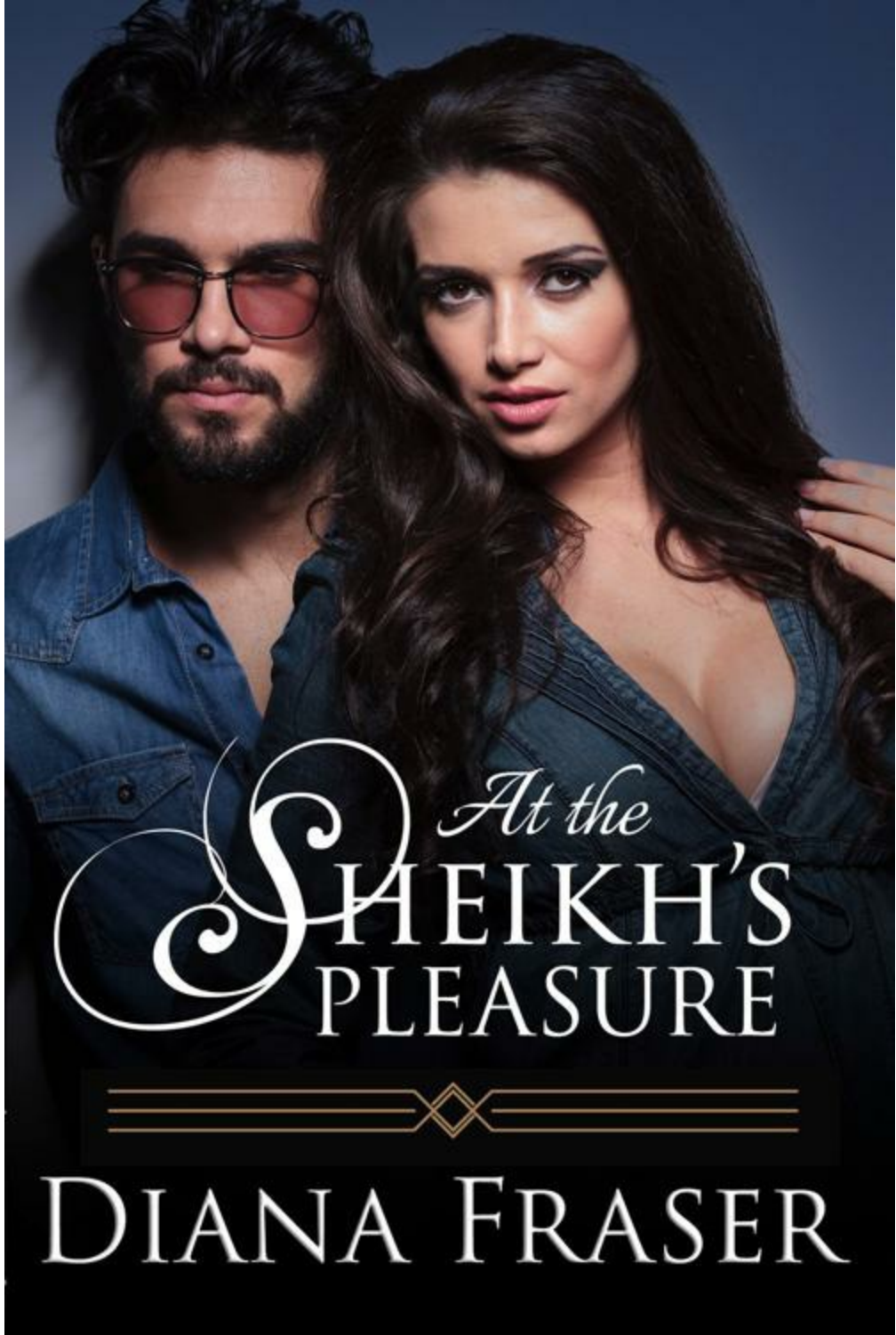


At the
SHEIKH'S
PLEASURE



DIANA FRASER



AT THE SHEIKH'S PLEASURE

DIAMOND SHEIKHS

BOOK THREE



DIANA FRASER

At the Sheikh's Pleasure

by Diana Fraser

© 2023 Diana Fraser

www.dianasbooks.nz

A grieving sheikh and a distrustful academic hunt for a mythical diamond, discovering love amidst ancient secrets and their own wounded hearts.

Diamond Sheikhs

[At the Sheikh's Command](#)

[At the Sheikh's Bidding](#)

At the Sheikh's Pleasure

Save \$\$ with Diana Fraser's ebook bundles!

Now half-price...

The Ultimate Sheikh Bundle! 14 Emotional, Sexy Sheikh Books

includes all the following books:

—Desert Kings—

[Wanted: A Wife for the Sheikh](#)

[The Sheikh's Bargain Bride](#)

[The Sheikh's Lost Lover](#)

[Awakened by the Sheikh](#)

[Claimed by the Sheikh](#)

[Wanted: A Baby by the Sheikh](#)

—The Sheikhs of Havilah—

[The Sheikh's Secret Baby](#)

[Bought by the Sheikh](#)

[The Sheikh's Forbidden Lover](#)

[Surrender to the Sheikh](#)

[Taken for the Sheikh's Harem](#)

—Secrets of the Sheikhs—
The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction
The Sheikh's Secret Love Child
The Sheikh's Marriage Trap



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is co-incidental. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the US Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without prior permission of the author.

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Also by Diana Fraser](#)

PROLOGUE



Gleave College, University of Oxford

Sheikha Rosana bint Abdullallah Al Khal—or Dr. Al Khal, as her Oxford students called her—gripped the sides of the ornately carved dining chair and met Dr. Leonora Cooper’s intense gaze full on. The college dinner had begun like any other but, *unlike* any other, Leonora had asked Rosana and a third colleague—Janey Montgomerie—to stay behind. There could only be one reason—the famed Bahr Al Noor diamond which had been missing for centuries and the subject of all three women’s research. But what Rosana didn’t know, was what Leonora planned to do about it.

“We *have* to find the Bahr Al Noor diamond,” Leonora said, leaning forward, resting her arms on the highly polished dining table. Neither Janey nor Rosana questioned the statement. The diamond was the point at which the research of all three women converged. Each had their area of academic interest, some of which shed light on the whereabouts of the fabled diamond.

“That,” continued Leonora, “is the task we’ve been given and which I’ve accepted on our behalf. In a few months it will be the two hundred-year anniversary of this college and the Chancellor has given us a significant grant to research the whereabouts of the diamond. It’s an opportunity we can’t pass up. It’ll make our careers.”

Despite the stir of excitement Rosana felt at the thought of tracking down the mysterious diamond, there was also fear—fear that it might entail a return to the country where it had last been seen—Sifra. Sifra neighbored her own country from which she'd fled eight years earlier with the intention of never returning. She did what she always did when conflicted—maintained a dignified silence. No one would ever have guessed her thoughts from her impassive face. The protective mask had become second nature over the years. She left it to Janey to respond.

“But surely there's no way we can find it in time for the anniversary celebrations?” Janey shrugged. “I mean, the ancient texts describe its unrivaled beauty, greater even than the Koh-i-Noor. It's priceless. How do we stand a chance of finding it when, for centuries, others have failed?”

“Because,” said Rosana, “each of us has unique knowledge that could help us find the diamond.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Leonora. “We are arguably the best equipped people in the world to locate it.”

“More so than the scholars of the countries to which the diamond is connected?” asked Janey, who obviously still felt doubtful.

Rosana and Leonora exchanged a swift glance and nodded in agreement.

“They don't have access to the college archives like we do,” said Leonora. “They don't have access to the joint research you and Ashley have produced on harems.”

“True,” conceded Janey. “Now Ashley has married Sheikh Zyir, she's passed on her research to me to continue.”

“And nor do they have access to your research, Rosana.”

Rosana bowed her head in dignified agreement.

“But where do we even start?” asked Janey.

“We start here.” Leonora pointed up to the ornate ceiling, whose centerpiece was an elaborate cut-glass dome. “With the newly revealed inscription. Thank goodness the college acted on our hunch to remove the

false ceiling. The Persian text inscribed around the glass has to be the key. Two hundred years ago, Lord Gleave returned from his explorations in the Middle East and founded this college. And that was the last known sighting of the diamond.”

Janey put her hands behind her head, slipped down in the chair and looked up at the ceiling and read the inscription out loud. “*In that elevated place of sensual indulgence you shall find what you seek in the eye of heaven.*” She sighed. “Could mean anywhere.”

“No. It means somewhere very precise,” said Leonora firmly. “Previous searches have focused on the belief that the diamond was stolen, either taken by Lord Gleave and ending up here, in England, which we know to be false. Or else bandits took it to India. I don’t believe it’s there either.”

“Where do you think it is?” Janey asked.

“Sifra.”

Janey’s eyebrows rose. “Sifra? Um... That could make sense, given the literature I’ve read.”

Rosana’s heart had sunk at the mention of her own country’s enemy. But this was her academic research about the diamond they were talking about, and that would always take precedence over anything personal. She would do whatever was necessary to advance her career. “I agree. It would fit with the evidence we have.”

“And it makes sense to me, too,” said Leonora. “I spent many months in Sifra and I believe it’s still there.”

“So, what do you propose, Leonora?” asked Janey. “I mean, Sifra is hardly a country you can enter with ease. How do we go about locating the diamond if the country is a closed book to outsiders?”

Rosana and Janey fixed their gazes onto Leonora, as the most senior academic.

“We open the book,” Leonora said simply, swirling her brandy around the glass before taking a sip, and placing it back on the table. “I propose we take

it in turns to travel to Sifra, enter the country by whatever means we can, and test our hypotheses. Say two weeks max each to do whatever we have to do in order to locate the diamond. Are you in?”

Janey nodded. “I’m in. Sounds cool. A bit of an adventure. And I’d love to see the harems I’ve read so much about.”

“Good. Rosana?”

Rosana was more cautious than Janey. And she had good reason to be. She bit her lip for a moment, then lifted her chin and shot them a brief, guarded smile. “I will go, too. After all, my studies on royal traditions are directly relevant. I’m sure we’ll find the diamond as part of a crown, or throne, but unadorned, so as not to attract notice.” She nodded again, this time more strongly. “I doubt it will be fun, but it will be interesting. Count me in.”

“Brilliant!” said Leonora, filling up their glasses with another generous helping of brandy, despite Rosana’s refusal. “You won’t regret it.”

Prompted by Janey who’d never been to the Middle East, Rosana began to describe Sifra, which she’d visited as a teenager, before shifting to her own country—the Kingdom of Harran, so similar to Sifra and yet a political adversary. As she described the desert, the mountains, the cities, her heart ached and she realized how much she missed it. The place, that was. But not her bullying father who’d forced her into a brief and loveless marriage, before her husband’s death had allowed her to escape. No, she never wanted to see her father again. But her homelands? Yes, she had a deep yearning to visit them. And the diamond? Most definitely, she thought as she sat back and allowed her mind to wander to the formal dinner which would take place here, in this room, in two months’ time. The dinner was timed to coincide with the spring equinox when the light flooded down from the light well in a series of prisms. It would be spectacular. And finding the diamond would be the icing on the cake.

Yes, despite her fears, Rosana almost hoped that both Leonora and Janey

would fail because then she'd be able to return to the lands for which her heart ached and which were forever forbidden to her, while her father was alive. The diamond was almost secondary. Almost.

CHAPTER 1



Rosana paced the guest room she'd been allocated, trying to get her nerves under control. Hanging on the hook was her best abaya—the kind she'd worn in her own country—made of stiff, expensive cloth and demure. The matching scarf was voluminous and in her home country of Harran she'd worn it so that not a strand of her hair showed, and sometimes not even her mouth. Talking wasn't required in her homeland. Her father had told her that often enough, while she was growing up. But she wouldn't have her family to hide behind, like last time she visited Sifra. *This* time—since her colleagues Leonora and Janey had failed to find the diamond—she definitely had talking to do. And *this* time, eight years after her previous visit, she was a different woman. The last eight years at Oxford had changed her.

She glanced at her computer, which stood open—the screensaver swirling around the clock face. She couldn't delay any longer. She'd have to face her family's long-standing enemy.

She shrugged the abaya on over her light dress, through which her generous curves were highly visible. There *were* some advantages to wearing such a voluminous garment, she thought to herself as she adjusted the abaya in front of the mirror. At least none of the men would be focusing on her breasts. No, she thought ruefully, checking her kohled eyes. They'd be fuming that they even had to entertain her in their palace, in *their* country.

She was under no illusions what they thought about her, or her family. She closed her eyes and shuddered at the memory of her last visit, surrounded by her angry father and his senior officials. The mission hadn't gone well. Her father had gone, believing their brief attempt at co-operation over a tourist resort would lead to a return of the disputed lands back to Harran. It hadn't. All the Sifran king suggested was marriage between Rosana and one of his sons. It hadn't gone down well—not with her father, nor, apparently, with the three sons. She knew the present king of Sifra hated her father. And, no doubt, she was tarred with the same brush.

She glanced at herself one last time in the mirror and narrowed her eyes at the reflection she no longer recognized. She'd transformed herself into the woman she didn't want to be—the woman she'd turned her back on eight years earlier when she'd left her country for the last time. But she could do it—for *this* purpose—because her job meant everything to her.

Straightening her spine, she swept out the room and became the woman she'd once been—overlooked and dispensable. Except this time, while she might look that way, she refused to be either.



THE PALACE RECEPTION room was full, exactly the way King Zaire liked it. He stood with his brothers, ostensibly listening to the latest anecdote from his youngest brother, Amare, but cast sweeping glances around the room from time to time with a frown. Because what he *didn't* like was what he was looking for.

Darrius nodded toward the door. “If you’re looking for our honored guest, she’s just arrived.”

Zaire gave an annoyed grunt, but didn't turn around. He knew who Darrius meant.

“You can't ignore her, you know,” said Darrius thoughtfully, looking at

Zaire. “I mean, she *is* the daughter of the King of Harran and, as our neighbor —”

“*And* our greatest problem,” interjected Zaire.

“Indeed. But neighbor or problem — either way, you need to treat her with respect.”

“You have to *earn* respect. And all she’s earned is my wariness. I wouldn’t trust *her* or her *family*. Which is why I’ve made it my business to inform her father of her visit.”

“You’ve done what?” asked Darrius in surprise.

“Made sure her father knew she was coming here. He’ll hate it, of course. It would make his allies believe he’d switched allegiances from them to us, which would definitely be bad for business.” Zaire shrugged. “Anyhow, I couldn’t resist stirring up the old man.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” said Darrius.

Zaire shrugged again. “It can’t hurt.” He stopped short of telling Darrius exactly the rumor he’d set into circulation, ensuring Rosana’s father heard it, because he felt an unusual stab of conscience at the lie. “Anyway, at least it’s making use of the woman’s visit here. I can tell you, I am *not* looking forward to it.”

“She was...” Darrius paused as he groped for a positive word for Rosana. “*Fine*, when she visited with her family.”

Zaire shot him an incredulous look. “Fine? You call arrogance, silence and rudeness, *fine*? And then there’s her coldness. My God, when she looks at you, it’s a wonder she doesn’t freeze off your —”

Darrius looked up suddenly, coughed loudly and placed a hand on Zaire’s arm, stopping him from naming that part of his most intimate anatomy which her gaze would freeze.

“What’s the matter?” said Zaire.

Darrius extended his other hand behind Zaire. “Welcome, Sheikha Rosana. It is a pleasure to meet you again.”

Zaire turned around to see Darrius shaking hands with the object of their conversation, who had no doubt heard everything they'd just said. His distrust of her deepened. Who the hell crept up on people like that? A sweeping glance revealed she was of medium height, and had dark, cold eyes—it was all that could be gleaned from her starched abaya and scarf. But... her lips—his gaze lingered there. It would have taken a saint not to as they were surprisingly full and luscious. He didn't remember her lips. He *certainly* didn't remember them. No doubt her mouth had been covered last time they'd met, as her ultra strict father would have insisted.

She suddenly straightened, standing a little taller, as if aware of his scrutiny. Her manner was chill and forbidding. Darrius's wife, Leonora, had described her as dignified. Zaire wouldn't. She was arrogance personified, and that arrogance was focused on him now. Her lips were forgotten.

"Your *Highness*," she said. The words sounding facetious—more like an *insult* than a greeting. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your..." She hesitated, revealing that she knew exactly what he'd been about to say. "Your *conversation*."

He raised an eyebrow, irritated by being on the back foot. "Are you?"

"Oh, yes. Wouldn't anyone be curious as to know what exactly my '*coldness*'—I think you called it—would freeze off?"

He ground his teeth. Another thing that had changed about her. Last time he couldn't remember her uttering anything more than mumbled acknowledgements under the severe stare of her father. Now it didn't look as if she were going to hold back. But, as much as he'd have liked to reply in kind, he knew he'd been in the wrong. He'd been rude. He wasn't usually rude—*well*, not to people's faces, anyway. And he *hated* being in the wrong.

"You misunderstood, sheikha. I was referring to..." He'd hoped a lie would spring into his mouth, but nothing emerged. Because her eyes, which at first glance had appeared as cold as he remembered, suddenly flashed hot as soon as he had spoken. She knew he was going to lie and was angry at the

added insult to her intelligence. The heat in her face transformed her, revealing an entirely different woman to the one he'd remembered. If he'd had to describe in one word what that heated gaze had revealed, he'd have said *passion*. His gaze, inevitably, fell to her lips once more. Before he could consider this revelation further, a clap on his back from Amare broke his reverie.

“Zaire was referring to our vizier’s wife.” Amare leaned close to Rosana. “She’s a shocker,” he said confidentially, before withdrawing with a smile. “But let’s not moan about your staff’s family in front of Rosana! May I call you Rosana, sheikha?”

Rosana nodded, and any trace of heat disappeared back behind her reserve. She inclined her head on a neck which, Zaire couldn’t help thinking, would be graceful beneath her conventional scarf. “Yes, you may. We are—or *were*—neighbors, and we will be working together.”

“And you are here to discover the whereabouts of the diamond. Like your colleagues.”

She raised an arched eyebrow. “Now your wives.”

Amare laughed. “Indeed. Funny that.” He glanced at Zaire, whose icy stare killed Amare’s laughter dead. Amare cleared his throat.

“And I will be working with you on my task,” continued Rosana.

“Ah, about that,” said Amare. He looked from Zaire back to Rosana. Zaire could read him like a book. He was wondering how on earth Zaire and Rosana were going to work together. “It will be my brother you’ll be working with.”

Rosana frowned. “But I thought Darrius would be returning tomorrow to be with Leonora. At the desert palace?”

Amare grimaced. “Not *that* brother.”

Zaire could see the moment Rosana understood the situation. He hadn’t thought her expression could become any frostier. She turned to him, her eyes haughty. “That would leave *you*, then, Your Majesty. But I’m sure you

have business to attend. Maybe this could be delegated to one of your assistants? I sincerely doubt you wish to aid me in my work.”

There was a challenge in her eyes, which surprised him. Maybe she'd heard as much about him as he had of her. The thought intrigued him. What had she heard? What pre-conceptions of him did she hold in her mind? That clear forehead which shielded that clever mind wrinkled a little and her brow raised in question. What? Then he remembered she'd asked him a question.

“I am committed to helping you.” He deftly avoided addressing her implication that he had no interest in either her or the diamond. He didn't. But he didn't wish her to know all his thoughts. “Of course I will help you. Exactly as my brothers have helped your colleagues.”

The eyebrow rose a little higher, and it took him all his control not to laugh.

“Maybe not *exactly*. They went a little further than ‘helpful’,” he added.

It seems she was not amused by his allusions. “Indeed. I have no curiosity about how far, or otherwise, they went. All I need from you is to gain access to certain rooms in the palace so I can test my theory.”

“And that,” he said, “is all you will get.” He forced a tight-lipped smile onto his face. She might have a full figure lurking beneath those stiff robes, she might have eyes that held depths he hadn't imagined, and lips that were generous with a sweet curve to them, but, really, she was as unbearable as he remembered.

She shot him a tight-lipped smile. “And that is all I want, I assure you.” She glanced around. “I trust I can begin my work first thing tomorrow morning?”

“Of course. I'll organize someone to take you to wherever you wish to go.”

“Excellent. Then,” she said, casting an arrogant, sweeping gaze at Amare and then back to him, “I'll leave, as it seems your fear of my gaze freezing off your balls has extinguished your legendary charm.”

He couldn't help it. He grinned before he could control it. Her forthright reply was so unexpected that he not only smiled, but laughed out loud. Her face didn't move an inch, only became heated again.

"You find something funny?"

He forced his laugh into a cough. "I didn't realize I had any charm, let alone it was the stuff of legends."

"I concur," she said stiffly and was about to walk away when Amare stepped in, shooting a warning frown at Zaire.

"Please, Rosana, stay a little longer. You're quite correct my brother is severely lacking in niceties, but I assure you his heart is in the right place."

She didn't look at Zaire. "And I can assure you, I have no interest in his heart or its locality. I really must be leaving now."

"But you have so much in common!" said Amare. Zaire could hear the desperation in his voice and knew its source. Amare positively glared at Zaire now and nodded knowingly behind her back. He knew what he was referring to. They'd talked earlier about the need to make Rosana's visit go as smoothly as possible, given her royal status, and the ongoing tensions between their two countries, and Zaire knew he wasn't helping. He was king now, whether he liked it or not, and he had to control his heated temper and work for the good of the country. "You should invite Rosana to see your horses," continued Amare.

"Horses?" Zaire frowned and turned to Rosana, whose eyes had unaccountably brightened. "You like horses?"

"Yes!" she said, with more liveliness in that one word than he'd heard all evening. "I mean..." Was it his imagination or was that a blush seeping up through her cheeks and uncertainty filling her eyes? "I mean, I used to."

He was confused. "Used to? You mean you don't like horses anymore?"

"No. I mean, yes." She took a deep breath, and he was suddenly quite enchanted by this confused woman before him. It was as if her shell had cracked, revealing something far more alluring beneath—something

uncertain, feminine, and most definitely appealing. As she looked up into his eyes, something caught and tangled between them. Had it been anyone else, he'd have called it attraction. But this was Sheikha Rosana, he reminded himself. The epitome of chill and hostility, the epitome of everything he disliked about the Al Khal royal family. The woman he was going to use.

CHAPTER 2



If Zaire was going to use her effectively, he first had to figure out what she was talking about.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure what you mean,” he said.

“I mean,” she said, more slowly, as if she were having trouble collecting her thoughts, “I grew up with horses, but I don’t have time now.”

His gaze didn’t leave hers. He didn’t think it could, even if he wanted it to. That tangled gaze was a web of magnetic attraction, heat, and something like fear, which puzzled him. He blinked.

“No time?” He didn’t like to see fear in women and took a step back, mentally and physically, untangling that gaze, which had become something far trickier than he’d at first thought. “Not now you’re a *serious* academic,” he said. It came out sounding facetious. He hadn’t meant it to.

But she must have interpreted it this way, too. Because suddenly all uncertainty disappeared and that facade shot up again, like an electric fence, defying anyone to toy with it. Well, that was fine with him, because he didn’t intend to get entangled with any woman. He’d done that once and would allow no one to take Galila’s place in his heart. She was gone and would never be forgotten.

“I am,” she said in a low, controlled voice, full of emotion.

“But serious academics can still have time off for good behavior, can’t

they?” chipped in Amare, still intent on doing his job of promoting diplomatic relations. Just as well one brother had the skills of a diplomat.

“My days are full in Oxford.”

“Ah,” said Amare, finding a hole in her argument, which he was determined to exploit. “But you’re here now. So why not take the time to indulge your interests once more?” He shot Zaire a dark look.

Zaire shrugged. He trusted Amare’s diplomatic instincts and knew, deep down, he’d have to push his personal thoughts and feelings about relationships, and about this woman in particular, aside. “Why don’t you come to the stables and have a look, maybe even go for a ride?”

“No.”

There was no ‘thank you’, no ‘perhaps’, no modification to the single syllable.

“Right,” he shrugged again, this time it was aimed at Amare. He’d given it his best shot. Well, maybe not his best, but a shot, anyhow. “If you change your mind, let me know.”

“I’m not someone who changes her mind.”

He didn’t doubt it. “I’m sure.”

She looked at him sharply. His brothers were always telling him they could easily read his thoughts. There was that flash of heat in her eyes again. It reminded him of someone else. Someone he didn’t want to think about. He swallowed. Simply the reminder of Galila tripped him up, made him unsure. Made him think he was being too hard. She’d used to rebuke him if she saw him being too hard on anyone. But that was second nature to him because it was how he was raised. He was brusque with everyone—everyone except Galila. Zaire’s chest tightened at the thought of her. He remembered her urging him to be kind to others, even when it felt impossible. He cleared his throat.

“And I’m also sure that you’d prefer to discuss your theory. Maybe...” He glanced at Amare, hoping he’d help him out, but Amare stood with his

arms crossed and his expression severe. Zaire sighed. His brother was angry with him and he knew why.

“Maybe,” he repeated, “we could find a quieter place to discuss your theory,” he suggested, gesturing towards the open doors beyond which lights lit up the trees, and tables and chairs were grouped along a terrace.

She didn’t look toward the doors. “Why?” While her face was impassive and cold, he noticed her fingers tapped impatiently together. She wasn’t going to make this easy for him. It looked like only a humble apology would do. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done humble, or an apology.

“Because, sheikha, I owe you an apology.” His voice constricted as he said the word, almost choking. He cleared this throat. “I’ve been extremely rude.”

“Indeed.”

He inclined his head and pressed his lips together. If he’d hoped for a simple acceptance of his apology, he’d hoped wrong. “In which case,” he shot a pleading glance at Amare but was met with a fierce gaze, which told him his choices were limited to one if he were going to be on good terms with his chief diplomat. He cleared his voice again. “In which case”—he said, this time with the conviction of someone who knew he was cornered and had no other option—“I’d like the opportunity to make up for that, if I may.”

She raised an arrogant eyebrow. “And how do you propose to do that?”

A sudden burst of laughter from a group close by made her wince. Seemed she was more sensitive to her surroundings than he’d imagined.

“By talking. Just you and me. Somewhere quiet where you can tell me exactly what it is you’re looking for, and exactly how I can help you.”

Her beautiful mouth opened, but no words came forth. It was as if she hadn’t imagined him, the King of Sifra, being direct, telling the truth. For two heartbeats of silence, he wondered what had happened to her for her to be unused to direct dealing and conciliatory behavior.

She licked her lips and his gaze fell to them before he forced his focus once more on her eyes. It was no hardship. A momentary softening intrigued him before she looked away, toward the doors he'd originally pointed to. She was avoiding his gaze, he suddenly realized. She didn't want him to see her unguarded by her arrogance. It softened him a little more, which he found most irksome.

"Of course," she said at last. "That would be a useful discussion."

"Good. If you'd care to go outside, we can talk there undisturbed."

As they walked across the room, he was aware of the way she moved, with a grace and dignity which humbled him and made him even more uncomfortable about how rude he'd been.

He stepped outside and scanned the terrace, spotting a place in the far corner which wasn't obvious at first glance to anyone who didn't know the place—and he did. He'd used it before for intimate conversations—and gestured toward it. "We won't be disturbed over there."

She shot him a glance which didn't show trust, but gave him a brief nod, nevertheless. He called for the waiter to bring some drinks over and pulled aside a chair for her. She dragged out a different chair, one opposite him, and sat down. He shrugged and sat down as well. It didn't look as if this was going to be easy.

THE INSTANT PHYSICAL awareness Rosana had felt when she'd first looked at Zaire had quickly been superseded by an antipathy so strong that it was all she could do not to be as rude to him as he'd been to her. She was determined to show him she was not a woman to be messed with, not a woman to be insulted, and certainly not a woman to be seduced, which was obviously his intention given the heated glances he'd shot her, not even bothering to conceal his interest. She knew he wanted her physically, and knew, equally well, that she annoyed him intellectually. She didn't care on either account.

She was here for one purpose only.

She shook her head when offered a drink and sat forward, hands clasped on the table before her, determined to speak first rather than wait for permission to talk, as was traditional.

“So, Zaire,” she said, emphasizing his name. “As you are no doubt aware, I’m here to find the diamond.”

He didn’t look impressed by the use of his first name. A frown deepened over his eyes. She blinked, annoyed at how that intense stare pricked at the barriers she’d erected.

“And I intend,” she continued hurriedly, not liking how he’d opened his mouth as if to interrupt her, “to focus on the throne room.”

He sat back with a sigh and looped his arm over the back of the chair. “The throne room,” he repeated. “And you think it wouldn’t have been discovered there before now? You think you have some extra knowledge, some extra skill to locate it?”

“Yes,” she said between gritted teeth. “I do. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” he repeated.

“I’ve been researching Queen Mandana, as I believe she is the connection to the diamond.”

He looked no more impressed. “Queen Mandana. A woman, I believe, who has been the subject of extensive research in our own country, in our own university. And you believe you have something different to add to this sum of knowledge?”

“I don’t believe. I *know*.”

“Really.” Derision oozed through the word. He tapped the back of the chair with impatient fingers. Then it was as if he’d made a decision. He swiveled in his chair until he faced her directly and shifted to the edge of the seat so that their faces were far too close for her liking.

“Well, that’s all very interesting,” he said, his eyes fixed on her,

skewering her to the spot. She couldn't have looked away if she'd wanted to. And she desperately *did* want to. "But why should I allow you to indulge your ridiculous fantasies? What's in it for me?" He paused and her mind raced into places she really didn't want to go. "What's in it for my country?" he clarified, and a deep blush filled her face at her ridiculous fantasies. She forced herself to focus.

"You don't believe finding the diamond will be beneficial for your country?"

"I do, if it were found elsewhere, in England, where it undoubtedly is, stolen by your Lord Gleave, and if it were brought back here. But you're looking in the wrong place."

"I don't believe so."

He sat back and waved his hand. "Then continue in your fruitless search if you must, but know this."

She was aware of only the blood pounding through her veins. "What?" she said in an annoyingly husky whisper.

"I will be beside you every step of the way. Because you are a member of the royal family of the Kingdom of Harran and I don't trust you. For all I know, this is a ruse, arranged by your father, to gain access and spy on us."

"I am no spy."

He shrugged. "I'll soon find out the truth."

She jumped up, incensed that he would believe such a thing. "I'll go now. I've said what I have to say."

He didn't look in the least perturbed that she was breaking with protocol by concluding an audience with the king. "Go then. But we will meet again tomorrow, and the next day, for however many days you are here."

She forced herself to meet his gaze. She refused to be cowed or intimidated by him. "I hadn't expected you to be so"—she leaned in to him, determined to show him she was no feeble girl to be bullied—"helpful."

He blinked. She'd got to him. She stepped away, unable to keep up the

pretense a moment longer.

“Goodnight,” she said.

She didn't wait for a reply, but turned and walked away, refusing to look back, but aware with every step she took his eyes were fixed on her. But, while each step took her farther from him, it did nothing to ease the churning in her stomach and the clenching of her breath, as if her body had received a blow. She blinked back the pricking in her eyes. She refused to appear weak before these men. She refused to become the woman she'd once been in her own homeland. She'd thought she'd progressed. She'd thought the men had progressed. But, it seemed, nothing had changed. She was still a woman, unwanted and disregarded, not worthy of respect, and, she suspected, she always would be in their eyes.

HE WATCHED HER WALK AWAY, unable to take his eyes off her. She had that kind of aura, despite hiding her figure under the voluminous abaya. She had a power and intensity which was magnetic.

He sighed. He'd done what he rarely did. He'd lied. She was no more a spy than him. But he'd used it as an excuse. He desired her. And he would be with her every step of the way because he wished to be. Because how else could he seduce her?

CHAPTER 3



*R*osana hadn't expected to have slept so well, considering the agitation Zaire had created within her. She had chosen not to examine the cause. But as soon as she'd lain down on that vast bed, her eyes had closed against the shifting gauzy curtains which draped her four-poster bed and she'd sunk into the most contented sleep she'd had in a long time.

And now, feeling more rested than she had in years, she stood on the small balcony of her bedroom and looked out to the city, the desert and the mountains beyond. She gripped the rail of the balcony, trying to control the wayward instincts which assailed her. She measured her breathing, forcing it to be calm, to quieten her quickened heartbeat. Because she'd forgotten. Forgotten the light. The sound. The fragrances. She closed her eyes to ward off the pain which such beauty had uncovered deep inside. She'd thought she'd buried it deep. She'd thought wrong.

She'd run from these lands eight years ago without a backward glance and made the life for herself that she'd wanted in England's green and misty lands. But, it seemed, she'd left something behind—a feeling of home. A feeling she hadn't even known she'd possessed until she'd returned yesterday. She tried to isolate the thoughts, to dissect them like a good academic, to prevent the emotion from overwhelming her.

She blinked as she opened her eyes. The best she could come up with was

that it was a connection, as real as if she had an invisible thread tying her to these lands. All the time in Oxford, she'd thrown herself into her studies, ignoring the absence she'd felt at her center. But now? There was no absence. Something had slid into it, and filled it.

As the sound of the muezzin's call to prayer faded and the sun rose higher, piercing the shadows of the gardens through branches and lattice work, she shrugged and forced herself to turn away. Absence or presence—what did it matter? The truth about her homelands was that they were no place for a woman. And there was no changing that.

She glanced at her phone to check the time. King Zaire had been clear he would send someone to escort her to him, but she refused to wait for anyone. She'd always been one step ahead. It was how she survived her family, and it would be how she'd survive here. Because she didn't fool herself, it would be no less challenging here than in her home country.



ZAIRE GLARED at his younger brother, Amare. Sure, he appreciated his work, and, if he were pressed, he'd even say he loved his brother. But, really, he wished he'd stop trying to organize him. He was beginning to think he'd be glad when he and his new wife, Janey, returned to Paris.

“Amare! Will you stop? Sheikha Rosana is here for a purpose, and I have no intention of putting myself out to entertain her.” Or, at least, not in the way Amare was suggesting.

Whatever, he had a country to run and, contrary to Amare's suggestions, he had no interest in forming a lasting liaison with a high-maintenance princess. Especially one who belonged to a family who'd been a thorn in the side of Sifra for centuries.

Amare sat back in his chair and grinned. “That shrug,” he said. “I know what it means.”

Zaire shot him an irritated glare. Amare sat forward, placed his hands on the table, and stared Zaire right in the eyes like no one else would dare to. Except his other brother, of course.

“Come on, Zaire, I’ve seen the way you look at her. You’re attracted to her and don’t deny it.”

“She’s arrogant, angry, and as cold as ice. Why would I be attracted to her?” He realized he’d avoided the question. But wasn’t he a politician and a king now?”

Amare shrugged. “I don’t know, but it’s clear you *are* attracted to her. You can’t deny it.”

“I have no need to either confirm or deny anything to you.” He jumped up. “Despite what you think, I am not answerable to you or to Darrius. Now, I believe you have a plane to catch. So don’t let me hold you up.”

Amare’s grin morphed into something equally galling. Sympathy. He shook his head as if pitying his big brother. “I know what you’re doing. I remember Galila, too, you know.”

A lump shot up into Zaire’s throat from nowhere. No one ever talked about Galila. Darrius knew better. But it seemed Amare hadn’t been informed. Zaire shook his head and held up his hand. “Don’t.” It was all he could say as a wave of emotion swept over him. He couldn’t remember the last time this had happened to him. It was usually okay so long as her name wasn’t mentioned. “Just don’t.” He swallowed the lump down hard, but it refused to leave. He blinked rapidly, and fearing he was going to break down in front of his brother, he twisted around and raked his hair from his face.

“I won’t,” said Amare, “if you go ahead with my plans. To tell you the truth, both Darrius and I are worried about you.”

He spun around to face Amare. It was the first he’d heard. “Worried? Why?”

Amare stood silent, his eyes conveying what he wasn’t allowed to say. “You know why,” he said eventually.

Zaire would do anything not to talk about this. *Had* done anything. And now, he could either talk, or pull rank and block out his brother. But Amare had got to him, weakened him where it counted. He met his brother's gaze and knew he couldn't deny what Amare was accusing him of.

"You've never recovered from her death," Amare continued. "And you never will if you continue to deny yourself close relationships with women."

"I *have* close relationships."

"You have sex with women who pose no danger to your emotions when you're out of the country. You don't have relationships. You need to face facts, Zaire."

"It's not that easy. I've lost the only woman I'll ever love."

"You don't know that."

Zaire held his brother's gaze steadily, mustering all the conviction he could, which was a lot. "Yes, I do." He'd lived with his grief for many years.

Amare pressed his lips together in an expression of regret. It looked like Zaire had got his message across at last.

"Well, whatever," said Amare, "I've made arrangements for you which can't be undone."

"*Everything* can be undone," said Amare indignantly.

"Sure. If you want to upset my wife. She arranged it all for you."

"You talked to her about me?" Zaire couldn't believe it. His past was his own business, no one else's, not even his brothers'. It felt like a betrayal.

"Of course. She wanted to help."

"I don't *need* help."

He shrugged again. "That's a matter of opinion." They glared at each other for a few moments. Then Amare sighed and placed a hand on Zaire's shoulder. "Look, do what you want. But Janey arranged this for you." He grinned suddenly, and the squeeze on the shoulder transformed into a playful slap. "Sure go ahead and cancel... if you want to see my beautiful wife's wrath!"

Zaire scowled.

“Anyway,” said Amare, “we’re off now. We’ll catch up at our weekly video meeting, right?”

“Of course.”

Amare stopped by the door and turned to him, his hand on the door handle. “You will *go* though, won’t you?”

Zaire heaved a deep sigh. “Wouldn’t want to incur your wife’s wrath.” Nor, he thought, did he want to offend Amare, his younger brother who, even if he didn’t say it as readily as Amare, he loved with all his heart.

Amare’s smile broadened. “Good.” He nodded, satisfied. “See you then.”

Zaire hadn’t even had time to return to his desk when he heard his assistant outside explaining something to a woman whose voice he instantly recognized. There was a quality to its timbre which struck a chord and affected him physically.

He focused on that voice as he looked down at the desk and the paperwork he should be working on and went to ring for his assistant, but hesitated instead and switched on the camera, which gave him a view of his assistant’s office. He couldn’t help noticing Rosana was wearing something more revealing this morning. Smart trousers topped with a long shirt made of silky stuff, and a scarf flung casually around her head and shoulders, which had loosened as she leaned over the desk and spoke to his assistant. He sat back, put his hands behind his head, and watched the scene unfold, entertained.

“I’m *here* to see the *king*,” she said for the third time through gritted teeth. “As I’ve explained, he’s expecting me.”

His assistant’s expression was suitably impassive as he gave a slight shrug. “I’m sorry, Sheikha, but I have strict instructions not to allow anyone in who doesn’t have an appointment.”

“Then make me one,” she said.

“It’s not as easy as that,” the man said patiently.

Zaire smiled at his assistant's pleasant stubbornness. He'd see about advancing his career. Anyone who could remain unmoved under Rosana's fierce glance and commands would go far.

"It's as easy as entering my name in the diary. I suggest you do it now, or else I'm going to walk right through that door"—she threw her arm, pointing toward the unseen Zaire. Even Zaire flinched a little under the glare she gave him—"with or without an appointment. Let's see how your king likes that!"

Zaire decided to take pity on his assistant, and buzzed for him to enter.

The door opened, briefly revealing the profile of an annoyed Rosana. She shot him an angry glance before his assistant stepped inside and closed the door on her. In that instant, with her eyes flashing with passion, he knew what he'd do. Besides, it would keep his brothers and new sister-in-law sweet.

"I apologize, Your Highness," the flustered assistant said. "Sheikha Rosana arrived without an appointment. You're not scheduled to see her for another hour."

"That's fine. I'll see her, but before I do, I want you to reschedule all my appointments. Delay any deadlines and make sure the rest of the week is clear. I want everything canceled."

His assistant looked even more flustered. "But the visit by Sheikh —"

"Of course," interrupted Zaire. He'd really prefer Rosana not to know about the imminent visit of Sheikh Saeed—a friend to both Sifra and to Rosana's own country of Harran. The visit was yet another attempt to reconcile the two countries of their differences. "I will keep that, but clear everything else."

His official didn't dare query further the unusual instruction. "Of course, Your Majesty."

"You may bring her in now."

He sat at his desk, closed his computer, and turned his attention to the door, which the assistant opened for her. She swept in on a wave of perfume

and irritation.

“Sheikha Rosana!” he greeted, rising and walking around his desk. “What a pleasant but unexpected surprise.”

He was gratified to see her complexion redden with a blush. So she wasn’t as impervious to his presence as she’d have him believe.

“I thought,” she said in that perfect voice of hers, clipped and precise, “that we had planned for me to visit the throne room this morning.”

“We had,” he said with contrived patience. “The arrangement was that someone would accompany you to my office. No doubt one of my assistants is, at this very moment, on his way to your room to bring you to me.”

“I don’t need people to escort me around. I am quite capable of finding your office by myself.”

He had no doubt. He firmly repressed the impulse to respond in kind to her. He’d do as his brother suggested, partly to keep him and his new wife happy, and partly because she interested him at a level he wasn’t prepared to examine too deeply.

“I’m sure, sheikha, and we had no intention of showing you disrespect, but you must allow for protocol.” She frowned for a moment as she considered his excuse. “And,” he continued despite her frown, “protocol expects you to stick to our agreement, to wait in your room, until I summon you.”

She cocked her head angrily to one side. “You wish to treat me like someone subservient to you? You appear to have forgotten who I am.”

His lip curled. “I wish I could.”

“Why? Because you dislike my family and country so much?”

“No,” he leaned forward, “because I’d like to get to know you better.”

Rosana’s blush bloomed again. He sat back in his chair, steepled his fingers, and tapped them against his lips thoughtfully. This was getting better and better.

CHAPTER 4



“*J*...” she began before pausing. He hadn’t realized how entertaining watching such a self-possessed woman lose her poise could be. She cleared her throat. “I’m not sure what you mean, Your Majesty.”

He leaned back in his chair, the corners of his lips twitching in amusement. “I mean exactly that, sheikha. I want to get to know you. As a person, not simply as a princess of my neighboring country.”

Her narrowed eyes searched his as if trying to discern any hidden meaning in his words. He wondered what had made her so suspicious of good intentions.

“Well, that is all very interesting, but I can assure you there is nothing about me you’d wish to know.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because my life is my work. I’m an academic. Education is my only interest. Now,” she rose, obviously determined to take control of the situation. “Perhaps we could get down to business.”

“Not yet,” he said, rising and walking over to a sideboard and pouring a coffee. “Would you care for one?” he asked.

She shook her head. “What I’d care for is to get on with the task at hand.”

He continued to pour the coffee.

“You’ve been away from your country for too long, if you think we can

do business like that. You, Sheikha Rosana,” he said, turning to her and taking a sip of his coffee, “need to relax a little.”

Her nostrils flared at the fragrance of the freshly brewed coffee. The smell of cardamom and spices was so different from the western beverage. He could see she was tempted.

“Or if not relax, then indulge me. I need a second coffee before embarking on a wild goose chase.”

She was irritated again. But that was okay, he could live with that.

“Testing my hypothesis about the diamond is *not* a wild goose chase.” She sighed heavily and then nodded and he poured a coffee and handed it to her. He couldn’t take his eyes off her as she took a sip of her coffee, cradling the cup in both hands as if relishing the experience. Her scarf slipped down and he watched her swallow. His first impressions were correct. Her neck was slender and long.

Then she looked up and blinked nervously before looking away again. She placed the cup carefully onto the table, as if giving herself time to think. “Thank you,” she shot him a brief smile. “It’s been a while since I’ve drunk coffee from home.” She clipped the last word as if she’d been surprised at what she’d said.

“Hm. Perhaps you’ve been away too long. Your family must miss you, surely?” He realized it was a personal question, but he couldn’t help it. The feeling with which she’d edged that last word made him realize she was hiding something, something which hurt her. He needed to know what lay behind it.

She bit her lip and shrugged. “I think they are managing just fine without me.”

“There’s a difference between managing and missing, surely?” He tapped his fingers against his lips as he watched her response carefully. Then he made a mistake. He leaned forward. “You are your father’s only daughter. Your place is at his home.”

Her head shot up and her eyes blazed with a passion which really shouldn't have affected him so much. He felt his arousal instantly.

"Your Majesty," she said, putting the cup down on the table. "I'm not here to discuss '*my place*' in my father's home, nor am I here to make small talk with you. I'm here to help solve a puzzle and illuminate your country's history."

"I understand," he said, his voice softening. "But even in matters of great importance, there is always room for some relaxation. I promise you, we will get to the matter at hand." He gave a small, experimental smile and was rewarded with a relaxing of her frown. She gave a brief nod, as if satisfied.

"Thank you, but I'm here as an academic, not as a princess. I need autonomy, not protection. I need to work, not to relax."

"And you *will* work, but you will also *not* work." One glance at her expression told him she needed persuasion. Something he never had to do. He cleared his throat. "Your work, I believe, focuses on royal traditions?"

"Yes, but —"

He held up his hand to stop her from talking. "Then how better to explore royal traditions than spending time with the king?" He raised his eyebrow in query, but her expression didn't change. This was going to be tougher than he thought. "I spent my youth observing royal traditions and my adulthood partaking in them. You will learn from me things you cannot read about." Other, distracting thoughts of what she might learn flittered into his head, but he firmly rejected them. Now wasn't the time to get diverted.

The frown lifted again. "All right," she agreed, as if she were doing him a favor. He wasn't sure how that had happened. "I *will* spend time with you, only because it will help my research."

"So pleased I can help," he said, unable to hide his facetious tone. "So pleased," he repeated, "that you will indulge me." She licked those luscious lips of hers and he didn't bother to rein in his imagination this time. He looked up to see her eyes flash again.

“Now, may I see the throne room?”

He gritted his teeth. She was determined to take control. “Of course.” He opened the door for her. “As you know so much about the palace, please lead the way.”

She didn’t need telling twice, and she swept out of his offices and into the grand hallway without stopping to see if he followed her. Although, he thought, if she were as aware of him as he was of her, she’d know he was. He took the opportunity to allow his sweeping gaze to check her out. The outfit she wore revealed an hour-glass figure which sent his imagination into overdrive. He drew beside her when they walked out into the marble corridors which led to the throne room.

Despite her stated dislike of superficial chat, he had to do something to fill the silence and stop himself from contemplating her lips and figure. Luckily, by the time he’d run out of small-talk, they’d reached the throne room. He stepped forward and exchanged a few words with the guard, and the doors were opened. He strode inside and looked around.

“I haven’t been in here since my coronation.”

“It’s only used for ceremonial purposes, then?” Rosana stepped inside, and looked around the room as if seeking something in particular. Then her gaze came to rest on a portrait, smaller than some, less elaborate than others, but the one which became the focus of everyone’s attention when they entered the room.

“Magnificent,” he said as he shifted his gaze from Rosana to the portrait of Queen Mandana. The likeness between her and their common ancestor was unmistakable.

She didn’t take her eyes off the portrait. “I’ve seen small black and white reproductions of this portrait in books, as well as the larger images reproduced on websites but I hadn’t expected it was look quite so…” She trailed off and shook her head, for once at a loss for words.

“Magnificent,” she repeated his word. “Queen Mandana was indeed a

magnificent queen.”

His gaze lingered on her before moving to the portrait. “A distant relative of yours, of course.”

“A direct descendant. In those times, before the dispute over land, our countries were far closer than they are now.”

“I hope that will change, sheikha.”

“Peace is always preferable. For everyone.”

“Indeed. And Queen Mandana was a great advocate of peace. She exemplified it in bringing our two countries closer together than they’ve ever been—before or since.” He looked back at the portrait and frowned and was silent for a few moments. “She has a look of you. Around the eyes.”

She jerked her neck up to look into the queen’s eyes with a shocked look of recognition.

“Don’t you think?” he asked, puzzled by her silence.

“Maybe. I’ve never seen a good reproduction of her before. There are no portraits of her in my country. And the few in books aren’t clear.” She reached out and gently touched the frame of the portrait. “But this is something different. It’s as if I can see her for the first time.” She muttered as if she were talking to herself, as if she’d forgotten that she was a princess of a rival country, as if they hadn’t gotten off on the wrong foot, as if, he thought, they were friends.

When she looked back at him, he saw she was moved. “It seems you feel a connection with the queen.”

She withdrew her hand and stepped back, as if suddenly aware that she’d revealed herself. He guessed it wasn’t something she often allowed herself to do. This wasn’t a woman who let her guard slip easily.

She shrugged, as if trying to deny it, but unable to declare it openly. “I... I admire her and what she achieved. She was an independent, strong woman who cared for her people, especially the women.” She nodded her head, emphasizing her words which distanced herself from the personal.

“Ah, yes, of course. No doubt you share her passions.” He’d chosen the word carefully because he could see the passion inside of her again. He wanted to see more, so decided to push her a little. “But there was also scandal.”

She shot him a dark look. “Scandal always surrounds a woman who lives true to herself. A woman who knows her own mind.”

“Hm,” he said, “I think it was her heart, rather than her mind, which scandalized our people if the reports are to be believed.”

She didn’t answer.

“You must surely have read the reports about a love affair between Queen Mandana and Lord Gleave,” he pressed.

“Of course. Although I’m sure they’re exaggerated. Why would the queen risk everything she’d worked her whole life for, for someone she hardly knew? Someone outside her world. Someone who was forbidden her?”

“Only she could answer that, and while we have many papers on the subject, none are penned by her own hand.”

Rosana’s instincts were suddenly alert. “Papers? What papers?”

“You haven’t heard?” he teased.

She shook her head.

“No doubt because outsiders have not discovered them yet. They weren’t made public. But Mandana’s ‘love’ papers were favorites of the ladies of the harem. I guess it was equivalent to reading a forbidden love romance novel.” He smiled slowly. “Like Romeo and Juliet—forbidden love between people from different cultures whose families do not approve.”

“Oh,” breathed Rosana, obviously intrigued, although whether by the image he’d created of forbidden love, or the lure of undiscovered academic texts, he couldn’t have said. “These papers—I wonder if I might see them?”

Amusement at her keen need made his lips twitch nearly into a smile. “I’m sure that can be arranged. But, tell me, what is it you’re so keen to read?” He had an urge to know whether it was the personal or the

professional which had brought that spark to her eyes.

She held his gaze steadily. She was strong. He admired that. “How can I know when I don’t know what the papers contain?”

“Fair point.” He took a step toward her, compelled by instinct, and to see what her reaction would be. She froze and her brown eyes heated with a warmth which sent a corresponding flare in his belly and lower.

A breeze blew through the room from the open window and her scarf, which had already slipped off her head, slid over her silky top down to the floor. He took yet another step closer, leaned into her and in any other circumstances he had the feeling she would have slapped his face, stepped back, or shot him an angry retort, but, again, she said nothing. She appeared frozen to the spot, her eyes fixed on his lips as he took yet another step toward her. And then he reached down, his hand brushing the hem of her top as he picked up her scarf, stood up and slipped it around her head, adjusting it into place. Only then did she jump back as if she’d never been touched by a man before. The scarf slid away through his fingers as she turned her back on him and walked abruptly to the magnificent double doors which led to the main room.

“Perhaps we should move on now. It is the rooms through there I’ve come to see.”

“Another time, Sheikha.”

She turned to him, surprised, perhaps, at his tone, which was lower, more seductive than before. The scent and touch of her had put only one thought in his mind.

“But—”

“Arrangements have been made for us elsewhere.”

“What arrangements? The only arrangements I want are to do with my work!”

He understood her abruptness, her slight aggression. She was embarrassed by her instinctive response to him, and was trying to cover it up.

She hadn't succeeded. It seemed she was an open book when her guard was dropped.

"Ah," he said, "but I think you will like this."

"I would *like* to carry out my research. I would *like* to get to work." She lifted her chin in defiance. "As soon as possible."

"And you will. But, at the moment, it is not possible."

"Why isn't it possible? We're here." She pointed to the room. "What I wish to see is the other side of that locked door."

"There's no hurry. You mentioned your love of horses last night, and so an excursion has been prepared for you."

He could see she was torn. She hated being told what to do. She liked to be in charge because, he guessed, she'd been denied it growing up. But she'd chosen the wrong person to boss. There was no way she was going to get the better of him.

"Horses, Rosana," he used her name for the first time. She appeared not to notice. "The desert. How long is it since you've been riding through our lands? Too long, I should imagine. You know there's nothing like it." He'd captured her attention and could see the exact moment when her expression changed and she gave up resisting.

"But," she gave one last attempt, "I... have work to do."

"And the work will be done. *Later.*" He grinned and shook his head, enjoying the challenge of getting her to change her mind. No mean feat. "Consider it as part of the hospitality we would extend to any member of the royal family."

The thought obviously reassured her a little. "Okay, I'll come."

She smiled for the first time, and his heart thumped heavily. It wasn't desire he suddenly felt for her, but something far more complex at that glimpse into the soul she kept hidden from the world. It was he who looked away this time.

"Good," he said, as he followed her outside the throne room and closed

the door. For the first time, he wondered whether he wasn't getting himself into something deeper than he'd imagined.

CHAPTER 5



Rosana wasn't sure what she'd expected, but she knew for sure that it hadn't been this. The lodge where the country's famed Arabian horses were bred and trained was a state-of-the-art modern complex. Her father's stables were antiquated compared with these. She looked around the place wide-eyed as they drove into the compound.

"You look surprised," he said. "I take it that this is different to your own family's stables," he continued.

She turned to him. Conversation on the car ride out to the lodge had been surprisingly easy. But she was aware she didn't want to give anything away about her country. She needed to remember who she was. She had to make sure she didn't drop her guard. Zaire's legendary charm had re-appeared, and she realized it was working its magic on her. She felt the most relaxed she'd been for a long time.

"It *is* different," she said, unable to look him in the eye. "Very different," she conceded. She felt a flutter of disloyalty. "But of course, our operations are very established and based on buildings and ways of doing things which have existed for centuries." She continued looking in front of her, aware that he'd glanced at her. He knew she was trying to cover up that what she saw before her was far superior to that of her home country.

"And, of course, your father's stables have produced many fine animals."

“Yes.” She looked back at the buildings they’d passed, horses being trained and people going about their business. “But this is on another scale entirely,” she conceded. “I’ve seen nothing like it.”

And she hadn’t. From the gleaming state of the buildings to the bright eyes of the horses, nothing was out of place. It was easy to see the money and care which had gone into the stables. Despite her intentions, Rosana felt herself softening to this man. She’d always believed you could tell a person by the way they treated their animals. It was certainly true of her father and, in the opposite way, it appeared to be true of Zaire.

A group of men immediately approached Zaire and greeted him. Rosana was surprised when Zaire introduced her to them. Again, this was not something her father would have done. After conversing for a few moments, two horses were brought forward.

Zaire stopped talking and came over to her as she patted the horse who’d been selected for her to ride.

“I especially asked for this horse for you. I thought you’d enjoy her. I hear you’re an excellent horsewoman.”

She glanced at him sharply, wondering where he’d heard that. She hadn’t ridden since she’d left her home country. “Really? I doubt that.”

Zaire gave a surprised grunt. He was obviously unused to anyone doubting him. “It’s true,” he said, stepping forward and rubbing the horse’s nose, “my assistant had to dig deep to find anything out about you.” He glanced at her. “But even so, word of your excellence travels, sheikha. We have heard of your prowess as a rider and didn’t wish to insult you with an inferior animal.”

She shrugged and turned her attention back to the horse. There was no point refuting it because she had been an excellent horsewoman. “I haven’t ridden in years.”

“Then perhaps you’d prefer a less lively horse?”

The horse responded to her touch, and she shook her head. “No, this one

will do. What's her name?"

"Adira"

"Adira" she murmured. "She certainly looks like her name—noble, beautiful, and powerful." She stepped back and looked at the mare. "Adira is definitely the horse for me."

Adira's eyes weren't fearful, but strong and direct, and intelligent. Rosana felt as if she was being assessed. She leaned into the horse and spoke in a slow and lowered tone, rubbing her neck to reassure her. As she continued to speak in a gentle voice, she gave Adira the opportunity to see her and inhale her scent, and to gain confidence in her. Adira's ears pricked up and her eyes widened to begin with, but then she settled and Rosana took the reins and smoothed and briefly massaged her neck.

Adira looked away as if she no longer had any interest in assessing Rosana and had given permission for her to mount. Which she did, with the help of a groom, grateful that her maid had somehow summoned up a beautiful set of riding clothes for her to wear.

And then it happened. One moment she'd been Sheikha Rosana, prideful and contained, intent on her purpose, the next... She was a woman, astride a beautiful, powerful horse and the facade with which she confronted the world had vanished.

She looked up briefly and caught Zaire's eyes. His smile faded, and she realized she was revealing herself. She moved the horse so no one could see her expression, fearing what could be seen there. She blinked back the pricking in her eyes as emotion washed through her, cleansing her of the years of work, years of repressing her true self to prove her worth.

"Is everything okay?"

She turned to see Zaire bringing his horse closer to her, his head tilted to one side in concern.

She forced a smile onto her face. "Sure," she said, sucking in a deep breath to calm her racing heartbeat.

He came alongside her, keeping his horse, who wanted to gallop off, in check. “I thought you might have changed your mind. Your expression—it was...” It seemed words had failed him for the first time.

She shrugged quickly. She really didn’t want him to consider what thought processes had been going through her mind to create the expression he was trying to describe. “It was nothing at all. Simply pleasure at being back in the saddle.”

He didn’t look convinced. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She leaned forward and patted her horse’s neck. “I’m on a beautiful horse, and”—she said, giving a gentle squeeze to her horse’s flanks—“I’m about to ride out into the desert which I haven’t been able to do since I was a child.”

They walked through the yard and past a car with his security team in it, who would follow them at a distance. Rosana had forgotten what it was like to be so hemmed in by people. Her freedom at Oxford had been curtailed only by her own nature. Now she was beginning to regret having led such a circumscribed life in England.

As soon as they were able, she looked ahead, sensing her horse’s need to pull away, and gave her free rein. She was aware of a burst of laughter behind her, followed by an answering thunder of hooves to match her horse’s own.

Soon, the world behind her, and even Zaire, was forgotten. She was at one with her mount, sitting lightly as Adira flexed and stretched her muscles into a strong, rhythmic gallop. There was nothing but the flat plains in front of her and the distant enticement of a shimmering oasis—their destination. For the first time in a very long time, she didn’t think, she just was.

Slowly, her scarf slid from her face and hair. She only realized it when she felt the tug of the wind in her hair which had loosed from the tight bun. And the scarf went flying away — a white flash in the brilliant blue of the sky.

Then she felt his presence and saw him riding alongside her. He shot her

a surprised smile and she could see the same joy on his face as she felt inside of her. And she suddenly thought that he, as king, was as trapped in his role as she was. This was a man who yearned for freedom, too. But maybe a different kind of freedom.

Slowly the shimmer of the oasis formed into a spiky outline, then the dark amorphous shape separated into individual trees, and the towers of the central palace rose above the surroundings, their details emerging in the bright light.

She was the first one to trot into the shadowy, welcome green of the trees. She felt as if she were a million miles away. And she wondered if Queen Mandana had felt like that. And if that had contributed to allowing herself to form a relationship with Lord Gleave.

She realized that Zaire's horse, larger and more powerful than hers, could have easily overtaken her, but he hadn't. He jumped down, led his horse up to her and looked up at her with a smile. "You enjoyed that."

She answered with an equally broad smile. She was filled with the thrill of the ride and the scent of freedom, and was in no hurry for the old Rosana to make an appearance.

"I did." She waved away his offer of help and jumped down, rubbed Adira's nose and looked deep into her eyes. "I think Adira did, too."

"She was bred for it." He opened his mouth to continue, but obviously thought better of it and gave a small grunt instead. She knew what he was about to say, and didn't query it. Because she knew, too, that this was as much her world as that of the horse. She was bred for this life, too.

She looked away, blinking into the dappled sunlight which filtered through the trees from the scorching sun, baking the world around this, their private oasis. For the first time in years, she questioned her life. Had she made the right decision about leaving her home? In making a new life for herself in England?

But, even as the words formed, she knew she had. While she might love her country, she had no love for her family or the culture which had restricted

her every move. However, it seemed from the brief time she'd been in Sifra that their culture was more enlightened than hers was. She knew why. She glanced at the outline of the palace, which appeared through the trees. It was because of the queen who'd wrought such changes to her land, and had fallen in love with the wrong man. The enemy.

"It's easy to forget what makes one happy," he said.

She didn't know if he was talking about himself or her and she swung around to ask, but her mind went blank when she discovered how close Zaire had moved to her.

He shrugged, as if he didn't know the answer. "Shall we continue to the palace?" he continued. "I think you'll find much to interest you there."

She heard the car draw up discreetly behind them and voices as the men got out, but they kept their distance. The oasis continued to be theirs and theirs alone.

She nodded. "Sure."

They walked along the overgrown path which led to the palace once owned by Queen Mandana. The golden yellow of the Sidr trees punctuated the thick stands of evergreen palms, and the scent of the oasis which hung in the sultry air took her back to her childhood. They emerged from the shelter of the trees to be immediately confronted with the brilliant blue of the water, so startling after so much desert. Beyond it rose the palace.

"A palace fit for a king," murmured Zaire.

"And even for a queen," responded Rosana.

He glanced at her and her skin shivered under its warmth. "Even a queen with the reputation of Mandana."

Rosana averted her eyes from him, fully aware that he was scrutinizing her. She felt dizzy, disoriented under that intense gaze, as if the world had shifted.

"Yes. Of all the queens, she was the mightiest."

"A heroine of yours?"

“No, not a heroine.” Then she made a fatal error—she looked at him. The warmth in his eyes flared into something much stronger, transforming his dark eyes into a rich mahogany brown. She felt as if she could sink into them and be absorbed into them. She swallowed and forced herself to look away, before his gaze could annihilate her. “I do not revere women who sacrifice everything they have for forbidden love.”

“Very proper,” he commented.

“They were both married, and he was a foreigner. No doubt they would have carried out their affair in a place like this which could keep their secret—at least to begin with. And if she had other secrets, they could also be here.”

“Hm,” he said, looking back at the palace. “Then let’s explore the palace and uncover Mandana’s secrets. It’s been many years since I’ve been here.”

The short walk around the water to the palace was under the shelter of the trees and Rosana was glad of them because out here, in the desert, distant from the mountains or sea, there were no cooling breezes, only the freshness which came from the water and the shade from the trees. But once they’d stepped up to the clearing in front of the palace, the heat was searing on her bare head and she was grateful to enter the palace itself.

Here it was cooler. With its high ceilings, the large, empty rooms echoed as they walked through them, disturbing the dust and the palace’s forgotten history. There was no hint of the glamor and riches which had once been there. But they had no need of them to imagine what it must once have looked like because the empty rooms and overgrown courtyards were redolent with atmosphere and mystery. There was no need for concrete reminders of what had passed between these walls.

She shivered as she imagined what the palace had borne witness to.

“Are you cold? Would you like me to summon my men? They would have retrieved your scarf for you.”

She touched her hair. She’d almost forgotten that it had slipped off on the

ride. She shook her head, suddenly aware of the sensuous tumble of her hair around her shoulders and back. From feeling cool, she suddenly felt very warm. “No, I’m fine, really. It’s only my imagination running away with me.”

His hand reached out as if to touch her hair, but he paused, frowned and withdrew his hand as if he’d surprised himself. He’d certainly surprised her. It seemed it wasn’t only *her* imagination which was running away with itself.

He cleared his throat. “Perhaps we should move on.”

Indeed, she thought, as her mind moved on, but not in the direction he meant.

CHAPTER 6



For a royal palace, it was relatively simple in design. No doubt partly because of its great antiquity and its dual function of fortress in this outlying area. Rosana took photos of some features and wall frescoes which, although faded, still adorned the walls deep inside the fortress. Few foreigners had seen the building. Although, of course, Lord Gleave had been pre-eminent amongst them. She followed Zaire onward, up to the top floor and nearly bumped in to him when he halted.

“And this was the bedroom.” He walked inside, looked around, and then turned to look at her. “Where the queen, no doubt, entertained Lord Gleave.”

The blush began deep inside of her, sparked into bloom by the intense expression in his eyes. He seemed to look directly into her very soul—enquiring, seeking, and finding. She took a deep breath and averted her gaze. She couldn’t allow herself to be exposed to such scrutiny.

She walked away from him, admiring the traces of ancient paintings which still remained on the walls, before looking out the windows to the inner courtyard. It must once have been a thing of beauty, but now it was overgrown. “She had been a great queen and yet she threw it all away for him.”

“Maybe she considered him to be worth the sacrifice.”

She turned to him. “No man is worth the sacrifice.”

Slowly he walked toward her and she couldn't have moved, even if she'd wanted to. "You talk like someone who has never been in love."

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She couldn't think of anything. His sunglasses, pushed on top of his head, nestled in his sexily tousled hair. His uncompromising, strong features underscored the fact that, not only was he a handsome man, but he was also a tough one. He was also a king, and her enemy—a forbidden man from a rival family.

"That is very personal," she managed to say. She had no intention of discussing anything remotely personal with him, because she didn't know where it would lead her. "I'm merely interested in the historic facts about their affair and how it influenced history."

To her surprise, he coughed out a laugh. "How... *academic*."

"Surely you're not surprised. I am an academic."

"I *am* surprised. To understand the history, I'd have thought you needed to understand the people, and what motivated them."

Her lips tightened in a slight grimace because he spoke the truth. "Maybe."

"Most definitely, I'd have said. Now me, I *do* understand."

"Why?" she asked before she could rein in her curiosity. "Have you been in love?" She regretted the words as soon as they'd slipped from her lips.

A curious look entered his eyes as he shifted his gaze away. She allowed the silence to lengthen, wondering why he'd suddenly gone quiet. Then he turned to her and gave a quick nod.

"Yes. I have. It changes people. It puts everything else about life into perspective. If Mandana loved Gleave as I once loved, then she'd have done anything—absolutely anything—to be with him. Nothing else mattered."

The expression in his eyes was both one of passion and pain. It transformed him into a different man—a complex man, a man she didn't dare know. "But you are unmarried."

His expression relaxed into one of resigned amusement. "You *are* a

straight woman, aren't you? Did you not know that one can love when one is unmarried?"

Annoyed by the accusation, she began to walk out the door. To her surprise, he reached out and grabbed her arm. She stopped abruptly and stared at him.

"You can walk away, Rosana, but you can't run forever."

"What makes you think I'm running away?"

"Everything about you," he said enigmatically, releasing her arm. He leaned against the doorjamb. She could have continued on through but was held both by his gaze, which seemed to skewer her to the spot, and his response. Could he really see through her so easily?

"And you believe you know me so well after such a short time together?"

"I know," he said in a low, seductive voice, "that you weren't happy at home. You were a different girl a few years ago when you came here with your father and brother." A small smile tweaked at his lips. "Arrogant, of course, but different. Then you were restrained. Now nothing appears to restrain you. I could see it the moment I met you, and it was confirmed when I saw how you rode your horse. You"—he stepped forward and lightly tapped her arm—"are a woman who has narrowly escaped something and is wary of ever being trapped again."

Her breath stuttered as she drew it in, and then she shook her head, pushed past him, ran out of the door, and kept on running until she was outside, sucking in deep breaths of the hot dry desert air. She heard footsteps behind her and she was about to return to the horses when he called out.

"I'm sorry, Rosana. I didn't mean to offend you. I guess neither of us does small talk well. We get honest too quickly." Before she could respond, he pointed to an elevated shady stone terrace beside the water which promised to catch the slightest breeze. Beneath the spreading trees was a table laden with food and two chairs. "Please forgive my rudeness, and join me for lunch."

She hesitated. But there was little point in insisting they return to the palace. First, he may decide not to give her access to the palace throne room she needed. And second, there was information only *he* had, and she was here in the palace of Queen Mandana. Because, no matter how much she denied it, she *was* fascinated by Mandana. And, she realized, not only with her, but with this land. With this man.

She chewed her lip and nodded, uncharacteristically hesitant.

“Lunch then?” he asked for clarification.

“Lunch,” she nodded again, more emphatically this time.

As soon as she set foot on the terrace where lunch had been laid out, presumably by the men who’d accompanied them in the car, any lingering regrets disappeared. The traditional Bedouin meal of salads and breads was laid out on a stone table covered with a fresh white linen tablecloth. Colorful cushions had been arranged on the stone seats, bringing life back to the long-abandoned buildings. It was magical, she thought with surprise.

“Something has amused you?”

She turned to see Zaire twisting the cap of a bottle of water and passing it to her. She accepted it and took a drink gratefully, needing time before she answered.

“Yes, me,” she said with a smile.

Zaire sat back and shook his head with a big smile. “You know, when you smile, your face is transformed.”

She immediately felt her smile slip. She hadn’t even realized she was smiling.

“So, what amused you?” he continued.

“The magic of this place.”

“It is, indeed, magical. But you’re surprised at this?”

“I’m surprised that I even used the word ‘magic’.”

“Ah, yes,” he said, taking a drink of water. “An objective, serious academic shouldn’t believe in magic.” He placed the bottle on the table and

offered her a bowl of olives. She took one and popped it in her mouth, relishing the salty, astringent taste. “But you?” He narrowed his eyes in a way which made her stomach flip with something she instinctively recognized as desire. “Yes, I can imagine that magic is something very much a part of your soul.”

“Zaire,” she said, leaning forward, “are you flirting with me? Because all of this...”

He leaned forward too, brushing her hand—whether accidentally, she couldn’t have said—and resting it there for one long moment. “All of this is what?” he prompted.

Suddenly, she didn’t have a clue what they’d been talking about. The air between them crackled with sexual tension. She shook her head and only then realized that her shirt had slipped a little, and her long silky hair had snaked its way inside it, tickling her neck. She plucked it out and tossed it to one side. His eyes followed her every movement.

“Is...” She glanced around, desperately trying to think of a logical conclusion to her sentence. Her eyes alighted on the food. “All of this is making me extremely hungry,” she said with raised eyebrows, daring him to bring the conversation back to flirting.

He sat back, and the tension broke. “Of course. Let’s eat.”

And they did. Or, rather, *he* did, in between asking her questions. She didn’t know whether it was her surroundings—both strange and familiar at the same time—or this man who seemed truly interested in finding out about her. She wasn’t used to such attention.

“And so”—he prompted after she’d decided he really couldn’t want to know any more about her—“your father wasn’t exactly the nurturing sort.”

“*That* is the understatement of the year,” she said, pushing her empty plate to one side and leaning back against the cushions. “My father is a strict man and one who has no interest in women except for their traditional roles.”

“And you weren’t interested in traditional roles?”

“Not solely, no. And certainly not the kind of role he had in mind for me.”

“And what kind was that?”

“A docile daughter who would marry whoever he wanted me to, no matter how old, how unkind...” she trailed away as she remembered her disastrous marriage.

“Ah, I’m sorry to hear that. There were rumors about your husband.”

“And I’m sure they were all true. Including the fact that he was found dead in a Paris brothel.” She sighed. “The only good thing about my marriage was that it gave me a way to leave my father.”

“And you stayed away.”

“I did. Despite him insisting I return home. I suspect he had another arranged marriage ready for me.”

“But you’re not going back?”

“No. Never. He was also a... cruel man.”

Zaire narrowed his eyes. “You mean he was cruel to you?”

She nodded.

He sat up straight. “Did he hurt you?”

“Many times. I will not return home to be subjected to that abuse anymore.”

Was it her imagination, or did his eyes soften? He reached out and took her hand. “I am truly sorry that your father abused you. If I’d known when you’d come to Sifra to visit, all those years ago, I’d have intervened.”

She smiled, imagining the young man Zaire had been then, standing up for her against her father. “Then, it’s just as well you didn’t, because I assure you, you would have come off worst. My father is powerful and knows no boundaries.”

“And your brother? Didn’t he protect you?”

“My brother? No, he was too young, and I doubt he knew what was going on.” She shook her head. “I will never return to my family or my country,

because it will be worse than it was before. I have gone against my father's wishes by not returning. To be honest, I was concerned about coming to Sifra, so near my father."

He squeezed her hand. "I promise you, no harm will come to you here. You are under my protection." With that, he released her hand, and glanced at the sun, which was beginning to lower in the sky. "It's time we returned."

They walked back in silence to the horses. He helped her mount Adira and patted her horse's neck, holding on to the bridle.

"Zaire, tell me, why the inquisition? Why did you ask me all those questions about me and my background?" She had to know.

"Because I'm interested in you. Is that so hard to understand?"

She gave a small grunt, unwilling to answer that, yes, it was. Because no one ever had been before.

AS THEY RODE in an easy canter across the desert plains, back to the city, Zaire lingered a little behind Rosana, so he could watch her. His hunch had been correct. There was more to her than a beautiful, arrogant princess. But what he most definitely hadn't been expecting was to find a beautiful, arrogant sheikha who was full of pain, a woman who'd suffered at the hands of her family like no woman ever should. And that got him in some primitive place which he knew he wouldn't be able to ignore. Whether he liked it or not, and something told him he probably would, he had to protect this woman. And, not only that, the little he'd learned about her only whetted his appetite for something more. For something *much* more.

CHAPTER 7



As soon as she'd retrieved her hijab from one of Zaire's men, upon re-entering the stables, she felt as if she'd returned to normality. The brief respite from freedom—during which she'd felt like a regular woman with normal needs and desires and the possibility to fulfill these—was over. She was chained once more by her identity and her past.

After fixing her headscarf in the restroom, she returned to see Zaire leaning against the car, waiting for her. He waved in greeting. Her step faltered at the assumed familiarity. How could she have allowed herself to slip into such a casual relationship? Her thoughts must have been reflected in her expression because his smile slipped as he pushed himself off the car.

“Is everything okay?” he frowned.

“Of course,” she said, unable to meet his gaze. “But I need to get on with my work. I only have a few more days.”

He grunted, as if understanding the change in her. But how could he? How could anyone understand her when they hadn't an inkling of what her life had been like, and all that she'd gone through?

“I understand.” She shot him a suspicious look. He held up his hands in mock surrender. “I do! You have to get back to your studies. And I assure you, I will help you in every way I can.”

Panic filled her at the thought of his continued presence. “There's really

no need for that.”

He stopped in his tracks. “You don’t want me to help you?”

She continued walking. “It’s not that, it’s just... I need to focus, to read through the papers, to...”

He waited for her to continue speaking, but she couldn’t think what else to say. He sighed as if her lack of words provided the explanation. “Have it your own way. I’ll have someone show you around. You have a few hours before dinner.”

“Wait!” she said, whirling around to face him. After the day they’d had, she suddenly felt ungrateful. “And thank you. I’m sure you had a million better things to do than take me to Queen Mandana’s palace. I appreciate it.”

He smiled at her. “I know you do. I could see how much you enjoyed it. But I wish you hadn’t lost that sense of enjoyment quite so quickly.” There was a call from inside the palace, and he looked around. “I must go. I’ll see you later.”

He walked through the palace foyer with the physical ease of an athlete. There was no doubt about it, he was incredibly attractive. What was she thinking? She was mad not to follow him. She lifted her hand and was about to call after him, but suddenly a phalanx of white-robed officials descended on him and closed ranks around him. Their progress through the lofty chambers was marked by a Mexican wave of officials bowing as the king walked by.

This was all smoke and mirrors, she thought, returning to her room to get changed. This was a mirage as much as the oasis in the desert had been. He was the king, and her enemy. There was no point spending time together unless it would further her academic career. No point at all.

Because her career was all she had. It was the thing she’d always escaped to. But, what she couldn’t understand was why that place of refuge didn’t feel like one anymore.



THE THRONE ROOM was out of bounds unless the king accompanied her, so she'd had to content herself with the magnificent library for the few remaining hours of the afternoon.

Her colleagues had told her what they'd found there. But they'd been looking for different things. Her specialty was royal traditions, and the library proved a treasure trove on this subject. But some of what she found related to traditions in her own country, and the pain that seeing such details, which brought back her homeland so clearly, brought her research to an abrupt halt. She sat back and squeezed her eyes shut as she tried, unsuccessfully, to blot out the memories of the last time she'd been surrounded by the suffocating ceremonies of the royal court. It had been on her wedding day.

She'd been too young. And, with no decent education, no mother, no aunt, no grandmother to guide her, the only clue about what to expect had come from what she'd witnessed among the animals in the desert, and the stables. But nothing she'd seen in the animal kingdom had been cruel, nothing had been perverted, nothing had prepared her for an old man who needed more than a beautiful young body to become aroused.

She'd told no one about what had happened to her or her continued suffering at his hands. Trauma had cut deep and cauterized the memories but, now, seeing the images of weddings and knowing what had lain behind hers, brought it all back. She hid in the corner of the library, slid down the wall and cried for the innocence she'd lost on her wedding night and the hatred and distrust for men which had taken hold of her then and had never let her go since. She hadn't even realized how hard she'd become until now. Until she'd met a man who'd been kind, who had wanted nothing but to know her, and to understand her. But that man was the king, her father's enemy. She lay her head on her arms and sobbed for everything she'd lost, and everything she could never have.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and she jumped up, swiping away her tears in panic that she'd be caught. To her relief, it wasn't Zaire at the door—she doubted he would have knocked—but an official who handed her a note from the king inviting her to dine with him. She declined the invitation. She felt battered, confused and a wreck, certainly in no fit state to withstand Zaire's flirtation. She'd opened up too easily to Zaire, and her memories of where that could lead to taunted her. No, she'd go straight to bed and then it would be business only in the morning. She just had to get through a few more days before she could leave these desert lands of painful memories.

She spent the remaining minutes of the day in the library, struggling to focus. Her brain power felt as scattered as her emotions felt shattered. In the end, she went to the far window with its view over the desert lands to where she was born and raised, and waited until night fell.

She'd forgotten how sudden was the change from day to night. In Oxford, the twilight was long as the light faded imperceptibly over hours. Here, it was as if a vast, star-studded cloak was suddenly flung over the land, hiding it from the light, taking the world from day to night with one swift movement. She sighed as she watched the lights flicker on—from the utilitarian lights of the palace public areas, to the more subtle lighting in the gardens below her.

She rose and collected her books. One thing was for certain, she wouldn't be using those well-lit public areas to return to her suite of rooms. Unlike her colleagues who'd been lost within the labyrinthine palace walls, not only had she been here before, she knew the layout of the palace, it being similar to the one in which she was raised. No, she intended to return to her rooms, unnoticed, through the gardens.

Darkness had settled even deeper by the time Rosana stepped out of the library buildings. She pulled her scarf lower around her face and hurried through the formal gardens, designed to impress. And they did. In this dry land, it was water which was revered, and it was water around which the

design was based. Everywhere water reflected the star-studded indigo sky along with the tall dark trees which pierced it. As a night breeze rose, the reflections rippled on the surface of the ponds and rills, as if the world was shivering with anticipation, disintegrating before her eyes.

She didn't pass anyone, for which she was thankful. She wanted to go directly to her room and stay there until she could access the throne room, do what she needed to do, and escape back to her well-ordered life. A life under control. A life without emotion and longing and the potential for pain. She wanted none of that.

As she approached the wing in which her rooms were situated, the gardens became more heavily planted, creating more intimate, private areas. She hurried even faster through these. At last she'd reached the end of the gardens and glanced behind her, hardly believing her luck that she'd made it this far without detection. She raised the heavy metal latch on the ancient door which led to the terrace from which she could access her room.

It was only when she'd closed the door behind her she realized she wasn't alone. Zaire rose from a chair. Her heart leaped in her chest and instinctively she clutched it. It was the one thing she didn't want activated. It was the one thing which spelled disaster for her well-ordered life of calm and safety.

"I thought I'd have to send out a search party for you," he said in a casual tone.

She swallowed and forced herself to step forward. "I didn't realize there was a curfew," she said, forcing her tone into an equally casual one. She walked up the steps to the terrace. One quick glance revealed dinner and drinks, set for two. She swallowed again, forcing down the flutter of nerves. But they refused to leave. The breakdown in the library had left its mark. How the hell was she going to get through this?

"No curfew," he said, his casual tone unperturbed. "Simply concern that my guest shouldn't go to bed hungry."

"How considerate," she said lightly. "Are you like this with all the

palace's guests?"

He laughed and poured her a drink. "No." He held out a glass of fragrant sahlab to her. "Only the very *important* ones."

There was something ambiguous in his use of the word 'important', and she was dying for clarification while, at the same time, not wanting to hear why she might be important. To cover her confusion, she accepted the glass. The warmth of the glass in her hand, combined with the smell of cinnamon, made her suddenly realize how thirsty she was. She took a long sip and sighed as she placed it on the table.

"Thank you," she said. "That was kind, but I must get an early night."

"Of course. But," he said, pouting a little, "it's a shame to waste this food." He took the lid off a plate and the mouthwatering fragrance of aromatic spiced rice wafted over and her stomach rumbled. She could hardly deny her hunger now.

She shrugged. "I guess I won't sleep so well on an empty stomach."

"An excellent decision. Come, take a seat and help yourself. I promise I won't keep you indefinitely."

She sat down and began to eat, grateful for the food. Somehow, she'd forgotten how hungry she was.

"You enjoy our food," he said with a smile.

"It's been a long time since I ate it."

"And you don't miss it?"

She shrugged evasively. It seemed she didn't need to answer.

"Of course you do. And the land. That much is obvious." He sat back thoughtfully and tapped his fingers against his lips. "And yet you still choose to stay away."

"I have my reasons."

"Anyway, I did not intend to continue the inquisition. I apologize for asking so many questions earlier. I thought this might give *you* the opportunity to ask *me* questions. If you like," he added.

She had to smile. “Not particularly,” she said. She almost laughed to see his confidence falter slightly. She very much doubted that any women had ever shown anything but interest in him.

“May I ask why?” he asked.

“You may, and I’ll even answer you. I don’t have any questions to ask because I’m not interested in the answers.”

He winced as if he’d been shot. “You know how to hurt a man.”

All humor suddenly drained away. “No, you’re wrong there. *Men* know how to hurt *me*.”

She was shocked she’d let her guard slip and spoken her true thoughts. She was even more shocked by the look of intense look of sympathy in his eyes. She didn’t need sympathy. The only thing she needed from this man was help in finding the diamond.

CHAPTER 8



*I*t horrified Rosana that she'd revealed even a little of her past to Zaire because it made her vulnerable and that was the last thing she wanted to be. She opened her mouth but closed it quickly, not trusting herself to speak in case she incriminated herself further.

Zaire's lips were pursed as if he wanted to say a lot more but was stopping himself. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said finally, leaning on his arms on the table across from her with a gentle smile. "And, as I sense you don't wish to discuss this, how about we change the subject?"

"Gladly," she said with a sigh of relief.

"Well, if you'd like to be entertained, I can tell you all the secrets about my brothers. Things"—he leaned forward confidentially—"which they would hate anyone to know. Including their wives."

"Then how can I resist?" she said, unable to prevent herself from grinning. He was impossible. And he was also impossibly charming. No woman could be immune. Certainly not one like her, unused to flirtation. Her barriers were usually enough to keep men at a distance. Unfortunately, those barriers were no longer in evidence. They'd gone. Been wiped out by the blast of emotions and memories which had demolished them from the inside out. She'd never expected her armor would have to be defended from herself.

And he didn't disappoint. He told her anecdotes about his brothers, which

turned them into real people—not simply royalty or seducers of her colleagues. Apart from the evening of her arrival, she'd only met them in the formal visit of her father and brother when they'd appeared distant and intensely royal, barely able to conceal their hatred for her family.

Little by little she relaxed, her laughter coming spontaneously when he delivered the punchline on some embarrassing story about Amare. He was particularly prone to getting himself into very un-royal situations, which their elder brother Darrius inevitably had to retrieve him from before their father discovered the predicament. Women, being stranded miles from anywhere wearing the most inappropriate clothing, lost luggage—they all featured in one story about Darrius this time. Rosana very much doubted whether Leonora knew of it. Although even if she did, she doubted whether it would ever dent her colleague's love for Darrius. Nothing external could touch her relationship. Same went for Janey, she was sure. The thought of such love that she'd never allow herself made her heave a sigh. She looked up, suddenly aware that Zaire was silent.

“I thought my stories would entertain you, but you look sad.”

She forced a smile. “They did entertain. Believe me, they did. It's just...” she trailed off. She wasn't about to admit that she was sad because she didn't believe she'd ever experience love on the same level as Leonora or Janey.

He tilted his head so he could see her more clearly. “It's just?”

She shrugged and shook her head.

He placed his hand on hers. “Don't do that. Don't evade the question. Please, I'd like to know.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Because I'd like to know you. And I can't do that if you don't tell me things which are important to you.”

“But I'll be gone in a few days. What difference does it make if you know me or not?”

“A lot to me.”

She still didn't understand. But before she could question him further, he squeezed her hand and sat back.

"Humor me, please. Tell me what brought that wave of sadness to your face."

She would be gone in a few days. What did it matter? And she wanted to. Why, she didn't know. But for the first time in her life, she felt the urge to get closer to a man.

"I was simply thinking of Leonora and Janey and how much they love your brothers. They seem changed somehow. So different and"—she shrugged—"I don't know, I wondered what that would be like."

"Ah, I remember. You said you've never been in love."

She kept her gaze steady on his. His words were spoken kindly, gently. If there had been any hint that he was ridiculing her, she'd have run a mile. But this wasn't the King Zaire she'd first met. And, for the life of her, she couldn't look away. She shook her head in an awkward, jerky movement. Even that seemed too much, and she felt a blush of fear rise within her. Had she given too much of herself away?

"Then I am sorry, because being in love is one of the most amazing things in life," he continued.

She had to ask. "You said you'd been in love. Or maybe you were kidding me?" Her flushed skin would have told him how interested she was in the answer, even if her question hadn't. She was sure he'd know that there was nothing casual about her inquiry. He'd realize that she'd lied earlier about not wanting to know anything about him. Because, apparently, she did.

"No. I wasn't kidding," he said with a rueful press of the lips, as if he regretted it. "I *have* been in love."

She couldn't have said why, but she felt disappointed. She hardly knew the man and yet she felt hurt that he'd loved someone. She was being ridiculous.

"And you still are?"

The night air pulsed with the sound of night insects and darkened a shade further as clouds passed over the stars. She held her breath, waiting for his answer. Because, despite all her resolve, all her determination to keep separate from this man, his answer was unbearably important to her.

“Yes.” The single word floated to her like a puff of air. Insubstantial, but holding a wealth of meaning in that single syllable.

She exhaled and bit her lip and looked away. She felt deeply disappointed. She rubbed her chest. Suddenly, he reached out and took her hand.

“Yes,” he repeated. “I do still love the woman I fell in love with as a kid. I —”

She held up her hand. She really didn’t want to know the details. She needed to put an end to this now. While she could. “Please —”

But *he* stopped *her* this time. “No, hear me out, Rosana. I want you to know. Galila and I were inseparable from a very young age, and that closeness changed when we became teenagers. Eventually we became lovers, in secret, no one knew. My father would never have entertained a marriage between me and Galila, but we *had* to be together. It was too elemental, too strong, to resist.” Then he looked down, stopping suddenly, lost in thought.

She swallowed down a hard lump. “What happened?”

Slowly he raised his face. At that moment, the clouds passed over, leaving the stars bright once more, shining light on his face, revealing a pain she wished she hadn’t witnessed. It was soul-deep.

“She died.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He swallowed hard and nodded. For the first time she thought she saw the real man behind the kingly facade.

“Not as sorry as me.” He shot her a fleeting smile before sucking in a deep breath. “She’s gone, but my love for her remains. It always will. No one can ever replace her.”

Her heart sank, and she sat back. The message had been received loud and clear.

“So, you will never marry.”

He shook his head. “No. I have no doubt that I will have a host of nieces and nephews to choose from as my heir.”

“Nieces? You might choose a niece?”

“Of course. My love for Galila showed me how powerful women are, and how wise. It would be indeed foolish of me to ignore a suitable woman. My wish for my country is to become stronger, more stable and peaceful.”

She was surprised again. Pleased *and* surprised. Obviously, the misogyny of her family and culture didn’t apply here, in Sifra, at least not to the king.

“She’s left a lasting legacy,” she added softly.

Zaire tapped his hands over his lips and then lowered them and smiled. “She has. Now, I believe I’ve done my share of confessions. It’s your turn.”

She raised an eyebrow, also relieved to have moved on from talking about emotions, an area she knew little about. “I suppose that’s only fair. What do you want to know?”

“What your passion is.”

She blinked lightly, firmly repressing the first thing which came to mind.

“What is it that drives you?” He asked again, obviously realizing her discomfort at the word ‘passion’.

“My work.”

“That’s what you *do*. Not what *drives* you.”

She was silent for a few moments. No one had ever asked her that question before. Education was a goal on its own, right? But now he asked, it gave her pause for thought.

“I wanted to be educated. That is what I needed, what I wanted, what I couldn’t have in my country. That was what drove me.”

“And now?”

“Now, I...” she trailed off and shrugged, suddenly realizing what was at

the bottom of her need to succeed. There was only one person whose image was conjured up in her mind when she thought of winning. “Now, I imagine how my father will see how wrong he was.”

“You want to prove your father wrong,” he said gently.

“I guess. I think I’ve been so focused, I hadn’t really thought of it like that. But I want him to see what I’ve become, what all women can become if they’re not treated like chattels—things to be bought and sold for political gain.”

He leaned forward. “You realize he will never understand, that he’ll never change his views. He’s not that kind of man. He’s not that kind of king.”

She blinked. “There’s always hope.”

“Have you heard what he’s doing now? My ministers advise me he’s sent women to jail for demonstrating about women’s rights.”

She gasped. She hadn’t heard. She jumped up and paced around. “I must go there. I must support them.”

He placed his hands firmly on her shoulders. “Rosana. Leave it. There’s nothing you can do—for now, at least.” She blinked back the tears, and he gently swiped away a rogue tear before it could trail down her cheek. “There’s nothing you can do,” he reiterated.

“Then I’ve failed.”

“You can’t right the wrongs of your father single-handedly.”

And then she looked up at him and forgot he was king, and an enemy of her family. It was all she could do not to reach out for him, the only person with whom she’d ever talked about her father, the only person who’d ever given her sympathy and advice. Advice which she knew, in her heart, was true. She blinked and his face seemed to become closer, as if she swayed toward him. She couldn’t have said if she had, until his palm cupped her cheek gently, and his eyes connected with hers in a way which made her heart melt.

“Rosana,” he said, his breath soft against her cheek, “you can’t put the

world to rights by yourself. You've done nothing wrong. You've only had wrong done *to you*."

It was the last straw, and all she craved was his warmth and understanding to press deep inside her soul. She wanted connection and, without a further thought, she rolled onto her tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his. She held it there for one long moment, absorbing every sensation of the kiss—his sensuous, manly fragrance, the softness of those lips which appeared so hard, and, the whisper of a sigh which escaped his mouth before his lips opened, moving over hers with a sensitivity which snatched at her heart. It wasn't any thought which made her open her mouth and touch his tongue with her own, but a deep-seated need, an imperative which would not be stopped. And she didn't want it stopped when the intimacy deepened and his hands slid around her waist, his fingers splaying over her curves, as if his need for her was equally strong.

It was only when he stepped closer to her and she felt the press of his body against hers and his erection push into her stomach that she was finally roused from the sensuous state in which her thinking brain played no part. She pulled away, suddenly horrified. What the hell had she done?

She stepped away, but the step became a stumble and a chair fell over with a clang, further rousing her from her fugue state. She pressed her fingers against her lips as if shocked by the sensation which still lingered there.

He didn't move, simply reached out for her, as if he wanted her back in his arms again, but daren't try.

"I'm sorry," he said, dropping his hands to his sides. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

She shook her head, knowing that he hadn't instigated it. She gulped, but no words came.

"You're upset," he continued. "I understand that, and I apologize. I got carried away."

She shook her head. "That's not why I'm upset. I'm upset because I

meant that to happen.”

Without a further word, she turned away and rushed into the darkness of the open doors, towards her room. She didn't dare remain a moment longer with him because she couldn't be with him and not want him. And she had no future with this man, this king, this enemy of her nation.

ZAIRE WATCHED HER LEAVE, the taste of her on his tongue, confusion reeling through his brain. He'd accomplished what he'd set out to do. He'd helped her to relax, and drop the barriers which she'd re-erected after their ride into the desert when she'd opened up to him in such an enchanting way. No doubt she'd regretted it. She probably imagined it had made her vulnerable when her defenses had dropped, and all signs of arrogance had vanished. Maybe it had. Because in their place was a woman who he wanted to know better. A lot better.

The passion he'd sensed when they'd first met was there in her eyes and in the shape and swell and taste of her lips. It was there in her soul.

He'd spoken truly when he'd said he still loved Galila. He did. And that would never leave. But it didn't stop him from wanting to steal another kiss from this enigmatic woman with pain in her heart and passion on her lips.

CHAPTER 9



The next morning, Rosana didn't hesitate. She rose early, showered, and breakfasted with her usual precision and sense of purpose. Her disciplined adherence to routine and work had served her well every day for the past eight years. Until now.

She dressed with care, selecting more formal clothes than the previous day, and strode out to meet the king. She refused to allow herself to think about the kiss. There was no point. She'd made a big mistake and the best way forward was simply to not think about it, not be tempted again, do what she needed to do, and get out of Sifra as soon as she could. It was that simple. She could work with simple.



KING ZAIRE PACED from one side of his office to the next while he waited for Rosana to arrive. He'd spent a sleepless night thinking about the kiss and the feelings it had awakened in him. He'd originally cleared his workload, intending to toy with her, even seduce her, imagining how such a relationship would destroy Rosana's father's credibility with his new allies—the Faud Federation. If the Federation believed Rosana's father had become an ally to Sifra, it would destroy the flow of economic support they were providing for

his country—the Kingdom of Harran. It would isolate and weaken Harran and increase Sifra’s power. It had all been very tempting.

He stopped pacing suddenly and looked out at the bustling palace out of his window. But now? The thought of using her in any way whatsoever was abhorrent to him.

He felt her pain. In fact, it devastated him. And he wanted nothing more than to eradicate it, to make that passionate woman he saw yesterday blossom into the woman she could be.

He picked up a photo of Galila.

“What would you think of all of this, my love?” he asked, his thumb caressing the framed photograph. “Would you feel betrayed?”

Silence filled the air, suddenly broken by the sound of his assistants working outside his room, their voices becoming increasingly agitated. Then Rosana’s voice, calm, dignified but quite clear and imperious, rose above them. He sighed and replaced the frame, his eyes lingering on the hopeful, shy grace of the woman in the photo—the woman who’d died too soon. She was leaning over her pet dog, patting it because something had spooked it. She’d been like that. Kind. The kindest person he’d known. Which, to be honest, wasn’t hard when the only people he could compare her to were his family.

And then the thought came to him. He closed his eyes as Rosana’s voice rose louder still, as his assistants tried to delay her because she was early. He smiled to himself. Galila would have been kind to him, and to Rosana. She’d always seen through people’s exterior, to their soul. And she would have liked Rosana’s soul. He was sure of it. And maybe, just maybe, she’d meant it when she’d told him she wanted him to be happy. After all, that was what she’d told him as she’d lain dying in the hospital—a long lingering illness which she faced with a courage which he didn’t possess. She’d told him to be happy. And he’d let her down so far because he hadn’t been. He’d simply been living, day by day, forcing himself through a reality which felt less real

than his dreams and memories. But that kiss had changed everything.

He brushed off a speck of dust from the photo, and went and opened the door. All eyes were on him. Two harried assistants and an aloof, business-like Rosana. His smile faded. He saw instantly that she regretted the kiss.

“Sheikha Rosana,” he said formally, addressing her as he could see she wished to be addressed. Her entire attitude shouted formality. “You’re early.”

She lifted her chin and looked even more regal, if that were possible. He could hardly believe that only a few hours previously his lips had been pressed to hers, and, even more unbelievably, she’d instigated it.

“I am on time, Your Highness.” She stepped aside with a raised brow. “Shall we proceed to the throne room?”

“If you wish,” he murmured, and the doors were opened for them and she swept through, leaving him with no option but to follow her. It didn’t annoy him, rather it amused him. But it also reinforced the fact that it would not be easy to break down those barriers once more. But, he thought, this time he knew it would be worth it.

“I trust you slept well,” he said, opening a further door for her.

She glanced at him, her face flushing slightly before her lips tightened and she nodded and walked through. He sighed. This was going to be harder than he imagined.

He thrust his hands in his pockets and continued alongside her without speaking for a few moments. He was content with stealing occasional glances of her stony face—those beautiful lips pouting slightly in her desire to keep them unexpressive—and with inhaling her fragrance. Contrary to her cool demeanor, the fragrance she wore was feminine and light, like flowers after rain, with an earthy note which was definitely sexy. He couldn’t help wondering which came from her actual scent and which came from her. *Her skin*. He sucked in a deep breath and cleared his throat, trying to control his arousal. He definitely wouldn’t get anywhere by allowing his mind to travel there.

“I think you’ll be very interested in what you find in the throne room,” he said, determined to get his mind back on track.

She half-turned toward him, before thinking better of it.

“I’m sure,” she said crisply. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

He swallowed a grin. She really was such a princess. He wouldn’t have accepted such insolence from anyone else. But from her? It was an enjoyable challenge.

“I *am* surprised, though,” he said.

They continued walking in silence, which he was determined not to break. She *would* answer him. They stopped at another door, which required a security code. He didn’t enter one. Instead, he raised a questioning eyebrow at her. She was forced to meet his gaze, which she did briefly before looking down, a welcome blush suffusing her face. He knew she wouldn’t be able to keep up the pretense that there was a barrier between them. Because the kiss had destroyed that last night.

“At what?” she finally muttered, her eyes downcast.

“Hm?” he said, as if he hadn’t heard her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what you said?”

She heaved a sigh and looked up at him with a steady gaze now. She had courage, but he’d known that. “What are you surprised at?”

He couldn’t think for a minute, because he was totally lost in those eyes. Their velvety darkness held hints of green, making her eyes a more hazel shade of brown, suggesting complexity. She certainly held that in spades. Then her eyes narrowed, her dark brows lowering a little, and he was brought around, realizing she wanted an answer to her question.

But he wasn’t ready to give an answer yet. He wanted that curious gaze to continue to be focused on him, because at last he had her attention. He punched the code into the door, and it sprang open. He gestured for her to enter. Her lips pressed together tightly, drawing their fullness into an almost, but not quite, straight line. They were too full for that. The doors of the

throne room were before them and he waited as they walked a few steps further before answering.

“I’m surprised that, for someone who wanted to leave her royal family and lands and culture behind her, you specialized in royal tradition. I’d have thought you’d have had enough of all that.”

“You mistake wanting to leave my country with not loving my country.”

“Now there’s a paradox if ever there was one. Please explain.”

“I doubt you’d be interested,” she said.

He stopped walking and eventually she stopped on the pathway, overhanging blooms brushing her head as slowly she turned to look back. “You doubt I’d be *interested*?”

“I mean, why would you?” She opened her arms wide and shrugged. “We hardly know each other. We met only a few days ago. Your interest, if you have any, must be superficial.”

He bridged the gap between them in a few paces. To her credit, she didn’t move away, although he could see alarm in her eyes. Instead, it was he who took the step back. He didn’t know what had made her so fearful of a man approaching, but he never wanted to see that look in her eyes again.

“Is there a period designated after which interest is allowed?” he asked. “Have you never met someone, or something, that has piqued your interest, stirred you after a moment, or two, or a few hours? Or maybe after a significant event?”

He was rewarded with a lick of the lips. He gave a brief sigh of pleasure. So long as all of this ended up with another taste of her lips, he’d be happy.

“Significant event? You consider a horse ride a significant event?”

“No,” he said, becoming irritated by her absolute refusal to acknowledge what they both knew. “I consider a significant event the fact that you kissed me.”

Her shocked expression had him reaching out for her, determined to stop her from running from him.

“You can’t make it go away, Rosana. You kissed me, and I kissed you back, and it changed everything.”

He felt the tension leave her body as she shook her head. He turned her around, and she continued shaking her head, her eyes downcast.

“Rosana, you can’t turn the clock back. You can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

She shot her chin up and glared at him defiantly. “Watch me!”

“Believe me,” he said, releasing his grip. “I will.”

He allowed her to pull away from him and to enter the room. He waited a few moments to gather himself before he followed. The woman was impossible! He huffed a frustrated sigh. How the hell was he going to make her see sense? Then he remembered Galila. She’d taught him how to behave with frightened horses, horses that had been abused. Gentleness and kindness were required. You had to earn their trust. And all he’d been doing was bullying her. He had to give her free rein, even if that meant she ended up walking away. Because, unless he did, she’d most surely leave, and fast.

CHAPTER 10



*H*e followed her into the throne room and closed the door behind them. She was standing in the middle of the magnificent room, her gaze not shifting but as direct as herself, focusing on one thing and one thing only—the throne.

“What do you think?” he asked quietly, keeping his distance this time.

“I think it’s of its time.” A slight frown settled on her face as she approached the chair. She was the complete academic now, with her prey in sight. She peered at the gold scrollwork and the ornate design without touching it, as if she were looking at something in a book.

“That doesn’t sound exactly complimentary.”

She shot him a quick look, as if she’d forgotten he was there. “It’s not.” She pointed to the top of the throne. “Here, it’s obviously been influenced by Byzantine design, and there”—she pointed to the claw-like feet—“the French style of the time is clear.” She took a few steps up to the throne itself and touched its base. Her hijab slipped a little, and she didn’t pull it back into place. Her hair fell forward in a shiny dark curtain, which his hands itched to sweep back. Instead, he clenched his fists to stop himself. “But here,” she said, for the first time running her finger along the design, “here is something quite different.”

He forced his gaze from her to the object her fingers were caressing. He

saw immediately what she meant. He'd never noticed it before.

“The flower of the *Boswellia Sacra*—the tree from which frankincense comes,” he said. “It was such an important part of our countries' wealth, it had to be honored. At least there's a part of this which is our own.”

“Yes. But you can also see that this has been added later.” She sat back on her haunches, examining the throne as a whole and that piece in particular. “Hm, I thought as much.” Her fingers felt underneath, her eyes focused on their exploration. She gave a small grunt—too orgasmic for his liking—which did nothing for his self-control as he watched her bend right over, her bottom in the air, as she explored the hidden secrets of the chair. She sat back, and looked up at him with a wide smile. “Do I have your permission to take that piece off?”

His eyebrows shot up. The throne was a symbol of his kingship, and he'd never even considered dismantling or destroying any part of it.

“Is that really necessary?”

She smiled then, and he thought he'd do anything to keep that radiant smile on her face. He didn't wait for an answer.

“Of course you have my permission.”

“Don't worry, it will fit back together perfectly. It was designed to come apart.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because, Zaire, I have studied all these things. I have learned things which have been before you every day of your life, but which I doubt you've even seen.”

Zaire wasn't sure if he was more shocked by her use of his name—which she hadn't done before—or the fact that she knew more about his world than he did.

“Then, sure, go ahead.”

He stood back and watched as she crouched down. Her arm was fully extended beneath the throne while her gaze was upward, frowning as she

focused all her senses on what her fingers were doing. Suddenly, there was a popping sound and her frown lifted. There was the grating sound of wood moving over wood and she rose to her knees as she turned her attention to the front piece, which now slid easily aside, revealing yet more complexity beneath.

He swore under his breath at the array of sparkling gems, which were suddenly exposed.

“It’s a false front,” she said, stepping back to look at the new frame exposed. “What you are seeing is the original front.”

“I had no idea such treasures lurked beneath there. They look more valuable than the gems on display.”

“They are the originals. The ones on display *are* real gemstones, but not as high quality, not as valuable as these.”

He pointed to the gaping hole in the middle of the section. “And that’s where you expected the diamond would be?”

She shrugged. “I’d hoped, but hardly expected. That wouldn’t be in keeping with Queen Mandana.”

“You think she had something to do with this false front?”

“Oh yes. It bears the hallmark of her design interests and the date it was added suggests her involvement.” She glanced at his obviously bemused face. “Maybe you hadn’t noticed, but the early images of the throne didn’t include the false piece. But, after the mid-nineteenth century, it does. She had to have had a hand in it.”

“Why did she go to the bother? Why not simply lock the jewels away?”

“Because she was playful. Nothing was straightforward with her.”

“So what was the point of all of that if the diamond wasn’t there?”

“Oh, but it was, originally. Not the real one, of course, but a good enough replica to have fooled whoever has stolen it.”

“So where do you believe the genuine diamond is?”

She smiled a sweet smile he hadn’t seen before. “On another throne. On

her throne.”

“But that throne is so modest, of such a simple design, that my family rejected it.”

She laughed, and it further softened his heart. He’d go on talking about the throne forever if that was what was needed to connect with this woman who he couldn’t stop thinking about. “Of course. But that was Mandana. She couldn’t resist showing a modest front to the world while hiding such wealth, a symbol of her power beneath it. She was playing a joke on men who would so easily overlook women, not realizing their worth.”

“An extravagant joke,” he commented. “So, where do you think her throne is?”

“I should imagine it’s been placed with other discarded objects—too valuable to dispose of, but not deemed valuable enough to put on display. Where might that be?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” He pulled out his phone and rang his vizier and exchanged a few brief words. “Someone will come to take us there. While we wait, is there anything else you’d like to show me I don’t know already?”

He shot her a smile but was surprised when she turned to him with a thoughtful expression, her head tilted slightly as if she were scrutinizing him. He didn’t like to be scrutinized.

“Sure. Over there.” She pointed to a frieze which showed the downfall of his family’s line. It had been replaced some time later, but only after bitter bloodshed.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Because it’s what happened before when the king didn’t marry and had no children. There was a civil war, bloodshed, division. You can’t let that happen again.”

“It won’t.”

“I’m a historian, remember? And if there’s one thing I know, it’s that

history *does* repeat itself, given the right conditions.”

He felt angry at her forthright words and annoyed that she’d turned the tables on him. It seemed Queen Mandana’s sense of superiority over men had rubbed off on her. But he refused to have it. No one talked to the king like that. “I think that’s enough of your conjecture for one day.” He turned and walked away.

“You can keep on walking away, but it doesn’t make any difference to the facts.”

He spun around. “What do you know of the facts?”

“What I’ve heard, and what you’ve told me. You’re so in love with the memory of a woman that you refuse to live in the present and do your duty as king.”

He stabbed his finger in the air at her, suddenly furious. “That is absolutely untrue!”

But his anger didn’t deflate her in the least. In fact, she took a step toward him as if she had no fear of his rage. “You loved a woman, you lost her, and you don’t believe anyone can ever replace her. *That* is the truth of the matter. And that will be your, and your country’s, undoing.”

He was silenced by her sureness and a rap at the door.

“Come!” he bellowed. Two officials entered the room.

“Your Highness. Sheikha. You wished to see the royal storerooms?”

He exhaled roughly. “Yes.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Yes, that’s right. Where are they?”

“In the old palace, Highness.”

“Let’s go.” Zaire really wasn’t in the mood for loitering now. He wanted this over with. He didn’t need anyone—least of all a woman with the lips of a seductress—to lecture him about duty or his personal life.

THE OFFICIALS HELD the door open, and Rosana made sure she kept pace with

Zaire. She knew she'd rattled him. If it hadn't been for the way he'd needled her—trying to get her to lower her defenses, mentioning the kiss, which she deeply regretted—she wouldn't have said anything. But she didn't regret what she'd said because it was true. The more time she'd spent with him, the more she saw that—for all his apparent strength, power and control—he had an Achilles Heel and that was his love for the woman who'd died.

She had to run to keep up with him as they walked through deserted corridors where pieces of furniture were piled high. It was obvious from his expression that Zaire had never been here before. This raised her hopes even further that she was getting closer to finding the diamond.

Eventually, the officials arrived at an upstairs room, far from the main areas of the palace. The gardens outside were unruly and unkempt, and the dust on the windows from the ever-present blast of sand remained uncleared.

“Is this it?” asked Zaire, breaking the silence. It was the first thing he'd said since they'd left the throne room.

The officials nodded. “It is, Your Highness.”

One of them fumbled through a set of keys until he found the correct ones to open the doors. In the end, unlocking wasn't sufficient, and he had to shove with his shoulder to release the swollen wooden doors which creaked in protest against this disturbance from their slumber.

The officials stepped aside, as did Zaire who gestured for her to enter. She needed no further invitation.

As soon as she stepped inside, she knew she'd found the right place. Her senses were assailed by the sight and smell of history. Even the sounds of the present day came from a distance and were muffled and remote. Before her was the chaotic jumble of discarded objects, some piled on top of each other, and others partially covered with dust sheets which had rotted over the years.

From the ornate decorations on the ceiling and walls, she could see that once, many centuries ago, this chamber had been important. But not now. Now it held no meaning for anyone except her. She glanced back at Zaire,

who stayed with the officials outside the door, after a swift, disdainful glance into the interior. He was still smarting from what she'd said, which told her that her comments had found their target. She'd deal with him later. Now she'd focus on the treasure trove before her.

She walked around the room, stopping at each pile to discover what lay beneath the dust sheets. Ancient objects of stone, of marble, of precious metals, and of gold lay discarded, as if of no value. She guessed their comparative value was small when measured against the treasures which were on show in the palace. She continued to explore, ignoring the impatient movements of the men by the door, until she stopped, arrested by the shape of the dust sheet before her, initially disguised by other objects piled up around it.

Without waiting for permission, she wriggled through the surrounding piles of furniture until she could pull away the dust sheet which had caught her eye. It slid away with a swish like a gasp, as if it were saying, at last, I've been found again. She blinked and coughed at the dust. But when she'd wiped her eyes clear of the tears that her sneezing had created, she could see she'd found what she was looking for.

The shape was more feminine than most thrones, as Queen Mandana had commissioned it for herself. She'd obviously wanted a throne which didn't look as if it drowned her, but enhanced her power, rather than making people doubt her eligibility for it. The famed peacock motif fanned out behind where her head would have been, and the emeralds still shone in its decorations. It wasn't a lumpen chair made of gold with no style. This chair had integrity. Suddenly, she was aware of a presence behind her.

Zaire gave a low whistle. "Are they emeralds?" he asked, rubbing his thumb against them.

"Yes," Rosana said, "they are. And the stars are small diamonds."

"Then what on earth is such a thing doing hidden away here? It's beautiful."

“I should imagine it’s hidden because your ancestors wanted no reference to, or trace of, Mandana in the public reception rooms. She was *persona non grata* after what happened.”

“I didn’t realize.”

“She’d made the fatal mistake of loving someone more than she loved her country.”

He called the officials over to move things out of the way, so she could better examine the chair. Eventually it stood before them in all its subtle grandeur.

“So, is there a similar hidden place to the one on the other throne?”

“No. Not the same.” She moved around the back, her fingers exploring along its edge. “In some of the poetry she wrote, she gave the exact description as Gleave did.” She looked at him. “Remember the prophecy?”

He shook his head. “Should I?”

“Both Leonora and Janey would have told your brothers.” She shrugged. Obviously, there was a distinct lack of interest between the brothers about the diamond. None of them believed their theories that it would be here, in Sifra, hiding in plain sight under their noses all these years. But Rosana couldn’t think of anywhere else it could be. The removal of the false ceiling in Oxford at Gleave College, nearly a year ago, had originally raised hopes it might be there, but nothing had been discovered, only a complicated set of glass prisms. So here was their last hope.

“*In that elevated place of sensual indulgence you shall find what you seek in the eye of heaven,*” she quoted. “‘Elevated place’—once this throne was in the harem—one of the highest points of the palace. And it was a place most closely identified with sensual indulgence. ‘Eye of heaven?’ That’s easy. This”—she pointed to a central motif of a fountain—“represents the fountain which Leonora believed to be the hiding place of the diamond. The Qur’an describes gardens as earthly paradises, and this one represents the original eye of heaven. I believe it’s here.” It was a tricky place to find, but she slid

her fingers underneath the chair. “It’s where she would have hidden other things. Why not the diamond?”

The mechanism sprang open, and both Rosana and Zaire peered inside. Zaire straightened up immediately, but Rosana continued to look into the secret place, unwilling to believe what she could see before her. There was no diamond. Only the knowledge that it had once lain there and had left its mark in the crushed, cushioned velvet.

CHAPTER 11



For a moment, Zaire had almost believed Rosana. She'd been convincing, and he'd been impressed, despite himself. She'd almost had him believing her. But then she'd pulled aside the secret compartment to reveal an empty space.

He was about to say something derogatory when he saw the look on her face. She was devastated. She looked up at him with bleak eyes and he suddenly realized how much she'd had riding on this.

"I'm sorry you didn't find what you're looking for."

"It's your diamond. I'd have thought you'd be more sorry," she snapped before turning away.

"I never thought it would be here. Gleave took it. It's in England. You should look there."

"We have. It's not there."

He shrugged. "Anyway, you've tested your theory and found nothing. Mission accomplished."

"Exactly," she said sharply. "I've done what I came here to do, and now I'm free to leave."

He didn't want her to go. The thought slammed into his brain and refused to leave. "Now you're here, you could always study all of this," he said, indicating the room full of treasures. "There are bound to be more secrets

tucked away here.”

“They’re your secrets to uncover. Not mine.”

He caught the glint of tears in her eyes as she tried to turn away. He reached out and touched her on the arm. “You’re upset.” She refused to look him in the eye.

“Of course I am. Finding the diamond would have made sense of everything.”

“And it would have shown your father what you’ve done. What you’ve achieved.”

She was silent. And he knew he’d found the real reason for her search for the diamond.

“All this, your work, was to prove your worth to your father, wasn’t it?”

Then she turned to him and he could see the depth of sadness in her, and it reached out to him, as if it were something tangible, and grabbed him where it hurt most—in the heart.

“You don’t need your father’s acknowledgement,” he continued. “Your worth is there for anyone to see. If your father chooses not to see, then it’s his loss.”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head and her gaze darted around the room, before settling on the exit where the officials waited.

“I have to go,” she said. “I have to get out of here.”

He released her arm, and watched her half-stumble, half-run outside. He knew she was crying properly now. He followed her in time to see her disappear along the corridor.

He watched her go, but didn’t race after her. If she wasn’t in her room, he knew where she’d be.

ROSANA RAN BLINDLY along the corridors, trying to retrace her steps, wanting to leave Zaire and his sympathy behind. She hated that he’d found her out.

She hated even more that he'd discovered something about her she hadn't even acknowledged to herself.

She stopped running and looked around. Somehow, she'd found herself at the library. But then, she always had. It had always been her place of refuge—her safe place. She opened the door and entered. She looked around and waited but, for once, there was no soothing of her soul. The smell of musty papers did nothing to sweep away the turbulent emotions which continued to churn through her.

Suddenly, she heard the door open. She looked around, ready to turn away an official in search of information. But it wasn't an official.

Zaire glanced across at her and closed the door quietly behind him. She quickly swept away the tears which had spilled onto her cheeks, refusing to appear any weaker in his eyes than she did already.

But he didn't come over to her straight away. Instead, he looked around.

"I haven't been here for..." He sighed and looked around. "Actually, I don't think I've ever been here."

"Then why are you here now? You can't be looking for something."

He held her gaze, but kept his distance. "But I am."

She bit her lip and walked over to the desk and sat down, smoothing her hands over its dusty surface. She cleared her throat and racked her brains, trying to think of something to say to divert his attention from what he'd been looking for. Because she knew he'd been looking for her.

"I'd have thought you'd have been too busy to... to be running around on senseless errands." She shrugged. "Whatever they are."

"There's nothing senseless about my errand." He picked up an ancient priceless stone figurine being used as a paperweight and frowned in a puzzled way, before placing it down on the table once more. He leaned against a wall of books and crossed his arms. "Aren't you curious to know what my errand is?"

"No!" The single word came out too forcefully. "I mean, your errands are

your own business.”

“Not in this case. Not if that errand involves someone else. Someone who I’m concerned about.”

“There’s no need to be concerned.”

“I think there is.”

He pushed himself off the bookshelves and walked over to her. She kept her eyes lowered. He gripped the edges of the desk and leaned over toward her.

“I think there is,” he repeated, “when that other person doesn’t seem to understand themselves. Doesn’t seem to see the world around them for what it really is.”

“Are you suggesting I don’t understand my world?”

“No, I’m not suggesting anything. I’m saying, quite clearly, that for a clever woman, you don’t have a clue what’s going on inside of you.”

She jumped up. “How dare you imagine you know me better than I know myself! Do you really think I’m that stupid?”

“Apparently, even the cleverest mind can be stupid sometimes,” he said in an annoyingly calm voice.

Further incensed, she walked around the desk wanting to force him to back down, to admit that he was in the wrong.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” she said, her voice echoing around the lofty room with its marble walls. “And until you do, I suggest you keep quiet!” She glared at him, with all the anger, frustration and emotion that was piling up inside of her, forcing itself to the surface like a volcano which had been simmering for too long.

Infuriatingly, his lips formed a slight smile. “It won’t work, you know.”

If he’d said anything else. If he’d argued with her, agreed with her, anything else at all, she’d have known what to do. She’d have countered it with an argument. But this? It took the wind out of her sails. She opened her mouth to speak but no words formed and she sighed instead. She raised her

hands and let them fall against her hips in an expression of confusion. “Okay, you’ve got me. What won’t work?”

“You, venting that anger of yours on me. I’m not the enemy.”

“Then who is?”

“I think you might believe it’s you.”

She spluttered. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He shook his head. “Think about it. It’s what you do best. Think about how you treat yourself.”

“I don’t know what —”

He took a step toward her and tapped his finger against her lips, and she stopped talking immediately. His touch silenced any thought.

“Rosana,” he said, his eyes softening along with his smile, as his eyes ranged around her face. “You’re in pain. I see it, and I want you to see it too. Otherwise you’ll never be free.”

She shook her head in one last-ditch attempt to deny what he was accusing her of.

“No,” he said, his finger now moving over her lips, caressing them, rather than trying to stop her from talking. She opened them slightly and his fingertip dragged along her full bottom lip. She gasped and her tongue licked her lips and found his finger.

He looked up into her eyes and then all bets were off.

“I’ve been wanting to do this ever since I met you,” he said, dipping his mouth to hers and kissing the swell of her upper lip and then lower, and then moving his tongue along the slight gap between them. She suddenly felt drained of all her energy. All she wanted was for that sensation to continue.

She closed her eyes and swayed into him. He caught her and held her close, his hands around her, supporting her as he explored her lips, her mouth, her tongue. Every part of her was both primed for action and putty in his arms. And the best part was that she had no thought, nothing at all in her mind, except an instinctive need for him to continue, and that had nothing to

do with her brain. Only her body. And her body wanted him. She knew it by the desire which throbbed between her thighs, by the way she pressed her breasts against his chest, wanting her needy nipples to be rubbed by his flesh. Every part of her wanted him. She had no choice but to accept this need. It was too overwhelming to ignore.

She groaned and swept her tongue along his while slipping her hands around his hips, splaying her fingers around his back, feeling out the lines of muscle and sinew through his clothes. She hated that there was fabric between her fingers and his body.

As she acted on her instincts, his kiss deepened and she swallowed a groan which came from him. It was a groan of desire and intent which made her even wetter than before. His grip on her body tightened before he moved to smooth his fingers down her back until they covered her rounded bottom. He splayed his fingers over her ample flesh and squeezed it, while slamming her needy sex against his erection.

She staggered back under the force of his movements until she was stopped from going any further by the desk which she'd used as a barrier only minutes earlier. Now she wanted no barrier, including clothes. So when his hands slid under her abaya and pulled it off, she offered no resistance. And when she was standing in the simple dress, her only thoughts were in line with his—it had to come off.

CHAPTER 12



Rosana gasped as the wrap dress stretched over her generous breasts, her nipples hard and pointing through the fine material. He brushed his fingers over them and she jumped at the electric charge which zapped through her. And then he lowered his kisses to her neck, her chest, and only then did he pull down the stretchy material to expose her lacy bra and the swell of her breasts over the top. She saw him swallow as he swept his fingers over her skin, watching as goosebumps bloomed in their wake. She gasped and thrust out her breasts, wanting him to undress her, but unable to ask for what she wanted. It seemed he understood.

With one sweeping movement, he pulled down her dress from her arms and lower. Shocked, she stood only in her bra and knickers. It took only a second for her to realize there was no way she wanted her clothes back on. There was only one thing she wanted, and he was standing in front of her, his eyes raking her body, his erection clearly visible.

“Are you sure, Rosana? Because I am. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life before. I want you. Are you sure you want me?”

She gulped and nodded quickly. She didn’t want him to have any doubts, because she didn’t. She’d only ever had sex with one man before and that had been the man her father had forced her to marry. There had been no enjoyment. But that had been a long time ago, and as different to this as night

to day. And Zaire shone like the sun to her—hot, encompassing and all she wanted.

“Yes,” she said again, in case her nodding was misinterpreted.

“In that case,” he said, his voice lowered sexily to almost a growl. “Turn around.”

She did as he said. She thought she’d do anything, say anything, to continue the flood of pleasure which filled her now. She was rewarded with a caress and a flick of her bra, which released her breasts into his waiting hands. He caressed her sensitive nipples, and she leaned back into his arms with a groan as he continued to play with her.

She might have had sex before, but the foreplay had been severely lacking and she couldn’t believe the sensations which coursed through her body, making her sex pulse with desire. He kissed her neck and then turned her around. Right now, she knew she’d do anything he asked of her.

Papers and objects fluttered and crashed to the floor as he cleared the desk. He lifted her up, and she sat on the desk. He lowered his mouth to her breasts, holding their full weight in each of his hands as he suckled first one, then the other. She gasped and held his head firm in her hands. She didn’t want him to go anywhere. She only wanted that exquisite sensation, which was heightened with each lick, to go on forever.

But it didn’t. Too soon, he stood up, and she whimpered in protest. He silenced the whimper with a kiss so sensual that she found, when it had finished, her fingers had raked through his hair and were pressing against his scalp, and her legs were wrapped around his hips. Hips, she noticed with a disapproving glance, which were still fully clothed.

He lifted her chin with his finger. “What is it?” he asked with a frown. “Is something wrong?”

She stood up. “Yes, you.” He cocked his head to one side. “You’re wearing too many clothes.” He grinned and immediately discarded his clothes. Her eyes slipped to his cock. It was hard and long and was exactly

what she wanted.

“You know?” he said, reaching out for her. “Sometimes I’m quite willing to do as you tell me. When your imperious manner is exactly what I like. Tell me, what else would you have me do?”

She took in a breath as her mind raced with all the things she wanted him to do. “I... I want you to make love to me.”

With one swift movement, he lifted her into his arms, and her legs curled around his waist. And, with his hands under her bottom, her hands locked around his neck, she let herself fall back as she angled her sex onto the length of him. She was so wet, she slid easily onto it, taking the whole of him until he was deep inside of her.

She gasped and sighed as she adjusted to the myriad sensations which traveled through her. Then he moved, and she was back against the velvety bindings of the book covers as he withdrew and then pushed deep inside of her again. The sensations were nearly overpowering, but he slowed his rhythm and kept his gaze on her, supporting her as he thrust inside of her again and again. Only when she’d reached the place which, unknowingly she’d been seeking did she cry out and wave after wave of flexing pleasure coursed through her. At that moment, he thrust repeatedly and gasped as he came inside of her.

Slowly he released her, and she slid to standing. He kissed her long and languorously. He put his arms around her and pressed her head against his chest. She could hear the beating of his heart and knew she was exactly where she should be.

Then he huffed a brief laugh and pulled away, pushing her hair off her face. “I can’t believe we just did that.”

She frowned, and he kissed it away. “I mean, that was the most wonderful...” And then he frowned and drew back a little. Somehow, she knew exactly what he was thinking. How could it be the ‘most wonderful’ when he loved his dead lover so much? She understood. Because she wasn’t

the only one with a past which was hard to forget. Except in her case, it was filled with fear and pain rather than love. But it made no difference whether the memories were good or bad, because it was still the past which needed to be overcome if they were to move on. But she didn't know if they could do it—either alone or through each other.

“It's okay, you know,” she said. “What we did then, it was...” She shook her head, as she tried to think of words which could convey not only the pleasure she'd experienced, but how much it meant to her. How much it had touched her deep inside in more than a physical way. It had pierced her emotions equally thoroughly. “It was special, unique, incomparable. So, please, don't think of our lovemaking as competing with that of the woman you loved. It's not. It's different. You're different. I'm different.”

“And I called you stupid?”

She laughed back. “And that, Your Highness, requires me to punish you. I will have you begging for mercy as I use you.”

“I like the sound of that.”

She looked around and led him to a beautifully soft carpet, and told him to lie down. Then she pinned his hands on either side of his head and dipped down and with the tip of her tongue teased his lips. As soon as he tried to lift his head to deepen the kiss, she drew back. “No, this is going to be on my terms. And my terms only.”

He sighed. “Do as you please. I think I'm going to enjoy it all the better for that.”

Her eyes were once again drawn to his erection. She put both hands around it, cupping it, enjoying how it flexed in her hands, and the pearly drop at its head. She leaned down and licked it off, tasting both her and him and knowing that it tasted good, that blend, the two of them together. She couldn't wait any longer. Her sex pulsed with need and her breasts were tight, aching for his tongue to lash them.

She sat astride him and lowered herself onto him, teasing him as she

brushed her wet sex against him, moistened even further as his seed slid out of her. She wanted it back inside of her again. And she placed herself over him and pushed down, closing her eyes to extract every drop of sensation which came from the movement of his skin against hers, inside and against her clitoris.

She rose and fell gently at first, feeling her way. This was all new to her, and she was moving instinctively, taking what her body told her she wanted. She came almost straight away. Her body was so sensitive, and his cock so strong and erotic inside of her. So she began to rise and fall on him again, this time taking her time, allowing her breasts to settle on his chest and to rub her nipples against the hair there, exciting her even further. Her long hair fell around her, shielding them from the outside world—creating a secret world of sensuous joy.

Eventually she sat up and bounced on him as the orgasm gripped her. Then, with a swift movement, he turned her over and took control once more. It seemed he might allow her to do as she pleased for a while but, ultimately, he was a sheikh, he was king, he was her lover and knew exactly what she wanted, and what would please her. She could live with that.

ZAIRE DIDN'T KNOW how much time had passed as both he and Rosana dozed in each other's arms among the tangled sheets. They'd called a halt to their lovemaking in the library only so they could return to her room where they could continue to make love throughout the night. Now, a low stream of sunlight passed through the filtered screens at the windows, indicating that it was time to get up. But he didn't. Instead, he watched the shadowy patterns shift over Rosana's breasts. They were, like her, completely erotic. He'd sensed her passion when he'd first met her. But she'd kept it tightly hidden and, maybe because of that, it was even more extreme when it had emerged.

While she lay sleeping, her eyelids flickering as dreams played lightly

with her mind, he thought about what she'd said. He knew she was right. This lovemaking changed everything. He had loved Galila, and he still loved Galila. But she was no longer here. She existed only in his mind and heart. But Rosana was here. Larger than life, with enough passion and intellect to keep him engaged emotionally and mentally for... well, he thought, forever.

He rolled back and looked up at the ornate ceiling. *Forever*, he repeated. He knew it was the truth. He repeated the word again, rolling it on his tongue, feeling the shape of it, getting accustomed to it. It didn't take him long. He tilted his head to one side and looked at her. Her dark brows were lowered lightly, as if puzzling something out in her dreams. He adored everything about her, from her rounded cheeks and flawless skin to the flare of her nostrils and exquisite, passionate lips. He could do forever with Rosana. Only her. There would be no one else from now on. He was sure that, after what had happened, she would be of like mind. They would marry. They would have children. And they would live happily ever after. He sighed with pleasure, exhaling away any lingering doubts and all his past fears. Yes, that would be exactly what would happen. He closed his eyes.

But, as he closed them, he didn't see Rosana's eyes flutter open, nor did he witness the frown deepen on her face. Nor the way her teeth nipped at her lips as if she were not only regretful, but scared to death.

CHAPTER 13



Zaire blinked his eyes open from a deep sleep and wondered what had awoken him. Then he heard it again, the sound of someone talking. He looked around and remembered where he was, but saw no signs of Rosana. He stretched out, enjoying the satiated sensation in his limbs and body, while listening to the murmur of what he now identified as Rosana's voice.

Their lovemaking had been a revelation. He'd never, in his life enjoyed being with a woman so much. And he had to admit he knew the reason. While their physical connection was amazing, there was something extra, something about her which got to him emotionally. His world had been turned upside down, and yet he still felt okay about it. He'd think more about what that meant later, because lying here thinking about Rosana had made her want her again. Very much.

He found her out on the terrace. She was dressed in a robe and was facing away from him. Her loose hair, which tumbled around her shoulders and down her back, shone in the sunlight. Whoever was on the other end of the phone was obviously not agreeing with her because as each moment passed, her voice became a little more tense. He realized it wasn't the volume of her voice which had awoken him, but its edginess.

He was about to slip his arms around her and press up behind her so that she could feel what he wanted, when he heard her say something which

stopped him in his tracks.

“There must be a seat available. What—nothing until tomorrow? No, that’s impossible. I need to return urgently.”

She grunted with impatience, finished the call, and slipped the phone back in her pocket.

“Urgently?” he asked.

She swung around, guilt stamped all over her face. Despite that, she looked incredibly sexy. But his ardor lessened when he saw the expression in her eyes. He got the feeling that they wouldn’t be returning to bed.

“Oh, I...” She shrugged. “I need to return to Oxford urgently.”

He bet she did. As soon as she thought about what she’d done, and had become terrified.

“Why? Did a student of yours have an urgent need to have his essay marked? Some Oxford dinner requires your urgent presence to test the quality of the wine?”

“I don’t drink,” she said between gritted teeth. “And I *don’t* appreciate you suggesting that what we do there isn’t important.”

“Then what is so pressing at Oxford, which requires your presence as soon as possible?”

“I slept with you, Zaire. That doesn’t give you the right to interrogate me about my movements.”

She was right, and it annoyed him. He was acting like a jerk, or a king. For the first time, he wondered if there was a difference.

“Of course. Please forgive me. It was rude, though understandable given the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?”

“That I know the reason for this ‘urgent’ need to escape.”

She crossed her arms, the folds of her robe softly draping around her ample bosom, almost distracting him. “Of course, you’re a man. I’m sure you can read my mind.”

“As it happens, I can.” He stepped closer, and she blinked. He traced her brow with his finger. It was no good. It was hard keeping focused when her robe slipped like that, revealing her cleavage, and the natural pout of her lips which had been further swollen by a night of passion. “I know that it’s not your thinking brain that’s the problem, but your fear.”

He was so close to her he could see the pulse quicken in her neck, the sharp intake of breath and darkening of her eyes. He didn’t need her to do a lie detector test to prove the veracity of his statement.

“You can’t believe you’ve allowed your natural instincts to take over that mind, which rules your life like a cast iron jailer.” He brushed away a lock of her hair from her face, allowing his gaze to rest on her lips for a long second before looking up into eyes whose expression almost took his breath away. Gone was the anger and arrogance and all that was left was naked fear combined with awakening arousal. The two combined made his heart ache. He dropped his hand from her face. The arousal was easy to deal with, but the fear? He needed to focus on eradicating that first.

“Please,” her voice was a husky whisper. “Don’t do this to me.”

“Do what, Rosana?” He shrugged. “Make you see that there’s no need to fear yourself or me? Make you see that you no longer need to hide your emotions? Make you see that your place is here with me?” Even he couldn’t believe he’d said it. But the truth was out there now. And it felt right. “With me,” he repeated with emphasis, as much to prove to himself that he meant it, as to her. But he no longer had any doubt.

She took a step away, her cheeks flushed, but at least the fear had gone. Other emotions, not altogether welcome ones as far as Zaire thought, now replaced it.

“What are you talking about?” she asked. “My place? With you? Are you mad?”

Quite possibly was his first thought, but there was no way he was going to admit that to her. “If the truth is mad, then maybe.”

“But, but...” she stuttered. “We’ve had one night together. That’s hardly enough to build a relationship on, even if I wasn’t who I am, and you weren’t who you are.”

“And who are we?”

“You’re king and I’m a princess of a country which wants nothing to do with yours.”

“And yet you’re here.”

“For professional reasons.”

“The reason you’re here has nothing to do with what’s happened. *That* is all about us. A man and a woman who can’t resist each other.”

“Last night,” she said, “was just sex.” She went to turn away, but he grabbed her hand.

“There was nothing *just* about last night. It was a lot more than sex.” He was angry now. Angry that she should diminish what had happened between them. “And you know it. And you refuse to accept it.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to accept!”

They glared at each other. And, in that moment, he knew it could have gone either way. If he’d tugged her and she’d slammed against his chest, they would have ended up back in bed again, making the kind of love that only two people could when their needs are great, and their fears are even greater.

But, as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t tug her toward him. There were still traces of the fear in her eyes behind her mask of anger. Reluctantly, he released her hand and stepped away.

“You know there is,” he said quietly, “and whether you like it or not, I will help you accept it. I’ll go now because I see fear in your eyes. And I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“I don’t understand why you want to help me. No one else has ever helped me.”

“Perhaps no one else has ever truly loved you as I do.”

She stood silent for a few moments, her shocked expression telling him

everything he didn't want to know. He couldn't bear to see her walk away, so he turned instead and went to his suite of rooms. He didn't know how he was going to help her see that their future lay together, but he knew he couldn't simply let her go—this princess, this angry, hurting woman who he wanted to spend the rest of his days and nights with.

ROSANA WATCHED HIM WALK AWAY, with his words echoing around her head. Had he really just told her he loved her? She pulled the belt of the robe tighter around her and padded barefoot back to her room. She looked around at the rumpled sheets, the discarded clothing, and closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall.

What the hell was she going to do? How was she going to get herself out of this mess? Because it was messier than Zaire believed. And he was wrong. She wasn't frightened of him. But of herself.

CHAPTER 14



*R*osana paced the room, eager for a confirmation of a flight out of Sifra, even if it was the next day. It seemed a flight was more difficult to book than she'd thought. Apparently there were none available today. But she had to leave.

She stopped pacing and looked at herself in the mirror. She couldn't believe what she'd allowed herself to do last night, nor the effect it had had on her. She felt as if she were looking at a different person, someone she didn't know. But then he'd become someone different, too. Someone who wasn't a king, but a man who desired her, a man who could make her feel things she'd never felt before.

She jumped as her phone rang and a flight, the last of the next day, was confirmed. She'd have preferred an earlier one, so she didn't have time to dwell on what had happened to her, and what most definitely she shouldn't have allowed to happen. But at least she was on the wait list should anyone cancel.

She'd packed everything away, and had stayed in her room, working all morning, and she'd have stayed all afternoon, if she hadn't received an unwanted text. The text she could ignore. Even though it was from the king. But the knock at the door, she couldn't. The first time she did. And the second. But the person obviously would not go away.

Impatiently, she jumped up and flung open the door, ready to launch a tirade at Zaire. But it wasn't him. She came face to face with a startled looking assistant.

"Sheikha," the woman bowed. "His Majesty, the king has requested that you join him this afternoon."

"No, I can't. I'm busy."

The woman looked even more startled. Rosana doubted if many people refused an invitation from the king. Although it was more of a summons than an invitation.

The woman bowed. "His Highness asked me to inform you that the car will collect you both at two this afternoon, to take you to your appointment."

"What appointment?"

The woman's impassive expression didn't alter. "With the school."

Rosana was so surprised that she didn't respond, and the woman simply bowed and walked away.

Rosana closed the door and glanced at her watch. It was one thirty. She had half an hour. She paced the room. She really couldn't stand the thought of being with him. Her resistance was usually strong, but it was paper thin when she was with him. But if they were going to a school, perhaps she could cope. But which school, and why?

She checked her messages, which she'd been ignoring, and she found the answer to her question. It was the school which Queen Mandana had founded. Damn. She tossed her phone on the bed. He knew how to tempt her. He understood her, that much was obvious, because this was about the only thing which would make her meet up with him.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. She quickly composed herself and went to open it. It was one of the palace officials.

"His Highness has asked me to escort you to the car. He will leave to visit the schools in ten minutes, exactly."

She grabbed her hijab and briefcase and followed the attendant out the

door.

Zaire was waiting by the car for her, a smile playing on his lips. Her step faltered for a moment. He looked incredibly handsome in his suit, and she didn't miss the way his eyes flickered over her body as she approached.

"Good afternoon," he said, indicating to the assistant to open the door for her.

She hesitated before replying, because there was a world of meaning in his voice. She decided to ignore his sexy tone and the way his eyes lingered on her lips.

"Good afternoon, Your Highness," she replied, adding the honorific, although it wasn't necessary. "This *is* a surprise." She was relieved to hear her voice emerge steady and strong, not reflecting the tumult of emotions which just seeing Zaire, having his eyes caress her, created within her.

"A good one, I hope," he said, pointing to the open door.

She stepped towards the car, and inevitably closer to him. "I'll reserve judgement on that for later."

He raised a suggestive eyebrow, and she wondered what kind of 'later' he was imagining, because it sure wasn't what she'd intended him to think. Before he could reply, she slid into the back seat. She hoped he'd take the front seat, as he usually did. She hoped in vain, because he walked around the car, and the door was opened for him to be seated next to her.

He shot her a smile, and his gaze lingered on her. She looked straight ahead at the rear of the driver's neck, and could feel the blush rise. She tugged her hijab closer to hide the fact, but she obviously hadn't succeeded if his smile was anything to go by.

"So," she said, determined to put their conversation onto a more professional footing. "This surprise visit to the Queen's School. Why?"

"Because I thought you'd be interested. Was I wrong?"

His gaze held hers. She couldn't lie, so she shook her head. "No, you weren't." She swallowed, desperately wanting to shift her eyes from Zaire

but unable to. The intensity of the chemistry which existed between them couldn't be denied. "Education is important to me. It's vital for women, and I'm interested to see Queen Mandana's legacy first-hand."

Zaire searched her face and gave a small grunt, as if he still hadn't gotten the answer to his question. He looked away, and she relaxed back against the chair, as if she'd been released from a bond. She looked out the window at the passing city streets. They slowed as they arrived at the school. It had been built in a strategically important central area which had been highly coveted over the years by different kings, but none had been able to remove the school from its central city location. Queen Mandana had made sure of that with her generous endowments, which had kept her legacy safe for two centuries.

The principal and teachers were waiting for them as the car approached the front entrance. Suddenly, she felt his hand on hers and she turned to face him.

"Rosana, about last night. I know you don't wish to talk about it, but I'm giving you warning, that we will talk about it. Because this is too important not to."

Before she could respond, both their doors were opened for them, and Zaire exited the car. It seemed that this was only going to be a brief respite, no doubt to prove something to her. She just wasn't sure what.

ZAIRE WATCHED Rosana talk animatedly to the principal. He'd made it clear to the principal that the visit was for her, not him, and so, after the protocol was over, he'd taken the back seat and enjoyed it.

He'd been correct. It hadn't taken her long to relax in a situation which meant so much to her. He could imagine her taking over the role which Queen Mandana had created so many years before. As his queen, she could make a difference. She just needed to be shown that.

He could see from the education officials that they connected with her passion and understood it. He not only wanted her for his wife and lover, he wanted her for his queen. Which only left two obstacles—Rosana’s fears of being controlled by a man, and the political implications. The former he was sure he could both rationalize and seduce away, but the latter? Their marriage would affect the power balance in the region and would need all the diplomacy which he and his brothers could muster to ensure it benefited them.

The brief visit had ended and he only half-listened to the principal as they walked to the exit. He was more intent on watching Rosana’s bright smile instead.

It was only after they’d re-entered the car that the brightness faded, replaced by a look of concern.

“What is it?” He thought he’d always be able to read her easily now. He couldn’t believe that he’d once found her arrogant. It was now clear to him that behind her aloofness lay a heart that was both passionate and generous.

“Queen Mandana’s endowment of the school has played a huge part in raising the profile of women’s education in Sifra, far above my country. It’s humbling. But I’m concerned about its future. The endowment has preserved it for two centuries, but the principal said that the funding is now in jeopardy.”

“Yes, so I believe. And from what I’ve seen, it doesn’t look as if the ruling council is making its future a priority.”

“That’s terrible! What will happen to those girls, and their potential? You can’t let the school just fade away! It’s too important.”

“I agree. You’ll have to do something about it.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“The same as the late queen,” he said thoughtfully. “You are alike, I think.”

“I’m more like that young pupil I spoke to.”

He frowned. "In what way?"

"You could see how frustrated she was about not being able to complete her studies here. There should be a university the girls can attend, or scholarships to help them study overseas."

"You managed to study overseas. But then, I guess you were a sheikha with resources."

She turned to him with blazing eyes. "It was even worse for me. I had *no* resources. None! Do you know how I paid for my education and the rent on my bed-sit?" She didn't wait for a response. "By waitressing, by cleaning, by doing anything menial I could because my father refused to help me. I either lived in my country under his antiquated rules, or I was by myself. I chose myself."

Tears glistened in her eyes, and he had to restrain himself from reaching out and wiping them away. But he knew that wouldn't help her.

"Then you must do something about it. You must help these girls."

"How can I?"

"Start by writing me a report. Tell me and my ministers how we can improve things and how we can help the girls and women in Sifra achieve their potential."

She blinked.

"You look surprised," he accused.

"I am. I thought..."

"Yes?"

She sighed. "I thought you'd be like my father, but you're not, are you?"

He exhaled heavily. "No, Rosana, I'm not. And I'm glad you finally understand that." He shook his head. "I'm nothing like." He licked his lips, trying to find the words to delay her from leaving the country, trying to figure out what the next step would be. In the end, it was Rosana who took the initiative.

"I have one last night in Sifra, Zaire. I hope you don't have any plans?"

The tentative tone of her voice betrayed her lack of confidence.

He smiled. "I do have plans."

He enjoyed her crestfallen look. "Oh," she sighed.

"And they include you."

His hand tightened over hers. Her expression was one of pure carnal lust, and he silently cursed at their public situation. What he wouldn't have given to be an ordinary man with no responsibilities, no public profile, and to be able to make love to this woman here and now.

He was relieved when the car came to a halt outside the palace, and both their doors were instantly opened by his staff. The temptation was removed from him. His eyes were still fixed on hers when, without a further word, she stepped out of the car and walked toward the steps. He followed. He suspected it would always be like this from now on—wherever she went, he'd follow, and he realized the thought made him happy. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been truly happy before last night. He had one night to show her, to convince her, how right they were together. He smiled. He had no doubts how he could do that.

She stopped once inside the palace and turned to wait for him, a sexy smile on her lips.

"Unfortunately, my plans don't only include you," he said. "I wish they did. But, I'm afraid I will be entertaining Sheikh Saeed tonight and I cannot cancel. Will you come?" He bridged the gap between them and only just stopped himself from reaching out for her. The need to touch her was overwhelming.

She raised an eyebrow in query. "Will that not seem a little odd?"

"To be truthful, I don't care how it will look."

"But Sheikh Saeed knows my father. Word will reach him I'm here."

"If it hasn't already," he said, remembering the message he'd sent to her father about her impending visit, making the first move in a game of chess designed to redress the balance of power in the region. He regretted it now.

Everything had changed since that day.

She frowned. “I hope not, because I wouldn’t put it past him to come and demand I return home with him so he can marry me off to someone in the Faud Federation to cement their collaboration.” She shook herself. “Anyway, I will be gone by then, so it doesn’t matter.”

“So, I will see you soon then, Rosana? You will come to the state banquet in honor of Sheikh Saeed?”

She nodded with a smile.

“And then later, we will be alone where we have far more important things to do.”

Her smile tweaked sexily at the corners. “Like what?”

He leaned in to her, so close he could smell the subtle scent of vanilla on her skin, and whispered in her ear exactly what it was he wanted to do to her. By the time he’d finished describing in vivid detail how he’d make her feel, her smile had slipped and in its place was a look of desperate desire that required all his willpower to walk away from.

“I must go now,” he said.

She swallowed, nodded and hurried away. He watched her go. She might believe she’d be leaving the next day, but he’d use everything in his power to make her stay. There could be no other way now.

CHAPTER 15



The banquet hall was a picture of sensual opulence. The scent of lilies filled the air, priceless paintings hung from the walls below ornate friezes decorated in gold leaf, and the tables were adorned with candles that glowed with a soft golden light. The background sound of traditional music mixed with the clinking of glasses and the laughter of his guests—each one an embodiment of power and influence. But Zaire hardly noticed any of it. He did his best to concentrate on what Sheikh Saeed was telling him, but he couldn't help continually glancing toward the door. He had to stop himself from sending someone to fetch her to him, or from going himself. But he knew neither would work—he was in unknown territory now. A place where she had all the power, and it scared him to death.

Despite knowing he shouldn't go looking for her, he stood up, intending to do exactly that. His guest, who'd been in mid-sentence, stopped speaking with a look of surprise. But then Rosana entered the room. She looked around with a sweeping gaze, which he caught and held for a moment before Darrius, who was sitting beside him, coughed loudly and drew his attention back to his honored guest. He'd been rude. Zaire knew Darrius was trying to get him to focus. This evening was too important to allow himself to be distracted by a woman. But then Rosana wasn't just any woman. She was a stunningly beautiful one who'd captured his heart. Darrius coughed again and

shot him a dark look. Zaire took the hint this time, sat down immediately and turned to his guest, Sheikh Saeed—a friend of both Sifra and the Kingdom of Harran, and possibly the last chance to broker peace between the two countries.

“My apologies. You were saying?”

Darrius, who’d arrived to help Zaire with the delicate diplomacy which would see the tensions between Sifra and the surrounding countries ease, shook his head pityingly and took over the conversation. Zaire immediately turned to Rosana, who, ignoring all the admiring stares, followed his assistant towards his table. The only sign that she was in the slightest bit nervous was in the way she shifted her clutch bag from one hand to the other. But her imperious, calm gaze told no one this.

If she was surprised that she’d been seated by his side, she didn’t show it. Besides, he had an excuse for seating her next to him. She was, after all, a princess of a neighboring country.

Zaire rose once more to greet Rosana. “Sheikha Rosana, I’m glad you could make it.”

She smiled a warm smile for him alone, and he felt his heart swell. “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” she said.

“Greetings, Rosana,” said Darrius. “I’m glad we’re able to meet again.”

“Me, as well. How is Leonora?”

“She is very well, thank you. She’s in Oxford at the moment, preparing for the bi-centennial celebrations next month. She says you’ll be joining her in a few days?”

“Indeed.” She kept her gaze fixed on Darrius. “I’ve changed my flight to tomorrow, so I’ll be able to help her with the arrangements.”

Darrius cast an uneasy look from Zaire, back to Rosana again. “I’m sure she’ll be pleased to see you.” With the practiced manners of a former king, Darrius turned to their guests. “Sheikh, may I introduce Sheikha Rosana bint Abdullah Al Khal.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Sheikha Rosana,” Sheikh Saeed said, “although a little surprised.”

Zaire and Darrius exchanged looks. They’d been trying to move the conversation on to the prickly subject of where the sheikh’s country stood, given the impasse between Rosana’s country and Sifra. Their earlier discussions had yielded little progress in the coming together of their countries. They weren’t certain how Saeed would interpret Rosana’s presence in Sifra.

Rosana gave a small smile and took a sip of her drink before answering. “And why is that?”

Sheikh Saeed shrugged. “It is common knowledge that your father’s relations with Sifra are strained. Your presence shows your father is softening his stance towards Sifra, if he has allowed you to accept the king’s invitation. It also has implications regarding his alliance with the Faud Federation.”

Saeed’s frankness surprised Zaire, but he knew Rosana wouldn’t want him to speak on her behalf, so he kept silent. Rosana gave herself a moment, by inclining her head, which could have been interpreted as agreement, before answering. He wondered how she was going to admit that her father had no idea she was here.

“I am here on business. I am a professor at Oxford University researching a subject here, in Sifra.”

Sheikh Saeed frowned and steepled his fingers as if trying to unravel the complexities of her relationship with her father. If he could do that, thought Zaire, he was a better man than he.

“And your father allowed this visit?”

The muscles around Rosana’s mouth tightened her smile. “I do not need my father’s permission to do anything, or to go anywhere, sir.”

“Ah, so you are a *modern woman*.” He said the words with emphasis, as if it were a separate species. “That is very interesting.”

“Yes, it is.” She took a sip of water and placed the glass back on the table

with careful deliberation, before turning to him with that imperious gaze. “Tell me, how are your daughters? Are they attending university yet?”

“No, indeed. A marriage has been arranged for my eldest, and I’m sure that none of the others are interested in further education.”

“They have said as much?”

“The subject isn’t discussed,” he said with warning finality.

“Then perhaps it should be. An educated woman benefits everyone—herself, her husband, her children, her family, her country.”

Zaire realized he was holding his breath awaiting the reaction of this man, who was key to the future stability of the region. It was clear Sheikh Saeed was surprised at Rosana’s statement, and was undecided how to respond.

Rosana still held Saeed’s gaze, and her face softened slightly into a warmer smile, a smile that would melt the heart of the most hardened of men.

“Education is nothing to be feared, sir, but cherished as the treasure it is,” she continued.

Then Saeed’s brow lowered a little further and Zaire realized they were all holding their breath, trying to determine whether the sheikh would double down on his resistance or agree with Rosana. Then his head cocked to one side and his brow lifted, revealing a sparkle in his eyes.

“Perhaps you are right, sheikha. I will ask my daughters.”

“Good. It is always good to hear a woman’s voice.”

“That it is. And yours in particular, sheikha.”

“Please, call me Rosana.”

“Rosana. It’s been a pleasure talking to you, but I can see our host is most eager for your attention.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at Zaire thoughtfully. “I suspect your presence here will be good for him, good for Sifra.”

Zaire smiled uncomfortably, embarrassed both that his desire for Rosana was so obvious and that Sheikh Saeed should have voiced his suspicions. Saeed was right of course, but Zaire didn’t want Rosana to think, even for

one minute, that he might be using her. He had originally wanted to, but not now. Definitely not now.

Saeed rose, and his retinue rose around him. “Thank you, Your Majesty, for inviting us here on this occasion.” He turned to Darrius. “And it is a pleasure to see you again, but it is time for us to take our leave.” Then he turned to Rosana. “And may I say what a great pleasure it was talking with you, Sheikha Rosana. You have a lot to teach us, I think. It is good that you have begun the peace process for your father. It will make further negotiations with him easier.”

Zaire thought it unlikely, but didn’t comment.

Darrius rose and walked Saeed to the door. Zaire could hear them arranging a further meeting the next day.

“Looks like you made an impression on Saeed, Rosana,” said Zaire.

“Isn’t that what you wished me to do?”

“Did I ask you to?”

“No, but I could see what was going on. I thought it wouldn’t hurt to talk about things a little more openly than you were.”

“I was raised to be cautious.”

“And I was raised to fight for what I want,” she said.

“Your father taught you to fight?”

“My father taught me I had no other option but to fight to get what I wanted.”

“And what is it you want now?”

She leaned in so that only he could hear. “I wish to go to bed with you.”

Suddenly it felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room, the sound of the people all around them receded into a background of white noise.

“Then it would be churlish of me to deny you. I will leave now, and I hope you will follow.”

She swallowed, her nerves and arousal betraying her, despite her bold

demand.

He rose and forced himself to turn away. People took their cue from his exit and rose themselves and the function broke up. He stepped out into the gardens, muttered a few words to his security, and walked to where the private wing of the palace began. All his guests would have exited through the palace. He stood in the shadows and waited.

CHAPTER 16



Rosana could hardly believe she'd told Zaire she wished to go to bed with him. She followed him into the garden, blushing as his security men stepped aside for her to pass, before they stepped back to block the way of any others who might attempt to follow. Despite her embarrassment, she had no regrets about saying it. She wanted him. All the time she'd been talking to Sheikh Saeed, she'd been desperately trying not to meet Zaire's gaze which she knew had been fixed on her, knowing that if she did, she wouldn't have been able to prevent her need for him showing. Not only to him, but to everyone else there.

But now she was free to be herself, and to be with who she wanted. And there was only one person. She walked alongside the water, passing the small fountain which was the only sound, other than her heels on the marble path. The trees which shaded the garden rustled, and a surprised owl hooted and swept across her path, making her halt and look around. Excitement and lust buzzed in her gut. She'd never felt so right about anything in her life before.

She carried on along the path and jumped as he reached out from the shadows and took her arm, pulled her to him and kissed her thoroughly. He held her tight, allowing her to feel exactly how much he wanted her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. As their kiss deepened, their tongues tangled and desire electrified her body. When they at last parted, they

pressed their foreheads together, their panting breaths hot against each other's faces.

In that moment, her body pressed against his, and with only the sound of water and the wind in the trees for company, she felt blissfully happy. Real life was suspended and all the sights and sounds of her home were around her now, completed by this man who gave her everything she'd ever wanted, and everything she hadn't known she'd wanted.

Without speaking, he gripped her hand, and they walked toward his suite of rooms. As soon as they were inside, he cradled her face as if she were something to treasure.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered before pressing a kiss to her lips.

Unlike before, there was no hurrying him now. He touched her and savored her, stroked and gentled her as he slowly stripped her of her clothes.

Only when she was naked did he lift her in his arms and carry her to the bed. She was lulled into a strange torpor, luxuriating in all the sensations which she'd never experienced before. It was only when she was lying on her back on the bed, and he pushed her legs open wide and kneeled down before her, that panic replaced the torpor.

It felt so wrong to be so vulnerable before him, but then his tongue persuaded her it was completely right. And she relaxed once more, sinking down into a bliss of sensuous feeling, relishing the curling, escalating spirals of arousal which spun through her body. They reached every part of her, but centered strongly around her sex, as he stimulated her with his mouth, tongue, and fingers. When he thrust his fingers inside of her, she came in a blast of white light where everything was suspended. It took long seconds before she realized her fingers were pressing hard into his scalp, holding him there, so that she could glean every last little bit of sensation out of him.

She gave a small gasp and withdrew her hands. He looked up at her with dark, lustful eyes as he took a last lick of her most intimate parts and rose above her. She opened her legs wider to allow him entry, but still he didn't

hurry. He trailed his fingers up her legs, kissed first one breast and then another, until he was holding himself up over her, his erection connecting with her sex, but not entering her.

“You are so beautiful,” he said to her, his voice a low, sexy growl. “Your eyes,” he shook his head, “they take me to another place, connect with me like...” He trailed off. He obviously didn’t want to go there. His gaze raked her body. “And your body, your breasts—you were made for love. Correction,” he said, as he shifted, ready to enter her, “you were made for *me* to love you.” Before she could comment or respond to this, he thrust deeply inside of her. She was so wet there was no friction. She gripped his shoulders, her fingers shaping over his muscles, wanting him to stay there, deep inside of her, feeling the heat and pulsing within.

When he withdrew, it created more glorious sensations, and then he thrust deeply into her again with a small grunt. She could see from his eyes that he was trying to hold back, but she didn’t want him to. She wanted him to come and she wriggled until he had no choice but to quicken his pace until he was pumping hard into her and they both came in an explosion of sensation.

They lay side by side, holding hands, looking up at the ceiling, both lost in their own thoughts as their breathing returned to normal. Then he rolled over to her and traced his finger around her breast. Her nipple tightened in response and she felt the pull of need once more inside of her. She wondered if it would always be this way.

“This can’t go on, you know,” he said at last.

Fear clutched at her gut. “What do you mean?”

“You. Me. We must marry.”

“But how can we? You know what that will mean for my father. It will threaten his current pact with the Faud Federation, which has brought Harran wealth. It will only make things worse. By the way, what did Sheikh Saeed mean when he said that my presence here would be good for you?”

She’d almost forgotten Sheikh Saeed’s comment, but now she re-

considered it, it seemed even more strange. “Zaire?” she prompted, noting he’d turned away.

“Hm?” he said, as if he hadn’t heard her. He pulled her into his arms and the thought disappeared as quickly as it had come. “Don’t worry about a thing,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “The only thing that matters is that we are together.”

She gave a deep sigh, her body sated, her spirit calmed as he held her close and she drifted into sleep.

ZAIRE DIDN’T KNOW how many hours he’d lain awake looking at her. But during those hours, his thoughts shifted seamlessly between Galila, the intervening years of loneliness now forgotten, and Rosana. It seemed to him that his love for Rosana was an extension of his love for Galila. Different somehow, more adult and more powerful for that. But there was no competition now. No feelings of guilt. Everything felt so right.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She lay curled into his body, her cheek pressed against his chest. He wondered if she could hear the regular thud of his heartbeat, imprinting his existence deep inside of her. He hoped so because he didn’t think he’d ever be able to tell her enough how much he loved her.

Gently, so as not to disturb her, he slid his finger along the length of her luxuriant, shiny hair. It fell all around her shoulders and across his chest. He thought he wanted no other cover than that in the future. To be connected with her, close to her, was all he wanted now.

Then the sun’s rays slid between the curtains and shone on the far side of the room. Something glinted and his eyes strayed to the collection of photographs arranged on the shelf. It was Galila. Of course it was. He didn’t move, waiting for the guilt and remorse to hit him. But nothing happened. The sun simply rose and shed more light on them, and he felt more at peace,

not less.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the photograph of Galila, her dark brown, trusting eyes permanently focused on him. “I’m so sorry, but life goes on.”

Suddenly he heard laughter out of the window. Galila had loved to laugh. He’d never forget anything about her, but he would especially never forget the sound of her laughter. He would take the memory forward with him into his new life, with her in his heart forever. It seemed the heart wasn’t a finite thing, it could hold so much love, more than just for one person.

He sighed deeply as his mind shifted to the wedding arrangements he’d make as soon as they got up. He didn’t want to waste any time. He couldn’t bear for her to leave him, ever. It would have all the pomp and ceremony which would be expected of him. No expense would be spared. Of course, there was the question of Rosana’s father. He felt uncomfortable that he’d ensured her father would be informed about Rosana’s visit by spreading a rumor about their relationship before it had even existed. He’d done it for political reasons, to provoke her father. But it turned out he’d been prophetic. It hadn’t been a lie. Even so, he hoped Rosana would never hear of it. She certainly wouldn’t from him. He had no wish for her to know quite how much he’d intended to use her.

He shifted, annoyed at the thought of Rosana’s father, and accidentally awoke her. She kissed his chest and then raised herself on her elbows and looked at him sleepily. He loved seeing the cloudy vestiges of dreams in her eyes. Loved it even more when she kissed him with a soft moan and curled her body around him and was astride him before he knew it.

The phone rang, but he ignored it. Rosana was his only focus. He was ready, more than ready after having cradled her in his arms for an hour. And when she slid onto him, the sunlight now bathing her, highlighting the glory of her body, he thought he’d died and gone to heaven.

But the phone continued to ring. Only when they’d both got what they wanted did he roll over and answer it with a curt command. But what he

heard made him release her hand, made him swing his legs onto the floor and push his fingers through his hair.

“What is it?” she asked, kneeling on the bed behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist. “What’s happened?”

He unpeeled her hands, knowing how she’d react to the news. He stood up and pulled on his gown before turning to her.

“It seems,” he said grimly, “that your father has arrived.” He hated how her expression changed from warm and soft to scared in one brief beat of the heart. Then the scared expression was replaced by that closed off look which he’d hoped he’d seen the last of. But it was back. And he knew what he’d have to tell her would make it stay. And he didn’t know how the hell he was going to remove it again.

“My father?” she repeated, also reaching for her gown, as if she half-expected her father to walk into the room. “He’s here?”

“Yes. I’ve just been informed.”

“But... What’s he doing here? Does he know I’m here?”

Zaire answered her first question first. It seemed easier. It would buy him time before he had to answer her second question.

“He’s here for the same reason Sheikh Saeed was.”

She looked incredulous. “About Harran’s relations with Sifra? What would prompt him to do that? An alliance with Sifra would threaten his pact with the Faud Federation. It would be madness. What is he thinking? Zaire, answer me. Something must have triggered this visit.”

Zaire grimaced. He couldn’t delay the truth any longer. She had to know. But he was scared how she’d react once she knew. Would what they had be enough to conquer her anger? He didn’t know, but he was about to find out.

“Yes, you’re right. Something did trigger this visit.”

She stood, hands on hips, her eyes blazing as if she understood what he was about to say before he could say it. He guessed she could. He felt so close to her he, too, could anticipate her thoughts and feelings.

“And? What might that be, Zaire?”

“Your father was advised you were coming here and, it might,” he grimaced again, shamed at what he’d done, “just might have been suggested that we were in a relationship.”

“What?” she exploded.

“As I said, word got out to your father that you were coming here.”

“When was this?”

“Before you came, obviously.”

“There’s nothing obvious about any of this.” She swore under her breath and he raised an eyebrow. He’d never heard Rosana be anything other than dignified. She paced away and then turned back to him, her glorious hair falling all around her like the mane of a lion. Her eyes flashed like one, too. One that was angry, on the trail, and about to pounce. “Tell me exactly what happened. Tell me exactly who told my father this... this preposterous story, long before I even came here. Who, Zaire, who?”

He wasn’t going to get away with it. He could see it in her eyes. He could see it in the trembling of her hands, in the way she gripped the back of the chair, as if she were about to fall over. He stepped forward to support her, but she held up one shaking hand.

“Don’t,” she said. “All I want to know is who told him.”

“Me.” He cleared his throat. “I told him.”

He felt sick to his stomach as she shook her head, her mouth slack, her eyes full of pain and hurt. He’d done that. He’d put that pain there, and he wished with every beat of his heart that he hadn’t. She opened the door.

“Get out,” she said, her voice full of trembling emotion.

There was nothing he could do but collect his clothes and walk toward the door. There he stopped. “We need to talk, Rosana. I need to explain everything.”

She looked at him coldly. “I think your actions have explained everything. I thought you were different from my father.” She shook her head

in dismay. “You’re not at all. You want to control me exactly as he did.”

“That’s not true. I did all this before I knew you.”

“And using me before you knew me makes it better?”

“Please, Rosana. I love you, and if you have any feelings for me, you need to hear me out. Don’t let what we have slip away, because I acted like a fool. Please.”

He stood waiting, his breath held, waiting for the slightest response which would change his life.

CHAPTER 17



Zaire didn't let his eyes move from hers. He felt that if he did, she'd be gone. She'd walk out of his life and never return. Silently, he urged her to give him a chance. At first, he was terrified she'd turn around and leave. Then he saw the first flutter of indecision in her eyes, then the hurt emerged and he knew he was in with a chance.

"Please, Rosana, I beg you. Listen to what I have to say before you leave."

"You think I owe you this?" she said, with a flash of her former chilly pride.

"No," he said, without hesitation. "I think you owe yourself this."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you walk away without hearing me out, that pain you're embracing right now will never leave you. Listen to what I have to say and you'll leave maybe thinking I'm a fool, and many other things besides, but you'll understand that I never intended to hurt you, and it was never my aim to humiliate you. *Never.*"

She blinked watery eyes and then she sat down as if all the strength had drained out of her. "Okay," she said. "Tell me why you told my father we were in a relationship before we'd even met properly, before I'd set foot in the country."

He sat opposite. “A week ago, all I knew about you was what I’d figured out from your brief visit here years ago. You appeared arrogant and cold, and I had no reason to believe you’d changed. So I figured I’d use the opportunity to shake up your father’s pact with the Faud Federation.”

“You used me,” she said bleakly. “Just as he did.”

“I didn’t know you then, Rosana. I used who you were. But, believe me, I wouldn’t have if I knew then what I know now about you.”

She gnawed her lip and looked away uncertainly as she tried to process his words. He could see that she was warring with herself over whether to believe what he said.

He reached out and took both her hands in his. “Rosana, believe me. I’d never do anything to hurt you now. Nothing.”

She blinked and looked into his eyes and sighed, and his heart relaxed. “I shouldn’t believe you. I’m crazy to believe you but... I can’t not. Because it seems my heart believes you and my head follows.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I have no choice but to trust you. I can’t even believe I’m saying this.”

“Good,” he said, pulling her to standing. “Now, let’s get ready to meet your father and get this over with. Then, *habibti*, we can get on with our lives together.”



ROSANA HADN’T a clue whether she’d done the right thing by believing Zaire. All she knew, as she showered and got dressed in her finest clothes, ready to meet her father, was that she had no choice. Instinctively, she trusted Zaire and only time would tell if her instincts were correct.

They went together to meet her father, but as they were about to enter the room, she stopped and followed her instincts for a second time that morning. “Please, leave me here, Zaire. I wish to speak to my father alone.”

“Leave you alone with that man?” Zaire shook his head.

But Rosana stood firm. His protectiveness warmed her to the core, but knew she had to do this alone. “I’m not a little girl anymore, and I need to do this on my own. Without your help.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure?” Zaire looked from Rosana to the closed door behind which her father waited. “I can’t,” he said, shaking his head.

“You’ll have to. I need you to give me the space to do this my way. You need to respect that, Zaire.”

“Of course. Otherwise, I’d be no better than your father.”

“Exactly.”

He gritted his teeth and then gave one brief nod. “Okay. I’ll leave you to talk things through with your father, but you have to promise me you’ll call out if you need anything. I won’t move. I’ll be right here.” He gave her cheek a brief caress. “Promise?”

She shot him a tight smile. “I promise.”

Rosana glanced back at Zaire, who stood behind the door, out of sight and out of earshot. She knew that giving her this opportunity had been hard for him. The struggle was plain to see in his eyes. He always took control, but here he’d given it to her. He nodded his encouragement, and she twisted the door handle and entered the room.

His father was standing alone for a change. He whirled around to face her, his eyes like black coals under dark, beetling brows. He looked like the devil. A sense of panic filled her, and she suddenly felt she couldn’t breathe. She nearly turned around and fled back to Zaire. But she dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands and forced herself to stay put. Now wasn’t the time to run away. That time was long past. Now was the time for staying and sorting things out.

“Pathetic,” her father spat out, hatred transforming his handsome face into an ugly one.

“I seem to remember you think everyone who disagrees with you is pathetic.”

“So you do remember some things.” He took a threatening step toward her, but she refused to move, only lifted her chin in an attitude of defiance. “And do you also remember the loyalty you owe to a father?” he demanded.

“I owe you nothing, father.”

“You owe me *everything*, girl.”

She couldn't stand it any longer. She walked around him and pushed aside a heavy curtain and opened a window, allowing the evening air to flood into the room. She took a deep breath and glanced over to the room she'd just left and saw Zaire's shadow. She felt comforted by his presence and knew he would be there in an instant if she called out. But she refused to do that. Instead, she turned to face her father once more.

“Why are you here, father?”

“You know why,” he growled. “I've come to take you home.”

His response was so ludicrous, she laughed.

His eyes flashed with anger. “How dare you laugh at me?” he growled.

“Because your mission is ridiculous. There is no way in this world I am returning to Harran with you.”

“You are my *daughter*. Your place is with your *family*. Why can you not see that?”

She shook her head, searching his face, trying to understand the enigma who was her father. How he could believe she'd return to Harran with him was beyond her. She shook her head again. “I did once, but you destroyed my belief in family, destroyed my trust in men. There is nothing for me in Harran.”

“There is your *family*. Harran is and always will be, your country. You call that *nothing*?”

“It should have been everything,” she said with quiet dignity. “But you robbed me of that. I had no option to leave, and I will not return.”

“I suppose you intend to go to England to play at education. Education is for a reason, girl—to use, not for its own sake.”

“No, I won’t be returning to England.” She waited for her words to sink in.

He narrowed his eyes dangerously. “Why not?”

“Because I have decided to stay here, with the king.”

“You will be his mistress? That is preposterous! My daughter, a whore, I think not!”

“We will marry, father.” She felt joy creep through her soul and body as she said the words she’d never imagined saying. After an upbringing like she’d had, she’d never thought she’d find a man she could commit to. “We will marry as soon as possible.”

Then he did something she hadn’t imagined him doing. He laughed and continued laughing as he walked away. After a moment, he turned back to her, his face cruel again. He stabbed his finger at her. “For all your education, you are more stupid than anyone I know. Don’t you understand?” he said, derision curling his lips.

She frowned. “I understand we love each other and we will marry. That is all I need to understand.”

“Then you aren’t only ignorant, you are stunningly stupid, girl.” He took a step closer to her and she could smell garlic on his breath, could see the spittle around his mouth as the words of hatred continued to spew forth. “Zaire, the King of Sifra, is simply using you. He has seduced you for one reason only.”

A tight ball of fear formed in her throat and she tried in vain to swallow it down hard. “We will marry, father. That is an end to it.”

“You don’t want to know the reason he’s seduced you?”

“I will not join you in your ridiculous theories. We are in love. That is all you need to know.”

“You’re wrong, child. And don’t come crying to me when you realize

exactly how wrong you are. He's a king, and everything he does is for political reasons. Think"—he spat out—"with that brain you're so proud of. If my allies hear that you are with him, it will appear that I have reneged on my deals with them and thrown in my lot with Sifra." He leaned in even closer. "I would not only lose face, but I would lose allies, and economic and political co-operation. That is what your lover wants from you—my strength diminished, and his relationship with other countries improved. You are merely a tool for this, as any woman is."

She shook her head. "That's ridiculous."

"No, *you're* ridiculous. All this talk about education, about learning. You know *nothing*. *That* is what Zaire's game is, and you were his choice of weapon." The sneer deepened. "Face it, Rosana, you've been used in a manoeuvre which is way beyond your knowledge of play. You're out of your depth, girl."

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words emerged because her head was full of images of Zaire talking to his vizier, and then looking up to see her as if she'd interrupted something. Of Zaire asking her about her country and its allies. So many moments which she'd thought nothing of until now, when everything seemed to have taken on another quite sinister meaning. She shook her head to rid it of the images, but they stubbornly remained there. She opened her eyes to see her father's sneering face.

"Go ask him if you like and then you'll come running back to me and your rightful family and we will return home. And all this nonsense will be forgotten."

She'd have left him even if he hadn't ordered her to. Because she had only one thing she wanted to know now from one man—and that man wasn't her father.

CHAPTER 18



Zaire had been pacing the room, alert for any sound, anything which would give him the excuse to rush in and put himself between Rosana and her father. He whirled around when the door opened, half-expecting her father to come rampaging through. Instead, it was Rosana, and she didn't look upset or in need of comforting. She looked furious.

“What's happened?” he asked, glancing into the room where her father was sitting down, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. He closed the door behind him. Whatever was going on, he was determined to find out without her father watching on.

“Tell me the truth,” said Rosana. “Did you seduce me for political reasons?”

He reached out and placed his hand on her arm. “Rosana, please, calm down.”

She shook his hand off her. “Answer my question please, and do not tell me to calm down.”

Words formed, but he rejected them before he spoke them. There was only one way out of this, and that was the kind of evasiveness for which he admonished his advisers.

“Rosana, I love you, and I want to marry you, and neither of these are connected with politics.”

But her expression glowered even more darkly. “You did not answer my question.”

“Rosana, please, hear me out.”

“Only if you answer my question. Did you seduce me for political reasons? You told me before that you’d spread a false rumor that we were in a relationship. You said nothing about actual, pre-meditated seduction to destroy my country’s pact with their allies.”

“Okay, I will answer your question if you’ll do one thing for me.”

“And that is?”

“Take a seat and hear me out.” Silence followed, and his heart pounded heavily, punctuating the seconds. He knew if he answered her question and she walked out on him, he might never get a chance to explain himself and he’d lose the happiness he’d only had a tantalizing glimpse of.

After a few moments, she took a seat, and he sat opposite and held her gaze. He chose his words carefully. A lot depended on them.

“When I first heard you were coming here, all I knew was that I wanted you gone as soon as possible. As far as I was concerned, you were the daughter of our enemy, which made you, by association, also our enemy. You had shown only arrogance on your previous visit. There was nothing to recommend you. Until I saw you.”

“And then you decided you would seduce me.”

“Not at first, no. That came later.”

She frowned. “How much later?”

“About five minutes.” He risked a seductive smile. “I couldn’t resist you.” His eyes dropped to her lips, which tightened under his gaze. He glanced back into her flashing eyes.

“Because you knew how it would seem to my father’s allies when you fed the information back to them?”

This was the tricky bit, because he had. “Maybe, momentarily.”

“Momentarily.” Her fingers drummed as she repeated the word. “And

when did this moment cease? One hour? One day? A few moments ago?”

“The moment I saw into your soul and saw the real you behind that facade you show to the world. That was the moment when everything else faded away, and all I could think about was how much I wanted you in my life, no matter the consequences.”

“Oh,” she said with a sigh.

He was relieved with the sigh and even more relieved when a look of hope entered her eyes. He waited for her to speak. He’d said all he could say. But she said nothing to reassure him.

“Rosana?”

She extended her hand to him and he closed his eyes and pressed it to his lips, concentrating all his relief and gratitude that she believed him in that kiss.

“I love you, Rosana, and I want us to be married and, I promise you, *that* has nothing to do with politics.”

He pulled her to him in a close embrace, and she pressed her cheek against his chest. He thought he could have held her there forever, his arms tight around her, protecting her from the hurt which had followed her all her life. He wanted her never to be hurt again. Then they heard her father talking on the phone in the next room. They couldn't delay it any longer.

He lifted her chin. “You don't have to see him again. Go now, and leave me to deal with your father.”

“But—”

He kissed her lips, cutting off her words and train of thought. “No buts. There's nothing further to be gained by talking to him or listening to him. You know that in your heart. He'll never change, so let's move on—with or without his blessing. Go now and I'll see you back in my suite. Okay?”

“Okay.” She shot him a relieved smile and rolled onto her tiptoes, clutched his collar, and kissed him. When she'd finished, she pressed her finger against his lips and smiled. And he knew he could live forever in that

smile. Then she took a step backwards, turned and walked away.

He sighed. All he wanted to do was to walk after her, but he needed to deal with her father. And he knew exactly how to do that. He'd tell him anything to get rid of him.

ROSANA HADN'T GONE FAR through the palace grounds when she stopped suddenly. She'd been buoyed by the love that Zaire filled her with. But, as the chill of the night air cooled her heated skin, she realized she didn't want him to sort out her father for her. She could do it. She would go back and tell him what she needed to.

She returned through the gardens, following the sounds of her father and Zaire talking, and was surprised not to hear her father dominating the conversation. Their voices drifted on the night air, through the window she'd opened only minutes earlier. She took a few steps closer and saw her father was listening to Zaire. That, in itself, was unusual. She took a few more steps towards the open window and could now hear clearly what was being said. But there was something in Zaire's tone which made her halt. He wasn't being conciliatory. He sounded like a victor. She stood, stock still, listening intently.

"So," said her father, "your plan worked, Zaire. You must be very pleased with yourself." His tone was bitter, a promise of retribution lurked in his every word.

She held her breath, waiting to hear his response.

"Of course," said Zaire, in that same self-satisfied tone he'd used before. He gave a gruff laugh. "It's worked out so much better than I'd imagined."

Rosana heard no more. Her head buzzed with words that refused to leave, devoid of love and any indication of his feelings for her, treating her as a mere possession to be passed between men. She leaned heavily against the wall for support, willing the cool marble wall to cool her brain, and to help

her make sense of what she'd just heard.

But the sick sensation in her gut told her that the only sense to be made was that she was a bargaining chip, a fly caught in a spider's web. She glanced into the room where her father's bitterness and anger were plainly expressed in his face and gestures while Zaire stood firm and confident—the obvious victor. It was enough. She turned and walked away.

How could she have been fooled by Zaire after all that had happened with her father? He was exactly the same as him. He'd taken advantage of her weakened resolve and robbed her of her defenses and senses. She'd walked into a trap. But she could walk right back out again, and that was exactly what she intended to do.

CHAPTER 19



*I*t was with a mixture of satisfaction and regret that Zaire watched Rosana's father walk away. Satisfaction to have out-played him at his own game, and regret that, in order to make gains for his country, he'd been forced to lie. It didn't make Zaire feel good to twist the truth. But, he reassured himself, his old tutor used to tell him that the means justified the ends. His country would be more secure by weakening Harran, and with a weakened country, his way was clear to be with Rosana.

It was late by the time he returned to his private suite of rooms. He'd taken a detour to inform his brothers of events and had got delayed there. A few rounds of drinks later and he was even more eager to be with Rosana again, relieved that this whole mess was behind him. He stopped at his door and took a deep breath of the night air. Anticipation filled him. He didn't think he'd ever been so happy. Maybe not even with Galila. That had been a different love, a more innocent, less mature love. A simpler love. There was nothing simple about Rosana and he loved her all the more because of it.

He glanced up at the half-moon, visible between the tracery of branches, and drew in another deep breath before entering. He opened his mouth to greet Rosana, but the words stalled on his lips. Even in the dim light of the moon, he could see that his apartment was empty.

She must have misunderstood where they were to meet. Frowning, he

hurried to her room, knocked, and entered. There were no lights, no sound came from the rooms, and, more tellingly, none of her things were around. He flicked on the light but knew what he'd see before the bright light flooded the room. It was empty. It was as if she'd never been there. He swallowed hard, but it did nothing to ease the fear which fluttered low in his belly. She couldn't have left. She *couldn't* have.

Despite what he saw, he called her name. But there was no response. What the hell? Anger replaced fear as he strode into the room, searching for clues. He had to face it. She'd packed up her things in her suitcase and she'd left.

He reached in his pocket for his phone and quickly got hold of the palace porter. He closed his eyes in shocked disbelief when the porter confirmed Rosana had left the palace thirty minutes earlier. By the time he'd established whereabouts the taxi who'd collected her was taking her, he'd jumped into his car and revved up the engine. He'd also made sure the next flight out wasn't leaving until he got there.

ROSANA STOOD GRIPPING HER HANDBAG, looking out the window at the waiting plane. Something was wrong. She knew it. They'd received the announcement to board but, at the last minute, an official had hurried over and they were told to wait. They didn't receive any explanation. She looked around at the puzzled faces and the growing irritation of the passengers. It was nearly midnight.

She glanced at her phone before switching it off again with relief. There was no message, no alert. Thank goodness. Chances were that Zaire was still involved in those discussions she'd overheard with her father. Trouble was, the more prolonged this mysterious delay became, the more likely he'd discover she'd managed to secure a cancellation and had gone. What would he do? She hoped her departure would speak for itself, and he'd let her go.

But he was king, and he was used to controlling everyone around him. She just hoped that didn't extend to her.

She looked around. This was ridiculous. Clutching her bags, she strode over to the counter, about to demand to know what the holdup was. Then she glimpsed him through the interior window, his furious gaze fixed on her. As she took a few steps back, a wall of men blocked her way. She turned around. One of them politely bowed.

“Dr. Al Khal, you're wanted in the office, if you please.”

Her mouth dried, and she felt sick in the pit of her stomach. Dredging up the few remaining shreds of courage from somewhere deep down, she drew herself up to her full height and eyeballed the man. “Whatever it is, you can tell me now. I have a plane to catch.”

“Apologies, Dr. Al Khal, but you are required in the office.”

She shook her head and tried to walk off, but they blocked her way. She refused to be caught in his net, to be trapped and held against her will. This was exactly the situation she'd run away from. She wasn't that woman any longer.

“My flight is leaving soon. Please let me pass.”

The man shook his head. “Your flight isn't going anywhere until you go to the office.”

All the fire drained from her, leaving her weak and shaken. He'd won. He could stop her from leaving him, and he had. She looked around at the people, who were growing increasingly frustrated and arguing with the aircrew, and knew they wouldn't be going anywhere until she surrendered herself to Zaire.

“Okay, I'll come.”

With her head held high, she walked to the office surrounded by men, feeling like a criminal. She knew what she'd find when she was ushered into a room. Zaire was standing at the far end. He nodded to the men who all swiftly departed.

“You don’t need your soldiers now?” she taunted. “You don’t think I’ll walk straight out that door?”

“If you do, there will be more soldiers who will stop you.”

“So you have me trapped.”

He had the grace to wince at the word. “Temporarily,” he said. “Until you hear me out.”

“Go on then. The quicker you’ve said what you need to say and I can go, the better.”

“Why are you leaving?”

“Straight to the point. Good.” She took a deep breath. “I’m leaving because I refuse to marry a liar.”

His eyes flared briefly at the insult before his brow lowered. He was angry. He was *very* angry.

“Whatever I am, I am not a liar.”

“Terminology is hardly important. The fact is that you’ve been using me, Zaire. All along, from the very first moment we met, you were using me.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Is it? Can you truly deny the fact that your country’s biggest problem is my country—the Kingdom of Harran? Can you?”

“It is certainly up there.”

“And that the best way to break my father’s allegiance with the Faud Federation is to make it appear that he’s broken the allegiance and fallen into one with you instead. And what better way than to seduce his daughter?”

He glowered at her. “That is *not* what happened, and you know it.”

“I know nothing of the sort! What I know is that despite insulting me upon first meeting me, you went out of your way to get me into your bed.”

He held up his hand to stop the stream of accusations. “Okay, I know I was rude and insulting, but that was before I knew you.”

“You didn’t know me when you invited me on a horse ride into the desert. The only thing you knew about me was that if you broke me down, if

you got me on side, then you would also be attacking my father and helping your own country at the same time.”

“Rosana, calm down, listen to me.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! I am not your puppy, nor your subject. I have every right to be angry and to communicate that anger! Never tell me what I should, or shouldn’t do, again. I’ve had a lifetime of that!”

Tears were pricking her eyes, and she turned around and walked away rather than let him see them. But she had no choice except to stop by the door, which could only be opened by a swipe card. She rattled the handle helplessly.

“I’m sorry, Rosana, but I’m asking you to hear me out. Please. I’d like you to listen to me, hear what I have to say, and then you’ll be perfectly at liberty to leave.”

Rosana glanced out the window and saw that the other passengers were still waiting. She’d imagined that the plane would be allowed to leave after Zaire had got hold of her, but it hadn’t. It wouldn’t go until she’d listened to what he had to say.

“Okay. Although that’s more than you deserve after what I heard.” She wished she could bite those words back, but anger had gotten the better of her.

“Tell me what you heard.”

“Why? So you can tailor your response to that? No, you tell me why I should trust you, because all the evidence points to the opposite. First, my father used me like a pawn in his political games, and now you have done the same. Shuffled around at will—not *my* will, but *yours*. I can trust you no more than I can trust him.”

“But, after everything, how can you *distrust* me? How can you *not* believe what we’ve experienced is true?” He opened his arms helplessly and shook his head in despair. “Tell me, because I don’t understand.”

“You ask me why I distrust men? Hey? You don’t think it’s something to

do with the fact the most important men in my life have betrayed me? Have used me for their own ends?” She shook her head and blinked, willing the tears which pricked her eyes to stay unshed. But it wasn’t to be, and they flowed thick and fast down her heated cheeks, stinging them with the traitorous show of grief. She didn’t want anyone to know how devastated she was by this most recent, and most terrible of betrayals. But she could see from his face that he was moved, and he reached out to her. She took a step away and he let his arms drop. “Let me go,” she said in a strangled voice.

“Of course I will, because I love you, and I never want to trap you.” He dipped his head and looked at her from beneath a lowered brow. “But know this.” His voice was intense and low. “Whatever you think I’ve done, it’s been done for one reason only, and that’s to clear the way so that we can be together. I know how much your father hurt you, and I’ve been trying to mend that as well. Don’t you see, Rosana? I only want you to be happy.”

“Then let me go.”

“Haven’t you heard what I’ve said?”

“I’ve heard. They’re only words. Words which don’t explain what I overheard you telling my father.”

He winced and closed his eyes briefly. “Ah, I see. I imagine you heard me tell your father that my plan had worked out better than I’d thought.”

She felt a sharp pain which sent tingling sensations coursing down to her fingers, such was the hurt at the devastating memory. “I did.”

“Thing is, it’s the truth. My plan *had* worked out better than I’d thought. Far better. But in a way I’d never imagined. My plan was to use you to put my country on a stronger footing by weakening your father’s alliances.”

“And that’s what I’ve got.”

“Maybe. But I’ve also got something far more valuable—I’ve got you.”

She shook her head. “You expect me to believe I’m more important than your country? Because I don’t. You’re the king of Sifra and I know you’d do anything for your country, and marriage to me would only do you good.”

“That’s true, but it doesn’t negate the fact that I love you. Do you still love me?”

Did she? She shook her head, trying to figure out what she felt, arrested by the question. She knew she did, but did that overcome the fact that he’d used her? She shook her head again and gripped the door handle. He must have given security a sign because now when she twisted it, it opened.

“It’s irrelevant.”

His eyes widened. “Love is irrelevant?”

“There are more important things than love.”

“No, Galila showed me that. You’re wrong. There aren’t.”

“Where does trust come into it?”

He was silent. And in that moment, she knew she had to leave. Love wasn’t enough. It never was. Everyone in her history—including her family and Queen Mandana, who’d been betrayed by her lover—had been shown that love was never enough.

“It doesn’t,” she said dully and walked out the doorway, toward the departure desk.

Suddenly the tannoy announced an invitation for people to board the plane. She was ushered straight onto it, not even having to show her boarding pass, and taken to a first-class seat where she sat, stunned. She refused to look out her window toward the terminal building, so close. What had she done? Suddenly doubt clouded her mind, and she twisted her head to look out the window after all. Her gaze connected with Zaire’s. He was standing, hands thrust in his pockets, looking directly at her, his face as stony as hers. She reached out and slammed down the shade and sat back, blinking.

“Is everything all right, madam?” asked the stewardess.

She nodded, but she sincerely doubted that anything would ever be right again. She was leaving the man she loved, body and soul, to return to her adopted country, which would never truly be home to her. But any other choice would deny her the right to choose and to live freely. And, after all

she'd been through, she knew love had to be free of control.

She'd said love wasn't enough, but she'd lied. It was only love she wanted. A love so strong that nothing else—no politics, no family—could touch it. And Zaire had proved that his love for her didn't match that. And she refused to compromise. She owed herself that much.

CHAPTER 20



Whatever Zaire had imagined life would be like without Rosana, it hadn't been like this. He couldn't seem to smile anymore. Food was tasteless, fragrance was spoiled. He felt sick to his stomach for placing politics on a level with love, for jeopardizing the one good thing that had happened to him since Galila had passed. And he didn't know how the hell to put things right.

"Are you even listening to me?" asked Amare, sitting forward, moving his head into Zaire's line of sight, obscuring his view of the sky which was where his gaze invariably rested, since Rosana had left.

Zaire sighed and turned to his younger brother who'd returned, along with Darrius, to sort out the mess of Sifra's relationships with its neighboring countries.

"It's impossible not to hear you. You haven't stopped talking since you arrived."

Amare's usual good-humor wasn't in evidence. "There's a difference between hearing and listening!"

Before Amare could continue, Darrius stepped between them.

"There's no point in getting angry. That won't get us anywhere. We need to sort this mess out with Sheikh Mohammad—Rosana's father—before it gets any worse," he said. "Any ideas, Zaire?"

“It’s not Rosana’s father I’m worried about. It’s putting things right with Rosana.”

Amare heaved a frustrated sigh, shot a look at Darrius, as if to say, “see”, and jumped up.

Darrius sat quietly contemplating Zaire. “You’ve got it bad, brother.”

Zaire turned to Darrius. His quiet tone had got through to him. He was the only person who knew what it was like to be king of Sifra, with all the challenges that brought. “Got what bad?” But he knew what he was talking about.

“Love. You can’t deny it. We all know what that’s like.”

Zaire looked down. “At least you could dump the kingship on me and get on with your life.”

“I wouldn’t have done that if you hadn’t wanted the job.”

“Yes, well, that was then.”

“And this is now,” added Amare. “So I suggest you stop feeling sorry for yourself and help us find a solution to this mess.”

“You’re right, of course.” He rose and went to the desk and checked his emails.

“So, what do you propose?” asked Amare.

“Marriage.”

His brothers frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I will go and see Rosana and show her I’ll sacrifice anything for her, prove to her she’s the most important thing in the world to me.”

“Right,” said Amare, unconvinced. “And how do you propose to do that?”

“Give back the disputed territories to the Kingdom of Harran.”

“No!” said both Darrius and Amare at once.

Zaire held up his hand to silence them. “You wanted a solution, and this is the one I’m suggesting. If we give him the land which our ancestors took from him, then the old feud will be over.”

Amare shook his head. “Think of what we’d lose. We can’t do that.” He turned to Darrius. “Can we?”

Darrius shrugged. “We can do anything, so long as we three agree. Is this what you want, Zaire?”

“Yes, it is. I’ve been giving it a lot of thought. The land was taken two hundred years ago and had always belonged to them before that. Yes, it’s valuable land, but our honor is more valuable.”

Darrius nodded and turned to Amare. “Amare? What do you say?”

Amare shrugged resignedly. “What can I say to that? You’re right, Zaire. Of course you are. We’ll lose face, we’ll lose wealth —”

“But we’ll gain our integrity back,” interrupted Zaire. “And that, believe me, is worth the loss of all of that.”

He certainly hoped so, because he needed it to be. He already had the royal plane booked to leave in a few hours to go to Oxford, to see if he could win the good opinion of the one person in the world who could influence his future happiness.

“Agreed?” asked Zaire.

“Agreed,” replied his two brothers.



ROSANA HADN’T REALIZED how much her visit to Sifra had affected her until she’d returned to Oxford. Everything seemed dreary here. The light wasn’t bright enough. The landscape was too soft—rolling and gentle to the eyes—and the fragrances too delicate. She realized that England simply wasn’t home, and she also realized she’d have to get used to that. Because there was no going back on her principles.

It also wasn’t the same because her colleagues weren’t the same. Both Leonora and Janey had returned from overseas to complete their contracts and preparations for the forthcoming bi-centennial celebrations. But both had

changed, both had a different focus now. But not her. Her focus had to be here, at Oxford University. It was a path she'd chosen years ago and sacrificed so much for. And, despite what she'd thought only days earlier, it was a path she still had to tread. But it was like eating food without flavor, listening to a conversation without meaning—it left her untouched and wanting something different and more vivid.

The sleety rain ran in thick rivulets down the bumpy old glass of her college office, distorting the clock tower opposite, which chimed the hour with gloomy regularity. She shivered and switched the battered old heater up. The sleet from the leaden clouds was already turning to snow. She couldn't seem to get or keep warm since her return. She felt like a flower without the sun in the cold northern spring—lost and yearning for that which she'd lost, knowing she could never have it.

Should she have stayed? She asked herself the question for the millionth time since her return. But the answer was always the same. How could she have stayed with a man who, though she loved with all her heart, appeared happy to use their love for his own ends? How could she trust in that love? No, she knew she'd done the right thing. And she'd do it again. Except... She looked back out the window and sighed. Except if it was the right thing to do, then why did it feel so wrong?

The ringing of an old-fashioned bell broke her reverie. Her college still used land-lines and ancient phones to connect the offices to the main gatehouse. She had a visitor, but the porter didn't say who. A student she thought, shrugging on her thick winter coat over her sweater and jeans. She hadn't been expecting anyone and her hair was loose. She ran down the worn, wooden stairs and out into the quadrangle, which was already collecting a thin layer of snow. She shuddered, although she should have been warm under the thick wool coat. The unseasonably icy air was sharp in her lungs as she greeted another academic returning to the office.

“Hi,” she said to the porter, looking around. “You said I had a visitor?”

“Ah, yes, Dr. Al Khal. He’s over there.”

She turned to see Zaire standing in the shadows, leaning against the wall, his hands thrust into his coat, the collar up, as if he, too, was suffering from the cold.

“Zaire.” She had to stop herself from running over to him and into those arms, stop herself from warming him up exactly how she knew he’d like to be warmed up.

“Rosana,” he said, stepping towards her as if he had the same instinct but couldn’t prevent himself from moving toward her. In the end he did stop himself, but only after she took a step back. He grimaced at the snub. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s...” She nodded, warring with what she wanted to say, and what she needed to say. “Yes...” she trailed off, knowing she wasn’t making sense but also knowing there was no sense to be made of the conflicting needs of her body and brain.

He smiled, as if understanding her confusion. He looked around. “Is there somewhere we could go to talk?”

The image of her bed sprang to mind, but she pushed it firmly away. “Sure, there’s a pub around the corner.”

They walked side by side along the pavement to the King’s Arms. Only a few inches separated them, but it felt like a yawning chasm. She thought anyone watching them would think they were only acquaintances as they walked in uneasy silence. He opened the door for her and she walked past, her shoulder brushing his, causing a sharp intake of breath which filled her lungs full of his scent—a mixture of sandalwood and pure, mouthwatering male. She glanced up into eyes that darkened instantly with desire and knew hers were doing the same as her body warmed and melted under that gaze. She swallowed and walked on into the bar, thankful the place was busy. She sat at a table while he went to get their drinks.

She was glad of the opportunity to collect her thoughts as she watched

him. Even in an ordinary pub in England, he looked impressive with his tall, broad physique and commanding air. People were eying him surreptitiously, aware of his aura of power. When he returned and placed the drinks on the table, she felt in control once more.

“Why are you here, Zaire?”

“Why?” he asked with a wry smile. “I thought it might take longer to get to that question. I should have realized you’d be direct. So I will be, too. The reason I’m here is because of this.” He promptly slipped off the seat and got to one knee, producing a velvet box from the pocket of his coat as he did so. “I love you, Rosana, and I cannot imagine life without you. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

So much for being in control. Rosana didn’t know whether to laugh at this autocratic man, kneeling on the worn, beer-soaked floor of the pub with students and academics watching on with amusement, or cry in confusion. In the end, she did neither.

“Zaire, no.”

He frowned. “No, you won’t marry me?”

“No, don’t do that, and no don’t ask me, and... just *no* to everything!”

Before he could say anything more, she jumped up and ran out into the frigid evening, brightened by falling snow, across the road to a park. Despite the muffled sounds of the city all around, she knew he was following her. Eventually, once she was in the center of the park, she stopped and turned around, realizing that she had no choice but to face him.

He came a few steps closer, his hand still holding out the ring, snowflakes dusting his dark hair and coat. She gave a surprised laugh. His frown deepened.

“You think I am joking?”

“No, it’s only, you look so out of place. Your home is Sifra, not this cold place.”

“And so is yours, if you’ll only see it.”

“I can’t make a home where there is no respect, where I cannot trust.”

“Don’t you see, Rosana? Everything I’ve done is to prove to you that you are at the center of my world. You’re the fulcrum upon which my life balances. Without you, there is no life. Everything else has to work around you. And that’s why I’ve waited until I could be sure that everything is in place.”

“What’s in place?”

“You haven’t heard?”

She shook her head. “What?”

“In six months’ time, after all the paperwork is done, we will transfer the disputed lands back to the Kingdom of Harran. Back to your father. I’ve done it for one reason only, to show you that you come first. Always.”

She opened her mouth to speak but was so surprised that no sound emerged.

“Please, say something, Rosana. Put me out of the misery I’ve been in ever since you left me.”

She shook her head, trying to rid it of the confusion. Suddenly, she wasn’t sure if she’d heard right. “The disputed lands? You’ve given them back to my father?”

“Yes. My brothers and I decided it was the only course of action.”

“But it wasn’t.”

“Oh, yes, it was.” He stepped forward and caught the hair which had escaped her hood in his hands and wound it around his fingers and brought it to his lips and kissed it. “If I ever wanted to do this again, it was.”

She reached out and touched his cheek lightly with her fingertips, as much to make sure he was real as to make contact with him. It took nothing, barely a movement, to step into his arms and press her lips to his. At last she felt warm, despite the snow which continued to fall, settling briefly on their heads and shoulders until their heat melted them. And in that moment, she knew where her future lay. She knew she could never turn away from this

man again because he'd obliterated any remaining doubts. And he'd done it for her. Something no one in her life had ever done before.

As their kiss deepened, he pulled away, his breathing coming hard.

"We'll go back to my apartment," she said breathlessly, beginning to walk away.

"No," he said, pulling her back to him. "Not until you give me an answer to my question."

"What question?" For the life of her, she couldn't imagine what question she hadn't answered.

He got down on his knees, this time in the snow, and asked her again. "Rosana? Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she laughed, "yes, yes, yes!"

Their laughter and running footsteps couldn't be heard in the muffled snow or above the clanging of the quadrangle bell—which this time sounded like a welcoming peal of good times to come.

CHAPTER 21



It seemed she *could* be warm in England, after all. But only if Zaire warmed her bed at night, and stayed close to her during the day. She stretched up her arm to admire her ring. It glinted in the stream of sunshine which beamed in through a gap in the curtains.

“Diamonds are forever,” she said, turning to him with a smile. “Forever is a long time.” She rolled onto her stomach, propped her chin on her hands, and gazed up into his eyes. She knew she’d never get enough of the way he looked at her. It was a selfless way, as if all he could think about was her. A girl could get accustomed to such adoration. “Are you up for forever?”

He took a lock of her hair and swept it behind her ear before stroking her face lovingly. “You bet. In fact,” he said, shifting closer to her until she was very aware of how much he wanted her, “I’m not sure forever will be long enough. I, as King of Sifra, demand you accept my company in the afterlife, too.” She raised an eyebrow, in a way which usually had people retreating. But not, apparently the King of Sifra. He traced her eyebrow with his finger before running the tip of his finger along her lips. “What say you, sheikha?”

“Well, my king, if that is a command, then I suppose I must obey.”

“It is no command. It is an invitation, if you like.”

“Hm,” she said, caressing him in such a way as to make him shift his focus back onto her. “At the sheikh’s pleasure, no doubt.”

He nodded with a smile.

“Well, my king, so long as it’s also at the sheikha’s pleasure, I agree.”

He kissed her. “I think,” he murmured against her lips, “you’ll find that they are the same thing.”



THE WEEKS without Zaire had dragged by. Rosana couldn’t believe how much she’d missed him, and how everything which had seemed so important to her in her life at Oxford now paled into insignificance. She was relieved that finally the day of the bi-centennial celebration had arrived. Her colleagues Janey and Leonora were in her room, dressed in their finest to toast the beginning of new lives for them all. The men would arrive soon and they’d meet them in the dining hall. But all three women wanted to take some time alone together.

Leonora, who’d begun this quest, raised her glass to the others. “Here’s to the diamond, which has brought us greater riches than we could ever imagine!”

The others laughed and clinked glasses.

“The hunt for the diamond certainly changed our lives,” said Janey, grimacing slightly. “But it’s a shame we couldn’t locate it.”

“Yes. I really thought we were in with a chance. I guess its whereabouts will remain one of life’s mysteries,” said Rosana. “Lost forever.” She shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe it’s best that way.”

“Why?” asked Leonora. “Personally, I hate mysteries. Surely, it’s best to know something?”

“I’m not so sure.” Rosana frowned. “Maybe our experience proves the opposite. If you’d found the diamond, then there wouldn’t have been any reason for either Janey or me to go to Sifra. Same with Janey. It was the act of searching which brought us to our husbands. Besides, I can’t help thinking

that finding the diamond would have been something of an anti-climax. The mystery would have disappeared. There wouldn't be any more stories to learn."

"I know what you mean," replied Leonora. "Sometimes, what we're searching for isn't what we need, or deep down, desire. That seems to have been the case with all of us. We were hot on the trail of the diamond and, instead, found love."

"Hm," said Janey. "With three brothers. Who'd have thought?" she said with a grin.

"You two, maybe," said Rosana. "You knew your men before. I only knew that I didn't like Zaire when I'd met him when I was a teenager. He was too arrogant, too domineering, too hard, too —"

"Sexy?" volunteered Janey.

Rosana grinned. "I don't think anyone can be *too* sexy. Anyway, I think maybe I was also too arrogant, domineering, hard." She pursed her lips ruefully. "My father made me like that, but Zaire changed me. He took away the pain and made me face up to things I'd been hiding from my whole life. If I hadn't taken on the challenge of hunting down the diamond, I'd still be nurturing that hurt, hiding away from love." She heaved a big sigh and smiled. "And I can say, from the bottom of my newly found heart, that I'm truly grateful for the treasure hunt you took us on, Leonora."

"Hm. A treasure hunt which yielded the only treasure that matters."

Janey raised her glass. "Here's to love."

They clinked their glasses.

"And to brothers," said Leonora. Again the glasses clinked.

Rosana looked from one woman to another. They'd always gotten on as colleagues and enjoyed each other's company, but now things were different. They'd grown so much closer and Rosana knew that without these women's support and friendship her future would be less rich.

"And sisters," Rosana said.

“Sisters,” they repeated in unison before finishing their drinks.

“Now,” said Leonora, “I think it’s time to join the men and celebrate the founding of this college.”

ROSANA DIDN’T THINK her heart had ever felt so full. She sat opposite Zaire—as she’d arranged—so she could look at him. A few weeks’ separation had made her hungry for the sight of him. Luckily, his brothers—Darrius and Amare—and Leonora and Janey kept the conversation flowing, otherwise she didn’t think she’d have been able to stop herself from taking his hand and pulling him from the room, away from everyone, where there were just the two of them to make love, to hold each other and to talk about the future. But that would have to wait a few hours because now it was the past being talked about as the Provost, the head of Gleave College, finished his speech on the history of the college, its founding, and Lord Gleave. The diamond, and the unsuccessful search, was tactfully ignored and finally everyone rose to make the last toast.

“This is,” intoned the Provost, “the exact time of day, and day of the month on which Lord Gleave stated the annual event should be held. The spring equinox. That point in the year when daytime and nighttime are equal across the planet.” He raised his glass. “Let us drink a toast to this institution which Lord Gleave created and which has witnessed so much scholarship over the past two centuries.” He inclined his head regally. “To Gleave College, long may it continue its work.”

Everyone rose and raised their crystal glasses in the air. At that moment, the equinox happened and slowly the light strengthened as expected. Except this year, it was different. This was the first year that they’d dined at this precise time since the removal of the false ceiling. No one knew why the ceiling had been erected in the first place. It had taken the combined persuasive powers of Leonora, Janey and Rosana to convince the college to

act, and to take down the false ceiling. Their suspicions as to what lay beneath the ceiling had been correct. And now, its full glory could be seen.

At first, the sunlight refracted from the glass's outer facets, spinning down onto the polished table below. One by one, people stopped talking and looked up, marveling at the complexity of the design and the beauty of its effect.

"It must be like this in the palace," Rosana murmured to Zaire. "If the diamond were there, I mean."

"That room is rarely used. I've never heard anyone speak of it." He frowned and looked across the table at her, the light dancing between them. "You said, 'if the diamond were there'."

She nodded.

"So what is creating *this* light show? A replica? I think not. Because the replica we have creates no such showy display."

They both looked up at the ceiling in the midst of which the grand centerpiece, which they'd always assumed was an ornate replica, was suddenly suffused with light, spilling out across the table, catching everyone's upturned faces and glancing off their jewelry.

There was a collective gasp. The three women looked at each other.

"I think," said Leonora...

"That we might just have found," said Janey...

"The diamond," breathed Rosana.

"BUT HOW," asked Amare, some hours later when the six of them were relaxing under the now faded light of the dining room, "could Gleave have spirited the diamond out of the country without someone knowing?"

"Queen Mandana," said Rosana, cradling her glass. "Never underestimate a woman in love."

"Why do you think she gave it to Gleave in the end? And didn't keep it in

Sifra?”

Rosana shrugged. “I can only guess.”

Zaire kissed her head. “Your guesses are better than most people’s certainties.”

She turned and kissed him, nearly forgetting what she was going to say. “Ah yes, my guess.” She looked back up at the diamond in the ceiling. “I think she gave it to him as a symbol of her heart, her love. Her country was in disarray and had betrayed her, and her diaries showed how much she adored the man.”

“Goodness knows why,” said Zaire dryly. “He robbed us.”

Rosana shrugged again. “One of life’s mysteries.”

“What is?”

“The power of love. The things people will do for love, and why people love someone who is forbidden to them, someone they have no wish to love, and shouldn’t love. It’s all a mystery.”

“A bigger mystery, it turns out, than the whereabouts of the diamond.”

“It surprised me,” said Darrius, “that the college should suggest the diamond be returned to Sifra.”

“We live in different times. They acknowledge the wrongdoings of Gleave and are happy to have the symbol of those misdeeds—the diamond—returned to where it belongs.”

“Especially when the diamond is so valuable. I bet they were worried about how to keep it safe.”

They laughed. “Well, there will be no problem keeping it safe in Sifra. We are used to housing such treasures. Although the Bahr Al Noor diamond exceeds the others.”

Zaire rose. “One last toast.”

“Another toast?” said Amare with a laugh, as their glasses were re-filled. “Surely we’ve just about toasted everything.”

“Not everyone. This is to the women who’ve changed history and our

lives. To Leonora, to Janey and to Rosana.” His eyes rested on Rosana. “Thank you for coming into our lives and shining your own special light onto it. We—each of my brothers and I—look forward to a lifetime together.”

The three men repeated the toast and the three women exchanged secret smiles. None of this had been easy, but they now had the loves of their lives by their sides and were ready for anything.

“Bring it on,” said Janey, and they all looked up at the central light well which for so many years had hidden its treasure. Now that the timing of the spring equinox had passed, the light had dimmed, but still its cool glow encompassed the three couples who’d been brought together in the quest for the Bahr Al Noor diamond.

EPILOGUE



One year later...

*I*t was late now. The brief moment of twilight had settled upon the small gathering out on the private terrace of the palace. And for the first time that day, silence had also settled. No doubt mainly because all the babies were safely tucked up in their beds, fast asleep, and their tired parents were relaxing. Rosana hadn't known that babies could make quite so much noise, take up quite so much headspace, or encompass so much love.

Leonora and Darrius's little boy—whose first birthday celebrations caused the gathering—was a straight-out mix between his blonde mother and dark-haired father. With his mid-brown hair and steady, autocratic gaze from those hazel eyes, he already possessed his father's commanding air. But he also had the sweetness in his smile, which promised a nature like Leonora. They'd settled in the Sifran palace where Darrius helped run the country, and Leonora could further her research.

Rosana didn't get to see so much of Janey and Amare's adorable daughter, as most of the time they lived in Paris. But, with the baby's golden curls and loud, demanding cries, there was no doubting who was the boss in their family.

Rosana tapped her phone and the most recent photo of Adam, their son,

popped up on the screen. She sighed and fell in love all over again. Darkly complexioned, like them both, with perfectly proportioned features and with Rosana's generous lips, as soon as he opened his eyes, he'd had everyone spellbound, especially his father. One look from Adam and Zaire would pick him up and carry him around, spending hours showing him their world. Rosana loved watching the two of them together, imagining what life held in store for them.

"I know what that smile means, *habibti*," said Zaire, reaching out for her hand and kissing it. He held it tight.

She turned to Zaire. "Do you indeed? You imagine you can read my face like a book?" It was true, he could. He sensed her thoughts with unerring accuracy. And she found it a little galling. She had nowhere to hide.

"I do, my love. You are looking at your son and imagining the man he will become."

"Partly true."

"Hm," he said with a frown. "Maybe I'm losing my touch."

"It wouldn't be surprising given how little sleep you get these days. You shouldn't keep getting up in the night to him," said Rosana. "We have nannies for that job."

"Ha!" Zaire laughed. "If we have nannies, then why do *you* also get up?"

She shrugged. "Because he is my son, and I can't stop myself."

"Then, my love," he said, kissing her hand once more, "we are as bad as each other."

"And as good," she said, leaning into his shoulder.

"Yes, that is true. We are definitely good together. All of us."

All of us. Zaire's words lingered in her head. *All of us. Her* family. Yes, definitely good, Rosana thought gratefully.

"So, tell me what I'm thinking now?" she asked. He followed her gaze as she looked around the intimate scene to the others assembled there.

Leonora and Janey sat close together, talking in a low tone, while Amare

had his feet up on a coffee table and eyes firmly closed. As he'd spent most of the day entertaining his demanding daughter, Rosana guessed he deserved his sleep. Darrius was flicking through his phone, frown lowered, no doubt working and thinking about Sifra's growing economy. He worked hard alongside Zaire on matters of state, happy to have abdicated the crown in favor of his brother, Zaire, because it had given him a life with Leonora, which he'd always wanted.

Then there was Rosana's brother, seated on the terrace wall, his gaze resting on the blue mountains which marked the boundary between Sifra and the Kingdom of Harran. A reconciliation with her brother had meant everything to her, but it had only been effected by the sudden death of her father in a riding accident. It seemed the lively Arab stallion hadn't appreciated either her father's royal status or his bullying nature and had tossed him off three months earlier, killing him instantly.

She was sad that the possibility of reconciliation, or, at least, of gaining any understanding of why he'd treated her like he had, had gone forever. But she couldn't mourn his loss after how he'd made her suffer. She also couldn't mourn his loss when it meant she now had a relationship with her brother, which had been severed when she'd been forced to leave home.

Last, Rosana let her gaze rest on Zaire.

"Can you guess my thoughts?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Truly? No. But I *do* know that we are both of the same mind when it comes to one important thing."

She raised her eyebrow, wondering if he was going to give the correct answer.

"Family," he said. "Greater riches than diamonds."

She grinned and nodded slowly, looking around them all once more.

"Indeed. Family. They are more important than I ever knew, and now I have them I feel I could cope with anything which comes my way."

"You're connected to people who love and respect you," he breathed.

“And always will be. It’s that connection which makes you strong.”

Rosana swallowed and blinked back the tears which now sprung as easily as laughter, since she’d allowed emotion into her heart.

“Makes us *both* strong,” she said. She looked up at him, at his strong face, sexy eyes and warm smile. “I love you, Zaire. Let’s go to bed.”

His eyes flashed with understanding, and then he kissed her tenderly on the lips.

“It would be my pleasure.”



Want to read more of Diana’s books and save money?

The why not check out the super-priced ebook bundles, available only at Diana’s store? You’ll find sheikhs, Italian and New Zealand billionaires, and more—all at heavily discounted prices.

[All the ebook bundles!](#)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *At the Sheikh's Pleasure*. I hope you enjoyed it! Reviews are always welcome—they help me, and they help prospective readers to decide if they'd enjoy the book.

The Diamond Sheikhs series comprises:

[At the Sheikh's Command](#)

[At the Sheikh's Bidding](#)

At the Sheikh's Pleasure

If you'd like to read more of my romances featuring sheikhs, you're in luck! I have 14 other sheikh romances for you to read. They're all available at your favorite online retailers or, if you're interested in discounts, you can buy them direct from my store.

For 50% off all 14 sheikh books check out this bundle:

[The Ultimate Sheikh Bundle! 14 Emotional, Sexy Sheikh Books](#)

For 20% off each of the sheikh series, click the following links:

[The Sheikhs of Havilah Bundle \(Books 1-5\)](#)

[Secrets of the Sheikhs Book Bundle](#)

[Desert Kings Book Bundle \(1-6\)](#)

All my books are listed on the following pages. If you'd like an email letting you know when my latest release has been published, you can sign up to my email list via my website and store—dianasbooks.nz.

Happy reading!

Diana

ALSO BY DIANA FRASER

eBook Bundles at Fantastic Prices!

50% OFF!

The Ultimate Sheikh Bundle! 14 Emotional, Sexy Sheikh Books

20% OFF!

British Billionaire Romance—three brothers, three page-turning romances

Italian Romance—Heartwarming and Sensual

The Lantern Bay series, packed with emotion, mystery and romance

The Heartwarming Mackenzies series—secrets, heartache and happy endings

Sensual Medieval Romances



Diana's Book List

Tap the book title and you'll be taken to your favorite online store.

Tap the series title to be taken to dianasbooks.nz where you'll find all the books, plus lots of bargains and other goodies for sale.

—**Diamond Sheikhs**—

At the Sheikh's Command

At the Sheikh's Bidding

At the Sheikh's Pleasure

—***British Billionaires***—

[The Billionaire's Contract Marriage](#)

[The Billionaire's Impossible CEO](#)

[The Billionaire's Secret Baby](#)

[British Billionaire Bundle](#)

—***Secrets of the Sheikhs***—

[The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction](#)

[The Sheikh's Secret Love Child](#)

[The Sheikh's Marriage Trap](#)

[Secrets of the Sheikhs Book Bundle](#)

—***The Sheikhs of Havilah***—

[The Sheikh's Secret Baby](#)

[Bought by the Sheikh](#)

[The Sheikh's Forbidden Lover](#)

[Surrender to the Sheikh](#)

[Taken for the Sheikh's Harem](#)

[The Sheikhs of Havilah Bundle \(Books 1-5\)](#)

—***Desert Kings***—

[Wanted: A Wife for the Sheikh](#)

[The Sheikh's Bargain Bride](#)

[The Sheikh's Lost Lover](#)

[Awakened by the Sheikh](#)

[Claimed by the Sheikh](#)

[Wanted: A Baby by the Sheikh](#)

[Desert Kings Book Bundle \(1-6\)](#)

—**Italian Romance**—

[The Italian's Perfect Lover](#)

[Seduced by the Italian](#)

[The Passionate Italian](#)

[An Accidental Christmas](#)

[Italian Romance Bundle \(1-4\)](#)

— ***Small-town contemporary romances*** —

—**The Mackenzies**—

[A Place Called Home](#)

[Secrets at Parata Bay](#)

[Escape to Shelter Springs](#)

[What you See in the Stars](#)

[Second Chance at Whisper Creek](#)

[Summer at the Lakehouse Café](#)

[The Mackenzies 6-Book Bundle](#)

—**Lantern Bay**—

[Yours to Give](#)

[Yours to Treasure](#)

[Yours to Cherish](#)

[Yours to Keep](#)

[Yours Forever](#)

[Yours to Love](#)

[The Lantern Bay 6-Book Bundle](#)

—**Medieval Romance**—

Claiming his Lady

Seducing his Lady

Awakening his Lady

Defending his Lady

Honoring his Lady

Norfolk Knights Bundle (1-5)

