women, Lila's heart hardened. "Sorry, Uncle Ibid. You're on your own. I no longer have connections at the palace."

Her uncle stared at her for a long moment, giving her his saddest, most pathetic face. But she held firm. Finally, he stood up and stomped out of her office, grumbling as he went.

Breathing a cautious sigh of relief, Lila turned and looked out the second story window. She worked from home as a political blogger, her office in one of the two bedrooms in her small but perfect house. She adored her house, had renovated and decorated every inch of it herself. She also loved her job and was damn good at it. Her subscribers' list and the

advertisers clamoring for space during her podcasts was slowly increasing as she gained prominence with her political analysis. If she ruffled a few political feathers when she disagreed with the latest proposed legislation, then good! Those grumpy old fossils ruling Fahre needed to get a fresh perspective and Lila was just the person for the job.

Smiling, she turned and resumed the latest opinion piece she was working on. An opinion that starkly disagreed with Sheik Tazir's proposal for the education system within Fahre.

Chapter 2

“You know it’s time.”

Tazir continued reading, ignoring his brother. But Rayed, Prince Rayed el Mitra and Crown Prince of Fahre to the rest of the world, was too persistent to ignore. Plus, he was right, damn it.

“Do you have anyone in mind?” Rayed asked, leaning against the doorframe, watching his older brother curiously.

“Go away,” Tazir snapped, picking up his pen and crossing out several words, writing in new language to tweak the contract.

But, Rayed was relentless. He pushed away from the doorframe of Tazir’s office and closed the door, moving towards his brother’s desk. “If you don’t choose someone, Sada and Zhara have some brilliant ideas.”

Tazir tossed his pen onto the desk and leaned back with increasing impatience. “Please tell me our dear sisters are not trying to find spouses for us?”

Rayed, Tazir’s younger brother by two years, smirked. “They are not trying to find spouses for *us*,” he confirmed. Tazir was just about to pick up the pen and resume his work when Rayed clarified, “They are trying to find a spouse for *you*.”

Tazir muttered a series of curses under his breath, running a hand through his hair. “Why the hell...?”

Rayed moved to the chair across from Tazir’s desk, making himself comfortable. “Because the legal time limit is drawing near and you know it.”

Tazir’s frustration morphed into teasing amusement. “If I don’t marry by the law’s time limit, then you get to take over.” He leaned back in his leather chair, a smug smile on his face.

Rayed’s eyes smoldered with anger and his relaxed pose disappeared. “Don’t even joke about that, big brother!”

Tazir laughed, leaning back in his oversized chair, lacing his fingers together and resting them on his flat stomach. “Why not? I’ve been doing

this job for almost ten years now.”

“You’ve only been *officially* in the job since Father passed away eleven months ago. Hence, the deadline on your marriage. You have thirty days.” Rayed stood up impatiently. “Find someone and get the deed done.” He headed for the doorway, his body tense with anger.

“Or...!” Tazir taunted.

Rayed paused at the unspoken threat, turning to glare at his older brother over his shoulder. “Or I tell Suzanna that you’re planning to propose to her,” he warned, referring to Suzann Mitchell, the palace’s social director.

Tazir’s smirk disappeared and he straightened up in horror. Rayed laughed and pulled the door open, only to find the woman in question standing in the doorway, her hand raised to knock.

“Oh good!” the vivacious events director exclaimed with a happy, and unnecessary, clap of her hands. “You’re both here!” Suzanne stepped into the room, flipping her shimmering, long, blond hair over her shoulder as she headed for Tazir’s desk. The perpetual aura of enthusiasm was normally amusing to the brothers. Neither of them understood how the woman could be so up-beat all the time.

Antoine, the woman’s assistant director and her perpetual glowering shadow, followed her into the room, but lingered against the wall near the doorway.

Suzanne laughed, eagerly delighted by whatever she was about to say. “Now, I know that there is an important,” she paused to give Tazir a meaningful smile, “deadline in thirty days.” She flipped open her leather notebook, smoothing her hand down the page. “As usual, I’m trying to be prepared for any eventuality. And since your,” she lowered her voice to a hushed whisper, “wedding...” she winked at both Rayed and Tazir before continuing, “is coming up, I wanted to run a few ideas by you.” She started spouting off the names of colors that Tazir didn’t recognize and food options that...well, he didn’t give a damn about what they ate. Hell, he didn’t even want to consider the deadline that was looming over him.

After several minutes of feigning interest, Tazir lifted a hand to stop her crazy flood of words.

There was a pause, a moment of silence that he used to ensure she was paying attention, before Tazir continued. “Suzanne, I appreciate your zeal for making my impending wedding...” he almost choked on the word, “...a special event. However, I don’t even have a bride yet.” At that, he looked over at his brother, the threat clear.

Which was why he missed Suzanne’s moment of irritation. By the time he turned back at her, the polite, professional expression was back in her eyes.

“Well!” she gushed, pasting on an encouraging smile. “I know you will find a bride soon and fulfill the terms of the law. I, for one, relish the thought of your rule for decades to come! Tik tok!” she chirped, waving her finger in the air like a metronome. “The moment is coming, and sooner than you might expect!” She flipped her notebook closed. “I will definitely be ready for this blessed event and I guarantee that this wedding is going to be the most talked about event all over the world!” She laughed and flipped her hair back over her shoulder before striding confidently out of the office.

Rayed nodded sharply to her as she walked out, Antoine following in her wake. Rayed stared after the woman, then silently walked out as well. It was obvious that there was something on his mind. Tazir had no idea what he was thinking, nor did he care. His brother was far more complicated than one might realize.

Chapter 3

“Who is here?” Tazir snapped, not in the mood to handle anything more today. It was well past the dinner hour and he was exhausted. He wanted to head out to the pool for a swim or maybe go down to the gym for a hard workout. Unfortunately, he was too late to head outside for a hard gallop, but his stallion, Zinz, probably needed the exercise just as much as Tazir did. So whoever had just arrived, asking for a meeting with him without an appointment would have to just buzz off! He wasn’t seeing anyone else today!

“A Ms. Lila Chakroun, Your Highness,” Eldra, his assistant, explained in a low, calm voice.

Lila? The lovely, spirited girl who used to play with his sisters? The girl who had grown into a gorgeous, stunningly beautiful woman?

“Lila is here?” Rayed interrupted, coming around the corner and looking just as worn out as Tazir. “Lila Chakroun is here? In the palace?”

The assistant bowed again, this time to Rayed. “Yes, Your Highness. Actually, Ms. Chakroun is in one of the guardrooms at the moment. Not exactly inside the palace.”

“What does she want?” Tazir demanded sharply.

The man shook his head. “Nothing, Your Highnesses. She simply walked up to one of the guard posts outside on the street and asked how you were.”

Tazir’s eyes narrowed. “The guard allowed her to enter the building?”

Eldra nodded. “Apparently, someone was harassing her on the street. Ms. Chakroun appeared flustered and anxious. So the guard brought her into the office to protect her while two other guards went out to investigate and question the two men who were bothering her.”

Rayed turned and glared at Tazir. “Someone was bothering Lila!” Rayed growled.

Tazir rolled his eyes. “I heard that part.” He turned back to his

assistant. “Why isn’t Lila here in the palace?”

Eldra shook his head. “She does not have an appointment, Your Highness. Nor does she have the correct credentials that would allow her to pass through the security checks. But I recognized her name from years ago. I know that she’s distantly related to your former step mother.”

“And she’s still here?” Tazir demanded.. He turned to his lead bodyguard. “Have Lila brought to my office immediately.”

The guard didn’t hesitate. He lifted his hand and spoke into the microphone attached to his wrist. He waited for the response from the guardroom, then turned to Tazir. “She’s being led through the security room now.”

Tazir nodded sharply, then returned to his office. “I’ll see her immediately.”

Rayed watched his older brother move towards his desk. Tazir had started his morning at four o’clock, having been woken early due to a problem in the northern region. It was now about thirty minutes past seven in the evening, he hadn’t eaten dinner, and had probably skipped lunch as well. Tazir was working too hard, he thought. But Tazir wouldn’t slow down. Every time he tried, something would happen and he was called back to deal with it.

Rayed took as much off of Tazir’s shoulders as possible, but his older brother was too focused on his duties and obligations to release more. The man worked twenty hour days and was constantly exhausted.

But at the mention of Lila Chakroun, his entire demeanor had shifted.

Turning, he focused on Eldra. In a low voice, he instructed, “Tell the palace staff to get a room ready for Ms. Chakroun. And find out where she’s living. Send someone to her apartment to pack up her personal items. Make sure it is a woman that packs up Ms. Chakroun’s clothing though.” He considered the situation for another long moment, then added, “On second thought, don’t worry about bringing her clothes here to the palace.” Lila probably didn’t have clothes in the latest fashion. For what Rayed had in mind, Lila would need to look her best. “Have Marci, our personal shopper,

arrange for an entire wardrobe to be delivered here. Assume that Lila will need everything, including makeup.”

Suzanne suddenly appeared, her hazel eyes shifting from Eldra to Rayed, sensing a secret. That annoyingly perky smile appeared right on schedule, but there was a tinge of anxiety in her eyes. “What’s going on? Someone is getting a new wardrobe?” she asked slyly. “I love Marci’s fashion sense! She’s so elegant, but with a quirky edge!”

Rayed looked down at the woman, not sure what the hell she was talking about. Ignoring her, he looked at Eldra. “And shoes.”

Eldra was writing frantically, but at that last part, he nodded and walked away.

“Ooh! I love shoes too!” Suzanne clapped her hands excitedly.

Rayed started to walk away, but remembered that conniving look Suzanne had aimed at Tazir the last time she’d been in his office. She was planning something, maybe even manipulating events, and Rayed wasn’t sure what her plan was. Better to get her out of the way so that Tazir had some private time with the lovely Lila.

“Could you come with me to discuss those wedding plans?” he asked, gesturing down the hallway. “I don’t think that Tazir has the time to review them right now. Maybe I should take a look and make sure that there aren’t any issues.”

Suzanne perked up, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Antoine roll his eyes. Rayed wasn’t sure what that was about, but his primary goal was to clear a path for Lila. There was something serendipitous happening that Lila, Tazir’s old flame, showed up on the same day that they’d been discussing wedding plans.

“That would be great! I’d love it if you could give me some insight into Tazir’s,” at his sharp look, Suzanne corrected herself, “I mean, His Highness’ preferences. I really want this to be a spectacular event. And you’re right, he’s been working so hard lately to…” the woman kept babbling, but Rayed stopped listening. He nodded to his bodyguards, giving the signal to clear the area and keep it that way.

“Oh, thank you but I’m sure that whoever that was is gone now,” Lila insisted, lifting her hands to stop the man’s insistence that she follow him deeper into the palace.

“Please, come this way, Ms. Chakroun,” the short man repeated, more firmly this time.

She shook her head. “No, really! The men who were trying...well, they are gone now,” she explained, waving towards the sidewalk in front of the palace. It was empty now and she felt safe enough to hurry down the street to her small townhouse.

Maybe! Perhaps the palace guards had merely scared the goons that had been threatening her further away. Were they waiting for her around the corner? Were they going to pounce on her as soon as she reemerged and spout more dire threats of pain and bodily mutilation?

“Ms. Chakroun?” one of the guards prompted hesitantly.

She turned back to him, glancing at the two guards standing at attention, then back out at the street. No sign of the horrible goons. She hitched her purse higher onto her shoulder and nodded, feigning a confidence that she didn’t feel. “I’m fine. Thank you so much for your impromptu rescue. Your team is too kind. But I need to be getting home now. I’m renting a place for the week and I’m just a few blocks away.”

Rayed stepped into the guardroom, his height and brawn instantly filling up the space. He looked around until his eyes landed on her. “Lila, please tell me that you’re not trying to escape without saying hello!”

His booming voice filled the air and she was startled to see how much he’d grown over the years. “Your Highness!” she gasped. A moment later, she was enveloped into a giant bear hug, literally lifting her off her feet. She laughed, hugging him back, truly thrilled to see him.

When he pulled away, her hands lingered on his shoulders. “You look so great!” she said, beaming up at him. “And wow, you are freakishly tall!”

They laughed together as Lila reclaimed her hands. “Although, I should have known you would be like this,” she teased. “You were always taller than me.”

He leaned forward, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “Remember when we tried playing hide and seek?”

She giggled, delighted at the reminder of those games. “You and Tazir could never find hiding places big enough!” she filled in, as they chuckled at the memory. “Goodness, how *are* you?”

“I’m quite well,” he replied, then put a hand to her arm, leading her towards the doorway to the main palace area. “Why are you trying to leave so quickly? We haven’t seen or heard from you in years.”

Lila flushed at the memories of the last time she’d visited the palace. “I know. I’m sorry I never came back after university.” She’d been too overwhelmed by her feelings for Tazir. Feelings she knew couldn’t be returned. She’d been a foolish, wishful teenager. But her classes at university had given her the time she’d needed to put her feelings into perspective.

He paused, pulling the door open and leading her down a long hallway. “I understand.”

She hesitated, those two words seeming to be more...perceptive... than she’d like. But as usual, his expression gave nothing away. She peered down the hallway hesitantly. “I didn’t want to disturb anyone. I was just here to...well, get out of the sun for a minute. It’s a hot day.”

A dark eyebrow lifted at her statement. “The guards told me you were being harassed by a pair of thugs.”

She pulled back, startled that he already knew the details. “No! It was just...a misunderstanding! Nothing important.” She reached for the door again. “I really need to get back to work. I have a deadline tonight and...”

“Nonsense. You posted your blog article earlier today and your next blog isn’t due for another three days.”

Her eyes widened. “You...know about my blog?”

He laughed and nudged her forward. “Of course we know about your blog. Your articles criticizing my economic policies and Tazir’s social policies are very influential. We appreciate your candor, even if we don’t

always agree with you.”

She cringed. “Well, I don’t just criticize your government policies. I’m an equal opportunity annoyance.”

He chuckled easily and nodded. “Your insights into other government policies are brilliant, Lila. You majored in political science, if I recall?”

She looked around suddenly and discovered that they were coming towards the stairs that would lead to the administrative branch of the palace. How had he managed to get her all the way down the hallway? “Yes, but... seriously, I don’t want to intrude. I know how hard everyone here works and,” she glanced at her watch, noting that it was already late evening. “It’s dinner time. I’m sure that Tazir is exhausted.”

“Tazir would beat me if I didn’t bring you to him.” He pushed open the door that led to the larger offices. Despite the late hour, the area was buzzing with people, everyone hard at work. Some were on the phone, others were working at computers, and there were many people rushing down the hallways or weaving their way through the open area desks. There were offices on both sides of the room and the energy was almost palpable.

“I really...!” she gasped, words failing her when he paused outside of a set of familiar double doors guarded by two stern-faced men that didn’t look happy to see her. “No. I can’t go in there.”

“Nonsense,” Rayed replied, then pushed open the door and literally shoved her inside. A moment later, the door closed behind her.

Lila stood still, just inside the door. The office was stunning. There was a sitting area with leather sofas and club chairs, a massive desk on the far side of the room and a conference table surrounded by leather chairs. There was a fully stocked bar and...goodness, there he was! Tazir!

He was pouring something into a pair of wine glasses, but Lila barely noticed.

Tazir. He was taller than she remembered. And much bigger! Many more muscles were packed onto Tazir’s tall frame. Which was a ridiculous thought since she hadn’t seen him in years! Of course he’d grown taller and more muscular!

But he was also harder, more intimidating. And, much to the chagrin of her delicate heart, so much more alluring. The tanned skin, hard jawline, and the five-o'clock shadow made him look almost menacing. Dark hair with just a hint of grey at the temples. Why grey? He was only thirty seven years old!

Those dark, intense eyes watched her for a long moment and she felt the familiar trembling inside of her. It had always been like this. At least, on her side it had been. Tazir was the standard by which she compared every other man. And every single one of them fell short of his standard. Tall, dark, and handsome didn't come close to explaining the appeal of Tazir. He was beyond powerful. Not because of his position as one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the world. But because...because of him. Because there was a confidence about him, a charisma that pulled her in.

In a word, the man was magnificent. She'd always thought so. She'd had such a painful crush on him during her teen years. He'd been so handsome, so dynamic and amazing. So educated and confident. They'd spent hours debating the issues in the world, laughing at each other's opinions, snorting at their disagreements, and just...generally enjoying the arguments.

That crush was one of the reasons she'd left Fahre. She'd attended Stanford University in the United States instead of choosing one of the celebrated universities here in Fahre.

It was also the reasons she'd stayed away for so many years. Nothing could come of that painful crush. Nothing at all! He would have to marry some day and she planned to be far, far away when that happened.

"Lila." Goodness, the way he said her name sent shivers down her spine!

Tazir stared, taking in every detail. Her tiny waist, full hips, and long legs. She wasn't short, nor tall. Lila was about average for a woman, but that was the only thing about her that could be called average. She was brilliant at politics, but he couldn't think about that right now. Right now, he was struggling to keep his eyes on her soft, brown eyes and the almost black

hair that trailed down her back in gentle waves. There were gentle wisps that curled around her face, softening the high cheekbones and almond shaped eyes. Dark eyebrows winged upwards. Soft, full lips that were slightly parted now as she stared at him. Cute nose and...damn, she'd filled out while away at university! He didn't remember her having such lush, tempting breasts!

When he lifted his eyes back to hers, he noticed the soft flush of color on those amazing cheekbones. He was embarrassing her! Damn, that hadn't been his intention. If Rayed witnessed his fascinated perusal, Tazir knew he'd never hear the end of it.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" he asked, lifting the already filled glass for her.

"Oh!" she replied, those lovely brown eyes dropping to the wine. Or was she looking at his hands? When she looked up again, he noticed the pink flush to her cheeks. Was she...?

"Thank you," she whispered, taking the glass. He noticed that she was careful not to touch his fingers as they transferred the glass.

"Please," he said, gesturing to the sofa. "Sit!"

She glanced at the sofa, then at her glass of wine, gripping it with both hands. "I don't want to disturb you. I'm sure that you're busy, Your Highness."

"Please," he urged, touching her elbow and leading her over to one of the chairs. "You used to call me Tazir. There's no reason to go all formal on me now. Not after all the arguments we shared."

She smiled, toying nervously with her wine glass. "That was years ago, Your Highness. I don't have that right anymore."

He sat down next to her on the sofa. "Nonsense. Please, call me Tazir or you'll force me to have to refer to you as Ms. Chakroun. And wouldn't that be awkward?"

She laughed and nodded, starting to relax just a little. "Fine. But only because you're pressuring me. And I won't abuse that privilege. When we're around others, I'll refer to you appropriately."

He lifted a dark eyebrow, but all he said was, “We’ll see.” He shifted slightly, so he could see her face. “So, what brings you to the palace?”

She took a sip before she answered, “I’m here in the capital for the World Economic Conference.”

One side of his mouth twitched in a mocking smile. “And was it as riveting as expected?”

She laughed. “Yeah. Actually, it was pretty fascinating. I enjoyed the debates and there were some truly excellent speakers.”

She and Tazir debated the economic issues for the next half hour, digging deeper as they warmed to the subject. It wasn’t surprising that they fell into their old habit of arguing, Lila scooting around to face him more fully when she wanted to press her point, or leaning forward as she listened to his argument.

Their discussion was disrupted when a soft knock sounded on his office door. A moment later, a man stepped into the room. She recognized him from earlier, but since they hadn’t been introduced, she didn’t know his name or the man’s role. He walked over, handed Tazir a slip of paper, and left as silently as he’d entered.

Lila glanced at the time, shocked to find that more than an hour had passed. “You’re busy. I’ll get out of your way and let you get back to work.” Carefully, she set her empty wine glass down on the low coffee table.

She’d just grabbed her purse when he asked the question that brought her problems crashing back down on her.

“Why were those men harassing you outside earlier?”

Lila’s mouth fell open and for a long moment, she wasn’t sure what to say. Finally, she relied on the old fallback, “Oh, it was nothing.” She added a breezy wave of her hand in the air to emphasize her point.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he continued, “Your uncle owes over three hundred thousand dollars to a loan shark and those men were pressuring you to pay off his loan.”

Lila stared at Tazir, that amount echoing through her mind. That was

a much higher figure than what he'd told her. "Three hundred thousand..." she swallowed audibly, "dollars?"

"You didn't know?"

She nodded slowly, refusing to lie to him. He'd probably see right through the lie anyway. "He told me it was just over one hundred thousand." She closed her eyes, her head bowing in shame. "I didn't know it was that much." She lifted her head, taking a deep breath and trying to rally. "Well, that explains the situation a bit better." Still, she stood up, hitching the straps of her purse over her shoulder. "Thank you for a delightful evening, Your Highness. The wine was delicious."

She'd just started for the door when he stopped her cold.

"Marry me."

Lila froze and slowly turned, staring at him with confusion. Surely she'd misunderstood. She'd misheard what he said. He definitely hadn't just...proposed!

"I'm...sorry?" she prompted weakly.

Tazir stood up and walked slowly towards her, debating the merit of his idea. Marriage to Lila. Was he insane? This was impossible. He would just pretend like he was teasing her, she'd laugh and he'd walk her out and order one of his guards to drive her home. The guard could even stay outside her place and ensure that no one bothered her.

Yes, that would be the sane thing to do.

"Marry me, Lila." He was going to hell. He must be crazy!

She stared up at him in shock. Her mouth opened and closed, as if she was trying to say something but her lips couldn't process the words.

He slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks and explained. "By law, I am required to marry within thirty days." He shook his head slightly. "Technically, it's twenty-nine days now. It's an ancient law that I'll banish once I am in power. But it's on the books and I don't currently have the power to ignore that law. If I don't marry, my brother will be put in charge. And he's already vowed to kill me in a most uncomfortable manner if I let

that happen.”

She laughed, but there wasn't much amusement in the sound. “Is there a comfortable way to be killed?” she asked, her voice breaking slightly.

Images of him...and her...and a bed. Hours in a bed. Yes, he suspected that dying from making love to her might be an excellent way to pass on to whatever came after life. But he kept that thought to himself. This was just business, he reminded himself.

Having thought that, he stated it out loud. “This would be a business relationship,” he explained. “I need a wife. You need someone to pay off your uncle's debts and get him under control.” He moved closer, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “Sounds like we could fix each other's problems.”

She shook her head, obviously startled by his touch. “I wouldn't ask you to pay off my uncle's debts,” she gasped, horrified at the offer.

He lifted an eyebrow. “You'd rather those men find him and show your only living relative what happens when your uncle borrows money from the wrong people?”

She jerked, stunned by his comment. “You don't think that they would...?” She shook her head. “That only happens in the movies.” She continued to eye him warily, not sure of anything anymore. “Right?” she asked hopefully.

He shook his head. “No, Lila. My security team tracked down the men who harassed you earlier.” He held up the note that his assistant had delivered. “They were instructed to hurt you in order to convince your uncle to pay up the money he owes.”

She stared at the note, obviously stunned. “But..! That's not fair! I'm not the one who gambled the money away! Why would they come after me?”

He moved closer, but didn't relent. “Because your uncle wasn't going to pay them. He was counting on you to fix the problem.”

“I...!” she stopped, her eyes widening. “He demanded I come see you!” she whispered, anguish tingeing her voice. Anguish and humiliation.

“He asked me to beg you to pay off his debts but I said no! I said that I didn’t know you well enough anymore!” She covered her mouth with her hands, trying to stop the flow of panicked words. “He knew that I was coming here for the conference and must have...” She stared up at him, shaking her head. “I swear to you that I wasn’t coming here to ask you for money!”

A muscle twitched in his cheek and he was silent for a long moment. She could see that he didn’t believe her. Oh, this was horrible. “I’m leaving now,” she announced and turned to go.

But his words stopped her as she touched the doorknob. “I’ll pay off the loan.”

She spun around, immediately shaking her head. “No. I absolutely will not allow you to pay off my uncle’s loan. It’s *his* debt. He can figure out how to pay it himself.”

“I’ll handle your uncle,” he vowed. “I’ll pay off the loan and will ensure that nothing happens to either of you.” His lips twisted slightly. “Correction, I’ll ensure that your uncle works off the debt. He’s always been a lazy son of a bitch.”

Lila felt shame burn through her. “I thought my uncle inherited a great deal of money from his father. I know that Aunt Mona never seemed to worry about money. And his sister, your step mother, always had money.”

His lip curled in disgust. “My step mother manipulated my father from the moment they met. He didn’t care, but he also knew how to manage her. She was a mooch too. Mona, your aunt, kept Ibid under control while she was alive. But after she passed away, he burned through his inheritance.”

“That’s...awful,” she replied, bowing her head again. “But that’s none of your business, Tazir. This is a family matter and I will handle it.”

“Do you have three hundred thousand dollars?”

She stiffened and tried to look him in the eye. Unfortunately, she couldn’t do it. Her gaze made it only as high as his chin before her courage failed her. “No, but...”

“Do you have the time, energy, and knowledge to guard your uncle

to ensure that he doesn't get even deeper into debt?"

"No!" she snapped, irritated now. "But I'll figure it out!"

"Marry me, Lila," he ordered, his tone firm now. "It will be only a marriage of convenience. We'll dissolve the marriage when we no longer need the relationship." He moved closer, one hand reaching up to touch her hair again, twirling a dark lock around his finger. "You solve my problems and I'll resolve yours."

The idea was so tempting, but not for any of the reasons he's stated. She'd marry him in an instant if he'd shown any sort of affection for her. But marry Tazir? No, her tender heart couldn't handle the trauma of being more than half in love with him and knowing that she could never really have him.

"You're going to reject the offer," he said, breaking through her chaotic thoughts. "How about this? Why don't you sleep on it? And we'll talk about it again in the morning. You're tired, stressed, and you were attacked just outside the palace today." He stabbed his thumb over his shoulder at his desk that was piled high with papers and files. "I have a few more hours of work to do before I can retire for the night. We'll both consider the pros and cons to a marriage of convenience and talk about it over breakfast tomorrow."

Lila glanced around him at his desk. There were huge stacks of papers and files. It looked overwhelming. "You're going to keep on working?" she asked, searching his features. What did she see, he wondered, then pushed the thought aside. It didn't matter. What was important was finding someone to marry, someone who would get the job done quickly and without all of the ridiculous romance and emotions that would get in the way.

This was the perfect solution, he told himself. Marrying Lila would be the perfect solution!

"I'll have someone show you to a room," he announced, gesturing to his assistant.

Chapter 4

Suzanne stared in horror at Antoine, but forced her lips to remain in a professional, bright smile. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

Antoine leaned against the doorframe to her office. “The wedding is on. It’s a good thing we’ve already started planning the wedding because now we’re ahead of the schedule, right?”

Suzanne slowly folded her hands on the table in front of her, trying to buy herself a moment to think. “But...Sheik Tazir hasn’t proposed yet. He hasn’t asked that very important question!” She would have known it if he’d asked her to marry him. She was sure of it! She thought back to last night. Yes, she’d had several glasses of wine as soon as she’d stepped into her apartment, but she’d been alone. All night. No, she hadn’t had that many glasses of wine. Tazir definitely hadn’t proposed.

So, why the hell was her deputy, the ass who always looked so smug and superior, telling her that the wedding, the wedding in which she’d planned to be the bride, was going to happen?

“Apparently, our esteemed leader proposed to an old family friend last night. Some woman he’d grown up with.”

She shook her head, then reached up and nervously smoothed her blond hair. Blond, sleek tresses were all the rage right now. No frizz. No wayward strands that floated out around one’s head. She...Suzanne...was the woman that should be by Tazir’s side as he announced his wedding plans to the world!

With the professional smile still in place, she said, “I didn’t know that His Highness had old family friends.” Did her voice sound unusually tight? Hopefully, Antoine would assume that she sounded off because of the strain of putting together a whole, freaking wedding, a royal wedding, in less than a month!

“I wasn’t aware of *any* friends that had been on the schedule to arrive this weekend either,” he agreed, opening his hands, then clapping them together. “But here we are! Wedding plans are in full swing!” He laughed

and Suzanne fantasized about slapping him across the face. How dare he be delighted when her entire world was crumbling around her. So many plans! So many happy dreams crushed! This was...impossible.

Yes! That was it. This was just impossible! A lie! Antoine was lying to her. That had to be it!

“Well, why don’t we go speak to this wonderful new future bride of his, shall we?” she offered, gathering up her notebook and a new pen. She loved new pens. There was just something fresh and clean about new pens. She’d use an old one if she had to, but when one worked for a sheik, new pens were expected!

“Let’s do it!” Antoine agreed and straightened his lanky form, then smoothed his baby blue suit down over his slim body. The man definitely knew how to wear odd fashions, Suzanne thought miserably.

“This will be great!” she burst out, her voice tight. Hopefully, her expression didn’t look as strained as it felt. But as long as she was smiling, everything was going to be okay! This was just a monumental misunderstanding. *She* was supposed to be Tazir’s bride and, as soon as she saw him, she’d explain that to him! Then this silly misunderstanding would be cleared up and she could get on with planning her wedding, with no expenses spared!

Lila stepped nervously into the elegant dining room, not sure what she was supposed to do. There was a buffet off to one side and a tea and coffee service on the opposite wall. Should she just serve herself?

“Good morning!” a female voice called out from behind her, startling Lila. The smile on the beautiful woman’s features was...something was off about that smile. It was too bright. Perhaps a bit brittle?

The blond woman extended a hand. “I’m Suzanne Mitchell,” she explained, shifting the expensive leather notebook to her other hand. “I’m the palace events coordinator.”

Lila shook the woman’s hand, not sure why the ‘palace events coordinator’ needed to introduce herself. “I’m Lila Chakroun. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Surprisingly, Suzanne's smile brightened a notch. "Yes! It is!" She laughed, leaning forward slightly as if she'd just said something hilarious. Lila didn't get the joke, but smiled politely, folding her hands in front of her. "I was going to grab a cup of coffee before heading out."

Suzanne's features softened. "Oh, surely you're not leaving us already, are you?"

"I need to—"

Tazir stepped into the room, his dark, intense eyes sweeping the room to land on her. "Suzanne, why don't you show Ms. Chakroun your wedding plans?"

Lila stared at the man, her eyes narrowing. He was trapping her into an agreement. Nodding, Lila wasn't aware of her lips curling slightly at the corners as she accepted the challenge.

She tilted her head slightly as she said, "I'm sure that Ms. Mitchel is an excellent event planner and her ideas for *your* wedding," she stressed the word "your" before going on, "will be perfectly adequate to your needs."

He moved closer, his eyes never leaving hers. "Ah, but I'd love your input. After all, you have excellent taste."

She shuffled her feet and crossed her arms over her chest. "How could you know what my taste is like, good or otherwise? My tastes, and my temperament, might have changed significantly since the last time you saw me."

He chuckled. "A *kitten*," he emphasized, "doesn't change her spots."

Oh, he was good! Referring to her as a kitten instead of a lioness meant he didn't think she was dangerous!

She inched closer, daring him to do it again. "You're belittling the years apart as well as my time at university, not to mention many years of experience arguing against your policies, Your Highness." She tilted her head back even further when he stepped closer and lowered her voice as she continued. "I might have grown sharper claws over the years."

He chuckled softly, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief. "I suspect that I could have you purring in no time at all."

Someone clearing her throat broke the spell. Lila and Tazir turned, staring at the events director as if they'd forgotten she was even in the room. Which was certainly the case for Lila! When Tazir was around, Lila forgot everything else. Obviously, she hadn't changed all that much after all. The man still had the ability to make her lose her senses!

"Sorry," Suzanne laughed, lifting her hand as if she were in school and pointed to her notebook. "Wedding plans?" She glanced between Lila and Tazir. "Should I discuss the details with her? Or should I just find another bride?"

"Ignore those two," Rayed teased, referring to Tazir and Lila, as he stepped into the dining room. "That was their version of flirting." He poured himself a cup of coffee, winked at Lila, and added some cream to his coffee.

Lila blinked. Was that flirting? She never flirted! She wasn't the kind of person who even knew *how* to flirt! She was the serious, passionately political woman that debated well. She was the geek that everyone avoided unless they wanted to get into a conversation about economics or environmental hazards!

She gestured toward the coffee service. "I'll just get some coffee and get out of your way. I need to get back to my hotel and head home."

"Your possessions were collected from the hotel last night," Prince Rayed announced, draining his cup and putting it down. His eyes took in her black slacks and blue, silk blouse. "I see that Marcia has been working overtime." He nodded sharply as he filled a second cup. "She did a great job."

"Marcia?" Lila parroted.

At the same time, Tazir's eyebrows snapped together as he said, "You asked Marcia to get involved?"

Rayed handed the cup of coffee to Lila, which she accepted gratefully. Obviously, she needed something to get her brain in gear. Flirting with Tazir hadn't been on her agenda. Ever! And who in the world was Marcia?

Rayed returned to the coffee service and poured himself another cup. "Marcia is the personal shopper for the el Mitra family, although Sada prefers

to choose her own clothing by flying to Milan or Paris.”

“I prefer the styles from New York, personally.” This was from Suzanne. She beamed as everyone turned her way, as if she hadn’t just said something very odd. Everyone blinked at her for a moment, then they turned to look at Lila once more.

“Last night, I asked Marcia to get you a whole new wardrobe,” Rayed explained, then scowled at Tazir as he stole his cup of coffee and downed more than half of it in one gulp. Rayed wondered how long Tazir had been working this morning. With that thought in mind, he turned to Lila. “I think that you and Tazir have a great deal to discuss. Why don’t you two take this basket,” he nodded towards the servant that had just stepped into the dining room, “over to the small courtyard in the left wing. It’s much more private than the family dining room. You can discuss what you need to without fear of interruptions.”

Tazir nodded sharply, handing the now-empty coffee cup back to Rayed. “Excellent idea,” he agreed, then took Lila’s barely touched coffee, handing that to Rayed as well.

Tazir took the offered basket, then smiled at Lila. “Ready?”

For a moment, Lila seemed undecided. But when she looked up at Tazir, the challenge was there in his eyes and she’d never, ever, turned away from a dare!

“Ready!” she agreed with a curt nod. “Let’s go.”

Antoine watched the couple leave, then turned to Suzanne. “I have a feeling that those two won’t care what plans you’ve decided upon for the wedding, my dear. They’ll be oblivious to anything except each other.”

He watched as Suzanne’s face suffused with color. A color that wasn’t particularly attractive with her golden coloring. She made a rude noise, then stomped out of the dining room.

Antoine rolled his eyes and pushed lazily away from the door. “I’ll handle her, Your Highness,” he told Rayed. “We’ll have the wedding planned in no time. If you have any additional instructions, don’t hesitate to

contact either of us.” And with that, he bowed, then followed in the wake of his lovelorn boss, wondering if she realized that her hopes and dreams were now dashed. The sheik was either madly in love with the adorable Ms. Chakroun, or he was well on his way to falling hard. Suzanne didn’t stand a chance!

Chapter 5

They walked in silence, side by side, until Tazir pushed through a door that opened up to a beautiful garden. In the distance, the ocean could be seen for miles! It was a lovely sight and Lila sighed happily as she gazed out at the pure, blue water.

“How lovely!”

“I’m glad that you like it.” He set the basket down on an ornate, iron table. “Your suite will look out at the ocean as well.” He handed her the thermos of coffee. “What are your color preferences?”

“You said we would discuss the pros and cons this morning,” Lila warned him. “You’re assuming that I’m simply going to accept your outrageous proposal.”

He looked up and lifted an eyebrow. “Okay, so let’s discuss the pros and cons of an alliance between us.”

She poured coffee into two cups, then sat down into the surprisingly comfortable chair. It shouldn’t be comfy because it was iron, like the table. But the contours of the chair seemed to hold one’s body perfectly.

Lila didn’t comment on the chair, although she was aware that, if she married Tazir, she would enjoy many creature comforts. Including a servant to cook and pack picnic meals whenever the idea popped into one’s head.

“I think the best option is for me to head on back to my home and ignore the problem with my uncle. I can…” she paused when he pulled an envelope out of the basket. “What’s that?”

He opened the envelope and looked at the pictures, then handed them to her. “I don’t think ignoring the situation will help,” he commented, pulling out a small casserole dish that, once opened, revealed a steaming egg concoction.

Lila ignored the savory scents as she pulled the glossy pictures out of the envelope, gasping when she saw what they revealed. “That’s my house!” she yelped, sitting up straighter in the chair. “And…!” Tears welled up in her eyes as she stared at the mess someone had made. The next few pictures

were of the inside of her house. It had been...destroyed! Her sofa was slashed and stuffing pulled out, tufts of it laying on the floor. The sheets on her bed were shredded and her pillows were gone. She wasn't sure what had happened to them. And her clothes! Goodness, all of her clothes were strewn about everywhere.

Someone had ransacked her apartment! Her television was gone, her makeup smeared all over the bathroom...everything was destroyed!

“Who did this?”

He tilted his head at the envelope and she pulled out the last image. It was the two men who had tried to stop her yesterday! “Dear heaven!” she whispered, her body going numb as she stared at the goons walking out of her house. One man appeared to be laughing!

“Why would they do this?”

“It's a warning,” he replied calmly, putting a plate in front of her. “The two men coming out of your home were arrested by my security personnel this morning.”

“Where did you get these photos?” She glanced down at the picnic basket and frowned as a thought hit her. Lila waved her hand, indicating the lovely picnic. “You didn't plan this. You were just going to talk to me in the dining room.”

“This was Rayed's idea. Possibly given to him by Sada or Zhara because,” he chuckled, “I can't imagine Rayed coming up with the idea of a picnic by himself.”

She set the horrible pictures aside. “So if the men who did this were arrested, then there's really no need for me to...”

Lila stopped when he lifted an eyebrow at her. “They were only the first round. Your apartment was a warning, Lila. Even with those two being arrested, this isn't over.”

She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “*Fine!* I should....”

“Stop, Lila.” His words were firm and delivered with authority. She looked up at him before he continued. “You don't need to marry me in order to remain here at the palace. Stay here and be safe.” He reached out,

covering her hand with his. “You deserve my protection.”

She stared at him, her heart twisting at his generosity. “But that won’t solve your problem of having to find a bride in thirty days.”

“Twenty-seven days, actually,” he corrected and popped the top of a muffin into his mouth. He put the rest of the muffin on the edge of his plate and served himself some eggs. “But that’s my problem and it will be resolved.” He pointed his fork at her plate. “Eat. You can’t make decisions on an empty stomach and you must be hungry.”

She wasn’t. Not after seeing those pictures. But she picked up her fork and started pushing the food around on her plate. Her thoughts were going a mile a minute. So, it was a surprise to both of them when she asked, “What would marriage between us look like?”

He stared at her for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. “What would you want it to look like?”

She sighed, still pushing eggs around her plate. Her stomach churned at the thought of being married to Tazir. She’d carried such a powerful torch for him, and for so long, that the thought of being married to him, spending time together, getting to know him more deeply...was almost painful to contemplate.

And yet, Lila knew there was no way she could deny him this request. He was saving her from some horrible men. She could save him from losing his country. It was the same issue, when she considered it carefully.

“Would you expect...intimacy?” she asked, and swallowed hard as the heat intensified in his eyes. He looked down, ostensibly concentrating on his food. But that initial look – could he...maybe, be slightly attracted to her?

The idea was so enticing, it completely changed the context of marrying Tazir!

“Intimacy would be completely up to you.” He lifted his head when his expression was safely under control. “If you would like children, then I would be more than happy to...” his lips curled into a smile, “assist you with that.”

Lila felt the flush burn her cheeks and she looked away. “I’ve never allowed myself to think about having children, Tazir.”

“Why not?”

She sighed and put her fork down. “Because I never thought I’d ever get married.” She looked him straight in the eye. That was a perfectly honest answer. She didn’t add that the reason she’d never thought to get married was because she’d lost her heart to him years ago.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Lila. I imagine men are lining up to ask you out.”

She snorted and, this time, she actually ate a bite of the casserole. It was delicious! The cheesy flavors were enhanced with a bit of rosemary and thyme. “The reality is that I’m more involved in my career than in anything else. That’s intimidating to a lot of men. Also, they can’t win an argument with me and...” she paused and looked out at the ocean. “And I probably argue too much. Most people don’t have time to keep up with all of the political issues swirling around these days.”

He lifted his fork in a salute. “I have never minded your arguments,” he told her.

She tilted her head, surprised by the unexpected softness in his tone. “You wouldn’t mind if every conversation was a debate?”

He laughed. “I suppose that I could figure out ways to stop you if I got sick of it.”

Her jaw dropped at the images that popped into her head. But surely he wasn’t talking about...kissing and...other intimate things. Was he?

No, impossible! Lila eyed his shoulders, wondering what it would be like. Of course, if any other man had even suggested something like that, she would have dumped him like a hot potato. She didn’t like it when men tried to control her.

But for Tazir to stop her arguments...maybe with a kiss? Yes, she’d like that. A lot!

Clearing her throat, she picked up her fork again, but she wasn’t sure what she was doing or even what food was still on her plate. “I should...”

she stopped and looked around, not sure what she should do.

“You should speak with my events coordinator about our wedding,” he supplied, his deep voice sounding even lower now. Huskier.

When she looked at him, the tension between them was almost palpable. Wedding? Goodness, that word sounded so...strange!

“I have work to do.” She set her fork down beside her plate. She wasn’t hungry, so it was pointless to pretend. “Why don’t you meet with the events coordinator and get the wedding settled?” There. She’d done it! She’d agreed to the wedding.

His eyes narrowed on her. “So you agree? You’ll marry me?”

Lila hesitated for a moment. But as she looked at him, she realized she couldn’t deny him. Or herself! “Yes,” she whispered. “Let’s do it!”

Now that the decision was made, Lila wasn’t exactly sure what to do. Feeling awkward, Lila delicately wiped her mouth with the linen napkin, set it beside her plate, and stood up. “Are you done eating? I’ll pack everything up and will take it to the...”

He stood as well, taking her hands, stopping her from packing up their picnic. “The servants will handle it, Lila.” He pulled her around the table and looked down at her. “Thank you for doing this.”

She inhaled slowly. “Thank you for protecting me.” She turned, glaring at the envelope containing the hateful images of her precious home, now completely destroyed. Whoever had desecrated her home, they couldn’t have hurt her more if they’d burned the place to the ground.

With a finger under her chin, he made her look up at him. “Don’t look at the images, Lila. I’ll send someone out to clean and replace whatever was damaged.”

“No,” she yelped, shaking her head. “You’ve already done so much for me and, if you’re going to pay off my uncle’s debt, I don’t want to be beholden to you for anything more.”

He squeezed her hands. “You’re not beholden to me for anything. I’m merely protecting an old family friend and,” he chuckled, “my fiancée. That’s my job.”

She cringed, one finger reaching up to daringly touch the side of his face. “It’s not your job. You take on too much responsibility.”

He reached up and pressed his hand against hers, holding her finger against his cheek for a moment. “I can handle it. I have the resources. You don’t.”

“Yes, but…”

“It’s done, Lila. A team will head to your house and fix everything.”

She stepped back, feeling strange in the circle of his arms. “Thank you, but don’t replace any of the furniture. That’s too much of an expense.”

Tazir waved a hand in the air dismissively. “I’ll add the cost of replacement to your uncle’s debt. He will repay me every penny.”

She snorted. “How? I don’t think that my Uncle Ibid has worked a day in his life! I don’t think he’s even capable of working.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow at that statement. “You doubt me?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re one of the most capable people I’ve ever met. So if you have a plan, I’m sure it’s more than adequate. However, it isn’t fair that you have to take on that responsibility.”

He turned, tucking her hand onto his arm and placing his hand over it as he led her back into the palace. “I think that your uncle will be more than ready to accept my plan. And he *will* pay me back.”

“What are you going to do to him?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “That is between myself and Ibid. He’s been a pain in the ass for too long. He tried to mooch off of my step mother as well, you know.”

“I thought you weren’t a fan of your step mother.”

He shrugged. “I’m not.”

He led her down an ornately decorated hallway. The ceilings were works of art, beautiful swooping curves and painted with extraordinary scenes. “But she gave my father Sada and Zhara.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “You like your sisters?”

“I do.” He opened a door. “I don’t get to spend enough time with them, but they are intelligent and interesting.”

“That’s good,” she said with obvious sarcasm. “One would hate to have ditzy sisters!”

He chuckled, as he led her through the next room. “I shouldn’t do this, because you are mocking me.”

“Do what?” she asked.

“Show you to your personal suite,” he explained. The doors were opened for them this time. They stepped into a large, airy space that was about four times the size of her house. There was a sitting room to the left, a private dining room to the right and, as they walked along a shining marble floor, he slowly pushed open yet another door that revealed a lovely bedroom done in shades of soothing teal, cream, and silver. The bed was piled with silk and faux fur pillows in the same shades and Lila wondered what it would feel like to curl up on that bed with a good book, surrounded by a wealth of pillows.

“Do you like it?” he asked eagerly. Immediately, the idea of reading on that bed vanished and in its place, fantasies of making love with Tazir, surrounded by pillows, rose up behind her eyes. Or no pillows. Nothing to interfere with touching and exploring and...!

“It’s very nice!” she gasped out. “Um...the colors are lovely.”

“I believe the decorator used the colors you preferred in your previous house as inspiration.”

Lila was stunned. A designer had been hired...yesterday? And they’d done all of this in twenty-four hours? No, it had been less than twenty-four hours since she’d arrived late yesterday afternoon!

Someone was a miracle worker!

She stepped further into the room, stunned to find a wall of mirrors. No, not mirrors, those were doors! A maid had followed them into the room. As Lila watched, the maid opened the doors to reveal a massive closet! And the closet was filled with clothes!

“Who’s clothes are those?” she asked, eyes widening in surprise.

“Was this someone else’s room? Am I kicking someone out of their space?” She shook her head. “The guest room I stayed in last night was more than adequate.”

He chuckled softly and Lila could tell she’d missed something important.

“Those clothes were brought here for you.”

Oh no! He’d incurred the expense of a whole new wardrobe? “No,” she quickly replied, pointing in the direction of the clothes. “Seriously, Tazir, that’s too much. I don’t need new clothes. I have plenty of clothes already.”

“You don’t actually have any clothes,” he explained, taking her hands and turning her away from the closet. “They were destroyed, remember?”

Lila’s shoulders slumped. “Right.” Taking a deep breath, she pulled herself together. “Thank you for the wardrobe, Tazir. I will repay you for everything.”

He laughed, then nodded at the servant who vanished silently. “You’re not going to repay me for the clothes or anything else, Lila. You’re going to marry me and save me from this ridiculous law that has been plaguing me since my father’s funeral last year. A new wardrobe is the very least I can do to repay you for what you’re doing for me.”

She stepped closer, looking up at him with pleading in her eyes. “Tazir, there are hundreds, probably thousands of women who would love to marry you. You don’t need to take on the burden of a woman who has a crazy uncle with a gambling addiction.”

Tazir tightened his hands around hers, wishing he could tell her that he’d been more than half in love with her for more than ten years. But she wasn’t in love with him. Marriage of convenience, he reminded himself. It wasn’t ideal, but it meant that he could be with her, he would be allowed to protect her, and that was worth the pain of longing he’d have to endure. Just having her here again was worth any price.

“You’re the one I want by my side, Lila,” he told her honestly. “We are very compatible. You’re beautiful, intelligent, and I always enjoy your company. What more could a man ask for in a marriage?”

Well...sex. *No.* No sex, he reminded himself. This was Lila. They’d been friends forever. If they’d lost touch after she’d gone to university, well, that was his fault. He’d been too caught up in taking over his father’s responsibilities.

No, that wasn’t accurate. He’d lost himself in his father’s responsibilities. It was easier to fix those issues than to wonder what Lila was doing at university.

A knock at the door interrupted his jumbled thoughts. He turned to see Eldra standing in the doorway. The man looked uncomfortable, so whatever was going on was a problem that needed Tazir’s attention.

He turned back to Lila. “Why don’t you get settled in here? Take a look around, talk to your new maid, and let her know if there’s anything you need. Whatever is missing, just tell her and she’ll ensure that it is obtained quickly.”

Letting go of her hands was one of the most difficult things he’d ever done. Turning, he left the room, forcing himself to focus on what Eldra was explaining to him. He sighed as he reached his office and realized he had no idea what his personal assistant had said. Lila really was going to be a distraction. Good or bad, he wasn’t sure yet.

However, he sat down behind his desk and asked Eldra to explain the situation again, paying proper attention this time.

Chapter 6

“Good morning!” the blond woman sing-songed as she stepped into Lila’s suite without knocking. Lila spun around, startled by the woman’s sudden appearance, but also relieved at the interruption of her thoughts about Tazir and that enormous bed.

Lila smiled invitingly at the woman. “Good morning,” she replied. “My apologies, but I can’t remember your name. Would you remind me?”

The blond’s smile wobbled slightly but she rallied quickly. “I’m Suzanne, the events coordinator for the palace,” she explained, speaking slowly as if Lila were mentally challenged. “I’m going to help you with your wedding plans.”

Lila fought to keep her face straight, and nodded. “Yes, of course. Thank you for reminding me. Yesterday was a bit overwhelming.”

Suzanne flicked her hair over her shoulder, nodding her understanding. Lila was astounded by how Suzanne’s blond locks shimmered under the overhead light. Her hair was like a waterfall against her shoulders! Lila had never seen hair that sleek and lovely before. Self-consciously, she smoothed a hand over her own brown waves, wishing that she knew the other woman’s secret.

“I’m sure,” Suzanne agreed, even though the hard look in her eyes warned Lila that she wasn’t happy about something. The events coordinator was obviously irritated.

“Tazir asked me to review the details for the wedding,” Lila commented, glancing at the notebook tucked under Suzanne’s arm. “Would you like to go over the plans you’ve organized so far?”

Suzanne shook her head, gently stroking her precious notebook. “Ah, well, now that the bride has changed, the ideas I’d worked on before won’t work out. They’re for a...,” she let her eyes drift pointedly down over Lila’s simple, black and white outfit, “more *flamboyant* personality.” She gestured to the living room area. “Why don’t we sit and talk about what would be closer to your style?”

Lila wanted to laugh at her, but she didn't want to offend the even planner. The coordinator was obviously trying to insult Lila. However, Lila wasn't easily offended. There was no way she could be a political analyst and commentator and not develop a thick skin. People ridiculed her analysis of events and proposed legislation constantly. But she knew her ideas were good, her criticisms backed up by facts.

Instead of commenting, she gestured to the sofa. "That sounds like an excellent idea." She followed Suzanne to the sofa, waiting for her to take a seat before choosing one herself. Since Suzanne took a seat on the sofa, slightly off to the right, Lila knew that the coordinator was waiting for her to sit next to her. Instead, Lila sat down in one of the club chairs opposite. Since there was a large floral bouquet on the coffee table between them, it acted as an obstacle.

It was a petty power play, but in this case, it was useful. Lila sat back and waited for Suzanne to shift on the sofa. She ended up having to lean forward to shift the bouquet off to one side.

Irritation showed on Suzanne's face. Lila had just established herself as the one in charge, and Suzanne clearly didn't like it. At that moment, a movement to the left caught Lila's eye. She looked up to find an unfamiliar man leaning against the wall.

Suzanne turned, smiling at the man. "Antoine, I forgot those fabric samples. Would you be a dear and grab them for me?"

"Of course," the man replied smoothly, keeping his face absolutely blank. He pushed away from the wall and Lila eyed his outfit in surprise. The black and white suit was...well, was the design on the side paisley? No. Yes! There were paisley stencils or something along the outside seam of the man's pants, as well as on the lapels of his jacket.

Bold choice, she thought, as she turned back to Suzanne. "Okay, what did you have in mind?"

Suzanne opened her notebook and pulled a fancy pen out of some inner pocket. "Well, why don't we start with your favorite colors?" She glanced pointedly through the open doors at the bedroom. "Teal? Or silver?" The woman's mouth twitched slightly before she suggested,

“Browns or tans?” She lifted a hand as soon as Lila started to speak. “Browns or tans aren’t a problem. I know that some people prefer the more...subtle and less ostentatious colors. So whatever you choose, I can make it look elegant or fanciful or...” she waved her hand in the air. “Whatever theme you choose.” She looked down at her notebook, then up at Lila, waiting for information.

Lila smothered a smile. The woman’s efforts were amusing, but Lila knew that, if she were to marry Tazir, even only for a short period, Suzanne might become a significant resource.

“I don’t think that my preferences should be the primary decision. What are Tazir’s favorite colors?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Lila knew she’d made a mistake. A fiancée should know her man’s favorite colors! And the triumph on Suzanne’s face showed she thought she’d scored a point against Lila.

“Tazir has a preference for green. The darker, hunter green shades.”

Lila smiled and nodded. “Then why don’t you focus the wedding décor around a forest green theme?”

Suzanne brightened. “Of course!” she replied eagerly and wrote something down. “And the food?”

Lila shrugged and, since she’d already shown her lack of knowledge, she continued. “What are Tazir’s favorite foods?”

Unfortunately, the coordinator didn’t know what Tazir’s favorite foods were. “I will check with the palace chef,” Suzanne replied quickly and wrote that detail down as well. A moment later, she flipped her notebook closed. “Well then! I guess that’s all the information I need!”

“Excellent,” Lila replied, standing up and folding her hands in front of her.

Suzanne stood as well and forced her lips into a professional smile, but there was no warmth in her eyes as she said, “I suspect that we’ll be working together a great deal in the future. I look forward to your ideas on menus and themes for all of the various entertaining that His Highness will need over the next few months.”

Lila smiled and nodded. "I'm sure it will be a delightful adventure."

Suzanne looked around. "This is a beautiful space. Would you mind if I looked around? I'm always searching for new ideas to brighten my own living space."

"Please," Lila said, gesturing with her hand. "Feel free to look around. Although, I won't be able to answer many questions since I haven't had much of a chance to peek around myself."

Suzanne laughed, a brittle, fake sound, and wandered into the bedroom. That was an odd place to start. Why had Suzanne headed directly for that particular room?

"I'm sorry to bother you, Ms. Chakroun," a servant interrupted before Lila could follow Suzanne. "I wanted to let you know that your office is up and running with internet and all other services."

"My office?" Lila parroted, startled. "I have an office?"

The woman smiled, bowing slightly. "Of course, Ma'am," she replied, gesturing behind her. "Would you like me to show you?"

Lila glanced toward the bedroom and saw Suzanne coming out of... somewhere. Maybe the bathroom?

"Lovely!" Suzanne chirped as she sashayed out the door. "Toodles!"

Lila blinked at the closed door, stunned and...curious. Walking cautiously into the room, she looked around. There weren't any voodoo dolls with pins nailed to the walls, no crazy lipstick messages scrawled on the mirrors threatening death or torture. What had Suzanne done in here?

"A mystery for another day," Lila whispered to herself, thinking about the new office. That was something she was eager to explore!

Turning, she walked out and found the servant who was still waiting in the other room. "I'd love to see the office, if you have time?" she asked.

The servant brightened and did a little curtsy. "Of course, ma'am. Right this way." The servant introduced herself as Badia. "I'll be your personal servant, if it pleases you," she explained. "If there is anything I can do to help you, please ask."

“Thank you, Badia,” Lila replied. “I’m sure that you’ve thought of everything. I suspect that you are extremely efficient.”

After Badia happily showed Lila the office, the private kitchen where Lila could make anything she desired, the sitting room, library and television room, she disappeared, allowing Lila to work in peace for several hours. When Badia returned, she asked if Lila wanted something for lunch, but Lila was preoccupied with an analysis of the new hospital funding and the roads that needed repairs within a certain area of the country. She was comparing previous road repair contracts with the current plans and found that the increased rates were abnormally high. She cross referenced the different amounts proposed for the supplies versus the labor versus the vehicle rental and all of the various activities and precautions that a road crew needed to take when tasked with fixing any significant stretch of a road.

“Are you going to stop her?”

Tazir looked up with impatience when Rayed burst into his office, disrupting his concentration on a proposal for a new hospital.

“No!” he growled, having no idea which “her” his brother was referring to, nor what he was supposed to stop. Brushing his brother aside, he returned to the numbers. Something was off about the amounts, but he wasn’t sure what was niggling at his subconscious.

“You’re not worried about her not eating?”

An image of Lila popped into his head. Not that she’d been very far from his thoughts this afternoon. Knowing that she was here, in his home, in a place that he’d designed for her, he’d been thinking about her all day. She’d been a constant distraction, which is why he was so far behind on his work.

“Who isn’t eating?”

Rayed leaned back in the leather chair in front of Tazir’s desk, and snorted with annoyance. “You bring Lila here to the palace and then abandon her on her first day?” he grumped. “Not great of you, old man.”

Tazir sighed impatiently. Tossing his pen away, he leaned back in

his chair. “What are you talking about?”

Rayed chuckled. “I want you to take care of your fiancée.”

Immediately, he was tense, his worry showing clearly on his face. “What’s wrong with her? Is she hurt? Is she okay?”

Rayed shrugged his shoulders. “No clue if she’s okay. She’s been working in her new office for several hours without eating anything. Is she scared to ask for food? Is she working herself too hard? Is she anxious about living in the palace after years on her own?” He leaned forward now. “She’s not my fiancée, so I don’t have the right to find out what’s going on in her head. But if you don’t care, then I’ll just go ask her.” And with that, he stood up and headed for the door.

Rayed made it five steps before Tazir pushed him out of the way. Snickering, Rayed watched as his brother hurried down the hallway towards his future wife. But as he watched, Rayed’s expression turned grim. If his brother’s obsession with Lila didn’t stop Tazir from working so hard, he was going to work himself into an early grave. He had to slow down and enjoy life a bit! The man was a heart attack just waiting to happen!

Chapter 7

“You haven’t eaten anything.”

Lila spun on her chair to face the newest interruption. Blinking, it took her a moment for her eyes to register the looming silhouette in the doorway. But she knew who it was. No one was as big and tall, or as devastating to her senses, as Tazir.

“Hi. Are you taking a break for lunch?”

His lips pressed into a grim line. “Lila, dinner is about to be served in the family dining room.”

Another blink and she turned, looking out the window. Sure enough, the sun was setting. “Oh,” she whispered. She looked at her computer, then up at Tazir. The temptation to stop and enjoy his company was strong. But she doubted that he was stopping his work. And she really didn’t want to dine alone.

“Come,” he said, reaching out to take her hand. “We’ll eat dinner together and you can tell me which of my latest proposals you’re shredding for your readers’ entertainment.”

Lila laughed, amused by his commentary on her job. “Roads.”

He did a double take. “Roads? What’s wrong with roads?”

As they walked into the dining room, she explained what she’d learned about the costs of the roads and the changes in the pricing. They debated back and forth to the point where, by the time dessert was served, they were laughing at the ridiculous options they were tossing out for how to fix the problems facing their country and other countries.

“Come, let’s have some brandy in the living room where we can relax for a bit longer,” he suggested, taking her hand and lifting her out of the dining room chair. But when he pulled her up, he was standing a bit closer than she’d anticipated and...their bodies pressed together. They froze at the unexpected contact.

Tazir held her close, feeling her soft, sweet breath on his neck. He wondered what it would feel like to lean down, to brush his lips against hers.

His fingers tightened on her back and...had she stepped closer? Why wasn't she pulling away? She didn't want a sexual relationship...did she? Impossible! This was Lila!

He should let go of her. He should step back and let her return to her room. And yet, she didn't move out of his arms. In fact, she leaned closer, her fingers sliding along his arms.

She smelled so damn good! He could lose himself in her scent, in the way she felt, so soft and warm against him.

He wanted her. Did she want him?

And yet, here she stood. She'd been here for less than two days and here he was, thinking about all the different ways he could make love to her.

Drawing on every ounce of his strength, he let his arms drop to his sides and stepped back. "Brandy," he blurted. Brandy might give him the tiny bit of strength needed to resist the allure of her soft skin and full, pink lips! She was so damn beautiful! He wanted to press her against him, to toss her over his shoulder so that he could haul her back to his bed and discover all of the soft, sweet places on her body that she liked to be touched. He wanted to know everything about her.

But not yet. He needed to be sure. He needed to give her room so that she could make up her mind about being with him. He'd marry her and pay off her uncle's debts, no matter what she decided. But maybe, just perhaps, he could find a taste of happiness with her. It would be damn nice to have someone like Lila to talk to about his day and all of the struggles that came with running a country the size of Fahre. She wasn't just beautiful and lovely. Lila understood. She got it. She fully grasped all of the potential problems that he faced every damn minute of his waking hours.

Thinking of those problems, he rubbed a hand over his face, sighing as the fatigue threatened to overwhelm him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, moving closer once again and placing a hand on his forearm. He looked down at her hand, at the delicate fingers resting on his sleeve. She was so damn delicate! He wanted to protect her from the world. He would, if only she'd let him!

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Just a lot of things to work on.”

Lila nodded her understanding. “You’re right. Perhaps we should skip the brandy and get back to our respective jobs.” She smiled, her brown eyes twinkling up at him merrily. “Your parliament is going to vote next week on funding for the education system. I’m not sure I agree with your ruling party’s choices.”

He laughed, taking her hand once again and tucked it onto his elbow. “I’ll see your argument for the education bill and raise you one on your points regarding the border problem.” As they left the dining room, they chatted amicably about the issues, but they were both very conscious to keep their bodies separate, only touching on his elbow where her hand rested in the crook of his arm.

“Here you are,” he said, stopping just outside the doors to her suite. “Is the apartment to your liking?” he asked.

She glanced at the closed door, then back up at him. “I guess so. I haven’t really looked around, except to sleep in the...” she paused, both of them tensing at the unspoken word. Lila inhaled softly and continued. “Badia showed me my office and I got a bit too involved over the past couple of hours.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her fingertips. “Well, be sure to look around tonight. No more work, okay?”

She smiled, not pulling her hands away. “I’ll stop working if you’ll do the same. Deal?”

He sighed. “I have so many documents I need to read through.”

She flipped her fingers out of his. “Fine!” she snapped. “If you’re going to work, then I’m going to review that education bill.” She turned and headed towards her office instead of entering the suite. She peered at him over her shoulder. “Send a servant to my office when you’re through.” She smothered a yawn before turning back.

“Fine!” he called back, exasperation lacing his tone.

Lila turned and lifted her eyebrows at him. “Fine...what?”

“I’ll stop if you stop!” he growled, fisting his hands on his hips.

“We’ll both call it an early night. Deal?”

She grinned and hurried back to him. “Deal. But I’m sending spies to watch out for you.”

He rolled his eyes and pushed open one of the doors to her suite. “Get in your room before I...!”

She paused at the door, turning to lean against it as her eyes twinkled up at him. “Or you’ll what?”

He shook his head. “Don’t push it, Lila,” he growled again, moving to the next doorway where his suite was.

He heard her soft laughter and the snick of her door when she closed it.

Then moments later, he heard a terrified scream.

Racing back to the door, he was blocked by his guards as they drew their weapons and swarmed into the suite.

Lila was kneeling on the floor, holding one of the palace servants. She glanced over her shoulder at the guards who were pouring through the door, frantically looking around for the threat. “Tazir! Help me! Badia! Something is wrong with her!” she called out.

Tazir hurried over to examine the servant, who was splayed on the floor her arms stretched out in front of her. There was a red rash on one arm, but no other indication of what might have hurt her. There were no other wounds, no bullet holes...nothing.

“Call for the doctor!” Tazir snapped to one of his guards, bending down to check the woman’s pulse. “She’s alive!”

Several of the other guards were moving around the space, looking for whoever had done this to the maid. But they all returned, shaking their heads to indicate that there was no other danger present.

Correction, there was no intruder in the room.

“What’s wrong with her?” Lila cried, bending down to take Badia’s hand between her own, trying to rub some warmth into the cold fingers. “She was smiling and happy earlier today. She tried to get me to eat lunch but...I

kept promising her that I would and then I forgot. But she brought me tea and water and lemonade and...Oh, Tazir! She can't die! Not because of me!"

"This isn't your fault, Lila," he assured her. "We don't know what's going on."

The palace emergency medical team burst into the room. They had a stretcher and medical bags, but neither paramedic could immediately tell what was wrong with Badia. They loaded her onto the stretcher, attached an IV and rolled her out of the suite.

"She's on her way to the hospital," Tazir told Lila as he wrapped a comforting arm around her waist, pulling her against his side as they watched the medical team hurry the fallen woman down the hallway. "Rest assured, she'll get excellent care. We'll find out what happened to her."

"Yes," Lila replied, wrapping her arms around her waist, her tone indicating her doubt about his promise. "I'm sure you're right." It was a lie and they both knew it. But it sounded good at the moment.

One of the guards whispered in Tazir's ear. He nodded and Tazir turned to Lila. "You can't stay here," he told her.

Lila pulled her eyes away from the door where the medical team had just departed. "I'm sorry, what?" she whispered.

"This suite clearly isn't safe. We need to find a safer place for you to sleep tonight."

Lila looked around, but she didn't really see the lovely décor. Nodding her head, she replied, "Yes. Of course. I can just..."

"You'll stay in my suite, Lila," he ordered. "I know there are several open guest suites, but the security isn't as good in the guest wing of the palace. I want you close by, so my guards can protect you."

She swallowed hard, looking up into his dark, intense eyes. "Stay with you?" she repeated. The implication of his words...thrilled her. Then guilt hit her almost immediately.

"There is an extra bedroom in my suite. You'll be comfortable there."

“Yes, you’re right. I would probably feel better there. Safer.” He could see the softening of her lips and her eyes seemed to shine with whatever was passing through her mind.

“Exactly,” he assured her, his voice husky. Lila would be close by! Only a wall away!

“Nonsense!” a female voice announced, shattering the sudden tension that had surrounded them.

Tazir and Lila both turned, surprised to find two gorgeous women with dark hair and dark, smiling eyes coming towards them.

She heard Tazir groan, low and frustrated, but he stepped forward, wrapping his arm around her waist as he said, “Lila, may I re-introduce you to my sisters, Princess Sada and Princess Zhara.” He paused for a moment as both Sada and Zhara nodded their heads. “Ladies, you remember Lila Chakroun. She has generously agreed to help me fulfill the marriage law by becoming my wife.”

Tazir shot a warning glare at his sisters. He recognized the mischievous look in their dark eyes and could tell they were up to something. They always were, but normally Zhara was the more practical. Today, seeing the glimmer in her eyes, Tazir suspected that she was the greater threat.

Her next comment confirmed his suspicions. “Lila can definitely stay in my suite instead of yours. I’m sure that she’d feel more comfortable with me than with you.” She smiled sweetly up at Tazir. “At least until after the wedding, that is.”

Sada’s smile brightened as well. “Or she could stay with me. You know that we both have plenty of room.” She smiled welcomingly at Lila. “What do you think? Wouldn’t you feel more comfortable with us than sleeping in the room adjoining this grouch?” She leaned forward and whispered sotto voice, “He’s just going to sneak out once you’re asleep and work more anyway.”

Lila’s eyes widened and she looked up at Tazir. “You are?”

Tazir wasn't sure how to respond. He hadn't planned on heading back to his office. Hell, with Lila by his side, his only thought was to get her into his bed and spend the next several hours there. However, if she was going to be in the spare bedroom, he suspected that it wouldn't be a bad idea to get some of those contracts reviewed.

"At this moment, I wasn't planning on doing anything other than ensuring your safety."

Lila's eyes narrowed, understanding the words he hadn't spoken. "You were! You were going back to work!"

Before Tazir could respond, Lila turned to his sisters and, with a polite smile, agreed, "Thank you so much for the offer. But this guy," she poked her thumb back towards him, "needs sleep. So I think I'll stay in his suite, maybe even on the sofa, so that he can't sneak out."

Sada laughed, clapping her hands and Tazir wondered if that had been their plan the whole time. "Excellent idea!" She turned to Zhara. "Maybe we should have thought about that before."

"Or maybe we could lock him out of his office after a certain hour each evening," Zhara offered. "Lila, it is wonderful to see you again! The three of us, minus our grumpy brother, will catch up tomorrow."

The princesses left Tazir's suite, leaned their heads together as they brainstormed ideas on how to stop their oldest brother from working too hard.

"Maybe we could..." Zhara began, but her voice was too low for Lila and Tazir to hear the rest.

A moment later, Sada shook her head. "That wouldn't work. He'd just sneak stuff out before we got the door locked," Sada whispered back.

Zhara contemplated Sada's comment, and nodded her agreement. "You're right. Maybe we could..." Their voices faded away as they turned the corner.

Tazir shifted so that he could look down at her. "They are obnoxious, but harmless."

Lila peered after the lovely pair and shook her head. "I don't think

they are harmless at all.” Her smile was a bit shy now. “I suspect that they just want you to think that. Remember, I used to come to the palace to play with them pretty often. I know they are devious, but with good intentions.”

For a moment, he eyed the empty doorway, then threw back his head laughing. He never thought of his sisters as anything more than fluff. “Right,” he replied, putting a hand to the small of her back. “I’ll show you to your room.”

Chapter 8

“I’ve never had a personal assistant,” Lila explained to Tazir the following morning. She’d barely slept knowing that Tazir, the man she’d fantasized about for so long, was only a wall away in the next bedroom. He didn’t look particularly well rested either.

He was sitting across the table from her on the lovely terrace, both of them drinking coffee. “Trust me, you’ll need one. I had Eldra organize interviews for you this afternoon. If you don’t like any of the people that applied, then tell Eldra and he’ll ask the employment agency to send over more candidates. Make sure that you feel as if you can work well with the person. They will be with you all the time for however long we’re married.”

Lila sipped her coffee, hiding her expression and the pain that lanced through her. He kept referring to this as a temporary marriage. She needed to start thinking that way as well. He hadn’t touched her in any way when they were alone. In fact, he only touched her when others were there to witness the effort. And that hurt, even though this was supposed to be only a marriage of convenience.

Pushing her pain aside, she focused on the conversation. “Okay. I’ll choose a personal assistant. But I’m not sure what this person will do for me. I’m used to working alone and I have a pretty good system for researching my articles, writing, and posting my ideas to my website.” She considered her next words, tilting her head slightly. “It would be nice to have someone else organize my travel plans though. That’s always a pain in the neck.”

He shook his head, picking up another file while he sipped his

morning coffee. “Your assistant can help, but all of your travel plans will be handled by your security team. They’ll send an advanced team to wherever you want to go and will ensure your safety during the trip. Just tell them where you want to go with enough notice, and everything will be fine.”

“Security team?” she squeaked, her eyes wide.

He chuckled. “Yes, a security team. You’re about to become a very powerful woman, Lila. You will be surrounded by security at all times.”

Thankfully, he looked down at his documents so he missed the flash of panic that crossed her face.

Lila tried to calm her panic. Of course there would be security. She’d spent plenty of time here as a child and had seen the security measures. Even as a teenager, Tazir had been surrounded by personal bodyguards. It was just a fact of life.

Trying to find a silver lining, she straightened in her chair and forced her lips into what she hoped was a bright, engaging smile. “On the positive side, I won’t have to go to the grocery store anymore!” she blurted.

His coffee cup was halfway to his mouth when he froze and stared at her. “Grocery store?”

She shrugged. “I really hate grocery shopping. I hate it so much, I’ve made a game of it.” She cradled the delicate, porcelain cup in her hands. “I time myself. I generally buy the same items every week, so I know where everything is in the store. That means I can get in and out fast.” She grinned at his stunned expression. “The goal is to shave off several seconds every trip.”

For a long moment, he just stared at her. Then he threw back his head, laughing. For some reason, helping Tazir to relax, even if just for a moment, made her heart soar with joy! She leaned back in her chair, taking a sip of the excellent coffee as she watched the laughter change his features from harsh and exhausted, to delighted and incredibly handsome.

“You should do that more often,” she told him as his laughter eased.

“What?” he asked, taking a bite of melon.

“Laugh. Relax.” She tilted her head unconsciously as she studied

him. “You don’t get to relax enough.”

He shrugged and bit into a strawberry. “I don’t have time to relax.”

She tsked her disapproval. “I’m sure that you’ve read the studies about how taking breaks and getting a good night’s sleep helps one to be more productive.”

He nodded, not taking his gaze off of her face. “I’ve heard that. I just haven’t figured out how to accomplish it.”

She smiled at him from across the table. “Then I guess I have a goal, don’t I?”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “And how, exactly, do you plan on forcing me to take breaks throughout the day?”

Lila felt her heart thud against her ribs as their conversation shifted from light and breezy to intense awareness. “I guess I’m going to have to get creative, aren’t I?”

Tazir opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything, Eldra stepped through the doors. Tazir lifted a dark eyebrow as if to silently say, “See what I mean?”

“Your Highness, your first meeting is in five minutes. Would you like for me to brief you on the way?”

Tazir sighed, tossed his napkin onto the table beside his plate and stood up. “Yes. Of course. That’s exactly what I want.” While saying this, his eyes moved over Lila’s face, chuckling when her cheeks turned a brilliant shade of pink.

He walked away, smiling with delight even as he acknowledged the aching in his lower regions.

“What’s next?” Tazir demanded, stepping out of the meeting room. His thoughts immediately turned to Lila, wondering what she was up to. She’d mentioned him taking more breaks. Would she be interested in taking a break with him? He thought about showing her some of the other areas of the palace, the older regions that weren’t in use at the moment. He’d always thought they were interesting as he wondered what history the walls had

seen.

“You are meeting with the board of governors for the proposed hospital in ten minutes, Your Highness,” Eldra replied. “I’ve put the new language for the environmental proposals on your desk if you’d like to take the time to review.”

Tazir knew that’s what he *should* do. Instead, he paused and asked, “Where is my fiancée?”

Eldra was confused for a moment, because Tazir rarely swayed from business during the day. And most nights as well.

Eldra rallied quickly and tapped on his tablet, then looked up. “She’s with a stylist, Your Highness. She’s already hired a new personal assistant. Your sisters arranged for her to have a complete makeover. I believe she’s in Princess Sada’s suite right now.” He tapped again. “Your next meeting is in seven minutes, Your Highness. I believe I can condense the information for the—”

“Push the meeting back a bit.” And with that, he turned in the opposite direction, heading towards his sister’s apartment.

“I’ve heard that the perfect shade of lipstick for a woman is one that matches her nipples.”

Tazir froze, just out of sight with those words. A tittering of feminine laughter followed and he took a slow, steady breath. Did women really match their lipstick to their nipples? It was such a fascinating thought that his body tightened.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward, interrupting a debate about dying one’s hair different colors. But before he could speak, his eyes dropped to Lila’s lips. Did they match her nipples? He couldn’t move as he contemplated that appealing possibility.

He’d never put much thought into the color of a woman’s nipples. Pink, mauve, tan...all nipples were wonderful. He loved nipples. Hell, he loved breasts!

But thinking about Lila’s nipples seemed...different. Better! Far

more fascinating than any other woman's breasts had ever been!

Once again, he eyed her pink lips, then dropped his gaze to examine her breasts. Not that he could see the color of her nipples. Lila was wearing a soft, pink sweater with black slacks. Surely, the lipstick color matched her sweater and had absolutely nothing to do with the color of her nipples.

And yet, the idea, the possibility, was...utterly distracting!

A noise buzzed in his ear, but he couldn't make any sense of the sound. He couldn't look away from Lila's pink lipstick. It looked damn good on her! That pink...it had to match her nipples! If nipple-color was the ideal color for a woman's lips, then that lipstick...!

Someone punched his arm and he looked down to find Sada glaring up at him. "What?" he snapped.

"I asked you if you were ready for the interview."

Interview? Wasn't Lila supposed to be conducting the interviews for her personal assistant? He'd sit in on the interviews if she needed his help. He'd gladly offer his help but...?

The *exact* shade of one's nipples? Was there any slight variation allowed? And how in the hell did one match the lipstick to one's nipples? He pictured women walking up to makeup counters and pulling her shirt up. He eyed Lila's sweater. Pink sweater. Pink nipples? Damn, he'd love to find out. He'd like to...!

"Tazir!" Sada snapped again, punching him harder and using her knuckles this time. In the same spot! It didn't hurt, but Tazir wondered how she'd learned to punch like that. And was the same-spot punch just luck? Or was she aware of the effect of aiming for the same place.

He looked at her, eyes narrowing. But she merely smiled sweetly up at him. Fluff!

"What's going on?" Rayed demanded, stepping into the room and looking around. "Good grief! That's a lot of makeup!" And then he was gone, obviously not willing to wait for an explanation.

"Are you ready for the *interview*?" Zhara asked, emphasizing the words this time.

Finally, her question sank into his nipple-muddled mind. He looked around and finally, the makeup and hair made sense. “Interview?”

Eldra stepped forward. Clearing his throat, he explained, “Yes, Your Highness. Apparently, Ms. Mitchell has organized a series of television and news interviews for Ms. Chakroun. She wanted to introduce your fiancée to the country.”

Anger hit him hard and fast. News interviews? He never, *ever*, did interviews! He did press conferences, but he never sat down, one on one, with a reporter. Because the news agencies were so biased these days, he didn’t want to show preferential treatment for any specific news agency.

“I don’t...!”

“I know that you don’t ever do specific interviews, Tazir,” Zhara interrupted, standing up and moving closer. “But Suzanne approached me about the interviews and I said that I thought it would be a good idea, just this once.” She smiled, adding, “It was supposed to be just for Lila, but it would be wonderful if you sat down with her. How often does the leader of our country get married?”

Tazir had to concede her point. But his eyes moved to Lila. The reporters were vicious. They always tried to trick the interviewee into revealing something that the person didn’t want to reveal. They were all sharks, ready to maul any fresh meat they sensed in the proverbial waters. And Lila, she was too sweet and too kind. The reporters would slaughter her! Her words would be twisted around and...!

“No! I’ll do the interviews.” He thought about it briefly and shook his head. “In fact, I’ll do a press conference this afternoon announcing the wedding plans.”

“Good,” Eldra nodded and backed up, prepared to cancel the individual interviews.

Unfortunately, Sada stepped up and shook her head. “No, that’s not going to work. If you are willing to introduce Lila to the world, that’s great. But that means that both of you are going to have to do these interviews.”

“The reporters...they will twist Lila’s words. They’ll make her look...!”

A huff of indignation stopped his words. “Do you really think so little of me?” Lila demanded, standing up from the stylist’s chair. She looked beautiful. Her dark hair had been pulled up into an elaborate twist that looked fresh and sophisticated. Her makeup was flawless, even if he kept wondering about the damn pink color!

He glared at her, wanting to pull her away so that they could talk in private. But there wasn’t time. “You’re not used to being interviewed.”

Lila’s shoulders straightened at that accusation. “Actually, I do my own podcast. Plus, I’ve done interviews on the various radio talk shows on a regular basis. I’m pretty adept at sidestepping questions I don’t want to answer, Tazir.” She stepped closer, clearly miffed. “Have a bit of faith in my capabilities.”

“Plus,” Zhara stepped into the fray, “we’ve been quizzing her while her makeup was done.” She laid a hand gently on Tazir’s arm. “She’s good, Tazir. She’s really good.”

Antoine appeared, scanning the room like he could sense the tension. “Is everything okay?” He looked over at Lila. “Are you ready?”

The man had chosen a purple suit today. Purple! It was perfectly cut for his tall, slender body, but it was about as flamboyant as any suit could be. Okay, wait a moment. The man had paisley on his suit yesterday. Was that one, or the purple suit more extreme?

Zhara filled the deputy in on the current issue. “My overly-protective brother doesn’t think that Lila is ready for an official interview yet.”

“Ever!” Tazir snapped.

Antoine’s blond eyebrows lifted in surprise. “I spent yesterday afternoon listening to her previous interviews, Your Highness. She’s excellent at getting right to the point.”

Sada and Zhara smiled triumphantly. “See?”

He turned to look at Lila, taking both of her hands in his. “Love, these people, they have no scruples.”

“That’s not true,” Lila assured him, squeezing his hands before pulling away. She folded her hands in front of her. “I know what I’m doing.

There are good and bad journalists, just like in every industry.” She glanced briefly over at Antoine who stood impassively off to the side. “I doubt that Suzanne would put me or you in front of an unscrupulous reporter. The journalists that I’ll speak with this afternoon were all hand-picked.” She turned to Antoine. “Isn’t that correct?”

“Absolutely, ma’am,” he assured her.

“See?” she replied, turning back to Tazir. “Everything will be fine!”

Tazir sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Fine. If you’re determined to do these interviews, then I’m doing them with you.” He turned to Eldra. “Cancel my afternoon meetings.”

Several hours later, Tazir was livid. “I’m going to kill her!” Tazir growled under his breath.

Lila tried to smile, but she was just too exhausted. Seven interviews down and two more to go. The bright lights and inane questions were causing her head to throb. “She’s just trying to get everyone on our side for the wedding.”

Another reporter was setting up, eager to get his “scoop”. Someone stepped over to put a microphone on each of them, then faded away.

The makeup artist rushed over and dabbed a bit more powder on Lila’s face. Lila felt someone tugging at her hair, then more hairspray was plastered onto her head. She felt as if her hair weighed an extra ten pounds just from the amount of hairspray that had been put on her head. And the makeup! Dear heaven, she’d never worn this much makeup before! There were layers and layers of the stuff!

“I’m fine,” she assured him again, stroking his arm. She could feel his muscles tense under her fingers and started to take her hand away, thinking that he didn’t want to be touched. But he covered her hand with his and turned, jerking his head to get the makeup and hair people to give them a moment of privacy.

When they were alone, he repeated the question. “Are *you* okay?” he asked, more firmly this time. “It’s been a long day, hasn’t it?”

She scooted closer to him so that a sound person could move some equipment around behind her. When she looked up, Tazir had his arm wrapped around her. The bustle of the room seemed to fade away. The bright, hot lights slipped from her consciousness, the sounds and the cameras were no longer present. When Tazir touched her, everything seemed to just...disappear. Everything but him.

“I’m fine,” she whispered, then lifted her hand, stroking the side of his face. “Are you okay? You’ve had the same day I have.”

He chuckled and bent as a heavy microphone swished above their heads. “Only two more interviews. Can you handle it?”

She sighed. “Of course. I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

He tilted his head so that her hand pressed more firmly against his cheek. “I have an excellent bottle of wine for when we’re finished here. Does that help?”

Lila laughed and nodded. “That would be wonderful!”

They continued to stand there, not moving, just staring into each other’s eyes as the world moved around them. Tazir wanted to pull her off to the side and hold her, to reassure her that she was doing an excellent job. In general, the reporters were throwing “softball” questions at them. But a couple had tried to challenge her on some of the arguments she’d brought up in her articles or podcasts or during other interviews. She quietly and confidently steered the conversation back to the wedding and what it would mean for the country’s future.

Just two more interviews and they’d be finished, he thought. Reaching out, he took her hands, lacing his fingers through hers. “Are you ready?”

“Absolutely,” she whispered and, for some reason, he wondered if she was talking about the interviews, or something else. Perhaps the same “something else” that seemed to constantly be on his mind.

Eldra stepped up and bowed his head. “The next interview is set up, Your Highness. The reporter is ready for you.”

Tazir dropped one of her hands, but kept his fingers laced through

hers with his other as he led her back to the chairs that had been set up. He knew that it was a severe breach in protocol. They shouldn't show displays of affection in front of cameras. But at this moment, he wasn't ready to let go.

The reporter shifted in her chair, glanced over at her camera guy, and nodded. "Okay, are you both comfortable?"

Lila sighed with relief as she left the room where the interviews had been going on for what seemed like days, but had only been approximately four hours. Why in the world had someone scheduled four hours of back-to-back interviews? Why hadn't someone just arranged for one interview and required that reporter to consolidate questions release the interview to anyone who wanted it?

Or even better, why hadn't the person who arranged these things arranged for a palace staff member to record the interview and release *that* to the press? It was done all the time.

She sighed and glanced over at Tazir. He was just as tired, but his assistant was by his side discussing something else that would absorb Tazir's time for the next several hours.

"Tazir, I need some help," she called out, surprising both men as well as herself. Why in the world had she spoken so abruptly?

Uh oh! Both men turned, staring at her with equal surprise on their faces. Thankfully, Tazir immediately excused himself and...Lila almost giggled at the brief flash of anger on the assistant's face before he schooled his expression, tucking his tablet under his arm and stepping back to give them a bit of breathing space.

"What's wrong?" Tazir asked, touching her arm and lowering his head. The film crew was still packing up, so they weren't alone.

"I just...I need to discuss something with you." She glanced at her watch, then looked back up at him. "And I have to admit that I'm starving. Will you have dinner with me and we can talk about it with that bottle of wine you promised?"

The assistant stepped forward, obviously having overheard her question. “Your Highness, you are dining with the British Ambassador,” he explained. Eldra glanced over at Lila. “I believe that a dress was procured for you to wear tonight.”

Lila’s heart sank. She didn’t want to spend the evening talking to a diplomat, pretending to be interested in anything the woman had to say. But she pasted a smile on her features and nodded. “Of course. Thank you for reminding me.”

Tazir looked at her sharply, his hand reaching out to touch her arm. “What is it?”

Lila shook her head. “Nothing overly important. I’ll go change and meet you in the drawing room in...,” she glanced at Eldra. “What time is the ambassador arriving?”

“In forty-five minutes,” the assistant explained.

Lila nodded, smothering a sigh of impatience. “I’ll be ready.” So much for that precious bottle of wine and a private conversation!

Chapter 9

Lila stepped into the suite, and leaned back against the door, closing her eyes as she tried to relax her muscles. It was difficult because she was so worried about Tazir. And this life. And the wedding. And Badia! Was she okay? She'd wanted to go to the hospital to visit her, but the day's schedule had been hijacked by an events coordinator with an evil streak.

Events Coordinator. Wedding! Goodness, she hadn't even chosen a wedding dress! Was it too late to back out of this?

The interviews. Good grief, they'd just announced to the entire world that she and Tazir would be getting married in a couple of weeks.

With a sigh, she pushed away from the door and headed into the bedroom. The wall of mirrored doors still shocked her, but in a good way. They seemed so glamorous. She felt like a movie star walking into the bedroom. Chuckling at her fanciful thoughts, she stepped into the closet and...gaspd at all of the lovely gowns! There were blues and greens, reds, yellows, and of course, silver and gold dresses, all of them so lovely and... yes, glamorous!

One dress, a simple Grecian style gown done in white silk hung separately from the others with a card at the top with today's date. She remembered reading that people often in the public eye had to notate their wardrobe with the date each piece was last worn so that it wouldn't be worn too often. "I guess this is my life now," she whispered, reaching out to touch the dated card.

"What's your life?" Tazir asked, stepping into the closet.

Lila swung around with a startled gasp. "Wh...what are you doing in here? How did you get in here?"

He chuckled and came to stand at her side. She tilted her head back to look at him.

"Your bedroom is connected to mine." He looked around, nodding with approval at the colorful dresses. "You didn't know that?"

She might have laughed if he wasn't so close, and if they weren't

alone. But being alone, and being so close that she could smell the spicy scent of his aftershave, words seemed to melt away.

Tazir reached out, touching the dated card just as she had. “This is what you’re wearing tonight?”

She might have smiled, but with his arm reaching for the dress, it was almost as if he were embracing her. Just centimeters separated their bodies. She couldn’t breathe. If she did, she’d inhale more of that intoxicating scent. “Apparently,” she whispered, her eyes dropping to the open neck of his dress shirt. It revealed the tanned column of his neck. Lila wondered what it would be like to kiss him there, right at the base of his neck. Or higher up? Yes, maybe along his collarbone.

The breath she’d been holding came out in a whoosh and she lifted her eyes to his. He was watching her intently, sending fire licking through her veins, her knees trembling with anticipation. Was he going to kiss her? Was she finally going to know what it felt like? She’d imagined it so many times in the past and...!

Tazir’s lips lowered to hers, brushing against her mouth as if testing her reaction. When she didn’t pull away, didn’t slap him and order him out of her closet, he did it again. She moaned and it was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. Roughly, he pulled her into his arms, crushing his mouth against hers before he remembered that he needed to take this slowly, not scare her with the need he felt for her and only her!

That’s when he realized that Lila wasn’t pushing him away! Lila wasn’t pushing him away!

Not just that, but she was kissing him back and his mind blanked as he deepened the kiss, his fingers diving into her hair so that he could angle her head to the side and kiss her more deeply. He wanted to carry her to that big bed with all of those pillows. He wanted to strip her down and explore every inch of her!

Lila whimpered, then pressed against him, her fingers reaching up to slide into his hair. He just about lost it then and there, but her awkward kiss made him realize that she wasn’t very experienced at this. Restraining

himself, he pulled back and softened his kiss, forcing himself to explore her lips and her mouth until she opened for him. Then his tongue moved inside, sweeping through her mouth to tease and tempt. When she tentatively did it back to him, he groaned and pressed her back against the wall, lifting her up ever so slightly. She cried out and he started to pull back, thinking that he'd gone too far. But when he freed her lips, about to ask her if he should walk away, she kissed his neck and he closed his eyes, trying to contain the need that was making his body harden to painful levels.

“Ms. Chakroun, I'm here to...”

They froze. Tazir had to throttle the urge to fire whoever had interrupted their interlude.

“I'll come back later!” the female voice announced, then there was silence.

Tazir wanted to pull Lila back into his arms, but she stepped around him and walked away.

“Oh dear,” she whispered into the painful silence.

“What's wrong?” he demanded. But Lila was staring at the floor, her slender fingers lifted to cover her mouth and...was that amusement on her face? Surely she wasn't laughing at what had just happened between them!

He looked down, wondering what the hell was so funny. He didn't think there was anything amusing about the situation. In fact, he was in a great deal of pain. He wanted to rip something apart and perhaps even howl with frustration. Now, wouldn't that be an interesting thing for a world leader to do?

Sighing, he pulled his mind out of the gutter and tried to ease the red haze of lust and fury that was boiling through his body.

“What's wrong?” he demanded, then tried harder when his voice came out sounding gruffer than he'd anticipated.

She lifted those beautiful brown eyes up to him, but pointed down at the floor. The thick carpeting apparently wasn't enough to protect the white silk dress from being crushed under their feet!

Tazir blinked, trying to figure out how that had happened. The dress

had been on the hangar and...damn, when he'd pressed her against the wall, he must have dislodged the dress. And in his urgency to kiss her, neither of them had noticed the white silk under their shoes.

Quickly, he stepped off the dress, then bent down to pick it up. The white silk dangling from his fingers was ruined. Well, perhaps not ruined, but certainly badly wrinkled. Apparently, a six foot, three inch man stomping on the delicate material wasn't a good idea.

He glanced at Lila and noticed she still looked as if she was about to burst out laughing. And that caused his amusement to bubble up. A moment later, they were laughing so hard, they were hanging onto each other for support. If anyone had caught them in the closet like this, they would have thought they'd gone insane.

"I'm so sorry, Lila," he said softly and carefully set the dress back on the hangar. Not that the effort would help the dress. Nope, that silk needed a good pressing from the palace laundry staff. He put the hangar back on the rack and looked around, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Don't worry about it," she told him, waving a hand behind her. "Apparently, I have a mysterious fairy godmother who keeps sneaking into my closet to bring more clothes for me to wear. I'll just choose another dress for tonight."

He looked at where she indicated, then nodded with approval. "Good enough." He sighed and stepped back. "I should let you get dressed. We're probably going to be late for dinner as it is."

She bit her lip and looked around. "I'll hurry. My makeup and hair are already done, so it won't take me long to get dressed."

He glanced at her hair, smiling at the memory of his fingers sliding through the locks. "You'll need to fix your hair again. Sorry about that." He didn't sound sorry. "I'll just...get out of your way."

Tazir wanted to pause and give her a kiss. He turned away, then hesitated, wondering what she would do if he kissed her. But the memory of their last kiss caused him to tamp down that impulse. If he touched her again, he didn't know if he'd be able to stop. His body was already primed, more than ready to make love to her.

“I’ll see you in,” he glanced at his watch, “twenty minutes?” he offered, then smiled when she nodded her agreement.

Lila watched Tazir leave her lovely closet, her eyes glued to his butt. His neck had been warm and wonderful when she’d kissed it earlier. What would his butt feel like? Would it be as hard and muscular as his biceps? What a fascinating thought!

Sighing, she forced her mind to stop mentally ravishing the man and walked over to the other evening gowns. They were all absolutely lovely, but she flipped through each of them, wondering which color would appeal to Tazir the most. Red? Was a red dress too brazen? Surely all of these dresses had been hand-picked and all were appropriate for whatever social or diplomatic events she’d need to attend with Tazir. But weren’t there issues with colors and countries and...well, Lila didn’t want to step into a gala wearing the colors of another country’s flag! Nope, that would be a big problem. Something like that would definitely send the wrong signal!

Sighing, she chose a buttercup yellow evening gown off of the hangar. The wrap style of the bodice and the draping of the skirt would look lovely, she thought.

“Oh ma’am!” a servant exclaimed. “I apologize for interrupting a moment ago.” She bowed low.

“No harm done,” Lila replied, walking over to the woman as she carried the yellow dress. Then she remembered the white dress and chuckled. “Well, a little harm done, but not by you.” She nodded towards the white dress. “Do you think you can get those wrinkles out so that I could wear the dress to another event?”

The servant eyed the dress and nodded. “Of course, ma’am. I’ll get that to the laundry staff right after I help you dress for tonight.” She looked at the yellow dress. “Is that what you’ll wear tonight?”

“I appreciate your help,” Lila said with a smile. “Thank you.”

The servant set the dress off to the side and nodded towards her hair. “Would you like help with your hair?”

“What’s wrong with...?” she began, reaching up to touch her hair. It had been done by the stylist earlier today, in anticipation of the cameras and interviews. As soon as her fingers touched the back of her head, she could tell the sophisticated twist was gone. Now that she thought about it, her hair felt as if it was falling down her back. She imagined Tazir’s fingers holding her head and...yes, the memories made her blush but she pushed through her embarrassment. This servant didn’t know that she and Tazir weren’t “truly” engaged. She probably thought it was normal for a man to kiss his fiancée.

“Right!” she whispered and handed over the white dress. “What’s your name?”

The servant took the dress, holding it carefully so no additional wrinkles were created at the hem. “I’m Fatima, ma’am.”

Lila extended her hand in greeting. “Fatima, it’s lovely to meet you. Thank you for your assistance and,” she delicately touched her hair, “I’d sincerely appreciate your help fixing this mess.”

The woman smiled and did a small curtsy. “Right away, ma’am,” she said with a smile.

Lila was about to turn around so that she could strip off the pink sweater and black slacks in order to don the yellow evening gown when something else occurred to her. “By the way, Fatima, have you heard any news about Badia? Is she recovering?”

Fatima nodded quickly. “Yes, ma’am. She’s doing much better. The poison got into her system through her skin, but since she was found so quickly, not much was absorbed.”

Lila wanted to ask about the “poison” but Fatima had already left the room. A question for another day, she thought. Another question – how had a poison gotten onto Badia’s skin?

Chapter 10

Fatima lingered outside of the guard's office, not sure if she was making too much of the situation. Surely, the little needle couldn't be a problem. Could it?

“What's wrong?”

Fatima jumped, startled at the abrupt words. She turned and looked up at the man standing almost immediately behind her. “Oh!” she forgot what she was about to say and, in that same moment, the needle fell to the floor.

They looked down and neither of them could see the tiny metal sliver against the grey stone of the floor.

“What are you looking for?” the guard demanded.

Fatima knelt onto the floor, searching for the needle. When she found it, she picked it up carefully, and showed it to the guard triumphantly. “This!” she whispered.

The man's eyes narrowed. He even leaned forward to stare at the offending object. “You brought us a needle?” he growled and pulled back, crossing his massive arms over his chest. “Why the hell would we be interested in a needle, woman?”

Fatima sighed and shook her head, ignoring the sexist tone of his voice. “Don't you watch movies?”

The big oaf shrugged and Fatima rolled her eyes. “Don't you remember the movie about Queen Victoria?”

“No.”

Fatima would have laughed at his stubbornness if the jerk wasn't in her way. Shifting on her feet impatiently, she waved the needle in her hand. “I don't remember when the movie was released, nor do I remember the title, but there was a scene in this movie where a dress was delivered to Queen Elizabeth, the first one, and it was laced with poison through needles hidden in the gown.”

The guard frowned at the needle. “And you think this needle might be poisoned?”

Fatima blinked at the needle, then at the man. “I don’t know, actually. I really hope that it isn’t poisoned. But I found this needle in Ms. Chakroun’s dress. The one she was supposed to wear last night to have dinner with His Highness and the British ambassador.”

The guard shrugged. “So, the seamstress left a needle in the dress. There’s nothing strange in that.”

She huffed a bit. “First of all, the dress in question was bought and delivered via Marcia, the palace shopper. I know that she buys clothes for everyone, but she always buys clothes from designer showrooms. She doesn’t buy dresses from the designer studios where the clients go to have dresses fitted for them specifically.”

The guard’s expression shifted from annoyed to interested.

“So, you’re saying this needle...?”

Fatima sighed. “Think about it. There might be a pin in a dress that a famous designer might have, possibly, forgotten to take out before passing the dress on to their client. But this,” she lifted the offending object higher, “is a needle. Not a pin.” She pointed to the hollow point. “There’s a significant difference and the possibility that a needle could have been left in a dress is almost nil. Even a pin left in a dress would be extremely odd.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, his dark eyebrows coming together as he contemplated the needle. Fatima pushed it closer and the guy pulled back, not taking the offending object.

“I’ll be right back,” he grumped, and disappeared into the guardroom.

Fatima waited, clutching the needle, praying she was wrong. That the guy would search her out in a few days and tell her that she had raised the alarm for nothing.

A moment later, the guy reappeared from the guardroom, this time holding a small, plastic cup. Another guard followed, this one even more intimidating than the first.

“Where did you find this?” the newcomer demanded as Fatima dropped the needle into the offered plastic cup.

“I found it in the dress that Ms. Chakroun was supposed to wear to last night’s dinner with the British ambassador. She didn’t wear it because,” she hesitated, not willing to tell anyone the secret upon which she’d interrupted last night. “It doesn’t matter why she didn’t wear it. However, I found the needle in the dress today when I was getting it ready to be sent to be pressed.”

“It was wrinkled?”

“Yes. Ms. Chakroun wore a different dress last night. So, if that needle was meant to cause harm, then....” She paused, shaking her head. “Only, I can’t imagine why anyone would *want* to harm her. But just...” she gestured to the container with the needle. “Just check it. If I’m wrong, then I’ll stop by here to apologize for wasting your time.”

The second man asked, “You said that you’d watched a movie about an assassination attempt with needles?” he demanded.

She tilted her head slightly, nodding her confirmation. “Yes. I’m sorry, but I can’t remember the title. But the woman died almost instantly.”

The new guard nodded, pressing his lips together. “Good enough. Even if this is nothing, I appreciate your vigilance,” the man said. Then both men disappeared into the guardroom, leaving Fatima wondering if they were laughing at her.

Probably, she thought as she turned and walked back down the hallway towards the mistress’ private suite. The needle was probably nothing. Nothing at all.

Chapter 11

“It’s poisoned, Your Highness.”

Tazir eyed the glass petri dish containing the tiny needle. “This?” he grumbled. “*This* is what was used in an attempt to kill Lila?”

Bano Filitimo, the head of palace security, nodded grimly. “Yes, Your Highness. We also tested everything in Ms. Chakroun’s suite and discovered that the pitcher of water was also poisoned. Her servant must have spilled some of the water on her arm, which is how she became poisoned.” He shifted on his feet before continuing. “Since this is the second attempt on her life in as many days, I’d like to increase her protection detail.”

Tazir rubbed a hand over his face in frustration, then turned to Rayed. “I don’t want to scare her,” he explained. “But I don’t want…” He didn’t finish that statement.

Rayed nodded understandingly. “You’ve only just found her again. You don’t want to scare her off. And if she discovers that someone is trying to kill her, most likely simply because she’s agreed to marry you, then you’re worried that she might run away.”

Tazir hated that his younger brother understood humanity and all of their complex emotions so thoroughly. He saw and understood way too much for Tazir’s comfort. But he didn’t deny any of Rayed’s statements. “What should I do?”

Rayed contemplated the issue for a moment, then said, “Increase her security. But for now, I wouldn’t tell her about the two previous attempts.” He pushed out of the leather chair and headed for the door. “Explain to Sada and Zhara. Ask them if some of their servants can assist Lila instead of bringing in new personnel. Their staff are crazy loyal to those two women. The staff won’t let anything happen to Lila.”

“Nor will my guards,” Bano announced with absolute finality. “We’re pulling the servants from Ms. Chakroun for now and replacing them with our own personnel. But I agree that Princess Sada’s staff or Princess

Zhara's staff might be able to help. And they don't spill secrets. I guarantee that."

Rayed was reaching to open Tazir's office door when Bano spoke but his phrasing was so odd, Rayed paused and frowned. Even Tazir turned to stare at his head of security with a speculative look in his eyes.

"Is there something we need to know about our sisters?" Tazir asked pointedly.

Bano shook his head. "They are safe." Both Tazir and Rayed had the same sneaking suspicion that there was something going on that they didn't know about. But Sada and Zhara...they weren't...they didn't...did they?!

Not by the blink of his eye did Bano contradict what Tazir and Rayed were thinking. And because he was the head of security, he most likely wouldn't tell Tazir anything unless it pertained to his sister's safety. Which was exactly why Sada and Zhara trusted their bodyguards so completely. It had to be that way. If either of his sisters suspected that their bodyguards were telling on them, they would sneak around, just to prove they could!

Sighing heavily, Tazir braced his hands on his desk, nodding to the man. "Thank you for letting me know about the needle and the poison in the pitcher of drinking water in Lila's bathroom. Please...let me know if you discover anything about who placed either the needle or the poison in her room."

"We're reviewing the security tapes now. We've already gone over them once, but we'll keep analyzing them until we figure it out, Your Highness." Then he bowed and walked out of the room.

Tazir looked at his brother and, in unison, they shrugged. Whatever their sisters were up to was a mystery for another day.

"I'm going to speak with Lila," Tazir announced, surprising Rayed, as well as his assistant, who was just stepping into the office. "I'll deal with whatever that is in an hour."

Eldra pressed his lips together, obviously wanting to argue with him but unwilling to challenge his sheik. He bowed, pressing the tablet against his chest as Tazir left the office.

“I don’t think the dress needs to be *this* grand,” Lila argued.

Suzanne laughed, waving Lila’s objections aside.. “Oh goodness, of course it does!” she insisted. “This is your wedding! You are quite literally going to be a princess on your big day!”

Marcia, the palace shopper and fashion guru, looked away, sorting through several of the designer wedding dresses that had been delivered earlier. Designers from all over the world had shipped dress options as soon as they heard about the engagement. So now, Lila’s private suite was a veritable cloud of white. There was white silk, white tulle, white flowers, and white...well, *everything*! Her world was all white!

“What about a champagne colored dress?” Lila asked, overwhelmed by the amount of white around her.

“Champagne?” Marcia and Suzanne spoke at the same time. Suzanne’s tone was horrified while Marcia’s was hopeful. “I have a champagne dress over here,” Marcia announced, immediately pushing her way through about ten dresses that were so filled with tulle and other materials that they trailed along the floor.

Suzanne made a choking sound, shaking her head. “You simply *cannot* wear champagne to your first wedding, my dear!”

Lila gritted her teeth, trying to ignore Suzanne’s patronizing tone. She turned to Marcia, who seemed to have a better grasp on style than Suzanne. But before Marcia could pull the dress out, Tazir stepped into the room.

He looked around, and even Lila could see his startled expression before he remembered to school his features. A brief moment later, he smiled at her. “May I have a word with you?”

Lila nodded, smiling. They hadn’t had a moment’s privacy since yesterday evening’s dress debacle. That kiss had caused her head to spin all night. She’d eventually fallen asleep, but her subconscious hadn’t let the kiss go either. She dreamed about Tazir all night, only to wake up this morning anxious and ready for another kiss. Plus all of the other stuff that happens after a kiss!

“Of course!” Lila replied, looking around for a place to sit. But there wasn’t any space. Dresses were everywhere. “Why don’t we go sit down, so that we won’t bother...?” She surveyed the area and sighed. When she turned back to him, he appeared just as stunned as she felt. “Well, I could use a break and you might not want to come back here. You might be smothered by dresses.”

“You’re right.” He took her hand and gently tugged her out of the chaos.

Once in the hallway, he tucked her hand into the curve of his elbow. “How are you doing today?” he asked as he guided her to the left, heading for the courtyard where they’d breakfasted the day before.

Lila watched over her shoulder as the guards stopped following them and fanned out, giving them a bit of privacy. She noticed most of the guards looked outward for potential threats, although there was one man who watched the interior of the courtyard. Plus, there was yet another man keeping watch from the roof.

“What’s on your mind?”

He led her over to a stone bench and they sat down. “I wanted to know how you are.”

She smiled. “How am I?” She laughed slightly and smiled up into his eyes. “You don’t look as tired as you did yesterday. Did you sleep well? How are *you* doing today?”

Lila was surprised, not only by his confusion, but also the wary expression that he immediately tried to hide.

Immediately, she understood his puzzlement. “No one asks you how you are doing, do they?” she asked softly, lifting a hand to stroke his cheek. “You’re the one that always takes care of everyone else. The whole world relies on you, and you...” she paused, trying to find the right words. “You feel as if the weight of the world is on your shoulders, don’t you?” The last wasn’t really a question. She could see the truth in his eyes.

He must have seen the sadness in her eyes because he turned away, staring off in to the distance. She didn’t think he was going to answer. She was just about to change the subject, trying to come up with something light

and funny.

“The world *does* rely upon me, Lila. It isn’t my imagination or an overly zealous sense of obligation or responsibility.” A muscle clenched in his jaw. “Which is why I need to ask you about last night.”

“I don’t like asparagus.”

Her response was obviously not even close to what he was thinking about. He swiveled his head towards her, then chuckled at the glimmer of mischief in her eyes. “Noted. No more asparagus. Ever!”

She laughed as well and shifted, hoping to appear more relaxed. It was hard to do when she was this close to Tazir though. She wanted to climb onto his lap and wrap her arms around his neck. She wanted to kiss him and offer a shoulder to lean on, an ear to vent to, assure him that he could let his guard down every once in a while.

But she didn’t know him well enough to say or do any of that. So instead, she sat beside him on the stone bench, waiting for him to gather his thoughts.

“About last night...” he started to say.

Suddenly, she couldn’t take the tension any longer. Lila jumped up and moved away. “Don’t you dare say that you regret kissing me, Tazir,” she whispered, glancing self-consciously at the guards before bringing her gaze back to him. “I know that we agreed that this would be a marriage of convenience. A marriage where we help each other.”

He followed her, grabbing her while his hands spun her around. “I don’t regret that kiss for a second,” he rasped. “Do you?”

Startled, she stared up at him for a long moment before answering. “No! I...I actually...”

He didn’t wait for her response. He kissed her right there in the courtyard in full view of the guards.

Lila kissed him back, but she was painfully aware of the crowd of observers. After only a moment, she pulled back, but didn’t release his arms.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, lifting his head when she didn’t respond

as she'd done last night to his kisses.

She looked around, pressing herself against his chest as if she could hide there. "I just...last night we were alone." She recalled the maid interrupting them and laughed again, leaning her forehead against his chest. "Well, more alone than right now."

He chuckled and she sensed the tension leave his body with her assurance. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," she argued, looking up into his eyes. "There are pros and cons to every aspect of life."

He smiled down at her, his hand moving over her back. "What are the pros about living here, with me, in this fishbowl?"

She grimaced. "Well, when you put it like that...!"

They both laughed, but he loosened his arms. Lila didn't move. Until he pushed her away, she wasn't moving from him. "Actually," she began again, still smiling. "I don't have to worry about what I'm going to eat at night. And I don't have to go grocery or clothes shopping."

Tazir couldn't hide his amusement. "You really hate grocery shopping so much that you'd put up with this kind of a life with me?"

She laughed, nodding emphatically. "Yes. I seriously hate grocery shopping that much!"

He kissed the top of her head, shifting slightly but not releasing her. "What are the other pros?"

She tilted her head, thinking hard. "Well, I don't have to clean my own toilets."

Tazir chuckled again. "Besides a bevy of servants, what are the benefits?"

She wanted to say that she got to experience moments like this. She got to be close to him, to laugh with him and be by his side, comfort him when he was overwhelmed. But that wasn't what their relationship was about. So instead, she said, "Well, I really like your sisters. They came by earlier today and we had tea. It was lovely. Your sisters are...?"

“Annoying? Obnoxious?”

“Unique,” she filled in for him, rolling her eyes.

He turned and they strolled through the garden, admiring the flowers and lush plants.

They meandered along the path, talking about everything and nothing at all. She made him laugh and he made her roll her eyes. He smelled better than anything she'd ever imagined, and he comforted her as she explained how she was struggling to answer a reader's email complaining about two pharmaceutical companies' competing products. She listened as he told her about how the hospitals were asking for a twenty percent increase in budgets while he wanted to build facilities outside of the hospital's domain to make health care more accessible and less intimidating.

The only issue with their interlude was that he didn't kiss her again. After the beginning when he held her in his arms, he didn't touch more than her hand. It was one of the most beautiful and painful conversations she'd ever had. When he left her at her apartment door, Lila felt somehow ... incomplete.

Chapter 12

This was it. This was her wedding day. Lila stared at the simple gown of white satin. Suzanne kept walking by, muttering about the lack of ruffles and embroidery on the gown. But Lila felt beautiful in the dress. The bodice hugged her figure, flowing elegantly down over her hips and legs, ending with a princess train behind her, like a calla lily. Suzanne had argued that she needed a longer train, but Marcia's advice prevailed.

She was about to be wed! Married! Good grief, was she insane?

Stepping out, she was about to run down the aisle and tell Tazir that they didn't need to do this. Then she remembered the haunted look in his eyes that first day. And the look on his face when they'd been interrupted during that kiss. It had been too busy in the week following that kiss for anything more than casual, private conversations. But tonight, all of that chaos would be over. She'd be married! She'd be "Her Highness" along with everything that title conveyed.

Was she ready for this?

Only temporarily, she reminded herself. This was just a blip in the plan of her life. And there wasn't anything that hindered her from continuing with her career. Being married to Tazir would probably improve her access to knowledge! She could still criticize the Fahre government, right? She could still use her voice to find better solutions.

"It isn't your career that you're worried about," she whispered.

"You're worried," a female voice interrupted her thoughts, "because you're in love with my brother and terrified that he'll never feel the same about you." Sada stepped up beside Lila and they locked eyes through the reflection of the mirror. "But don't worry. He adores you."

Lila snorted and looked away, not wanting Sada to see the pain and fear in her eyes. "He doesn't. This wedding is merely to fulfill the ancient laws requiring Tazir to be married. He's going to banish that law as soon as he is in power."

Sada stepped closer, putting a hand on each of Lila's arms and

squeezing gently. “He loves you,” she insisted softly. “He might not know it yet, but he loves you. Don’t let him convince you otherwise, because he’s going to try to do that.”

Lila wanted to ask why, but Suzanne and Zhara appeared. Their privacy gone, both ladies turned around. Sada was dressed in a lovely gown of creamy mauve and Zhara was in a deeper mauve. Both of Tazir’s sisters had immediately volunteered to be her bridesmaids. Lila had friends from her university days, but it would have been difficult for them to drop everything and come to Fahre on such short notice.

Impulsively, Lila hugged Sada tightly. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For everything!”

Sada hugged her back, careful to not mess up their hair or makeup. The wedding party was small, but because of the importance of this event, cameras were everywhere within the palace ballroom. The wedding would be livestreamed so that everyone in the country, possibly in the world, could watch the ceremony.

“You’ll be fine!” Zhara whispered, leaning forward to give Lila a hug as well.

Suzanne stepped forward next and Lila would have anticipated something vicious if she’d noticed the malicious gleam in the event planner’s eyes. But Lila was concentrating on the flowers someone was handing to her and didn’t see the expression. So she hadn’t braced for what came next.

“The walk is only twenty steps to reach His Highness. There are a couple of places where I taped down the rug to keep you from tripping.” She tilted her head slightly before adding, “That wouldn’t look good on camera, so try to avoid any trips or falls, okay?” She stepped behind Lila, to adjust her train as she continued. “You don’t want everyone’s first view of you to be your panties after your dress flies up.”

Sada and Zhara gasped at that while Lila felt her face drain of color. The sisters immediately stepped forward, embracing Lila from opposite sides. “Don’t listen to her, Lila,” Sada hissed, shooting an appalled glare at Suzanne. “You’re going to be fine! You won’t trip. That ballroom is designed specifically for ceremonies like this.”

Zhara patted Lila's arm soothingly, and murmured, "We'll go out first. Just follow us and do what we do, okay?"

Lila inhaled deeply, then nodded.

"Princess Sada, you're up first," Antoine announced, tapping his clipboard. He opened the doors for Sada, who stepped elegantly out and smiled welcomingly at the crowd. Zhara was next. She paused to give Lila an encouraging wink.

Suzanne started towards Lila, but Lila pointed a finger at the woman, stopping her in her tracks. "Don't you *dare* come near me!" she hissed furiously, then stepped through the double doors. She paused to take in a steadying breath, then pasted on a calm smile and pretended that this was merely a speaking engagement. She'd served on debate panels all of her adult life. She'd been in front of crowds too many times to count.

Unfortunately, that didn't make this any easier. Still, she kept moving forward, trusting Sada's promise that there weren't any tripping hazards. And if there were, maybe she could drop and roll in a way that didn't flash her panties! Oh dear heaven, now she was imagining herself falling in her face, with her dress over her head! That wasn't even a possibility, was it?

Looking up, she suddenly realized that Tazir was watching her with an odd expression in his eyes. Taking a deep breath, she tried very hard to look as if she were enjoying this. She wanted to present an image of confidence to the world!

Unfortunately, she couldn't get the idea of that panty-revealing possibility out of her head. What color were her panties today? She couldn't remember! What if they were too bright? Had she worn the red pair? Or the green ones? No, she'd pulled on a white pair. Wedding dress. White panties! She'd be fine, she thought.

But...what if she fell and got a wedgy?

Tazir reached out, giving her still clenched fists a comforting squeeze and Lila breathed a sigh of relief. However, it took him a moment to uncurl her fists. Wasn't she supposed to be carrying flowers? Where was her bouquet?

Forget the flowers! She'd done it! She'd made it without tripping and falling on her face! Success!

“Dearly beloved....”

Oh dear, she thought and looked up into Tazir's eyes. Wedding ceremony!

Another gentle squeeze and she forced her shoulders to relax.

The rest of the ceremony was a blur. She must have said the right words because she felt the platinum band slide onto her finger. Then she was turned. And he kissed her!

Thoughts vanished. Worries dissipated as she lifted a hand to touch his shoulder. Lila felt Tazir pull her in as he deepened the kiss. But not enough for her. Lila wanted to lose herself in that kiss, but they were still in front of so many people. And then the kiss was over. There was the sound of applause and she turned, but her mind still wasn't functioning clearly.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice gruff as he smiled down at her.

Tazir pulled Lila into a small room off of the ballroom and closed the door behind them. “What's wrong?” he demanded as soon as they were alone.

Lila blinked up at him, then looked around, still dazed. “Wrong?”

He reached out, gripping her upper arms. “Lila, what's happening? You look terrified!”

Lila's eyes suddenly lost their hazy, unfocused look and she lifted her head, tilting it back so that she could look him in the eye. “It's over? The cameras aren't watching me anymore?”

He shook his head. “Is that it? You were nervous about the cameras?”

“Yes!” She leaned against the wall behind her. “I kept imagining myself tripping and falling, or doing something equally stupid as the entire world watches me make a fool of myself.”

He took her cold hands, rubbing them to warm them up. “The world will never see you fall, love,” he vowed. “The cameras were livestreaming, but with a seven second delay. We never truly livestream, just in case something happens that we don’t want the world to see.”

Lila looked up at him, her fingers curling into fists. “That bitch!” she hissed.

“Who?”

“Suzanne! That obnoxious...*woman* warned me not to embarrass you or myself because the whole world would be watching. She never told me about a seven second delay!”

That muscle in his jaw started throbbing and Lila reached up, gently stroking his cheek. “It’s over,” she told him. “The deed is done.”

His eyes darkened with those words. He definitely didn’t like the way she’d referred to their wedding, but what could he expect? She was here to do him a favor. He had to remind himself of that fact and ignore the intense need to put his stamp on Lila. Just a favor, he reminded himself.

“Let’s go to...”

She stopped him by putting a hand on his chest. “What’s wrong?”

Lila stared up at him as his hands moved to her waist. Suddenly, his anger dissipated, replaced by that throbbing sense of possession, that intense, caveman-like reaction he felt now that Lila was his wife. His woman!

He sighed and shook his head. “Nothing at all.”

Suddenly, Lila’s eyes shuttered, her expression turned sad. That hadn’t been what he wanted. This was...what the hell was he doing? What had he said to change her expression?

His hands tightened on her waist, pulling her back when she started to pull away. “What’s wrong, Lila?” he demanded.

Lila huffed a bit and, at any other time, he might have been amused by her fit of irritation. But this was their wedding day. Perhaps it meant more to him than it did for her, but he couldn’t stop the sensation of... belonging that washed over him at the knowledge that Lila was his wife. The woman he’d wanted for so long, for over a decade, was finally his!

“I just...I don’t remember much about the ceremony. How long did it take?”

“About twenty minutes,” he told her, wondering where she was going with this conversation.

“Right.” She huffed again, her soft curves pressing more firmly against him. Did she have any idea of what that kind of movement did to him? Probably not.

She bit her lip and he could see the indecision in her eyes.

“Tell me,” he encouraged.

“Well, I was wondering if, maybe, you might kiss me again.” She peeked up at him through her lashes. “Just...to make this whole thing feel more *real* somehow. I know that you...might not feel that way. But I just... the whole ceremony was a blur because I was so worried about messing up in front of the entire world. So, if you could kiss me to remind...!”

He didn’t wait for her to finish. She wanted him to kiss her? He was more than delighted to oblige! He’d kiss her every time she asked him to! Hell, he’d never wanted to stop kissing her. But every time he started, something or someone interrupted them.

He pulled her closer and brushed his lips against hers. She shivered and his arms tightened, bringing her closer, feeling her tremble. He wanted to protect her, wrap himself around her so nothing could touch her. He needed to feel her softness, to reassure her that she was safe. So he deepened the kiss, but kept his hands away from her hair. He remembered the tousled look the last time and didn’t want to embarrass her. Once he started kissing her, he couldn’t seem to stop. Sensing that she might want him just as much as he wanted her was an intoxicating sensation.

Unfortunately, someone pounded on the door. Thoughts of his special forces team popped into his head. The men he commanded would shoot anyone who dared interrupt him.

Thankfully, his senses returned and he was able to stop himself from grabbing the nearest phone and ordering someone to be...No, he didn’t want to go down that road. Lila was in his arms. They weren’t kissing at the moment, but she was still pressed against him. She wasn’t trembling

anymore. At least, not from fear. Whatever she was feeling, it was because of that kiss!

He felt a soft brush of her lips against his neck before she pulled away. “Did you muss my hair this time?” she asked, a teasing twinkle in her eyes.

“No. You still look fresh and lovely,” he assured her.

“Thank you,” she said, but her words were a mere whisper now.

Was she feeling it too? Was she just as frustrated by their aborted interludes, both times, as he was?

That’s when he remembered there were about fifty people waiting for lunch. Nothing could happen in the banquet hall until after he and Lila stepped into the dining room. The servants wouldn’t dare start serving anything beyond appetizers and the celebratory champagne until the bride and groom arrived.

“We’d better get out of here,” he sighed, not really wanting to leave their tiny oasis from the chaos of what was essentially a political event.

Another firm knock on the door reinforced his comment. He smiled, but there was no amusement now. “I think that’s my brother.”

“Couldn’t you just...shoot him?” she whispered, then lifted up onto her toes to press her lips to the bare skin just above his collar.

“I actually had that exact same thought.”

“Will we ever have any privacy?”

He groaned, wondering if she was able to read his thoughts. “No!” he growled, then laced his fingers with hers and led her to the door. “Later,” he promised, then tugged the door open.

Sure enough, Rayed was waiting for them. “You have an entire room full of people that are waiting for you and your lovely bride to emerge.” He chuckled as his eyes moved from Lila to Tazir. “And have you forgotten that the crowning ceremony was to take place directly after the wedding?”

Tazir closed his eyes, his head bowing in frustration. “Damn. I’d

forgotten that part.”

Rayed chuckled. “Believe me, I hadn’t forgotten.” He cuffed his brother’s shoulder. “No way am I letting you get out of that ceremony! Let’s go, our bold leader.”

Rayed turned on his heel and led the way, determined to get his older brother well and truly crowned as leader of Fahre. It was a role that Tazir had been born to take on and had been doing for the past year. Now it was time to make the role official.

Before he led Lila out, he pulled her into his arms for a tight hug to reassure her. “We’re almost done. Can you make it another thirty minutes?”

“Yes,” she promised, leaning her head against his shoulder. “I’m fine.” She lifted her eyes to look up at him. “Are you okay? You’re not too exhausted?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “It wouldn’t matter if I was. This has to happen.”

She smiled weakly and nodded. “Okay then, let’s get this done. I’m hungry!”

He knew she was trying to lighten his mood, and he appreciated that. But he still wanted to throw caution to the wind and carry her off to a bedroom where they could make love for the rest of the day and to hell with all of this ridiculous pomp and ceremony.

He glared at Rayed. But his brother only laughed knowingly, and pointed towards the ceremonial throne room. “Deal with it,” the younger brother replied to Tazir’s unspoken epithet.

“Payback is coming,” Tazir grumbled, but took Lila’s hand and led her to the next ceremony.

Lila sat down and watched, relieved that she was no longer the center of attention. She watched as the head of Tazir’s advisory council asked her new husband questions. Tazir gave clear, precise answers. There was no hesitation. He knew what he had to do and he accepted all of the responsibilities that the council would convey upon him.

“By the power of the Disan,” the head of his council announced grandly, referring to the term used in Fahre for the formal council title, “I pronounce you King Tazir.” Tazir’s forehead was anointed. A scepter was handed to him. A medallion with the Fahre coat of arms was placed over his shoulders and a gold ring pressed onto his finger.

It was done. Tazir el Mitra was now the official ruler of Fahre. His authority was absolute, his power complete.

Lila sat in her chair beside his throne, startled by the tears she felt welling up at the completion of the ceremony. No man was more deserving. Tazir was strong and commanding, but also compassionate and empathetic. The amount of responsibility he was willing to take on would crush a normal human being, but he accepted all of it, because he’d been raised to this role. He’d been born into power and wore the mantle perfectly.

After the ceremonial chanting finished, Tazir extended his hand and lifted her out of her seat. He lifted her fingers, kissing them as if he was anointing her in some way. She didn’t understand the gesture, but she appreciated the respect that the moment seemed to convey.

And then the room erupted in cheers! There was applause from behind them as well as cheers outside in the streets, the sound pouring through the windows.

“Brace yourself,” he warned as he led her to a balcony. The glass doors swung open.

Lila had no idea what to expect. Tazir’s father had been elevated to the role long before she’d been born. So, she’d never witnessed the transition of power from father to son. As she stepped out to the balcony, she saw the crowds that filled the streets below, everyone cheering and waving Fahre flags, everyone thrilled with both the wedding as well as Tazir becoming their official leader.

With his arm around her waist, she braced herself while the crowd cheered. “What do I do?” she whispered up to him.

He bent down and, with a chuckle, kissed her cheek. “Just smile and wave.”

Lila laughed and turned, waving to the crowd. The noise grew even

more deafening after that. She continued to wave and Tazir did too. “Wasn’t that a line to a movie?” she asked, praying that no one could hear them.

Tazir chuckled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He turned and nodded. A moment later, Rayed stepped behind Tazir while Sada and Zhara stepped out to stand beside Lila. “They love you!” Zhara whispered, smiling and waving to the crowd as well.

Lila didn’t know if the crowd loved her as much as they loved the beaming princesses, but she didn’t argue. She couldn’t really form words since she was smiling from ear to ear, relieved that the difficult part of the day was over.

When they went inside, they found the palace staff had performed a miracle. The ceremonial paraphernalia had been removed and in its place, tables were now set up with flowers everywhere. Had an army of servants been hiding behind the scenes?

“Wow!” Lila whispered, leaning against Tazir. “This is amazing!”

He nodded. “I’ll admit that I’m impressed.”

Sada and Zhara nodded their approval. “This was Antoine’s effort,” Sada said, as Zhara nodded her agreement. “Suzanne couldn’t have accomplished this.”

“Antoine did all of this?” Lila whispered, still admiring the room.

“Absolutely!” Zhara replied. “He’s a miracle worker.”

Lila frowned in confusion at her new sister in law. “But I thought Suzanne was the director and Antoine was her assistant?”

Sada nodded and sighed. “That’s the case. I have no idea why though. Antoine is the mastermind behind all of this.” She indicated the tables. “He even knew your favorite color and matched the flowers.”

“My favorite color is pink?” Lila asked, who had been unaware of this fact.

Tazir stepped back, his body throbbing not just from the sweet, almost innocent kiss they’d shared, but now he was reminded of the color

pink. His gaze automatically dropped to her breasts, still covered by the satin wedding dress. But in his head, he'd already stripped her naked and was feasting on her pink nipples. Tan? Maybe mauve?

Stop it, he admonished himself. The lipstick probably didn't match her nipples at all.

However, the shade of lipstick she was wearing now seemed to be the same color as what she'd worn with the pink sweater. Was it the same? Was it slightly different?

Nipples changed colors. He'd witnessed the subtle variations when a woman was aroused versus when she wasn't. Were Lila's nipples a softer pink normally and a deeper pink when she was aroused?

Damn it, he was aching now and if he didn't get his mind off of her nipples, it was going to be obvious to everyone what was on his mind. He had a few more hours to get through and then he could be alone. Not alone with Lila though. Marriage of convenience, he reminded himself with a sigh.

Chapter 13

She should be exhausted. Lila smiled her thanks as the maid draped her wedding gown over her arm. “Thank you so much, Fatima.”

“I’ll get this pressed and put in a safe place for your daughters, in case they’d like to wear it for their weddings.”

Lila hoped that her smile hadn’t wobbled with those words. There would be no daughters. Not with this marriage at least. She wasn’t sure how long this marriage would last, not sure what the law required of Tazir, but he’d already made it clear that it was only temporary.

Tightening the belt on her silk robe, she strolled into the courtyard, listening to the sounds of the night. There were a few birds in the distance and engines further off. She saw a plane way out over the ocean, but couldn’t hear the engines from this far away.

Sitting down on a bench, she gazed up at the stars, wondering what Tazir was doing. Was he back in his office? Was he working on something that couldn’t wait until tomorrow? She imagined him in his apartment, the one connected to her suite, wandering restlessly and smiled at her fanciful thoughts. He wasn’t in his suite waiting for her, wishing she’d come to him. He was probably hard at work. That’s what he usually did. The man needed to learn how to relax, she thought. He didn’t smile enough. He rarely laughed. And she knew that he didn’t get enough sleep.

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” she snapped to the night air and stood up, ready to go inside and stop mooning for the man!

But just as she turned, a sharp pain slashed through her arm. “Ow!” she hissed and looked down. A dart? Was that really a dart sticking out of the tree next to her?

With a wave of panic, she grabbed the dart and raced inside, slamming the door behind her. “Tazir!” she screamed, rushing through the doors, frantically searching for him. When she spotted him, Lila threw herself in his arms. “Are you okay? Is anyone else in here?” she demanded, looking around frantically, her eyes searching the shadows for a villain.

His arms tightened around her and she hissed as pain spiked from her arm. “Ouch!” she pulled back, and checked the back of her arm. “Is it...?”

“Guards!” Tazir called out. Seconds later, guards poured into the room with their weapons drawn, searching for the threat. “My wife is hurt! Call a doctor!”

Lila shook her head. “I didn’t hurt myself,” she told him. “I was...” she held out her hand, revealing the dart. “Someone shot this at me!” she whispered.

Everyone stopped for a brief moment, staring at the offending dart. Seconds later, the guards shifted into overdrive. Someone got on the phone with the palace medical staff, another issued orders to get onto the roof. Several men were already heading for the courtyard, everyone determined to find the person who had shot a dart at her.

“Don’t touch it,” a guard ordered. He slipped on a pair of gloves and gingerly took the dart before hurrying out of the room.

A moment later, a doctor and a nurse rushed into the suite. “What happened?” the doctor demanded, hurrying over to examine Lila’s arm. The nurse was already setting up the cleaning supplies and rubbing iodine over the small wound. “This doesn’t look very deep, sir,” the nurse replied. The doctor started prepping bandages.

Lila kept her eyes firmly on Tazir, almost faint with the relief that he was okay. She didn’t care that someone had targeted her.

Okay, that was a lie. She didn’t like that someone had tried to kill her. However, could the dart have actually killed her? Or would it merely have hurt like the dickens? What was the needle of the dart even long enough to reach a vital organ?

“It’s poisoned,” one of the guards announced.

“Poisoned?” she gasped, trying to see the person who had said it. But the doctor and nurse were still bandaging her arm.

“Take a blood sample to see if any got into her system!” Tazir ordered.

“What?” Lila screeched, trying to reclaim her arm. But the nurse

was already wrapping a rubber tourniquet around her arm, then tapped on her vein and...! “Ouch!” she hissed.

“Sorry, Your Highness,” the nurse murmured. “Normally, I’m more careful when drawing blood but with the urgency, it’s more difficult to be gentle.”

“Urgency? Why does anyone think that the dart was poisoned?”

The guard lifted a small glass vial that had a purple bit of paper in it. “Cyanide,” the guard confirmed.

“Cyanide?” she whispered, shaking in earnest now. “Someone shot at me with a cyanide tipped dart?” she asked, but no one responded. Everyone was too busy doing whatever they were doing, instead of reassuring the person who had just been shot at! Lila didn’t think that was very fair. But she was too confused and...honestly...overwhelmed, to start snapping at them. Besides, they were all just trying to do their jobs.

That didn’t mean they should leave her out of the knowledge circle!

Impatiently, Lila raised her hand. “Will someone *please* tell me what’s going on?”

The doctor and nurse shared a glance, the nurse adding another piece of tape over the gauze bandage on her arm. It didn’t really hurt that much. It wasn’t so much the pain, but the lack of knowledge that was freaking her out. And the awareness that someone tried to kill her!

Slowly, the room began to clear out. “We’ll post extra guards around—”

“She’s staying with me,” Tazir interrupted.

The guard that seemed to be in charge, Lila had heard him called Bano, nodded confirmation. Then he called out a command and the room magically emptied of guards.

That left Lila alone with Tazir.

He sat down next to her on the sofa and reached for her hand. “Does it still hurt?”

She shook her head, but tears welled up anyway. She didn’t want to

cry, but the thought of someone trying to hurt her...for what? Why would they do that? It terrified her!

“Why would someone do this to me?” she asked in a tiny voice.

Tazir noticed the tear slide down her cheek and realized he had to make a decision. Pulling her onto his lap, he wrapped his arms around her, pressing her head to his shoulder. That’s when he realized that she was trembling and he tightened his grip, wishing he could take all of this fear from her.

“I’m sorry, love,” he said to her softly. “I should have organized more guards, but we all thought that it wouldn’t be necessary after the wedding.” He sighed, rubbing a cheek against her hair. “We thought that the wedding would put an end to it.”

She pulled back, looking up at him. “End to *what?*” She demanded, her face starting to crumple as she saw the dark look in his eyes. “Has this happened before? Was someone trying to kill you?”

He kissed her hair, getting a whiff of lilac. Or lavender? He wasn’t sure. “No, honey. Someone *is* trying to kill you.”

“Me?” she gasped, pulling back to try and look into his dark eyes. “But why?”

“To hurt me. To threaten me. To take your place,” he offered as possible reasons why someone would try and harm her.

There was a long silence. “Please tell me you’re kidding,” she begged in a whisper.

Unfortunately, he shook his head. “I’m afraid not, love.”

“Someone tried to kill me to hurt you? But...I don’t have that kind of power over you!”

He couldn’t tell her that she was wrong. Lila had a great deal of power over him. She could tell him that the sky was purple and, if she held him like she was right now, he’d be too stunned to verify that the sky really was purple. He’d wanted her for so damn long and she was here, on his lap, and she felt...incredible!

“Tazir, what’s going on?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I’m not really sure. Until we catch the person who has already tried twice before now, then we can’t know the culprit’s real motives.”

Lila wrapped her arms around his neck. “This is crazy.”

“I know.” He sighed and pulled her against his chest. “I’m sorry, Lila. I thought that you understood what the body guards were for, but—”

She put a finger to his lips. “I’m scared, Tazir. I don’t like the idea of someone trying to kill me.”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “I don’t like it either. It scares the hell out of me.”

She licked her lips and his body hardened immediately. For a long moment, he cursed himself for becoming aroused when she was so scared. But there wasn’t anything he could do about his body’s reaction to this woman.

“Tazir, will you...,” she hesitated and looked at his mouth.

“Anything,” he replied, trying to control his body. He didn’t want to embarrass her, but damn, she felt good!

“Will you...make love to me?”

Tazir froze. Finally, he managed to ask, “Are you sure?”

She nodded her head. “Yes. I’ve wondered what it would be like to be in your arms for so long.” He stared at her. “Tazir, I don’t want to die without knowing what it’s like to make love with you.” She slid a finger along his jawline. “Just once, will you...can we...?”

“Hell yes!” he growled. “Are you sure?” Could she feel his heart pounding against his chest? Surely, she was aware of his erection pressing against her thigh!

“Yes. Absolutely sure,” she whispered back.

He stood up with Lila in his arms and carried her into his bedroom. He kicked the door closed and, just for good measure, locked it. He wasn’t taking the chance that someone might interrupt them again. Not tonight!

“Damn, Lila!” he groaned, releasing her legs so that she stood next to him. His hands smoothed over her bare arms and her satin robe. She’d looked so beautiful today in the shimmering wedding gown, but he had to see all of her. Without anything! He wanted her naked so that he could memorize every inch of her body. If he had just one night, he was going to learn everything about her!

“I’m not exactly sure how to get out of this,” Lila muttered, contorting her body awkwardly as she searched for the hidden connections of the corset she’d left on underneath the silken robe.

“Let me,” he urged, finding the hooks. Slowly, sensuously, he released each of the hooks, letting his fingers trail down against the creamy skin he exposed as the corset loosened. “Beautiful!”

“Thank you,” she replied and he almost laughed at this new tone. But he suddenly realized that she wasn’t as aroused as he was. She was... nervous? Oh no! That wasn’t what he wanted her to feel. Not tonight!

He released the rest of the snaps but didn’t push the corset away. Instead, he smiled down at her, his hands resting on her hips. “Tell me what you enjoy, Lila,” he urged.

“Kiss me?” she requested, lifting those long, dark lashes to look up at him.

“With pleasure,” he replied and lowered his head. He kept the kiss light at first, nipping at her lips, teasing her until she reached up and pulled his head down, deepening the kiss. She was a glorious student, pressing her body against his just as she’d done earlier. He groaned into her mouth, his hands pulling her even closer. He heard a soft whimper and knew that she was catching up with him.

With deft fingers, he pushed the satin robe and the corset away. The material vanished without a sound, leaving her clad in...?

Holy...! The tight corset had cinched her waist, creating red marks on her soft skin. “You’ve been wearing that all damn day?” he demanded, thinking that his head might just explode as he watched her breasts pucker.

“Yes. It was pretty tight, but kept me...cinched in properly.”

He laughed, pulling back slightly so that he could survey her curves now that the corset was gone. “I’m glad that I didn’t know that it was underneath that dress. I wouldn’t have made it through the day without dragging you off!”

She laughed and he loved the husky, sexy sound.

He moved closer, nipping at her neck, nibbling her earlobe, the shell of her ear, finding the small places that made her shiver. It seemed that every place he touched caused that reaction.

His hands moved from her hips to her back, then slid down lower. That’s when he also discovered that she was wearing a thong! His hands cupped her bare bottom, discovering that her skin was even softer than the satin!

“Lila!” he groaned.

He picked her up and deposited her in the middle of the bed. “Stay right there,” he ordered. Quickly, he stripped of his shirt and slacks, never taking his eyes off of her.

Lila’s eyes widened as she gazed, awestruck, at his erection. He palmed his shaft, stroking himself as she watched, seeing her mouth fall open.

“Can I do that?” she asked, moving to her knees. The movement brought his attention back to her breasts and he almost lost control.

“Not this time, love,” he rasped, and pressed her back against the bed. “I’m barely hanging on as it is. If you touch me, it will be all over.”

“Oh,” Lila blinked, and then slowly smiled up at him, her hands sliding over his shoulders. “Is this okay?”

“Hell yes!” Tazir lowered his head, focusing on her neck until she moaned. Only then did he move lower, kissing and nibbling a path down to her breasts. Pink! Damn, she had pretty nipples! Pale pink and pointed right at him. When he took one in his mouth, he knew that he was in heaven. Especially when her fingernails dug into his shoulders. A moment later, he felt her hands move into his hair, guiding him, pulling his mouth away when the sensations became too much, then slowly, bringing his mouth back to her

nipple when she wanted more. It was a highly erotic moment for him!

Moving lower, he kissed her stomach, loving the way her muscles tightened under his lips. He grinned as he moved lower still, feeling her tug at his hair

“You don’t need to do that,” she whispered, leaning away. Trying to get away from him...or out of embarrassment? He wasn’t sure, but his fingers trailed along the delicate skin of her soft, creamy thighs.

“Tell me if I do something you don’t like.” And then he licked her, his tongue flicking against that sensitive nub. He heard her gasp and held onto her hips as they jerked slightly. Oh, she liked this! He moved closer for another touch. And then another. Very soon, her fingers were pulling at his hair for a completely different reason. Sliding one finger inside, he could barely restrain himself from slamming into her. She was so wet, so close, and...he circled her inner muscles with his finger while his mouth sucked hard against that nub. Lila screamed out her pleasure as her hips rocked against his mouth and her climax took over.

Tazir barely remembered to roll on protection before he slid into her heat, pressing deeper and deeper, feeling her inner muscles clench around his shaft. She felt so damn good! And so tight! He watched her, loving the way her eyes fluttered open and her back arched, taking him deeper into her body. That was all he needed to fill her completely, but he hesitated, wanting to savor this breathless moment.

Lowering his head, he kissed her lingeringly. His tongue thrust into her mouth just as his shaft thrust into her body. Over and over, he moved inside of her, shifting his hips to bring her the most pleasure. Slowly, he brought her body back to life until she was clawing his back and moving with him, lifting her hips to match his thrusts.

Tazir moved faster, pulling her hips higher, angling his body slightly so that every thrust created the friction she needed. Very soon, he felt her shiver with another climax and only then did he release his control, letting his own orgasm overwhelm him with the pleasure she gave him.

With a groan, he collapsed against her, then rolled so that he wasn’t crushing her. He settled her on his chest. With a contented sigh, he tried to

lift a hand, wanting to caress her, to show her how he felt because his brain wasn't working well enough to form words. Not yet. Soon.

Lila lay across Tazir's chest, limp with the shocking pleasure. Never in her life had she thought that kind of bliss possible. And twice?

"Are you okay?" he asked, his hand smoothing down her back until it rested on her bottom. Under other circumstances, she'd reach out and move his hand so that it wasn't in such an intimate place. But, she wasn't sure her muscles would obey her.

"Uh huh," she mumbled. She tried lifting her head, but settled for a roll so that her chin was propped up on his chest.

He laughed softly and she felt the strong vibrations echoing through her. Smiling, she tried to sit up, maybe even separate their bodies. But...she felt too good just the way she was.

"Ready to do that again?" he teased.

Lila groaned and shuddered. "No. No energy." Her head lolled again, her cheek pressed against his chest now. She sighed happily.

"That's okay. We have all night."

Lila giggled and shifted against him. She moved higher, separating their bodies. "I think I need a shower."

He sighed and, with shocking strength, stood up while holding her in his arms. She squeaked as he carried her into the bathroom. "Never say I don't give you everything you desire," he teased.

He didn't take her to the shower though. Instead, he carried her to a large, sunken bathtub that was already filled with water.

"That's going to be cold," she guessed, her arms wrapping around him as she lifted her body away from the water.

"It's warm," he promised. "The water is constantly heated." He carried her down the steps of the tub, then settled on one of the underwater benches, holding her on his lap.

The water was the perfect temperature and she sighed as she curled

into his lap. “Oh, this is wonderful!”

Tazir laughed again, swirling the water around their bodies. “You’re easy to please.”

She kissed his neck for the compliment, then tried to move to her own seat. He stopped her, his big hands on her hips as he held her in place. “Stay.”

Lila rolled her eyes. “I’m not a dog.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow, then said, “*Please* stay.” His hands moved to cup her breast. “You feel perfect right here.” His thumb flicked against her nipple, causing the tip to tighten.

And just that quickly, the desire flared. Lila lifted her eyes, staring into his as her body tingled with awareness.

“Tazir?” she whispered, her voice low and hopeful.

“Yes!” he groaned, lifting her onto his lap so that she was straddling him. “Now!” he urged. He grabbed a condom, placing it in her hand. “This time, you can do the honors.”

Lila eyed the small, foil package, licking her lips as she contemplated the idea. “How...?”

He moved to sit on the edge of the bathtub, letting his legs fall open. Lila didn’t hesitate. She tore open the condom and rolled it quickly down his shaft. Moments later, she pulled herself up against him. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she let him lower her onto his shaft, slowly, carefully filling her up.

“Damn,” he groaned, nipping at her neck. “You’re in control this time, love.”

Lila’s head fell back as she started moving, lifting slowly before sliding back down, the friction making her head spin with heat, lust, and tingles!

In no time, they were careening towards another climax, this time together as their bodies rocked and shifted. He tried to take over but she pushed his hands away. “Me!” she snapped, too far gone in the throes of pleasure to be more articulate. The explosion was mutual, clutching each

other as they found their pleasure together.

And when it was all over, they sank back into the water, Lila still cradled in Tazir's arms as the warmth soothed them.

Chapter 14

Lila stepped out into the bright sunshine, feeling like the world was brighter and happier. She loved that man! Goodness, how she loved him! The way he'd held her last night, the gentle way he'd reassured her and...she closed her eyes, remembering the reverent way he'd touched her. It was as if he wanted to savor her, to treasure her! No man had ever made her feel like Tazir did!

Yes, she loved him. Lila knew that he didn't love her and that hurt. But she could do this. She could love him and try to ease some of his burdens.

“Lila!”

The rough, haggard voice whispered to her and she looked around, startled. She was supposed to be alone here in their private courtyard! Memories of last night, the poisoned dart, and Tazir explaining the previous attempts on her life flashed through her mind.

Inching back toward the door, she was about to call for the guards she knew were close by. But before she could scream, her uncle appeared out of the foliage.

“Uncle Ibid!” she gasped, her hand on her chest as she tried to slow her racing heart. “Good grief, what are you doing here?” she demanded.

Ibid looked around, licking his fleshy lips as he shifted further back into the trees. “I need your help, Lila!” he hissed.

“My help?” she growled. “Why are you dressed like that?” She narrowed her eyes, eyeing him through the trees. “Isn't that a gardener's uniform? For the palace gardeners?”

“Yes!” he snapped, looking behind him, then down at his tan clothes. “That bastard is forcing me to work in the gardens, Lila!”

“Who? Who is making you work in the gardens, Uncle Ibid?”

“Tazir!” His eyes flashed with fury. “Tell me it's not too late! Tell me I can get you out of here. We'll go somewhere else. We'll hide away and—”

“What are you talking about? Why would we go somewhere to hide? I thought that Tazir paid off your gambling debts.”

Ibid’s whole body quivered with rage. “He did. But he’s forcing me to pay him back!”

Lila’s head tilted slightly, confused by his anger. “And that’s...a bad thing?”

“Of course it is!” Ibid replied in a furious hiss. “He wouldn’t give me a normal job, an office job! He said I wasn’t qualified to work in the administrative offices!”

Lila stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, *are* you qualified for an office job?”

His ruddy jowls jiggled with his impatience and outrage. “I don’t know!”

One dark eyebrow lifted in question. “Have you ever worked at anything in your life, Uncle Ibid?”

He glared at her as if she’d just said something offensive. “I didn’t need to work! I had money! I had my inheritance.”

Lila’s eyebrows lifted. “As long as I’ve known you, I honestly can’t remember you ever having a job. But you’ve always had money.”

Understanding dawned and her eyes widened. “Except when you came to visit one or both of your sisters.” Her arms dropped and she stepped closer. “Your visits to your sisters...were those visits to ask them for money?”

He shrugged dismissively. “My sisters were always happy to help a man in trouble. They were very generous over the years.”

Lila’s disgust increased with his dismissive words. “So you inherited money from your parents, the same amount? Or less than Aunt Elsa and Aunt Mona?”

He puffed up a bit. “I was the only male in our family. My parents gave me more.”

The man had no idea how pathetic he sounded. Ibid was actually bragging about his patriarchal privilege! He was the ultimate entitled male! “So you got more money than your sisters, and yet, you still had to beg them

for funds because you never learned self-control.”

He really didn't appreciate her pointing out the obvious. Nor did he like her admonishment.

He puffed up in outrage. “Now see here, Lila! I don't like your tone. And I have self-control! I'm a man of the world with lots of friends.”

She chuckled. “Having friends, or more likely, people who mooch off you, does not indicate any level of self-control.”

“Watch your mouth, missy!” he snapped, pointing a dirty, chubby finger at her.

Lila stepped back, startled by his harsh tone. Uncle Ibid had always been the happy-go-lucky relative. Apparently, he was only happy when someone was doing his bidding!

“Sure.” She sighed and rubbed her forehead. He was still the same entitled jerk he'd always been. Lila just hadn't recognized the signs so clearly until now. There was no way she was going to be dictated to by a man who treated her so poorly, especially after all she'd done to help the bastard! “Well, the heat is coming on now and I'm going inside.”

“Wait!” he called out before she could turn around. He eyed the entrance to the palace warily, probably watching for her bodyguards. “Just... hear me out, okay?”

“Okay. What do you want to say?” She wasn't in the mood to keep talking. She was more than disgusted with his entitled attitude now that she knew more about him and the way he'd drifted through life.

“Help me!” he urged.

Help him? She tilted her head slightly. “You mean, help you *more*? I've upended my life to protect you from the people you owe money to. They ransacked my house!” She shifted angrily on her feet, furious now. “How else am I supposed to help you?”

He gestured to his uniform, oblivious to her anger. “This isn't me!” he insisted. “I'm not a gardener.”

She didn't bother to glance at his person. “Then find another job and pay Tazir back that way. If you don't like being a gardener, then find

something you do like.”

Ibid huffed impatiently. “I’m not qualified for anything!” he snapped. “I’m above this! I’m the kind of person who connects with other people!”

She laughed now. “Are you seriously going to tell me that you’re above doing manual labor? That you are above earning a living?”

His eyes burned with his indignation. “Yes! I’m not one of *those* people.”

She was offended for everyone who loved gardening and landscaping. “You mean people who work hard for a living? People you’ve over-looked with your arrogant and elitist attitude?” She huffed when his mouth fell open in shock. “Do you have *any* skills? Did you go to university and get a degree? What value can you offer to an employer?”

He puffed up again. “Like I just said,” he growled. “My value is in my connections!” he explained with a patronizing tone. “I know a lot of people.” He grunted, as if that noise somehow added to his argument. “I should be in an office somewhere, talking with my friends and building connections.”

Lila snickered. “I don’t think that’s a marketable skill, unless you combine your networking capabilities with something more. Such as networking among job applicants, so that you can fill job positions. Or networking with companies to form business connections.” She shook her head. “Ibid, I don’t think that your friends are targets for networking positions anyway.” She stepped closer, softening her voice. “What other skills do you have?”

He threw his arms up in the air. “That’s it! I’ve spent my whole life making friends and networking!” He lowered his voice. “I know things! Things that might be helpful!”

She chuckled. “Again, I doubt gossip is considered a valuable commodity, Ibid.”

Frustration suffused his features and he turned around. “He’s turned you against me! You’re my only living relative and he’s turned you against me!”

Lila's patience with the man ran out with his words. "Actually, you've turned me against you, Ibid. Your reckless gambling put me in danger. The only thing that Tazir did was to protect me from the men who were going to hurt me because *you* said that I would pay your gambling debt. And you did that even after I told you that I don't have the money to pay the debt!"

"Yes, but I told you to go to Tazir and ask him to pay off the debt!" he roared, beyond remembering her guards. "My sisters would have loaned me money! Tazir should have followed in their legacy."

"Why? Why should Tazir have to cover a debt that you irresponsibly created because of stupid behavior!"

"Because that's my right!"

She rolled her eyes, furious now. "You're the epitome of an entitled ass, Ibid!" she snapped. She was repulsed by his attitude. "And if you can't pay off your own debts, then you should be thanking Tazir for providing you with a job and, most likely, protection from those goons!"

She turned, ready to dismiss him. She'd come out here in wonderful mood after sharing a magical evening with Tazir. And now she was disgusted and outraged.

"He got to you, didn't he?"

She spun around, glaring at the man now. "Who got to me?"

"Tazir. He got to you! He turned you against me!"

Furious now, she stomped back to him. "No! As I just explained, Tazir has done nothing but protect me from your stupidity! From your selfish, entitled acts that put me in danger! What have you done? Nothing, except lie to someone that I would pay off your debts. *Your* debts, Ibid! *Yours*! No one else's! No one owes you anything in this world and yet, you stand here complaining about a good job and protection from the people you swindled. And what have you done for me? I'm now in a loveless marriage! Because of you! You and your thoughtless, stupid gambling addiction that you're too stupid to even realize *is* an addiction! So don't-!"

She froze, the hairs on the back of her neck tingling, and she spun

around. Sure enough, Tazir stood there, his face completely blank.

He stared at her for a long moment and Lila knew that she'd hurt him. She'd wounded this wonderful, amazing man that she loved with all of her being!

Without saying a word, he turned on his heel and walked away. The guards didn't leave though. They surrounded Ibid, two guards flanking him, each grabbing an arm and literally dragging her uncle away.

Lila turned around to go after Tazir. She'd hurt him with that "loveless marriage" comment, she knew. She didn't know what to do. But she ran after him, going on reckless impulse now.

Because of his height and his long legs, he'd already reached his office by the time she caught up with him. He was just about to close the door. Shut her out! Lila couldn't let him shut her out of his life. Instinctively, she knew that he was hurting and, if she didn't fix this now, she'd never break through that wall that he created around himself. Because of all of the responsibilities that he carried, Tazir had learned to block out anything that didn't help him. He'd had to protect himself,

But Lila couldn't let him protect himself from her.

"Don't! Please, listen to me!" she pleaded when he started to close the door.

She saw the indecision in his eyes and shoved through, slamming the door closed behind her. Now that they were alone, she struggled, not sure what to say. She felt dampness on her cheeks and lifted a hand to wipe it away. That's when she realized that she was crying. Tears? Yes, tears of pain because she'd hurt him.

"Please Tazir, don't shut me out! I'm begging you to please not close me off from your life."

He walked over to his desk and started shuffling through the papers. "I don't think that we have anything to say to each other."

She shook her head and moved towards that obnoxious desk. "Well then, you can listen to me."

He lifted his eyes. "No, I don't think—"

“Stop it!” she pleaded bracing her hands on his desk. “I’ve loved you for so long, Tazir! Ever since I was seventeen years old.” She ignored his shock. “And I know you don’t love me like that. I know that you can’t love me that way. But I’ve loved you with all my heart and, over the past couple of weeks, that love has only deepened and grown! I’ve seen what a generous, amazing person you are. I’ve seen the way you take care of everyone around you! You’re so selfless, but you need me. You don’t have to love me. But let me at least love you!” She was sobbing now. “I love you so much and I just want to make you laugh every once in a while.” Oh goodness, she was making a fool of herself, but the words wouldn’t stop. “You’re exhausted but,” she lifted her eyes to his. “But last night, you slept in my arms! I know that you slept for more than a couple hours, Tazir. I know you did! Because I watched you! Every time you started to wake up, I soothed you right back to sleep. You don’t love me, but maybe you need me? Just...just a little?”

She stared into his eyes, her heart pounding against her chest as she held her breath and waited.

“You just told your uncle that this is a loveless marriage, Lila,” he hissed, bracing his hands on his desk. “You can’t claim to be in a loveless marriage, and in the next breath, tell me you’re in love with me.”

Angrily, she swiped at the tears on her face. “Loveless on *your* side, Tazir,” she whispered, her heart in her words and her voice now. “I’ve loved you for so long. I never thought I’d ever be a part of your life.”

He paused, then slowly sat in his leather chair, disbelief in his expression now. “But you left. All those years ago, you left Fahre!”

She shook her head, wiping away another tear. “I went away to university, choosing a school as far away as I could because I couldn’t stand being close to you and yet...” She sniffed and closed her eyes again. “Then your step mother passed away and...” she choked on her next words. “And then there was no reason for me to visit the palace! You didn’t ever call me after that so I had to accept that you didn’t want me.”

He leaned closer, his eyes smoldering with anger and hurt. “And yet, you’ve made a career out of arguing with me and my policies.”

She nodded, the tears coming faster now and she laughed weakly,

although the sound came out as an undignified hiccup. “It was the only way I could feel a connection with you,” she whispered. “I know this is pathetic, Tazir. But I promise I won’t...”

Lila wasn’t sure how she ended up on the other side of his desk, but suddenly there were papers scattered across the floor. Neither of them looked down at them because...he was kissing her! Lila’s heart soared and she wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers diving into his hair as she kissed him back with all of the love she’d kept hidden inside of her for too long.

Suddenly, he pulled away and held her head in his strong hands. “Damn it, Lila, why didn’t you tell me you loved me?”

She whimpered, her body shifting against his because she needed to feel him. “Because I didn’t want to burden you,” she admitted quietly. “You take care of everyone, all the time. I know you don’t love me and I didn’t want you to have to deal with the burden of my feelings on top of everything else you feel you have to do. But then you heard me saying those horrible things to my uncle and I saw the hurt look in your eyes.” She broke free of his hands and hugged him tightly. “And I just couldn’t let you walk away thinking that I don’t have feelings for you.” She hiccupped again, and her arms tightened around him. “I don’t care that you don’t love me.”

“I love you, damn it!” he growled, his arms encircling her body as he lifted her into his arms. “I was fascinated with you every time you came to the palace to visit your aunt. But I had to stay away. I didn’t feel as if I had the right to care for you. And you were so bright and vivacious,” he sighed, pressing his forehead against hers. “Then suddenly, you came back into my life. I’ve loved you for so long and I took advantage of your situation with the goons to trap you into marrying me.” He closed his eyes briefly. “I knew it was wrong. I kept telling myself to let you go.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t.” He opened his eyes. “I won’t! Now that I know you love me, I’ll do everything in my power to earn that love, Lila.”

She sobbed again and gently kissed him. “You don’t have to do anything to earn my love, Tazir. You’re such an amazing person! I already love you!”

He groaned and took her hand, walking out of his office with her

trailing behind him. Lila had no idea where he was taking her, nor did she care. “You love me?” she whispered, needing to hear the words again.

He paused in the hallway and pulled her close. After a brief kiss, he said, “Yes, I love you! I love that you don’t back down. That you’re so brilliant about everything. That I don’t intimidate you and—”

“You terrify me,” she admitted and beamed when he laughed. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she lifted onto her toes, kissing the bare skin exposed by his open necked shirt. “I love you!” she whispered, conscious of the guards surrounding them.

“I need to get you alone,” he hissed, glancing around the hallway where they’d stopped. Quickly, he turned and headed towards their suite again.

“Your Highness!” a feminine voice called out.

But Tazir didn’t slow his stride. “Later!” he bellowed to whoever it was. “Much later,” he growled into Lila’s ear. In a flash, he scooped her up in his arms.

She laughed, kicking her feet as joy washed over her. “I love you!” she said again, thrilled that she could now say the words.

“I love you too, woman!”

He stepped through the doors to his private suite and those doors were magically closed by his guards. But Lila and Tazir weren’t paying attention to the rest of the world. This was their space, their time. It was their moment.

“I really do love you,” she whispered as he released her. She stood on her toes, pressing her body against his.

“I really love you,” he replied, then pulled her blue sweater over her head. “And I need to see you properly.” His fingers released the catch on her slacks, pulling them down along with her panties.

Moments later, Lila stood in front of him, naked except for her bra and her black heels. She had to grab onto his shoulders when he lifted one of her legs, pulling it over his shoulder. A moment later, he nuzzled the curls between her legs, his tongue searching for, and finding, that overly sensitive

nub.

Tazir heard her gasp of surprise, but didn't stop his ministrations. He needed her. He needed all of her, including her cries of pleasure and release. With his hands gripping her hips, he licked and sucked at her nub, listening for her gasps to know if he was hitting the right spot. When she cried out, her body throbbing against his mouth, he grabbed her and slowly, carefully lowered her to the bed.

He watched her as he stripped off his own clothes. She writhed against the silk sheets and his body throbbed to be inside her, to feel her inner muscles tighten around him. This...this was his woman! Last night, she'd give him her body, and now he knew he held her heart as well. And that was infinitely more precious to him.

He grabbed a condom, sheathing himself before stretching out beside her. Slowly, with infinite tenderness, he brought her body back to needing him again. When he entered her this time, he laced his fingers with hers, needing as many connections as he could manage.

"Tell me again," she whispered, her lashes lowered and her legs wrapped tightly around his waist.

"I love you," he told her, knowing exactly what she needed to hear.

"I love you too!" she whispered, arching her back to take him deeper into her body.

From their experiences last night, he knew exactly when to speed up his thrusting. So when she screamed his name, he knew that she was close. He pushed deeper into her beautiful body, looking down at their connection, his thumb helping to bring her over the edge along with him. Their mutual climax was like an explosion, leaving them clinging to each other, breathless and sated.

Finally, the waves of pleasure lessened enough that he could fall against her. A moment later, he rolled to the side, pulling her with him until she was draped over his body. He'd done this last night, still connected to her, but this was better. This was...bliss!

Chapter 15

“That bitch!” Suzanne screamed, throwing her notebook against her office wall. “That stupid, ugly bitch!”

Antoine heard the sounds of his boss’ anger and pushed away from his computer, rushing into Suzanne’s office just as a vase of flowers crashed into the wall.

Staying in the doorway where he could duck if necessary, he eyed Suzanne curiously. “What happened?” he asked, using the calmest voice he could muster.

“That bitch happened!” she shrieked, waving her hand in the general direction of the other administrative offices. “That whorish trash happened! He carried her off to bed. *Again!*” she yelled, her tone rising to cringe-worthy levels on that last word.

Eldra appeared by Antoine’s side, his eyes wide as he took in the destruction. “Lila?” he whispered.

Antoine nodded, not sure what to say.

Finally, he stepped into the room and grabbed her hands before she could throw her laptop. He knew Suzanne was stronger than she appeared. The laptop would not survive her rage.

“I’ll fix this, Suzanne.”

Black streaks marred her face as the tears messed up her heavy mascara. “You can’t fix this! Not anymore!” She wiped at the tears, smearing the black across her cheeks. “It’s over! I quit! This is beyond fixing! I’ve tried and...” she took a shuddering breath, slowly letting it out. “I tried! For the past several months, I’ve tried to get him to see me as something other than an employee. But I’ve failed, Antoine.” She looked past her subordinate and hissed. “You!” she glared at Eldra. “Your boss rejected me! I could have been so much more than that bitch! I would have been the perfect wife for your boss. But no! He had to choose her! Over me!” She slapped her chest. “Me! I am perfect for him! I am the only one who could run this entire palace and draw people in from all over the

world. I could have thrown him the most amazing parties, entertained diplomats with elegance, wonderful food, and glorious entertainment!”

Suddenly, Suzanne collapsed to the floor, burying her fingers in her sleek, golden hair as she sobbed with anger and frustration at losing this opportunity.

Antoine looked at Eldra, neither sure what to do. A pair of stone-faced guards appeared and approached the chaos of Suzanne’s office.

Both men glanced at the guards hurrying down the hallway, then at each other.

“I’ll handle Suzanne. You handle the beasts,” Antoine decided and stepped into the office, pulling the door closed behind him.

Eldra turned and waited for the guards to reach him, and lifted his hands, keeping the guards from entering Suzanne’s office. “She’s fine. I’ve convinced her that the entertainment she was trying to organize for a celebration was too wild.” He let out a laugh, appearing to the guards as if nothing was wrong. “No worries. Sorry for the false alarm.”

Antoine heard the explanation through the door, fighting back laughter at the ridiculous story. But Eldra stopped the guards from entering, so Antoine was adequately impressed. The shorter man handled the guards perfectly, allowing him to sit down on the floor next to Suzanne. Pulling her into his arms, he muttered soothing words, trying to calm her while his mind raced, trying to figure out how help her. What could he do to soothe Suzanne’s temper? What would make her happy again?

Ibid glared at the machete, wishing that he could use it to slice through the metal bars of the palace garden. But the machete was only strong enough to cut through the trees. This...this was what he was reduced to! He was trimming branches! He was the equivalent of an aristocrat in Fahren society! He was royalty! And yet, that bitch didn’t understand his significance. She’d abandoned him and he wasn’t going to take it! Not anymore.

Taking the machete, he stalked out of the gardening shack. He wasn’t going down like this! The indignity of manual labor was just too much

to endure.

Eldra watched the guards leave as determination surged through him. Suzanne was a beautiful, misunderstood woman. She might be a bit spoiled and this latest temper tantrum proved that she expected to get her way. But beautiful women deserved to be pampered. And if he could do anything to help Suzanne feel better, he would. That stupid idiot Antoine had stolen flowers and put them in her office. Well, he could top that! He would give the blonde beauty something she *really* wanted!

Suzanne took a slow, steadying breath, and opened her eyes. Her office was in shambles. The lovely flowers that Tazir had sent to her office were destroyed. She was sure that Tazir had sent them because she'd recognized the flower arrangement. Several had been sent out earlier this morning to the various tables and entryways within the palace. The palace staff changed out the flower arrangements every week, or sooner, if the current arrangement wilted too quickly. So, she *knew* that Tazir had thought of her.

So, why the hell had he carried that tramp off to his suite?

Because Lila was a whore, that's why! Well, Suzanne wasn't going to be brought low by a tramp! Suzanne knew what she had to do! What she'd been trying to do all along!

Ignoring Antoine, Suzanne stood up, looked around, and fished her notebook out from the rubble. She was on a mission!

Lila smiled as Tazir pressed a kiss to her shoulder. They looked at each other in the mirror, now both fully dressed once more, and smiled. "Thank you!" she whispered, then turned around, grabbing his shoulders. Not because she needed to balance herself, but because she just wanted to touch him.

And now that she knew that he loved her, Lila felt as if she could touch him anytime she wanted. It was a liberating sensation!

“I really love you,” she whispered up to him.

“I love you too,” he replied, wrapping his arms around her waist. He kissed her, a slow, sweet kiss that she felt all the way to her toes. “Will you have time for dinner tonight?”

She grinned and nodded. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Excellent,” he replied, and patted her bottom. “I’m sure that Eldra is pacing outside, impatient to get me back on schedule.”

“The past few hours were well spent,” she laughed, then kissed him again. “Go. I’ve taken up too much of your time today.”

He paused in the bathroom doorway. “Lila, I’m going to have dinner with you every night from now on.”

She smiled, her heart melting. “I’d like that.”

He waved and hurried out the door. Lila watched him go and noticed a spring to his step that hadn’t been there before. It felt good, wonderful, actually, to see him so light-hearted.

Sighing with happiness, she picked up her laptop and walked out of their suite as well. They’d both agreed that having two suites was no longer necessary and she was going to move in here with him.

Stepping out of the suite, her bodyguards immediately surrounded her. “I’m going to my office, if that’s okay?”

The lead guard nodded. “We’ll be with you the whole way,” he assured her. “I’ve stationed guards in your office at all times when you’re not there as well.”

She blinked, caught off-guard by that news. “Is that necessary?”

He looked at her with a grim expression. “After last night, we won’t take chances with your safety, Your Highness.”

Lila considered arguing with him, but the man seemed determined.

Nodding, she smiled and nodded. “Okay, well, thank you for your diligence.”

The man nodded and all five of them headed for her office. There were two guards in front of her and two behind. She felt only slightly

embarrassed that so much attention was focused on her, but if this would help Tazir feel more secure, she wouldn't argue.

Lila had just settled into her office chair when a knock sounded on the door. "Come in!" she called out.

When the door opened, she was still looking at her laptop. So, she didn't see the knife flying through the air. In fact, she was completely oblivious until she felt the sudden pain in her back. The pain was so sharp, that it took her a moment to realize what had just happened.

Twisting around in her chair made the pain significantly worse. Lila tried to stand up, but her knees were too weak to support her. Her whole body felt the stab of pain now.

When she looked up, stunned and not exactly sure what had just happened, she tried to see who had done this to her. Unfortunately, the door closed and she whimpered as the pain lashed through her, encompassing the whole side of her body. Reaching behind her, she felt something protruding there. No, it was her side. The weakness increased and she struggled to call out. "Help!" she whimpered.

A moment later, she collapsed beside her desk.

Chapter 16

“She’s in surgery now, Your Highness,” the doctor explained. “The knife struck her back, but most of the knife was in the fleshy part of her side. It only nicked her small intestines. The surgeon has already closed up the wound and attended to the local blood vessels.”

Tazir rubbed the back of his neck, trying to make sense of the doctor’s explanation, but he was just so worried that he struggled to focus.

“She’s going to be okay?”

The doctor nodded, smiling, and that slowed the panic in his racing heart. “Your wife is going to be fine. She’ll have to slow down for a few weeks,” he explained with a chuckle, “but since the knife didn’t pierce her kidneys, she’ll have a much faster recovery.”

Tazir nodded, his mind still whirling with questions. As soon as the doctor left, he walked over to the window overlooking the surgery being performed on his wife. There were so many tubes and wires, machines that beeped, and so many people in the surgical unit. Surely, someone was going to trip!

And then it was over. The surgeon stepped back and nodded, the nursing staff puttering with the wires and connections that Tazir didn’t understand.

The surgeon left the operating room and, a moment later, appeared in the theater space.

“Your wife did beautifully,” he explained. “We’ll keep her on antibiotics and will continue to monitor her closely. The worst part is the amount of blood she lost, but her body will fix that quickly. She’s healthy and,” he smiled, nodding at the operating room, “we have excellent people to take care of her.”

Tazir nodded, relief making his head spin. He extended his hand, shaking the surgeon’s hand gratefully. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re very welcome,” the surgeon said, then stepped out of the area, leaving Tazir to watch while Lila was rolled out of the operating room.

He knew she'd be in the recovery area for a while. So he turned to glare at Bano. "What the hell happened?"

Chapter 17

Antoine didn't move a muscle. The guards surrounding him continued to demand answers, but he wasn't speaking. Not until he knew that Suzanne was gone, that she was free.

"She's not getting away," one of the guards whispered in his ear from behind.

Antoine jerked, but the chains connecting his wrists to the metal table held him fast. His struggles only amused the guards. He assumed that the "she" that wasn't getting away was Suzanne.

"Suzanne had nothing to do with this," he snarled.

The guard chuckled. "She destroyed her office earlier. Are you seriously trying to tell me that she didn't put you up to this?"

Antoine pulled in a slow, deep breath and pushed the man's words away. Suzanne was free. She was gone, far from the palace by now. He knew it. He could feel her sense of freedom. She was so beautiful. Surely, she was halfway around the globe by now.

Another guard stepped into the room and nodded. A moment later, the other guards hurried from the room.

Antoine knew he was in big trouble when the big guy sat down in front of him. "So you're in love with your boss, eh?"

Antoine didn't bother responding. He'd thrown the knife, there was no denying it. He was going to prison and there was nothing he could say or do that would alter that fact. His only wish was that Suzanne would be free and live a long, wonderful life.

"She's a lovely woman," the man continued. "She's been arrested, by the way."

Antoine's features crumpled into rage. "She's not a part of this!"

The guard snickered, then pushed a paper across the table. "Really?"

Antoine didn't want to look at the paper. But he noticed Suzanne's handwriting and couldn't resist. As he read, his stomach dropped into his

shoes. “He’ll kill her if he knows,” she wrote. “The guy is obsessed with me. He’ll kill her for me. All I have to do is say the word.”

Antoine lifted his head, shocked. “That’s not real. She didn’t write that!”

The guard sighed, shaking his head. “Suit yourself. But the security cameras caught you poking your head into Lila’s office. The recording also shows you throwing the knife at her. You will be prosecuted for four counts of attempted murder.”

Four counts? Antoine’s mind reeled. *Four* counts? The guard stepped to the door and pulled it open. He looked back and caught Antoine’s expression. “Ah, so you had no idea that someone tried to poison her twice and shot a poisoned dart at her?” Antoine couldn’t stop his jaw from dropping. What the hell?

“That’s what I thought,” the man said with a chuckle. A moment later, Suzanne was hauled down the hallway, past the still open door, her hands handcuffed behind her, and she was shrieking at the top of her lungs. “I hate that bitch!” and other epithets as well as more threats against Lila. Those threats alone meant that Suzanne would be in prison for many years.

Antoine sighed, defeated now. He’d tried to save her! But her fiery temperament was her downfall.

Chapter 18

“Did my uncle do this?”

Tazir jerked awake from his half dose at the soft whisper.

“Don’t move, love,” he warned, moving to the side of her bed and taking her hand. “You’re going to be fine.”

She tried to smile, but was still too weak. “When was the last time you slept?”

Tazir shook his head. “I’ll sleep when you’re back home with me,” he promised.

He could tell that she was trying to laugh, but it was too painful. “I’ll get you more pain medication.”

“No,” she whispered, tightening her grip on his hand. “Don’t leave me.”

Tazir settled down on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle her. “You scared me.”

She smiled slightly. “I scared me too!”

He laughed, kissing her fingers. Lila looked so pale and delicate, lying there against the white pillows in the palace surgical center.

“Who did this?” she rasped hoarsely.

“Do you remember the assistant to our events person?”

“Antoine?”

Tazir nodded, his thumb brushing against the back of her hand. “I think that’s his name. I recognize his face. He was the quiet one, lurking in the back during the meetings.”

“Yeah. That’s the one,” she confirmed. “Nice man.”

“He was in love with Suzanne, his boss. Apparently, she was angry that I married you instead of her and...well, she knew that Antoine was in love with her so she manipulated him into trying to kill you.”

“Ah.” She licked her dry lips. “That doesn’t sound like a very nice

man.”

“Suzanne was the one that tried to poison you twice.”

“How is Badia doing?” she asked, thinking of the maid who had been hurt by the poisoned water.

“She’s fully recovered, but I ordered her to take another week off, just to get her strength back.”

“Good,” Lila replied. “And the dart?”

He sighed. “That was your uncle. I had him working in the gardens and he thought you were me. He was trying to kill me.”

“Is he in prison now?”

“Nope. He vanished in the chaos. My guards are trying to find him, but we suspect he was caught by the men who want their money.”

“I thought you paid off the gambling debt.”

“I told your uncle that I’d pay it off in installments, as long as he kept working at a job that paid him a steady salary. So the fact that he ran away and stopped working means that I’m not paying off anything, because he broke our deal. Hence, why we suspect that the owners of his debt have... uh...*collected* in other ways.”

Lila thought about that, wondering how she felt about it. But her uncle had destroyed any remaining good will she still held for him. The fact that he’d demanded that she save him from the gardening job didn’t endear him either. She’d lost all respect for him and couldn’t feel anything about the fact he’d most likely gotten himself into deeper trouble, except relief that he was gone.

“Good riddance to him, then,” she said, and meant it.

“You’re going to be okay,” he said again, brushing her hair back from her forehead.

She smiled, squeezing his fingers. “Yeah. We are.”

Epilogue

“No! You can’t...!” Lila called out, but her two sons, Baden and Adil, six and four years old, pushed through the door into their father’s office.

Lila sighed, shaking her head at the guards standing outside of her husband’s doorway. “Tell me that he wasn’t in a meeting?” she pleaded, pausing outside the door.

The guard on the right smiled and shook his head. “He’s been alone all morning, Your Highness.”

Lila smiled with relief. “Thank goodness. I shudder every time I think about the time that King Heffington was here and my hellions broke through and scared that poor man half to death!”

The guard chuckled at the memory, then turned to survey the hallway as Lila stepped into the room. She never knew what to expect when her sons invaded their father’s domain. At the moment, both of them were upside down and giggling with delight as Tazir held one son in each arm.

“You’re not acting very sheik-like at the moment, dear,” Lila admonished.

He laughed, then bent his head to kiss one son, then the other. Both boys giggled so hard, their bodies shook with glee. Of course, her sons weren’t acting particularly princely either!

Carefully, Tazir lowered both boys to the floor. As soon as both were on their feet, they each spun around, then wrapped their tiny arms around his legs, still laughing, and begging him to, “Do it again!”

“I think that your favorite chef might have some warm cookies for you boys,” she announced.

Both boys turned, their little faces glowing with surprise and joy. “Go get ‘em,” Tazir encouraged.

Both boys sprinted off down the hallway, their bodyguards rushing after them as their nanny followed at a more leisurely pace.

Tazir walked over to kneel in front of Lila where she sat on the sofa.

His hands spread out over her rounded tummy before he asked, “And how is our daughter doing this morning?” he asked, lowering his head to kiss her belly first and then her lips.

“She’s hoping that her daddy could take a break and have a picnic with her.”

He laughed and stood up, pulling her to her feet with him.
“Definitely! Anything for my lovely ladies!”

Lila smiled, leaning against his side as she counted her blessings. Tazir didn’t work twenty hours a day anymore. He’d hired five more analysts who read over and summarized issues for him so that he didn’t have to read everything that crossed his desk. He still worked twelve hours, but he made sure to take time off so that he could spend dinners with his family. Plus, he slept soundly next to Lila every night.

“You said something about warm cookies?”

Lila smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I packed some cookies in our picnic basket. Just for you.”

He laughed and took her hand, leading her down the hallway. But they didn’t picnic in the courtyard. Nope, the two of them discovered that a picnic on their bed was the best way to spend a lovely afternoon!

A message from Elizabeth:

A new year – a new series! What did you think? Was this a good start to a new series? Any chance you could take a brief moment to 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. 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 Rayed’s story? Keep scrolling!

Excerpt from “The Prince’s Secret”

Crown Prince Rayed’s Story!

Release Date: February 10, 2023

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Emma’s cup froze halfway to her mouth and she blinked, not sure what to do. The doorbell rang again. Answer the door? For some reason, she didn’t want to.

“Answer it,” Amanda urged, still typing, but now she was staring at the monitor. “You and I both know it’s him.”

Still, Emma hesitated. “No, I actually have no idea who is on the other side of that door,” Emma replied, then shifted on the sofa to start typing on her own laptop. She didn’t have anything to write, but this was a game of chicken that Emma and Amanda played often. Neither of them wanted to answer the door, so both of them pretended to be too busy.

Unfortunately, in this instance, Amanda won. Mostly because Emma was too curious. It wasn’t him, she told herself as she closed her laptop with a glare that Amanda ignored. Rayed wasn’t behind the door. Why would he be here? He was probably at some important meeting, discussing some crazy, billion-dollar investment. An investment that would earn him several more billions of dollars while Emma and Amanda rationed out the coffee grounds at the end of the month, unable to afford more until their next paycheck arrived.

Now, why did that sound as if she resented the man for making money? Maybe because she didn’t have any at the moment. Grumbling, she yanked open the door, hoping to find a salesperson.

Instead, Rayed stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets, his jacket undone, and no tie. However, his suit was...gorgeous! The man must have a personal tailor because there just wasn’t any way that a man could achieve

that sophisticated a look with off the shelf clothing. Even the material looked too expensive for her to breathe on!

Emma stood there, clutching the door, feeling like all of the air had just left her body. He was just so...amazing! And tall! Had he been this tall last night? Yeah, probably. Men didn't grow several inches overnight.

Duh! She'd been wearing heels last night. While today...she glanced down at her bare feet. He did the same and her toes curled slightly as embarrassment washed over her. She hated standing in front of him, looking so dowdy when he was the epitome of sophistication.

"I'm outta here," Amanda grumbled, interrupting the tense moment. "One of you should speak though. Just a tip." Rayed stepped to the side so Amanda could leave.

Emma felt like calling out to her friend, demanding that she come back, to be here to protect her from the insane sensations that were already muddling her mind! But Amanda was gone. Goodness, her friend could move swiftly when she wanted to!

Finally, she turned back to Rayed. The man's dark eyebrow lifted and she felt her body heat up all over again.

Belatedly remembering her manners, she stepped aside, gesturing for him to enter.. "Would you like to come in?" she asked.

The corners of his lips quirked up slightly, but he bowed his head. "Yes. I would very much like to speak with you in private."

Did he have to duck to get through the doorway? Surely, that was just her imagination. He was tall, but he wasn't *that* tall, was he?

"How tall are you?" she blurted out, suddenly intensely curious.

He paused his perusal of her apartment, turning around to look down at her. "I'm six feet, four inches," he replied. "How tall are you? You seem shorter than you were last night." His eyes darted to her bare toes again. "I suppose you were wearing heels last night."

"Five feet, six," she answered. "And I was just thinking you seem taller this morning, so it must have been the shoes."

He nodded, not looking away from her. Were they really going to

stand here, talking about shoes?

“Would you care to give me more details about what you were doing at the party last night?”

Ah! He was going to just dive right into it!

“No,” she replied, enjoying the surprise in his eyes.

“No? You *aren't* going to tell me?”

She laughed, feeling slightly more relaxed now that she felt in control of the conversation. “Nope. It isn't any of your business why I was there.”

He moved closer, the look in his eyes warning her that she wasn't in control. Not by a long shot! “Would you tell me if I guessed correctly?”

Emma doubted that the man could figure out her motives for being at such a dull event, but she shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sure. Why not? I've already told you some of it.”

His smile widened. “If I guess correctly, do I get a kiss as a reward?”

Emma laughed again. “Sure. If you can figure out my reason for being at the charity ball last night, I'll give you a kiss.” She felt fairly safe with that bet. How could he possibly know why she'd been at the event?

He pulled a hand out of his pocket and tapped a long, sexy forefinger against his nose as if considering the options. Finally, he said, “You've already told me that you were there trying to figure out if something illegal is going on. However, you didn't explain why you were playing the ditz. I suspect,” he paused, examining her features, “that you were at the charity event last night so that you could find a man who could give you entrée into the exclusive parties, determined to play a ditz in order to put others off their guard so that you might hear things that they don't want you to hear. And,” he continued, chuckling at her stunned expression, “you think that Governor Mitchell is the person doing the illegal activities because of the crazy headline about sterilization. You think that the headline was a way to pull attention away from whatever his real goal is.”

Emma's mouth fell open! “How could you...?”

He threw back his head, laughing at her stunned expression. He

lowered his head, kissing her softly, but with a sensuality that was shocking. He pulled back, leaving her lips tingling.

“I cheated,” he admitted.

She blinked, not sure what he meant. “Cheated...how?” She looked around warily, wondering if he’d somehow installed listening devices in her apartment.

He shrugged, his hand sliding into his pants pockets again as he wandered around the family room. “I own a large share of stocks in your newspaper. I went to your editor and asked what you were working on. She gave me the details.”

Emma’s arms dropped to her sides and she glared at him. “That *is* cheating!”

He grinned. “Yes, I’d already admitted to that.”

Her eyes narrowed again. “You don’t look very repentant.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps because I’m completely unrepentant.” He moved over to her again. “Would it make things better if I told you that I could help?”

Help? How could he...? The devilish look in his dark eyes gave her the answer. “No!”

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