



The Sheikh's Embrace

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Description: A Sheikh's Proposal...

Tara Treon sought refuge from her tumultuous past and discovered solace within the opulent walls of the Pitra palace. Amidst its grandeur, she encountered the captivating Sheikh Zayed al Mastrion, whose intense and enigmatic gaze ignited emotions within Tara that she recognized as forbidden, yet uncontrollable.

Unfortunately, her terror laden past was poised to resurface.

During meetings, Zayed al Mastrion struggled to maintain focus with Tara, his uber efficient assistant, seated beside him. Her endearing freckles and intelligent eyes were constant distractions. When Zayed discerned that Tara's safety was at risk, he took control. His proposed remedy to her predicament? Marriage.

Will they figure out their love before Tara's past comes back to separate them?

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Chapter 1

The buzz, sharp and intrusive, seemed to hang in the air like a dissonant melody, disrupting the hallowed silence of the High Council chamber. The polished mahogany table, usually a symbol of order and authority, now served as a stage for the unfolding drama. Papers shuffled and pencils scratched, remnants of hastily halted note-taking, lay in front of each member, emphasizing the abrupt halt that had befallen the meeting.

As the participants' heads swiveled in unison, the strategic lighting in the chamber cast elongated shadows, heightening the sense of suspense. The ornate tapestries that adorned the walls, depicting scenes of historical significance, appeared to observe the proceedings with silent disapproval, as if the very fabric of the room had turned against them.

At the sound, Tara abruptly looked up from her laptop, her sharp eyes narrowing as she glanced at each member of the High Council, their elderly features creased by age and wisdom...and shock at the intrusive sound. No one moved as the censure built. A split second later, everyone glanced at their phones but Tara, always mindful of the tall, powerful man sitting next to her, looked to him. He was watching each of his council members with barely contained fury.

“Your Highness,” she started, watching the members stuff their cell phones back into their pockets after confirming that it hadn’t been their phone that buzzed.

Sheik Zayed el Mastrion, Ruler of Pitra, stared at her. Zayed sat at the head of the table, a commanding presence exuding strength and authority. His tall, muscular

frame bespoke a life of discipline and power. His broad shoulders and chiseled physique hinted at the physical prowess honed through the rigors of his duties. Dark, penetrating eyes, sharp and intelligent, revealed a mind adept at navigating the complexities of both tradition and modernity.

His dark gaze held an intensity that conveyed a wealth of experience and wisdom. The hard, unwavering set of his jaw suggested a man unyielding in the face of challenges. Dressed in a tailor made suit that accentuated his stature, he carried an air of dignity and grace.

And...she loved him. Tara knew, with all of her heart, that she loved this hard, powerful man. She loved the way he cared for the people of his country. She loved the way his lips pressed into a thin line when he disagreed, or the way the corners of his eyes crinkled when he was amused. She respected his ambitions for his people and the way he easily laughed. She even loved the way he teased her or when a sandwich appeared in her office because he knew she'd stayed in a meeting, skipping lunch to help him. She loved the way he knew every person's name in the administrative office, asked about their families, sent graduation presents, wedding gifts or big bouquets of flowers when someone lost a loved one.

Unfortunately, she also knew that she could never be anything more to him than a memory!

Another buzz intruded on the tense silence, bringing Tara's mind back to the present. When she glanced around again, the council members were subtly shaking their heads, denying that they'd just received an alert.

Then it sounded yet again, the dreadful, unmistakable buzz that indicated another message had come through, the sound adding to the escalating tension in the room. The council members, on edge and eyes narrowed, exchanged wary glances.

As the seconds ticked away, the air thickened with suspicion. The once-stately chamber, accustomed to dignified debates and measured discussions, fairly crackled with an undercurrent of paranoia. The ornate surroundings, adorned with gilded frames and aged tapestries, cast long, ominous shadows that danced across the faces of the councilors, amplifying the sense of secrecy and unease.

And then, like an ominous revelation, Tara felt it — a subtle vibration against her leg. Her eyes widened, the momentary shock registering on her face. The room seemed to shrink around her as she became acutely aware of the watchful gazes that now turned on her.

Tara, normally composed and stoic, faltered. Her hand instinctively moved to her ever-present tote bag, the fabric rustling with a nervous energy that mirrored the charged atmosphere of the room. She reached down into the depths of her bag, her fingers brushing against concealed secrets.

When she withdrew her hand, it held not the expected documents or personal effects, but a secret cell phone. The dim light in the room caught the glint of its screen, a forbidden beacon that illuminated Tara's face with an eerie glow. The tension in the room, already taut, reached a palpable climax as the councilors collectively held their breath.

Tara's fingers trembled as she lifted the phone from her bag. Her fingers trembled so badly, she could barely press the buttons to silence the noise. It took her three tries, but she finally, thankfully, silenced the rancorous buzzing.

However, she couldn't stuff the phone back into her bag. Not this phone. Unaware of the combined censure of the room's occupants, Tara's quivering fingers pressed the button that allowed her to read the message.

“Just letting you know that the hamburgers are ready. They are on their way to your

destination. Enjoy!”

Tara's gaze fixated on the words glowing on the screen, desperation driving her to re-read them as if hoping the second pass would magically alter their meaning. The dim light of the secret phone cast an eerie glow on her face, shadows dancing in unsettling patterns around the edges of the room. The councilors, suspended in a collective breath, awaited her reaction.

But as her eyes re-traced the last word, a sinister revelation dawned, plunging her into a chilling abyss. The message, rather than offering solace or reassurance, carried an undertone of malevolence that sent a shiver down her spine.

A sudden, stabbing pain erupted in Tara's stomach, a physical manifestation of the dread that gripped her. The room seemed to constrict around her, the air thickening with an almost suffocating intensity. Every muscle in her body tensed with terror, turning her limbs into a prison of fear. The oppressive weight of the unknown bore down on her, and the once-sturdy ground beneath her feet suddenly turned into shifting sands.

“Ms. Treon?” the deep, masculine tone interjected into her terror-filled mind.

Tara looked up, but she didn't see the handsome, roughly hewn features of Sheik Zayed el Mastrion. She didn't see the ancient walls or the polished table that had witnessed centuries of wars and conflict, negotiations and peace. She didn't see the twelve, beloved men who would tease her after the meeting for breaking protocol by having a cell phone in this room.

Stammering, she snapped her laptop shut, the sharp clack echoing like a gunshot in the hushed room. Panic etched across her face, and the cell phone's glow extinguished abruptly as she shoved the phone deep into her bag. Her laptop teetered dangerously on the precipice of the stone table while her heart thundered in her chest, a desperate

drumbeat in sync with the escalating tension. Every eye in the room fixated on her abrupt movement. The unexpected act spoke of urgency, a volatile secret now confined within the hidden cell phone. The room held its breath, poised on the brink of revelation or ruin.

“Tara?” Zayed prompted again, his tone gentler this time but still firm and commanding.

Tara shook her head and...her numb fingers accidentally dropped another file onto the floor. In the shocked silence, she looked at the papers strewn across the ancient stones, but she couldn't do anything about them. Clutching her tote containing the cell phone to her chest, she looked into Zayed's eyes and backed up a step. “I'll...I...um...!”

Words failed her. In this moment, her brain was consumed with the dire warning relayed in that simple message.

Instead of explaining, which she couldn't, Tara turned and rushed out of the room. The heavy oak door was already opened thanks to one of the guards. Normally, she would have smiled gratefully up at the man and given him a gracious thanks. But today, she bowed her head, her fingers tightening around her bag as she hurried out.

Once out in the hallway, the bright lights overhead hurt her eyes. The intensity of that light was like the message – a bright, desperate signal that her misery-filled past had caught up to her. Lifting her eyes, she looked around for a private place, a space where she could re-read the message.

Unfortunately, the hallway was teeming with guards and assistants to the council members, none of which were allowed in the council chambers. As the personal assistant to Sheik el Mastrion, Tara was the only assistant permitted to sit in on the meetings.

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Privacy! She needed a place where she could think, strategize, escape the suffocating weight of the looming crisis. The urgency clawed at her throat as she scanned the room for a sanctuary away from the hallway's chaos. What was she going to do? The unanswered question echoed like a siren in her mind, each passing moment intensifying the pressure. With every heartbeat, the need for a plan built relentlessly. The eyes of the room bore into her, a silent witness to her unspoken turmoil. The gravity of the situation hung in the air, demanding action, while uncertainty clung to her.

Rushing down the hallway, she glanced around. Unfortunately, the only doors in sight led either to another office or to...a storage room!

Tara nearly ran to the closet, jerked open the door and stepped inside. The light automatically came on but as soon as she pulled the door closed, the light clicked off.

Silence. Blessed silence and privacy!

Taking a slow, steadying breath, Tara closed her eyes, pressing the bag to her chest as if she could somehow suppress the message it contained. But after only a moment, Tara sighed and released her hold on the bag. Clutching the leather straps, she let the contents tumble downwards with an ominous thunk. Retrieving the phone, Tara nervously entered the unlock code and read the message again.

Unfortunately, the words didn't change with the third reading.

"No!" she whispered, closing her eyes again and leaning her head back against the wall behind her. "No no no no!"

Bending low, Tara, now concealed in the darkness, attempted to suppress the escalating panic clawing at her insides. This was no time for panic; she needed a clear mind, formulate a plan. But what plan could she devise? How could she escape this latest act in the pathetic drama that was her life? The question echoed through her thoughts, resonating with urgency.

When she looked up, a dim reflection off of a small mirror over a tiny sink revealed her terrified features. But Tara cared little for her image; instead, her priority was shrouding herself from the haunting shadows of her past. Though some bestowed upon her the label of beauty, it was a title she considered a nemesis. The very allure of her appearance had lured a tormentor into her life. Her facial features, once admired, were now considered a curse, the architect of the inferno she found herself in. The mirror, a reluctant accomplice in reflecting her image, served as a reminder of the turmoil that stemmed from the beauty that had betrayed her.

Though her green eyes shimmered with intelligence, they also mirrored the fear that gripped her. In the calming darkness of the little closet, Tara inhaled deeply, the taste of tension lingering on her tongue. Trying to calm down, she paused and held her breath, counting to five. Exhaling slowly through pursed lips, she repeated the calming ritual until, after the fourth repetition, a semblance of control returned.

As the threat of a panic attack subsided, Tara, her normally calm features were now accentuated by the strain etched on her face. But with the newly found calm, Tara also discovered clarity. Now, amidst the shadows, she could think, strategize, and confront the unknown challenges that loomed ahead. The tension in the air persisted, but Tara, with steely determination shining in her green eyes, was ready to face whatever awaited her next.

However, before she could create a solid plan, the door to her temporary sanctuary jerked open and the tall, terrifying persona of her boss loomed even larger because of her crouched position.

“Your Highness!” Tara gasped, quickly stretching herself to her full height. Or tried to. Perhaps she’d crouched here in this silly closet for longer than she’d realized because her legs didn’t want to cooperate.

Thankfully, two strong hands reached out, steadying her until she was upright.

“Thank you,” she whispered, lowering her eyes as his touch shot sparks of a strange sort of wanting inside of her. Backing up, she nearly tripped over a bucket. Grabbing onto a wire shelf, Tara attempted a small bit of dignity, despite her surroundings.

“You’re welcome.” Zayed released her and Tara suddenly felt cold. “Now explain.”

For a brief moment, she nearly laughed. Not because any of this situation was amusing. Nope, her laughter would be more along the hysterical kind. Tara doubted that the powerful, shockingly...um...healthy...she let her eyes skim over his broad shoulders and flat stomach. The man was absolutely yummy! She’d thought so from the first moment she’d interviewed with him.

“Tara!” Zayed snapped.

She realized that she’d allowed her eyes to...meander...and jerked her focus back to his face. Tara had to tilt her head back when he was this close, but didn’t mind. Not one little bit. A woman could get lost in those dark, intense eyes of his. And his lashes were ridiculously long. Why couldn’t she have been blessed with such lashes? Why had she received the “blessing” of pale skin that freckled at even the hint of sunshine?

With a heavy sigh, Zayed reached out and...if Tara had been in her right mind, she would have anticipated the man’s actions. But because she was so frazzled, she didn’t anticipate the man simply reaching out and plucking the cell phone from her numb fingers. He pressed a button and read the message, one dark eyebrow lifting.

When his quizzical gaze returned to her worried features, Tara knew he didn't understand.

Chapter 2

Zayed's mind was racing with questions. And need. And lust. And a whole host of other emotions. He should be used to some of them by now. The lust had been present ever since Tara Treon walked into his office for a job interview. With her bright smile and those adorable freckles sprinkled across her up-tilted nose, not to mention her sweet, rosebud lips and those enchanting green eyes...Zayed had been lost.

In this moment, her terror and the lingering memory of her frightened retreat from the meeting, Zayed wanted to pull Tara into his arms and hold her, tell her that she was safe from whatever had scared her. But he wasn't sure how to protect her from...a hamburger delivery.

"Are you hungry, qatah aghira?" he asked, his rough voice soft and compelling.

He noticed her lips moving, repeating the endearment. Tara spoke Arabic well, but her understanding of the language was more focused on business and political vocabulary. The endearment "kitten" wasn't something that she'd ever encountered. He almost laughed as he watched her agile mind work, but tried to focus on the message still displayed on the cell phone. The phone was obviously a burner phone since it was cheap and old. Hell, Zayed wasn't even sure if one could buy a flip phone anymore. He estimated that the phone was probably ten years old. How did it even work?

"No," she replied and he noticed as she stiffened. "I'm not hungry."

Those mesmerizing green eyes narrowed, and he swiftly turned the phone around,

revealing the message. She winced, barely casting a glance at the text before redirecting her gaze. As he observed, Tara rubbed a still-trembling hand over her stomach, reigniting the ever-present desire in his mind.

Had his longing for this woman ever truly waned? Over the past two years since Tara had entered his life, he'd managed to suppress the desire, keeping it at bay. Yet, it lingered beneath the surface, a persistent force that tested his sanity daily. Her most innocent gesture reignited the simmering passion, causing him to envision her in a more intimate light.

Was it intentional? Was Tara deliberately using such distractions to divert his attention from the coded message's meaning?

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His eyes narrowed on her lovely features. Mentally, he berated himself for such a ridiculous possibility. Tara was one of those rare women who had no clue how beautiful and enticing she really was. She was completely oblivious to the impact she had on the male species. Despite her obvious attempts to diminish her femininity with drab, ill-fitting clothes. The grey dress she wore today had a curved collar that cupped her neck and the dull material draped down over her body, the hem falling to the middle of her calves.

And yet, the dress couldn't fully hide her lush curves. Quite the opposite, in fact. The material taunted the male species, himself in particular, by floating around those curves, brushing against them, hinting at what was underneath, but that he couldn't have!

In that moment, he realized something amazing. He was no longer betrothed! Princess Ciara, the woman he'd been betrothed to for the past ten years, had finally broken off the contract. She was now engaged to marry Sheik Falk, one of Zayed's good friends!

Reminding himself of his betrothal over the past two years had become a habit. But now, he didn't need to continue restraining himself. He didn't need to keep holding off on pursuing the one woman who intrigued and enticed him more than any other ever had!

Tara! Tara Treon was going to be his!

As he observed her in the moment, he recognized the fear in her eyes. It served as a stark reminder that she was in jeopardy. Over a hamburger?

He read the message again; “Just letting you know that the hamburgers are ready. They are on their way to your destination. Enjoy!”

No, this wasn’t about a hamburger. It couldn’t be that simple. Clearly, someone was en route to Pitra, having discovered that Tara was here.

Someone dangerous.

But who? And why?

Stuffing the phone into his pocket, he waved towards the other end of the hallway where his office was located. “Let’s talk,” Zayed commanded. He turned and started moving down the hallway towards his office.

It took him several steps to realize that Tara wasn’t by his side. Turning back, he saw her timidly peering around the corner, as if she was worried that someone was going to jump out and grab her.

Turning back, he stopped right in front of her and took her hand, his fingers sliding against the softness of hers.

“Tara, no one is going to hurt you. I guarantee your safety.” He lowered his head so that no one could overhear. “I will protect you with my life, Tara.”

She gasped and started to pull away from him. But he tightened his grip on her fingers, shaking his head. “No, don’t try to deny that you are in danger, qatah aghira.” He ran his thumb over the top of her hand. “I can see the fear in your lovely, green eyes. I can also feel the way you’re trembling.” He tilted his head slightly. “Or is that trembling because you are afraid of me?”

“No!” Tara gasped and took a small step closer. “You would never hurt me. I know

that, Your Highness.”

Nodding his approval, he straightened up. “Jyid.” He took her hand and gently tugged her out of the odd sanctuary. “You’re going to tell me what that message meant and I’m going to fix the problem for you. And then we’re going to talk about other subjects more to my liking and yours.”

Chapter 3

Tara stared at the cell phone where it sat in the middle of Zayed’s desk, waiting for him to return. She sat in the extra chair, her hands folded primly on her lap. Memories of other conversations, painful, humiliating, stern lectures in front of a different desk, flashed through her mind, but she closed her eyes and banished them. Zayed wasn’t him! Looking around, Tara reminded herself that HE couldn’t get to her if she stayed inside the palace. She was safe here! She’d overreacted earlier, but she was safe. Looking around, she reminded herself of the layers of security both inside and out of the palace. She was safe. Perfectly safe!

Even if her sister’s message held an ominous accuracy — Kaia was always right, though Tara could never fathom how Kaia unearthed the schemes of those malicious individuals — the gravity of the situation loomed. The idea that she could not find her here, despite Kaia’s purported insight, injected a surge of tension into the air. Tara grappled with the dual weight of her sister’s warning and the realization that, perhaps this time, even Kaia’s foresight might not be enough to shield her from the impending threat that inched closer, threatening to shatter the fragile semblance of safety Tara had sought to carve out for herself.

The awareness of her own posture struck like a cruel revelation — the submissive pose, the bowed head, a grotesque echo of her past training. A jolt of panic surged through her veins, propelling her abruptly to her feet as if the chair itself had scorched her. The rapid retreat was a desperate attempt to distance herself from the haunting

remnants of her past self. She fervently hoped that Zayed, the observer of her involuntary regression, remained oblivious to that stark display of vulnerability. In the silent aftermath, the room held the lingering tension of a suppressed history threatening to unravel.

He had witnessed her hurried exit from the meeting just moments ago. Moreover, he'd seen her huddled in a broom closet. "Good grief!" she whispered, a self-directed exclamation filled with frustration. Closing her eyes in an attempt to gather composure, Tara began pacing, seething with anger for two distinct reasons. First, she had succumbed to fear at the mere hint of her tormentor finding her. Second, she had bared her vulnerabilities to her boss, an uncharacteristic lapse that fueled her fury even further. The weight of embarrassment and self-reproach hung heavily in the air as Tara grappled with the repercussions of her actions.

Zayed was big and strong and never cowered! There wasn't a gosh-darn thing that scared him!

No, that wasn't right. He hated spiders. Tara smiled as she remembered the man leaping out of his chair one day while in the middle of giving her instructions. When she'd walked around to the other side of the desk, thinking to find a woman hiding under there, she found, instead, a tiny spider crawling on the floor.

That moment had been her big show of bravery. The one and only time she'd been brave, she thought miserably. Point of fact, Zayed had run away from a tiny spider only that one moment in his life. She'd been running from her monsters for years.

Correction, she'd been cowering, terrified of her monsters her whole life!

The door to Zayed's office opened and Tara's head swiveled. She never denied herself that moment of pleasure. Watching Zayed step into a room was truly a magnificent sight! His strength and confidence were a palpable force. Plus, the man

was gorgeous! She even liked the tiny bump on his nose, a telltale sign that someone had broken his nose at some point.

She'd like to know that story. No, that wasn't true. Tara wanted to find out who had broken her...the...man's nose, and hurt them in return for wounding someone as wonderful as Zayed.

The man in question stopped midstride and looked at her. His sudden lack of movement confused her. Tara was used to him barreling through every moment of his day. The man worked long hours, often seven days a week. He worked eighteen to twenty hours and never had a full day off. Of course, she worked right alongside him and reveled in every moment. He made her feel alive! The work and his presence motivated her more than anything else. Plus, she felt as if she sparkled with every new accomplishment.

"Have you had your fill yet?" his deep voice asked.

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Tara was stunned for a moment, not sure what he meant. Then she jumped in surprise, her startled eyes lifting to look into his darker gaze.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness,” she gasped, bowing her head as she’d seen the servants do when they’d addressed him. She’d never gone all submissive on him like this before.

But then, she’d never made such an egregious mistake like ogling the man before.

His soft, husky laughter soothed her in an odd way. He proceeded to his desk, then did a little shake of his head, almost as if he’d changed his mind. And even that was an odd reaction. Sheik Zayed el Mastrion was a perpetually decisive man! He was able to absorb massive amounts of information, evaluate everything, and issue instructions immediately.

His decision making abilities had fascinated Tara from the moment she’d started working for him.

“Come sit with me, Tara,” he commanded, his voice soft, but that bite of authority was there.

She almost rebelled against that tone, but then she remembered how kind and generous he was. So instead of snapping at him, or taking a swing at him, she moved jerkily towards the sofa and chairs. He patted the leather cushion next to him, but she chose one of the leather chairs, perching primly on the edge. Then she opened her notebook, slipped the pen out of its leather loop, and looked at him, waiting for instructions.

Immediately, he shook his head. “This isn’t about work, Tara. And you know it.” He shifted, leaning forward with his elbows propped on his knees, his long, lean fingers dangling between them. “I want you to explain that message you received during the council meeting and why it scared you so badly.”

Darn it. She lifted her eyebrows questioningly. “The message?” she queried. “Fake it,” she reminded herself silently. She and Kaia had mastered the art of feigning innocence, confusion, contriteness—whatever emotion the situation demanded for a swift escape. Since their escape, the sisters had become adept at wearing masks, skillfully diverting unwanted questions and shielding the secrets they preferred to keep buried.

“I don’t know why someone would deliver hamburgers to me.”

His lips pressed together for a moment and Tara suspected that he was trying not to laugh.

Tara shifted on her chair, her pen poised over her notebook. “I imagine the message was meant for someone else. Nothing to be concerned about.”

“Except for the fact that, whatever that message meant, the coded warning sent you into a closet, Tara,” he argued. “Which begs the question, why are you hiding your fear from me?” He leaned closer. “You know that I’ll protect you from whatever might harm you, right? You know that I will never let anyone hurt you.”

She smiled, warmed by his words as well as the kindness he always showed her. Not many people got to see this side of Zayed. He had to be strong and fearless in front of his people and his advisors. The political machinations within the palace were constantly shifting and changing. Zayed rose above the manipulations, letting some plots move forward while squashing others if they didn’t serve his purposes.

It was yet another nuance of the man that she...respected. Tara needed to stop thinking about her feelings for him. They were pointless and could put him in danger if...well, that wouldn't happen! It couldn't!

"Your Highness, I am here to serve you. It is my duty to protect you as much as possible." She tapped her pen against her notebook. "Not the other way around."

"I beg to differ, Tara. You are....," he paused, searching for a word.

Tara filled in the silence for him. "I'm an employee."

He tilted his head slightly. "Do you really think that's all you are to me?"

She shrugged and looked down, praying that her longing wouldn't show in her eyes. Longing for this man, for who he was behind the world leader facade. She longed for the strength and the gentleness he rarely allowed anyone to see. Zayed adeptly hid that aspect of his personality, but she felt privileged to have seen it. She knew it was there, influencing his decisions.

"I'm merely your personal assistant, Your Highness. That's all."

"You think so?" he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "That's not all you are to me, Tara. And you're going to understand that very soon." He stood up and walked over to his desk, Tara following, her pen at the ready. He spouted off a list of instructions and she wrote them all down, adding her own notes on the side. Then he finished, "And I'll need you to take notes over dinner tonight as well."

She added that to her growing list as well. "Who will be at dinner tonight?" she asked, mentally reviewing his calendar. There wasn't an official dinner tonight, but that often changed during his meetings. Sometimes, he'd issue instructions to one of his directors, then invite them to dinner so that they could discuss the situation

further.

“You,” was all he said. “What’s next on my agenda?”

Tara was startled for a moment, but quickly looked down at the day’s schedule she kept pinned to her notebook. “You are speaking with the finance minister in,” she glanced at the time, “three minutes to go over last quarter’s employment numbers. After that, Ambassador Chillan asked for time with you.”

“That’s fine.” He moved towards the door, heading to the conference room. “What are we having for dinner?”

Tara was stumped. He’d never asked that question before. “I don’t know, Your Highness, but I’ll find out at once. I’ll let you know by the end of your finance meeting.”

He nodded his approval, stopping with his hand on the knob to the conference room. “What’s your favorite meal?”

Tara stopped, her mouth falling open. “My...?” she halted, shaking her head to try and dislodge her confusion. “I don’t think I have one.”

He stared at her for a moment and Tara could tell he knew she was lying.

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Zayed's grin sent her heart racing all over again.

"I'm going to find out, eazizi," he told her, leaning in so she could smell the spicy scent of his cologne as well as the scent that was his alone. There was something intriguing about the way Zayed smelled. It was almost...no, there were no words. He just smelled...unique. And enticing.

"You're going to find out what?" she asked, breathless as she tried to concentrate. When he was close like this, it was difficult. Then his meaning hit her and panic reared its nasty head again. "Find out" he'd said...about...the message? The coded message on her phone? He couldn't know! Impossible! That code was completely random, known only by her and one other person!

"What your favorite meal is," he replied, then winked at her before stepping into the meeting.

It took Tara a few moments of stunned surprise before she followed him in and settled in a chair along the wall. There were several people in the room and the meeting would be recorded, but Tara attended most of his meetings to take notes on issues Zayed, or Tara, needed to follow up on.

Normally, she was attentive in these meetings, knowledgeable on every issue because she read all of the contracts and reports before they reached Zayed's desk. She'd taught herself how to speed read and take shorthand notes. She'd taught herself to type over one hundred words a minute. She'd read up on all of the latest technology so that she could apply various apps to do her job better, faster, and more accurately.

But in this moment, she was too stunned by his words, by the possibility that he might care about her preferences, to take notes.

He must have realized that she was confused because he lifted a hand. “Just a moment ladies and gentlemen. Tara needs a moment.”

She jerked her head upwards and glared at him. The datted man only chuckled, then turned back to the table. “Okay, she’s ready. Proceed.”

Tara wasn’t “ready”, she mentally grumbled, but she started scratching on her notebook. The notes she’d written had nothing to do with the conversation and everything to do with coming up with retribution for that embarrassing moment.

That only lasted for perhaps one, maybe two minutes, before she brought her concentration back to the discussion. And darn it, he knew the exact moment that she’d re-focused. The man turned and winked at her! How...rude! How inappropriate!

Three hours later, Tara fought to hide her exhaustion. It had been another chaotic day with everyone wanting “just five minutes” of Zayed’s time. It was her job to determine who truly needed time with him, and who needed to speak with someone else. Thankfully, he went into a security briefing around five o’clock, giving her a breather. She took that time to transcribe her notes and code them into a database that she’d built. Later, once he was finished for the night, Tara would go back and read through tomorrow’s schedule and pull up any appropriate notes from past meetings that might be relevant.

Her stomach growled and she realized that she’d skipped lunch, but that wasn’t unusual. It was always a rush around the lunch hour. But knowing that Zayed would be in his security meeting for at least another hour, she considered heading down to the staff cafeteria to grab something to eat.

But before she could do that, she remembered the message. She needed to reply! Good grief, she closed her eyes, trying to remember the reply code. Slipping into Zayed's office, she retrieved her cell phone and flipped it open.

“Cereal for dinner tonight.”

With a sigh of relief, she tucked the phone back into its secret pocket and straightened up. But after that message, she wasn't hungry. In fact, her stomach twisted uneasily. So instead of grabbing a quick bite, she returned to her computer and started working again.

Chapter 4

Kaia Treon paced across the dirt floor of the old barn, nervously glancing at the cell phone she held with every step. “Come on, Tara!” she whispered impatiently. “Read the message!”

Nothing. Kaia kept pacing, going over to the hole in the old wood wall where she could watch the gathering. No one knew she was up here and she had to keep quiet so they wouldn't become suspicious. It was difficult though. She wanted to rush down the barely stable ladder, walk into the middle of the crowd of worshipers and yell at all of them, beg them to understand that they were being abused and controlled by an evil man.

However, she knew from past experience that her yelling, talking, coaxing, or any other form of communication would go unheard. Especially right now, since there were men and women worshiping together. In this “church”, women were not allowed to speak in mixed company. According to their interpretation of the Bible, women were to be silent during worship services – and since they believed that the entire world was the church, women were never allowed to speak when a man was present.

But even if the group contained only women, Kaia still would be ignored. These women had been brain-washed into believing that all women were inferior to men. She'd heard the Bible verses that the cult used to justify the male members' violent abuse of women over and over again. In fact, she had the scars, proving that she was "unworthy" of the grace of their god because she asked too many questions about the verses that were their "proof", the verses that all women were required to memorize and recite whenever a man considered her actions to be outside the bounds of appropriate behavior.

At last, the phone buzzed. Kaia's eyes darted down to the screen, quickly absorbing the message. A wave of relief engulfed her so profoundly that she almost let out a laugh, but she stifled it just in time. Silently, she descended the ladder.

Kaia paused long enough to check the cameras she'd installed, ensuring that they were all still working properly and were still well hidden. For a moment, she considered remaining in the barn, wanting to hear more of what was going on. But in the end, she opted to leave, well aware of the danger of overstaying her "welcome". The temptation of lingering too closely had nearly trapped her in the past.

So instead of waiting for the prolonged worship service to conclude, Kaia skillfully vanished into the woods, embarking on the three-mile trek to her car.

Chapter 5

Elijah Collins surveyed the busy international airport outside of the capital city of Pitra with self-righteous disdain. It was larger and more sophisticated than he'd prefer. Elijah had been hoping that the Pitra airport would be a shack, visibly demonstrating the clear inferiority of this foreign country. But it wasn't a shack. The airport was just as large and technologically advanced as anything one could find in the United States or Europe.

“Where do we go?” Beth Ann Collins asked, clutching her heavy, cumbersome suitcase tightly.

Nora Collins glared at her mother. “Shush!” she hissed, watching with satisfaction as her mother cringed inwardly. “Your son knows where we need to go. He got the address. We’ll only be here overnight. Just long enough to collect his bride so Elijah can bring Tara home where she belongs.”

Elijah lifted his hand and both women cringed, physically bracing for the slap. But it didn’t come. They should have known better. Elijah would never hit them in public. They’d quickly figured that out over the years. No man wanted his “discipline” to be questioned. Anyone outside of their church family couldn’t understand their ways.

Well, some probably did. There were many other church organizations that agreed with their beliefs. But some organizations had adopted new ways of thinking. Those people had moved away from the true word, the righteous path towards salvation. In other words, they would burn in everlasting hell for their leniency and naughty ways.

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“Woman is more guilty than man, because she was seduced by Satan, and so diverted her husband from obedience to God that she was an instrument of death leading all to perdition.” Beth Ann whispered the Bible verse to herself, lowering her eyes as she quickly prayed for forgiveness. “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” She continued, clasping her hands together as she recited another verse that she’d been required to memorize.

“Quiet, Beth Ann,” Elijah remonstrated. “We are in the world of heathens. We cannot let our wills be diverted.”

“Yes, Elijah,” she replied back in a placating tone, lowering her head even more to demonstrate her subservience.

The two women in drab clothing waited for Elijah, who looked quite dapper since he’d purchased a new suit and white shirt for the trip. He even had shiny new shoes. Beth Ann looked down at her son’s shoes, wondering what it would be like to wear something new. Everything they were allowed to wear and to use was purchased from the thrift stores in the small town near their home in Kentucky.

Beth Ann and Nora waited in silence. Beth Ann could see the overhead signs that instructed tourists where to go to find a taxi, but she kept silent. It wasn’t her place to instruct her son. It was his place to instruct the women. She waited, praying that she could find the patience. It was difficult. Elijah wasn’t the smartest man. He was similar to his father and Beth Ann had hated that man from the moment she’d been forced to marry the violent bastard. The day he’d died of a heart attack was both the happiest and saddest day of her life. When she’d found her husband dead in the field, she’d laughed with joy, thinking that she was finally free.

That joy had been short lived. Elijah had been notified and Beth Ann had been brought back under a man's domain.

It was how it should be, she reminded herself. It was the will of god. As a woman, she should know her place. Every day, she prayed that god would take away her desire to be free, to make her own decisions. Or even to be married off to a man who didn't smack her around at every opportunity.

But she'd birthed two children; Elijah and Nora. That meant she was no longer a virgin. Therefore, the men of the church family would never marry her. Virgins were required for a godly marriage.

In fact, finding Elijah's virgin "wife" was the whole reason the three of them were standing in the Pitra airport now. Having been told by their leader, Ethan Howell, that Elijah's wife had finally been found, they'd flown into the capital city to retrieve his bride. Elijah and his bride had been married thirteen years ago. But the little brat had run away, humiliating Elijah in front of their leader and all of their village members. It was a deeply embarrassing thing to not be able to control one's wife!

Ever since that hussy had left Elijah, he'd been banned from certain church ceremonies because the elders considered him weak. If...when...Elijah returned with his wife in tow, their family's honor would be restored. Elijah, and through him, Nora and Beth Ann, would be permitted to rejoin the others.

"We've received word of my wife's presence here in this heathen country," Elijah announced unnecessarily since Nora and Beth Ann knew exactly why they were all here. "Let's go, women. Find a way for me to retrieve my wife so that we can get back home."

That was all she needed to hear. Beth Ann pointed towards the sign. "Do you think that sign indicates that we should purchase a taxi to the city? We have her address."

Elijah stared at the place where Beth Ann was pointing, but she was starting to wonder if her son actually knew how to read. It was entirely possible that he didn't. Knowledge wasn't required to farm the land and the elders in the church "helped" all of the members of the congregation when it came time to sell their harvest.

Her son offered an arrogant nod, agreeing with Beth Ann. "Let's go!" he snapped and headed towards that area, ignoring the glances from passersby who didn't understand why he spoke in such a sharp tone.

A half hour later, the taxi pulled up to the address he'd provided to the driver. Elijah stepped out and waited for his sister and mother to collect the luggage while he stared up at the tall apartment complex.

"She's still a heathen," Elijah grumbled as his women-folk stepped up beside him, a suitcase in each of their hands. He looked down at them, noticed the strain on their hands and said, "Second Corinthians, my women; god expects you to use your pain to help others." He nodded approvingly. "The pain of carrying the heavy burdens will bring you goodness in heaven." And with that, he walked into the building, not slowing his steps as his mother and sister struggled with the heavy suitcases, two of which were his own. The larger two. He didn't allow his women to pack a large suitcase since they were required to smother their vanity to be pleasing to god.

Knocking firmly on the door, he waited, fully expecting, eagerly anticipating, his wife to answer. But when only silence greeted him, his temper sparked. "Where is my wife!" he snarled, irritated that he had to endure the indignity of standing in the hallway. He was a man and should immediately be brought inside, offered refreshment and comfort!

Neither Beth Ann, nor Nora, answered him, which was appropriate. He would never listen anyway.

Turning, he told his women, “Wait here while I find the building manager. I’ll be back.”

Ten minutes later, he returned, smiling pompously as the manager of the building trudged down the hallway with his keys. “Thank you, sir,” Elijah said to the man with a rotund belly hanging over his belt. “You will be gifted by god for your assistance in this matter.”

The manager slid the key into the lock and pushed open the door. But a moment later, he paused, standing in the open doorway as he surveyed the trio, his gaze resting on Elijah. “Are you seriously Tara’s husband?” he asked, his gaze moving over Elijah’s expensive suit. “She’s never mentioned a husband before.”

Elijah waved his hand, indicating that the building manager should step aside so that they could enter. “I’ve been married to Tara for over thirteen years,” he told him. “I’m here to bring her home.” He waved his sister and mother into the apartment. “When did you say that my wife usually arrives home?”

The man scratched his belly, tilting his head to one side. “Oh, I don’t know exactly when my tenants come and go, but I think that the woman who lives here comes back pretty late every night.”

Elijah’s eyebrows drew down over his eyes in disapproval. “She’s must be out getting food for us. However, her late nights will have to cease immediately. My wife is not allowed out after dark.”

Elijah slammed the door in the manager’s judgmental expression and looked around the small apartment. He was annoyed that the space was nicer than what he’d built at home. The apartment was sparsely furnished, but that was a positive. There was only a small chair in the main area of the apartment and a box spring and mattress sitting on the floor in the bedroom. There was one light in each room, with seven dresses

hanging in the closet.

No use spending money on material things, Elijah thought with approval after going through everything in the apartment. Tara was most likely saving her money in order to give it to charity. And if that wasn't the case, if Tara was saving her money to spend it on something frivolous, then he would beat her until she understood her place and how she should spend her money. On him and their community.

He surveyed the contents of the fridge, then slammed it shut in disgust when he saw only a few cups of yogurt and an apple inside. "We need food! We'll read the good word until my wife returns."

Nora and Beth Ann immediately knelt on the floor, both of them secretly grateful for the carpeting to cushion their knees.

Chapter 6

"Where is she?" Zayed demanded, hurrying briskly down the hallway.

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“In her office, Your Highness,” Chaid, his head of security replied, keeping pace by his side. “She hasn’t left the palace grounds.”

Zayed muttered a curse as he stepped into his office. “I knew I should have pushed for more information last night over dinner.” He muttered several expletives. “If we’d been alone, I could have gotten the truth out of her.”

His security guard didn’t reply, but they all knew that the palace security monitored the comings and goings of everyone who worked in the palace. That’s how he knew that Tara hadn’t left last night.

“I tracked the messages from the phone number you gave me, Your Highness.”

Zayed stopped abruptly, but his guard’s reactions were swift and Chaid, thankfully, didn’t run into Zayed’s back.

“Messages?” he growled. “I thought there was only one message.”

“Ms. Treon sent a reply while you were in a meeting about Bidar’s troop movements.”

Zayed muttered more expletives, thinking about his enemy’s provocative actions. “Any news on what Traine is doing?” he demanded, referring to the country’s leader on their western border.

Chaid shook his head. “General Mosten is waiting to brief you later this morning.”

“Fine,” Zayed sighed. Normally, he accepted that this was his life. Every moment of his day, and many of his nights, were absorbed with details that he had to resolve.

However, Tara was in trouble so the interruptions to his time and his ability to protect her were irritating. Someone was threatening Tara. He didn’t know why or who, but he was going to find out!

“Who sent the original message?”

Chaid hesitated and Zayed stopped, looking at the man. “The message was sent by a Ms. Kaia Treon. Her sister, Your Highness.”

Zayed fixed his gaze on the man before him, the weight of the revelation settling heavily on his shoulders. The news that a message from Tara's sibling had triggered such distress, prompting Tara to hastily abandon a meeting and seek refuge, sent ripples of tension through the air. His typically unflustered personal assistant, skilled in navigating the chaos of the business and diplomatic world, had been so shaken that she felt the need to literally hide.

The gravity of the situation hung heavily in the silence, and Zayed grappled with the ominous implications of the disturbing message that had sent Tara into a state of palpable fear.

He thought about that for a moment. Her instinct yesterday afternoon had been to hide! The message had warned her of danger. Which meant that she’d received messages like this before. And she’d hidden those messages as well.

Zayed turned and faced the man. “Send a team to Tara’s home town. I know that you did a background check on her, but I want more. I want details on her family and her past. I want pictures of the home she grew up in. Hell, I want you to speak with the doctor who helped birth her!” he told the head of his security forces. “I want to know

everything there is to know about Tara.”

The man nodded sharply, but hesitated. “Your Highness, is this...uh...personal?”

Zayed thought about Tara and her adorable nose and those sexy freckles. He considered how drably she dressed, as if...as if hiding, he suddenly realized.

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “This is very personal.” He looked at the man again. “It’s about as personal as it gets.” Now that he was no longer betrothed, he was going to pursue the lovely, mysterious Tara!

Chaid was stunned for a brief moment, but then he nodded. “I understand,” he replied, bowing slightly. “And should I organize a team of bodyguards for her as well?”

Zayed thought for a moment, then nodded again. “Yes, but...” he sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, “...don’t let her know that she’s being protected. That will only make her more nervous.”

The man’s eyes sharpened with understanding. “I suspect that it could also warn her of your intentions.”

Zayed’s mouth tilted into a grim smile. “So be it.”

He turned and headed for Tara’s office, determined to find out what had happened last night. Stepping into her small office, he looked around.

“Your Highness!” Tara gasped, standing up so abruptly that her desk chair nearly toppled. “What...what are you doing in my office?” She glanced at the clock in the corner of her computer screen. “And why are you here so early?” She smoothed a nervous hand down over her dress.

Zayed noticed only one chair in the office. And it was piled with neatly stacked boxes. “What’s in those files?” he asked.

She looked at the boxes, then back up at him. Damn, he loved her eyes. She had no idea how much she revealed in those green depths. Worry, intelligence, curiosity, and a host of other emotions continuously flashed through those orbs.

Tara walked over to the first box, touching the top gently. “This one contains the briefings and contracts for today’s meetings. At least, the ones that are currently on your calendar. It also includes some of the notes from previous meetings with answers to the questions that you asked in those meetings.” She laid her hand on the second box. “This box contains the information for tomorrow’s meetings that I’ll review during my spare time today, so that you have all the information you need for tomorrow’s meetings.”

He stared at the boxes, then walked over to one and lifted the lid. Pulling out a file, he flipped through the pages. Sure enough, it was filled with the usual details that she normally provided to him prior to every meeting. She even color coded the pages so that he could flip to whatever question he might have.

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Looking over at her, he asked, “Tara, when do you eat?”

She seemed startled by the question. She gestured to her desk and, for the first time, he noticed a large cup of coffee and a half eaten bowl of something that looked like gruel. “What is that?” he asked, laying the file down on the box and moving closer to her desk so that he could peer down at the gloopy mess.

“It’s oatmeal, Your Highness,” she replied, hiding her hands behind her back.

He bent closer, his nose wrinkling. “What are those dark blobs?”

He heard a muffled laugh and looked over at her. There were dark circles under her eyes, but her green irises were sparkling with amusement.

“Those are raisins, Your Highness.” She waved her hand towards her breakfast. “It’s a very healthy meal. Good for the heart.”

Zayed pulled back, but still stared in disgust at the bowl of...black blobs and grey mush. “Why the hell do you put raisins in your...” he almost gagged, “...oatmeal? Doesn’t that just make it worse?”

She laughed, then caught herself and slapped a hand over her mouth as if laughter wasn’t allowed. “It’s healthy.”

He groaned, shaking his head as he stepped back, fisting his hands on his lean hips. “I had some eggs and fruit this morning. Where’s the protein in your meal?”

She shook her head. "I'll have some protein for lunch, Your Highness."

His lips compressed as his irritation sparked.

"Stop saying that," he grumbled.

Her eyes widened. He knew that he was being an ass, but he also suspected that she said, "Your Highness" to maintain a mental distance from him. And since he didn't want any distance, or obstacles, between them, he wanted her to use his first name.

"Stop saying...what?"

He sighed and looked around. "Never mind," he grumbled. Then he remembered why he was in her office. "Why did you sleep here?" he asked her, moving closer. "Were you afraid to go home last night?"

There was a stunned silence, then he heard a small gasp before Tara took a step backwards, but there wasn't enough space for her to move. Her hands clutched the sides of her mauve dress and her green eyes darkened. "I don't know what you are talking about, Your Highness."

"My security team noticed that you didn't check out last night." He watched her carefully. "They investigated and discovered you sleeping in here. On two chairs." He reached out and took one of her hands, uncurling the fingers from her dress. "So I'm asking again. Why didn't you go home last night?"

Her mouth opened and closed, her eyes staring up at him. "I just...I was...I worked late," she finally replied, although he could hear the desperation in her voice. "I worked very late and knew that you had several important meetings first thing this morning. Meetings that I hadn't finished prepping for so I stayed late and just...kept working." She was lying. He could tell by the way she hid her free hand behind her

ugly dress. “I got tired and meant to only lay my head down for a moment. I didn’t mean to stay overnight, Your Highness. I promise it won’t happen again.”

He lifted her hand out from behind her back, wanting to kiss her tightly clenched fist. Instead, he merely patted her hand. “Tara, you can stay here any night. I don’t care if you are just tired or if you are too nervous to go home. If you need to sleep here, then do so. There are plenty of rooms where you can sleep in a proper bed. Don’t ever hesitate. Your safety and mental health are...very important to me.”

Chapter 7

Tara stared up at the man who had haunted her dreams last night. His concerned gaze wreathed by those thick lashes melted her heart. And his offer to keep her safe, to allow her to stay here whenever she felt the need was exactly what she needed to hear.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she gushed, letting the air fly out of her lungs as relief surged through her. “That’s very generous of you.”

He grunted, then glanced at the boxes again, thankfully releasing her hand. The skin where he’d touched her felt abnormally warm.

“Good. Now tell me how late you normally work each night.”

She shrugged, sensing another trap but uncertain what this one might be about. “I don’t know, Your Highness. It varies.” That was the truth. It all depended on when he finished his meetings for the night.

His intense gaze focused on her face, prompting Tara to swiftly suppress any hint of concern that might betray itself in her eyes. “You keep working after I’m done, don’t you?” he asked.

Her chin pulled back as if startled. “Well, of course. I need to type up your notes and ensure that everything is ready for you for the next day.”

He tapped the first box again, then stepped back “You need to hire three additional people to help you, Tara.”

Her mouth fell open and she stared up at him. “Three?”

“At least,” he confirmed with a firm nod. “Contact the human resources department and give them a job description. I want you to have help. And I apologize for not authorizing a whole staff for you before now. It was wrong of me to be oblivious to the long hours you’ve been working.”

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She couldn't form words. Three people? Was he about to fire her?

Tara stepped forward, her hands fisting the material of her dress. "I can handle the work load, Your Highness."

He smiled gently down at her. "I know you can. You've been working for me for the past two years and you've done an exceptionally good job. But I hadn't realized that you're working even longer hours than I do. You need help."

"But...!" she gasped, trying to figure out a way to convince him that she was capable of handling the requirements of the position. "I can do this, Your Highness! I've been doing it for more than two years! Have I ever let you down?"

"Never," he replied, then perched on the edge of her desk. "However, tell me the last movie you watched."

Tara blinked at him, so surprised by his question, it was almost as if he were speaking a different language.

"Movie?"

"Yes. What's the last movie you saw?"

Tara groaned, a little annoyed by his patient attitude, but also amused by his question. She crossed her arms and glared right back at him. "What was the last movie you saw?"

Chapter 8

Zayed could barely hold back on his desire when she looked like this. Her anxiety had shifted to confidence and he caught a knowing glint in those lovely eyes. It took him several moments to remember her question.

Thankfully, he thought of the movie, but only because it was an action movie and, while he'd watched it with his nieces and nephews, he'd wondered what it would be like to save Tara in the same way that the police officers had in the last scene of the movie.

He named the movie, then smiled smugly when her expression shifted to surprise. "Now you. What was the movie?"

Tara bit her lip, lowering her eyes and he knew he'd asked a question that would reveal a whole lot more than just her work habits.

"You're late for your first meeting, Your Highness," she said instead of answering the question.

Intriguing, he thought. He watched her for another moment, then nodded. "You're right. But this conversation isn't over." He pushed away from her desk and turned, heading for the doorway. "Finish your..." he glanced down at the disgusting breakfast, then sighed, "breakfast," he finally finished, "before coming in to take notes. I'll note any questions I need more information on. But I want that," he nodded towards the bowl of mush, "finished before you do anything else."

Then he walked out, nodding to Chaid before he headed to his first meeting.

Tara stared at the empty doorway, stifling the unexpected burst of laughter at his revulsion for her healthy meal. But oatmeal was one of her favorites. Not necessarily

because of the health benefits, but because she remembered her sister whenever she ate oatmeal. She remembered those desperate mornings and the ache, the terror as she'd wondered what would happen next.

Jerking herself out of the memories, she took the small bowl of oatmeal and ate as much as she could. It wasn't tasty, but the meal reminded her of those few good moments with her sister and...well, it was better not to dwell on the bad times.

Less than three minutes after Zayed left her office, she grabbed her notebook and headed down the hallway. There were two men, bodyguards, that seemed to be following in her wake. But she assumed they were heading for their shift to guard Zayed and their presence had nothing to do with her. So she ignored them and quietly opened the door to the conference room where Zayed's first meeting was in progress. She took a seat by the door, ignoring his glare as she settled in and started taking notes. Thankfully, they hadn't really gotten into the crux of the meeting, so she hadn't missed anything important.

The day went along as usual, with the expected hustle and bustle, and no new messages appeared on her secret phone. No new panic attacks. However, Tara knew not to let her guard down. So at the end of the day, while Zayed left to have dinner with the British ambassador, she sat at her desk, making notes and working through the meetings for the next day, all the while, contemplating where she was going to sleep tonight. There was also the problem of what she would wear to work tomorrow. Tara always kept a clean outfit here in her office. But she'd worn it this morning after showering in the employee locker room. She didn't have any more clothes here.

However, the thought of making the trek to her apartment was...worrying. She knew that Kaia wouldn't have sent the message if she wasn't positive of the danger.

Maybe she could wash her panties from yesterday and...would anyone recognize yesterday's outfit if she wore it tomorrow?

Her clothes weren't particularly interesting. So she assumed that no one would notice that she wore the same outfit twice in the same week. Yes, that would be her solution. And maybe she could rush over during...she examined tomorrow's schedule, her finger running down over the list of meetings on Zayed's calendar. He had another security briefing. Yes, she could slip away during that hour and grab more clothes. She'd bring several outfits back to the palace. She knew exactly where to hide them. Tara had become an expert at hiding stuff over the years to protect herself or something she cherished.

Chapter 9

Elijah huffed as he climbed out of bed in the morning, irritated to discover that it was still dark. "Blasted country! They don't even keep the correct schedules!" He was grumpy that he was wide awake at night, unwilling to shift his sleep schedule to the current day/night hours. Elijah didn't want to complicate his life upon his return to Kentucky by unnecessarily changing his watch to the current time zone.

His return. Thinking about his wife, he wondered what Tara looked like now. He'd been married to Tara thirteen years ago. But he hadn't been allowed to enjoy his wedding night. His wife had been secreted away, stolen by his brat of a sister-in-law. Kaia, he remembered, had been one of the most disobedient of their entire village. The child had been outspoken, constantly questioning the rules, speaking out when she should remain silent, and sneaking books into her room, reading materials other than the good book.

That little bitch had stolen Tara from him. Tara had been so pretty and innocent on their wedding day. She'd been nervous, as was appropriate. But those huge, green eyes had stared up at him, trusting him.

She would pay, he thought as he gripped his suddenly hard shaft with the palm of his hand. Stroking himself, he pictured in his mind what he would do to the sisters once

they were brought back into the fold of their church family. The lash would be the most appropriate form of discipline.

Grunting, he pictured his wife's back in his mind and...groaned as the pleasure erupted all over his hand.

Chapter 10

“Tell me,” Zayed ordered as he walked along the hallway towards his private suite.

“She’s in your office, Your Highness,” Chaid explained, keeping up with Zayed’s longer stride through much practice.

Zayed stopped and looked at the shorter man. “In my office? She didn’t go back to her apartment?”

“No, Your Highness. And I sent over two men to watch her place. There has been no movement, so we’re not sure why she’s afraid to go home.”

Zayed contemplated the security chief’s words carefully. “She’s not a coward. And that message...did you ever discover where the sender was?”

He nodded. “Two burner phones, one of which received the message yesterday, were purchased five years ago by Kaia Treon. The message was sent from a small town in Kentucky. We’ve continued to monitor the communications and there hasn’t been any other messages transmitted today.” He huffed a bit. “The team of men I sent to Ms. Treon’s village should be landing in a few hours. They’ll start investigating immediately.”

“That’s good, I suppose,” Zayed replied, thinking through the problem. He looked up. “You say that Tara is in my office? Sleeping?”

“On your sofa, Your Highness.”

On impulse, Zayed changed course and headed for his office. It was late and he'd just finished his meeting with the British ambassador. He should head to bed, knowing that he had another day of meetings tomorrow. But he wanted to see Tara, just to check on her. He needed to ensure that she was safe and comfortable. Why hadn't she asked for a private room?

He had a thought. Maybe he should order her to move into the palace. Would she accept that kind of order? And then another thought occurred to him. Wasn't the suite beside his apartment empty? One of his sisters had lived in that apartment before she'd married. But when Zelda's sister came to visit, she stayed in a different suite now, one that was larger so that her husband and kids would be more comfortable.

So the private apartment next to his was completely available! He liked the thought of Tara sleeping so close. He could protect her much more effectively if she was nearby.

He slipped silently through the door into his office. He moved over to the sofa. Sure enough, Tara was curled up in a ball, her hands tucked under her cheek. She was sound asleep, secure in the knowledge that whatever monsters were lurking outside of the palace walls couldn't get to her here.

Warmth filled his chest. She was here, in his office, under his roof, and under his protection. Why hadn't he thought of her moving into the palace before now? Some of the bodyguards lived in the palace. Those without families tended to prefer the rent-free lifestyle.

So why hadn't he considered this option before now? Mentally, he chided himself because he knew the answer. It was because, whenever Tara was around, he couldn't think clearly. It was also the reason why he didn't mind Tara sitting against the wall during the meetings when she took notes. He preferred having her close by, and none of his previous assistants had sat in on meetings. He found comfort in looking over and seeing her as she listened.

And yet, he hadn't realized the extra work he'd created by keeping her near him until today. Earlier, he'd ordered her to instruct human resources to hire three assistants to help her. He'd personally called the head of the HR department, knowing that Tara wouldn't have bothered. He'd instructed the HR director to use Tara's previous job description to find applicants and set up interviews. But he wanted someone else to prescreen the applicants for experience, then only the interviewees that had the appropriate knowledge and expertise would meet with Tara. No need to add yet another task onto her slender shoulders on top of everything else she had to weed through every day.

"I need a blanket," he whispered to Chaid who was standing just in the door.

The man immediately left, leaving Zayed alone. He knelt down, watching Tara sleep. Her lashes fluttered as if she were dreaming about something. Was it a good dream? Or was she dreaming about her monsters? The ones lurking outside of the palace?

Chaid arrived with a soft blanket and Zayed didn't bother to ask where it came from. Gently, he draped it over Tara's curled up limbs, watching as she sighed with relief. She'd been cold, he realized and touched her hair. It was softer than it looked. He examined every part of her, including those freckles that he loved so much. She was so sweet and so...his!

Chapter 11

Zayed watched as Chaid moved down the hallway towards him. "You have news!" That wasn't a question. He could see the truth on the other man's face.

Chaid stopped in front of Zayed and nodded. "My men discovered three people have been living in Ms. Treon's apartment, but we don't yet know who they are. When my men knocked on the door, the woman who answered would only say that she was waiting for her daughter to return."

“Tara told me that her parents died several years ago.”

Chaid nodded. “The men I sent to Kentucky to do the deep dive into Tara’s background confirmed that her mother passed away when Tara was five. She and her sister were raised by their father after that. But he passed away years ago. Tara and her sister left the village, but so far, my men haven’t been able to find out why, when, or where they went.”

Zayed nodded, but focused on the present issue. “So someone is squatting in Tara’s apartment? How did they get in?”

“My men spoke to the building manager who said they told him that they were waiting for his wife.”

Zayed’s blood went cold. “Tara is married?”

Chaid shook his head. “Not a chance. As soon as I heard that, I had my technical team go through every marriage registration in the state as well as the surrounding areas. There is no registration of a Tara Treon marrying anyone.”

Zayed's tension ebbed away, yet the enigma deepened. “Could she have changed her name at some point?”

“Nope,” Chaid replied. “Tara Treon was born twenty-five years ago. We have her birth certificate and confirmation through the United States passport agency that validates her identity.”

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Zayed's eyebrows furrowed. "So, who is in her apartment?"

"I don't know, Your Highness. I want to bring them in for questioning, but thought I should check in with you first."

Zayed thought about that for a moment. "Send the police over and ask for identification. In the meantime, I'll check in with Tara and see if she has any additional information on who might have invaded her home under the pretense of searching for a lost wife."

Chapter 12

Tara stared wide-eyed at the new message. "Did you receive the hamburgers? Satisfaction Survey Request"

They were here? Good grief, Tara's fingers trembled as she typed a response. "Cereal was delicious. Always perfect for dinner."

Then she stuffed the phone away and hurried to her office.

Unfortunately, she'd had her head down instead of looking where she was going, worrying about Kaia. What message could she send that would encourage Kaia to get away from that horrid place? Kaia needed to live her own life and not worry about Tara. But...?

"Oomph!"

Strong hands gripped her upper arms and Tara looked up into the dark eyes of Zayed.

Instantly, she realized her gaffe. “I’m so sorry, Your Highness!” she gasped. “I wasn’t paying attention and just...I’m just so sorry. That kind of lack of awareness won’t happen again.”

The grip on her arms softened, but he didn’t let go. Instead, he moved closer.

“Run into me anytime you want,” he said, his voice low and...was his voice more gravelly than usual? She wasn’t sure, nor could she really focus on that since he was so close. She wanted to step closer, to feel his arms wrap around her. She wanted to feel his heart beat in his massive chest. She wanted...!

Clearing her throat, she stepped back, using her free hand to smooth down her grey dress.

“I have your...,” she started to say.

“We need to talk,” he announced, interrupting her litany of morning meetings and people that wanted to speak with him. “Let’s go into my office. Chaid is going to join us. He has some information.”

Tara’s heart thudded in panic. Had she done something wrong? Oh no! He’d discovered that she’d slept in his office last night! Wracking her brain, she tried to figure out...the blanket! She’d woken up warm and cozy only to realize that there was a blanket draped over her! Had Zayed found a blanket and covered her?

No, maybe one of the security guards had discovered her. Zayed had asked her to join him for dinner last night, but then the ambassador had arrived and those plans had changed. She’d been relieved when she’d been allowed to retreat from the diner invitation, although she couldn’t put her finger on why. She and Zayed had shared

many meals over the two years she'd worked for him. Although, those had been working meetings. Last night's invitation had seemed...more personal, somehow.

So maybe the guard who had found her and covered her with the blanket had reported that she'd violated the sanctity of Zayed's office. Obviously, that information had been brought to Zayed's attention.

"Darn it!" she whispered, following meekly into his office.

Chapter 13

Zayed watched as Tara stood in front of him, trembling, her chin wobbling with whatever terrible thoughts were flashing through her head.

"Tara, you've done nothing wrong," he told her in as gentle a tone as possible. "You should know by now that I consider you to be a very valuable...member of my staff." He looked up just in time to see Chaid's eyes shift. Had the head of his security division just rolled his eyes?

Zayed made a mental note to speak with the man later.

Turning back to Tara, he stepped closer. "Tara, I ordered someone to go to your apartment yesterday. They discovered..." he stopped because he realized that Tara had stopped breathing. Tilting his head, he asked, "Do you already know what they found?"

"Was it...?" she asked, but her voice choked before she could utter the last part of her question.

"Your building manager unlocked the door for a man who claimed he was looking for his wife and that his wife lived in your apartment. There were two women with him,

but they didn't identify themselves. Do you know anything about someone married to a man from Kentucky? Isn't that where you're from?"

She swallowed and he saw tears fill her green eyes. "Yes, Your Highness. I'm from Kentucky. And yes, I know my husband is looking for me."

Zayed heard the words, but he couldn't process them in his brain. Husband? Tara was married? She had a husband that was searching for her?! But...Chaid had searched for her marriage certificate! There hadn't been one!

He glanced over at his head of security, but he was equally stunned.

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He stared at Tara, determined to get the whole story. Now! “You’re...married?”

She stood very still, the only movement was a tear sliding down the left cheek and her chin trembling. Eventually, she nodded, closing her eyes, which caused more of her tears to leak out.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice cracking with the admission.

Zayed still stared at her, stunned and...unexpectedly furious! He wanted to order her to divorce the bastard at once. Correction: he wanted to kill the man who had touched his Tara.HisTara! He would have sworn that she had feelings for him as well. But if she was married...?

What the hell kind of game was she playing?

“How long have you been married?” he rasped, trying to control his rage. He ignored Chaid who was muttering something into his radio.

Tara gripped the notebook so tightly that her knuckles turned white. She bowed her head and swallowed hard, obviously trying to control her emotions.

Finally, she lifted her head, but wouldn’t look him in the eye. “I’ve been married to Elijah Collins for...” she paused, biting her lips as she squeezed her eyelids tightly closed. When she opened them again, she took a small breath, then released it, lifting wet green eyes up to his. “I’ve been married for thirteen years, Your Highness.”

Zayed heard the words, but they didn’t make any sense. Thirteen years? Tara was

only twenty-five years old. It was impossible that she'd been married for thirteen years.

Rubbing a frustrated hand over his face, he did the math in his brain. But the numbers still came out the same. "Tara, that's not possible. You aren't old enough to have been married for thirteen years. That would mean you were only...twelve when...!" He stopped when she simply stood there, tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

Chaid wasn't as slow. He stepped forward, his eyes livid as he asked, "Ms. Treon, are you telling us that you were married when you were twelve years old?"

She nodded.

The silent nod was his undoing.

"Holy hell!" he muttered. Then he let loose a stream of epithets, turning away from Tara as he ran a hand through his hair, taking a few steps to process what she'd just said.

When he turned back to look at her, he shook his head. "The security team looked for a marriage license, Tara. And you never changed your name. How the hell were you married at twelve years old?"

That was a lot of questions all at once, but the most pertinent was if she was truly married. He couldn't comprehend that his Tara had been married for thirteen years!

"Yes, I was married when I was twelve years old," she whispered. "My father..." she paused to clear her throat, then lifted her chin and wiped impatiently at her tears. "My father made a deal with Elijah's father. They agreed that a marriage between us would be beneficial to the community. Our farms were adjacent. My father only had daughters. So, he needed someone to inherit his farmland, since my sister or I

couldn't." She paused, obviously trying to regain control. She started again, but she had to lower her gaze. "My father and our leaders agreed that Elijah was a good candidate to inherit the farm."

There was a stunned silence. But it was Zayed who came closer, gripping her arms as he bent down, needing to look into her eyes to understand. "Are you telling me that some minister married you to a man at the age of twelve?"

She nodded, but didn't audibly reply.

Zayed pulled her into his arms, cradling her gently as he stroked her back. "Honey, that's not marriage, that's pedophilia."

She lifted her tear-drenched eyes up to his. "I'm..."

"No, habibi," he interrupted. "Marriage at the age of twelve is legal only in two countries that I know of. And the United States isn't one of them."

"But...!"

"Even in the United States, a child would have to be at least thirteen with parental consent to be legally married. And even then, you need to look at the individual state laws."

Chapter 14

Tara blinked and looked around. Was it true? Was the legal age for marriage in Kentucky older than twelve? Was it possible that the terror she'd been living under over the past decade-plus years was pointless?

When she lifted her hand, she suddenly remembered that she held her tablet. Quickly,

Tara sat down and started tapping on the keyboard. Biting her lip, she looked up the legal marriage age in Kentucky.

It took only seconds before the state's law arrived in her search results. She clicked on the first link, her eyes reading faster than her brain could absorb the information. "Kentucky law states that a person needs to be at least seventeen, even with parental consent!" she whispered, then lifted shocked eyes to Zayed. "Does this...am I not...?"

"I don't believe that you are legally married, habibi," he told her, answering the unfinished question.

Blinking, she tried to process this news. Could it be true? She looked down at the tablet, but the tears in her eyes blurred her vision. Was she truly not married? Could this law mean that she was free of the shackles she'd lived with for so long?

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“I’m not married?” she whispered again, just to taste the words in her mouth as her knees gave out on her. She fell onto the leather sofa, too stunned at the moment to truly process this information.

He knelt down by her, looking into her eyes. “I don’t think so, love.” He ran a thumb over the back of her hand. “I’ve sent a couple of my men to your home town to investigate further. They were going to get more details on your background, but I’ll have them dive into the—”

“You what?” she yelped. “Please...tell me you didn’t send anyone to Tobra, Kentucky. Tell me you didn’t!”

“I did,” he replied, confused. “Is that a problem?”

“Yes,” she gasped and leapt to her feet. She stepped around Zayed and looked at Chaid, pleading with him. “You need to contact your people and tell them to get out of there. Now!” she snapped. “They are in danger! They will be shot at without question.”

“I’m sorry?” he replied, looking confused.

Tara wiped at her cheeks again, impatient with the useless tears. “Your people are in danger, Chaid. Call them back. The people who live in that town are...dangerous. They don’t live like the rest of the country. They don’t follow the same rules!” She looked down, trying to find the words that would explain precisely how dangerous Ethan Howell and his minions were. “Their entire lives revolve around their form of a church and the leader of that church. Ethan Howell is a tyrant with a team of armed

enforcers.” She rubbed her forehead, pushing her fingers through her hair. “They appear to be just small town people, but they aren’t. Mr. Howell is the leader. He is their minister and their dictator. If he were to tell everyone to drink the koolaid they would smile as they reached for a glass.”

“So, this is a cult?” Chaid asked.

Tara stopped for a moment, considering the term. Finally, she nodded. “In so far as everyone in the town is brainwashed into thinking that Howell is their leader and everything he says is the gospel truth, handed down to him by divine telepathy, then yes. It’s a cult. They would never defy him. If he told the congregation to attack your people, then they would wholeheartedly go after your men with pitchforks and rifles. And they would show no mercy, assuming that they were abiding by divine rules set forth by Ethan.”

She looked up at Zayed, reaching out to touch his chest, something she’d never done before. “Please, “ she whispered, “you have to get them out of there! They aren’t safe!”

He put a hand over hers where it lay against his chest. “I need to know more to keep you safe, Tara,” he explained.

Shaking her head adamantly, she said, “I’m not important. I don’t mean anything to anyone. Please, you have to get them out of there!”

Zayed’s eyes narrowed at her comment, but she couldn’t think about his anger at that moment. She sighed with relief when he turned his head slightly, not losing eye contact with her. “Call your men, Chaid, tell them to treat the investigation as hostile, and get information about Tara and...” he paused, his finger coming up to catch another tear before he finished, “...her sister.”

Tara froze at those last two words, her stomach clenching to the point that she thought that she might be sick.

“No!” she hissed, wanting to step back, to get out of this office. She needed to run away, to find a hiding place that was safe. And to warn her sister that someone else knew about Kaia’s existence.

“Yes,” he replied in a silky, smooth voice. “Why are you so afraid of your sister, Tara?:

She swallowed past the panic, not sure what to say. Zayed...he knew her secrets! He knew about her past! Jerking her hand away, she stepped back, looking around frantically.

“There’s no place to hide,” he warned her, moving closer. “Please don’t try to run away from me.” He reached out and took her hand and Tara wished that her fingers weren’t trembling so violently. It was such a dead giveaway to her feelings.

Dead? No! Not dead. No one was dead!

At least, she prayed that no one had died.

Zayed led her over to the leather sofa, the same place she’d slept last night. Thankfully, he didn’t know about that. If he ever found out that she’d slept on his sofa, she would...what? What would she do?

“You’re going to have to trust me, Tara,” Zayed commanded in that stern, sexy voice that had always intrigued her. In this moment though, she couldn’t stop the tremor of awareness that hit her with his voice. And his words.

Trust him? She’d only ever trusted one person in this entire world!

“Why are you afraid of your sister?”

Tara’s mouth fell open. She looked around, but Chaid was already walking out of Zayed’s office, muttering into his microphone. She heard the words, “warn of hostiles” and sighed with relief. His guards were well trained, probably better trained than the horrible men that Ethan employed.

Goodness, she hated and despised that man! His sermons were always filled with warnings of death and dismemberment at the hands of his divine power. All of the punishments were because his “servants” had disobeyed “the word”. And most of the disobedience was caused by, or perpetrated by, women. The man absolutely loved talking about how women needed to be especially watchful of their actions or they would lead the world to death and horrible, bloody, miserable punishments.

It was also the reason why he “disciplined” the women in the town so often and with such unfeeling brutality.

Also because he enjoyed hurting women.

Tara had thought of that possibility before, but she’d never uttered the words out loud, terrified that Ethan might somehow hear her even when she was thousands of miles away.

“I need more information, Tara,” Zayed insisted, interrupting her thoughts. “What hold does your sister have on you?”

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“Sister?” she prompted, pretending to be ignorant.

But his dark, raised eyebrow warned her that he wasn’t going to accept her dumb act.

“Kaia Treon sent you the initial message, didn’t she?”

She had to protect her sister. Kaia had been doing the same for Tara for more than thirteen years. It was Tara’s turn.

“My sister has nothing to do with this,” she told Zayed.

“And yet, she’s the one who sent you the warning.”

Her eyes narrowed and she curled her fingers into her palms. “Leave Kaia out of this conversation.”

Another curiously amused eyebrow shot up with that order. “Interesting,” was his only comment, and he shifted, moving so that he was facing her on the sofa. “So tell me about this wedding. Did you consent to marrying this Elijah person?”

“No!” she blurted before she could think of a better response. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head. “No, I never consented to marriage. Most of the girls who are members of my former community are married young. Ethan says that girls should be married young so that their husbands can teach them how to be good wives and mothers. He says that, if women are allowed to learn in a school room, they might question their husbands. So it’s better that the girls marry young so that their husbands can mold them into whatever they need them to be.” She gritted her teeth, her chin wobbling as a fresh wave of anger washed over her. “A happy marriage is

only achieved through a woman's compliance."

"That sounds archaic," Zayed growled, furious and horrified by what she'd gone through. "Obviously, you disagree with that idea, but how did you end up married?"

She lifted her chin, trying to push past the shame at what she'd been forced to endure. "I wasn't given a choice," she admitted. "The negotiations were already started before I was even asked if I approved of the union. Ethan thought it would be good to eventually merge the two farms. And after that, it was merely a matter of working out the details. Then I was informed of the 'blessed event'," she mocked that word, "and after a brief ceremony, I was Elijah's wife."

"Did you...officially become his wife?" Zayed asked.

Tara looked away, her fingers crumpling the already mussed dress. "If you're asking if I had sex with him, no. Kaia had somehow heard about the wedding." She stared out the window in his office, but she didn't see the beautiful flowers or trees shimmering in the sunshine. All she saw was the face of Elijah moments after Ethan had declared them married. Elijah had licked his lips, wiped the sweat from his forehead, then clapped his hands together as if he'd been given a delicious piece of candy. "After the wedding ceremony took place, I was sent to Elijah's house while Elijah, and Ethan, along with several of the other community elders, toasted the union, laughing and slapping each other on the back, congratulating each other over such a brilliant union."

"What happened, Tara?"

She looked down at her hands, trying to stop the tears from falling again, but her efforts were futile. The tears wouldn't stop as she kept wiping them angrily away. "Like I said, my sister somehow discovered what was happening. She snuck into Elijah's house with some clothes and helped me get away."

“Do you know how she did that?”

“No,” Tara replied, sighing with frustration. “My sister...she’s...amazing. She’s protected me all my life.” She stood up and walked towards the windows, wrapping her arms around herself as if she needed a hug. “My sister is two years older than I am. I remember running across the muddy grass in our backyard with Kaia holding my hand.” She smiled sadly. “Apparently, she’s never stopped trying to protect me.”

“She sounds like an extraordinary woman.”

Tara smiled. “She is.”

“Tell me more.”

Tara stared out into the sun-drenched courtyard. “Kaia left the farm before I got married. I don’t know where she went, but when she heard about the negotiations, she came back and fought with the community when Ethan made the wedding announcement.”

“If your sister is older, why didn’t your father arrange for her to be married to this Elijah person?”

Another tear slipped out and Tara swiped it away. “Kaia was always rebellious.” She sniffed. “Everyone who lives in our town attends the same services and ceremonies. There’s only one grocery store, and it’s owned and operated by one man in our community. Everyone volunteers a certain number of hours there. We don’t have a police force, per se. Instead, we have...”she stopped, thinking back to the cruel men who lurked around the outskirts of the town. “There is a team of four men who are allowed to do...whatever they deem necessary. When the minster, who acts as the mayor, tells these men to discipline someone, they go at it with all of their heart and soul.” A moment later, she snorted. “I don’t believe that they have a soul. Not

anymore.” She turned and looked at Zayed. “Nor do I believe in Ethan Collin’s version of a divine spirit.”

“You are an atheist?”

She shrugged, still hugging her waist. “I’d say I’m more agnostic than an atheist. You can’t grow up in Tobra, Kentucky, and not attend church. Ethan held services every night and every morning. And for several hours on Sunday.” She sighed. “Sunday was the sabbath and Ethan mandated that the sabbath be strictly observed with a vengeance. There were classes in the morning, then worship service, then more study classes, then prayer for the rest of the afternoon.” Her chin jutted up slightly. “Anyone who had broken one of Ethan’s laws was required to,” she paused, swallowing back the painful memories, “pray while kneeling on a line of raw rice all day on Sunday.” She looked over at Zayed. “Do you know what it’s like to kneel on rice for hours at a time? No bathroom breaks. No food. No water. No relief from the excruciating pain?”

“I don’t, habibi,” he said softly. Tara was grateful for the softness of his gruff voice. If he wanted to hear this story, she needed to be able to think about what she was saying, how much to reveal.

“Tell me how your sister protected you.”

She sniffed again, then looked around, saw the box of tissues on the corner of his desk and grabbed several. “When I was about five years old, I accidentally knocked a glass of milk off the table. Kaia took the blame and the punishment for it.”

“What was the punishment for breaking the glass?”

A long silence, then Tara said, “The glass didn’t break. But I’d spilled the milk. I’d wasted ‘the divine spirit’s’ offering. Since Kaia said that she’d done it, she was

forced to pray on that miserable rice for three hours that Sunday.”

“Damn!” Zayed hissed, shaking his head at the lack of humanity.

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“Exactly.” She turned and looked up at Zayed. “I didn’t even realize what was happening. Kaia took the punishment even when I didn’t understand what I’d done wrong.”

Zayed couldn’t hold back any longer. Rushing over to her, he pulled her into his arms. “You didn’t do anything wrong, love,” he whispered vehemently. “You were a child! Accidents happen!”

She sniffed and Tara accepted his embrace, feeling warm and secure. It had been a long time since she’d felt this way. Not since Kaia had stolen her away from that miserable place.

“Kaia wasn’t married off because she was considered too naughty to be an obedient wife. She rebelled by asking questions, refusing to pray, refusing obedience.” Tara pressed her face against his chest. “She ran away, but kept sneaking back to the house, bringing me food when I was being punished. She’d sneak in through my window. Somehow, she knew when I was denied food for the day and she’d sneak in and give me a sandwich or cookies. Sometimes milk.” Tara snuggled up against him, crying her outrage at the abuse. “On the day I was married, she somehow knew what was going to happen. After the wedding ceremony, I was ordered to go to Elijah’s house, change into my nightclothes and then sit on the bed, waiting for him to come and teach me...” she stumbled now. “He was going to begin teaching me how to be a good wife. At the time, I didn’t know what that meant. I just knew that I didn’t want to learn anything from that disgusting old man.”

“How old was he?”

She sniffed again. "I think at the time, he was in his mid-thirties. I don't know for sure, but I remember him turning a strange color of pink during the ceremony. And the sweat. When he kissed me, he felt all gross and sloppy." She shuddered, then pressed close against Zayed again. "Before I could change into my nightgown, Kaia was in the room. She looked me in the eye and said, 'You're coming with me' and we snuck away. I didn't care where we went. I was with Kaia and I knew I was going to be okay."

"Where did you go?"

She laughed. "To an old barn a few miles away. We stayed in that barn where Kaia would sneak books and food from the dumpster of a grocery store. They threw out rotting fruit that they couldn't sell. We cut away the rotting parts and ate the good parts. There was milk too. They had to throw away the milk when it was past its sell-by date." She smiled and pulled away, tilting her head back so that she was smiling up at Zayed. "We figured out the best time to get the food that the store threw away. It was around eleven o'clock at night, right after their closing time. We had to be careful though. We waited until the store employees had driven away, otherwise, they would catch us trying to dig through the dumpsters and yell at us."

"Do you know what happened with your...", he paused, clenching his jaw in fury, "I won't call him your husband, Tara." He held her steady. "What happened with your groomer that night?"

Tara shivered at that word. "You're right. That's exactly what he was. Any man who needs to marry a woman at such a young age in order to teach her how to be a good wife, like Ethan recommends, must be a groomer." She sighed, then suddenly realized that she was in his arms. "I'm sorry, Your Highness!" she gasped and stepped back, wiping at the remnants of her tears. "That was completely inappropriate!"

“And yet, it felt very nice,” he countered, then took her hand, leading her back over to the sofa. “Come, Tara. I want to hear more about this saga that you and your sister went on, and I also need to know if you are safe.”

“Yes,” she replied. “There is no way that Elijah could get to me here in the palace.”

“And that’s why you’ve slept here the last two nights? Once in your office and last night here in mine?”

She tugged at her hand, her eyes wide with worry. “You...You know about that?”

“Yes, I was informed both nights when you didn’t check out of the palace.”

“Check out? But...?” She looked over her shoulder, as if she could see the exit to the palace. “There isn’t a place that I officially check out each night.”

He laughed softly. “Tara, the palace guards know where everyone is at all times of the day and night. Palace employees don’t check out on any official clipboard, but the badge readers note everyone who comes and goes from the palace. When you didn’t badge out at your usual time at night, the guards came looking for you.”

She smiled, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “Oh, that makes sense,” she said with a nod. “One of them was kind enough to cover me in a blanket last night.”

“That was me,eazizi.” He took her hand again, laying her fingers on his knee and covering them with his own. “So you and your sister slept in a barn for how long?”

Tara blushed as she glanced down at her hand. She wanted to pull her hand away because this touch was too intimate. And yet, she also wanted to keep it right there. She wanted to slide her fingers over his thigh and explore more. An image of him, completely naked, popped into her mind. Yes, she wanted to discover what his thigh

felt like without his slacks in the way.

“Tara.” He said her name and it sounded like a combination of a growl and a purr. She lifted her eyes up to his and her heart accelerated at the intense look of...desire? Did he desire her? Impossible! No one desired her! She was...?

“How long did you stay in the barn?”

Tara blinked, startled out of her contemplation. It took her a long moment to remember what they were talking about.

“Um...I don’t know exactly. Kaia made it into a game. We had fun, actually.” She shrugged. “It was summer so we didn’t need to worry about the cold. We had enough to eat, and the food was better than what I’d been allowed to eat at home. So I...I was happy for the first time in...forever.”

“So, you didn’t care how long you stayed,” he finished for her.

“Exactly.”

“What made you leave the barn?”

Tara slouched slightly, still aware of her hand on his thigh, but it was a warm heat now. “Kaia somehow knew what was going on back home. She knew that it was time to leave. So we headed into the city.” She shook her head, thinking back to that time now. “I still can’t figure out how Kaia knew how to do everything, except that maybe she’d been living on the streets for so long before she came back to save me.” Tara looked out towards the windows as she continued. “We moved around a lot during those first few years. We spent a lot of time hiding in abandoned buildings. Sometimes, we had food and sometimes we didn’t. Kaia got both of us on babysitting lists, which helped us earn more money than most of the other homeless kids that we

saw around town. Kaia demanded that we always read. She was adamant that we always had a book and were learning something in our spare time.”

“Reading is very important,” he agreed.

Tara looked back at him, shaking her head. “No, you don’t understand. Ethan didn’t want the female community members to go to school.”

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His forehead furrowed at that bit of news. “Didn’t the state government require it?”

She snorted. “Absolutely! But our school classes were different than what the boys were studying. We were all home schooled in one of the community homes. But girls were only taught cooking, cleaning, and sewing. The boys were taught agricultural skills.”

“No math or science classes?”

“No way! Ethan explained that knowledge, other than an understanding of the rule book, was Satan’s way into our brains.”

“Sounds like he didn’t want anyone to question him.”

Tara nodded. “Exactly. Kaia explained over and over again that a person with a poor education doesn’t have the intellectual skills to question authority. She said that understanding the world helps us with critical thinking. And since females weren’t allowed to learn how to read and write, our efforts at reading everything she could get her hands on was part of Kaia’s rebellion against Ethan’s dictates.”

“She sounds amazing. When can I meet her?”

Tara laughed suddenly. “Kaia has been protecting me ever since she snuck me away that horrible night.” She looked into Zayed’s eyes. “I don’t know where she is, but if Elijah is nearby, then I won’t endanger her to come to me. I won’t.” Unconsciously, Tara squeezed his knee as she continued. “Kaia got a retail job at sixteen and was so good at it, so aware of every employee’s and customer’s needs, she worked her way

up to department manager by the age of eighteen. Everyone thought she was older, so even the more senior staff members never questioned her authority.”

“I’m even more impressed.”

“We got an apartment, just a tiny place and I shifted from babysitting jobs to a retail position when I was sixteen as well. We saved up all of the money we earned, never spending anything we didn’t absolutely have to. We shopped at thrift stores, bought basic foods and constantly read whatever we could get our hands on.” She blinked as tears formed again. “We were doing okay. We’d just started to think that maybe we were free. We were sitting in a park, just reading and minding our own business, when we spotted Ethan walking along the sidewalk.”

Tara wasn’t aware of the long pause, remembering that terrifying morning. The panic, the terror, they felt as they’d sat there on that park bench pretending to read until he was out of sight.

“We didn’t go back to our apartment that day. We abandoned everything. Thankfully, we always had cash on us and we had money saved in a bank account by then. So we had money that Ethan couldn’t take from us.”

“What happened, habun?” he prompted again.

“Kaia heard about an employment agency looking for international staff.” She peeked up at him through wet lashes. “I interviewed for this job and, for the past two years, I’d finally felt safe.”

Chapter 15

Zayed felt his chest grow tight.

“Now I understand how you see things other people miss.” He leaned closer. “You are always on your guard, aren’t you? Always waiting for someone to grab you, to take you back to hell.”

She let out a snort that was most likely a burst of laughter. “Yes. Always.”

“Well, you’re safe now, Tara. No one is going to get you.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. I’m married to him! At least, in his mind I am. He will claim me.”

He tightened his fingers around her cold hands. “Tara, you are not married to him. Whatever ridiculous ceremony you went through when you were twelve years old, it wasn’t a wedding. It was a grooming ceremony, at best. You are not married to whatever his name is.”

“Elijah Collins.”

“I don’t care what his name is. You’re not married to him.”

She shook her head. “He’ll get me, Your Highness. He thinks I’m his property.”

Zayed stood up and walked over to his desk, his hands fisted on his hips. He thought about the situation for a moment, then came to a decision.

Turning, he crossed his arms over his chest, knowing that Tara wasn’t going to like his next suggestion.

“You’ll marry me.”

Chapter 16

Tara stared at Zayed for a long moment, then suddenly burst out laughing. She laughed so hard, she bent over, clutching her stomach. Tears of laughter slipped from her eyes and she wiped them away, but these tears weren't a problem. She hadn't laughed this hard in...ever!

When her laughter finally subsided, she straightened up and sighed, folding her hands on her knees and looked at him again, the amusement still lurking in her eyes.

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“Thank you, Your Highness. That was...,” she didn’t have words to describe it.

“I’m serious, Tara. Marry me, then Elijah can’t get to you. He wouldn’t dare. I’ve already assigned a team of bodyguards to protect you. But as my wife, he wouldn’t be allowed to get anywhere near you.”

Zayed watched, fascinated, as she processed what he’d just said.

“You assigned guards to me?”

Zayed chuckled and moved forward, dropping his hands as he resumed his seat beside her on the sofa. “Out of all that, all you heard was that I assigned people to protect you?”

She licked her lips and Zayed was momentarily distracted. “No. I...uh...heard more than that. The guards thing was just the easiest to address.”

“Why not marry me?”

She cleared her throat and looked down at her hands. “Because I won’t ruin your life just because I’m facing a dangerous situation.”

“Is that all I would be to you?” he asked gently, taking her hand.

Her skin was so damn soft! He ran his thumb over the back of her fingers, enjoying the softness and the sweet scent of whatever shampoo she’d used this morning. He’d heard that she’d showered in the employee locker room. Mentally, he approved of the

hair products that were supplied to the staff.

“No,” she gasped and shifted so that she faced him at a better angle. “You’re...you are a...very kind man.”

“I think we should focus for a moment on the ‘man’ aspect of your observation,” he lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips. “Does that scare you? When I kiss you like that?”

“Yes!” she whispered, but he noticed that she didn’t reclaim her hand. In fact, when she looked up at him, he saw the wistful expression in those emerald depths.

He smiled slightly. “In a good way?”

She glanced down at his mouth, then back up into his eyes. “What’s a good way?”

He kissed her fingers again, then turned her hand over and pressed a kiss to the pulse beating at her wrist. “Does this make your heart beat faster?” He kissed her wrist again. “Does this make you want to kiss me?”

“Yes!” she whispered, staring at his mouth. Then she blinked and pulled away.

Zayed let her because this was all new. For both of them. He’d fantasized about making love to Tara in so many ways. But he’d take this slowly. Knowing more about her background gave him a better understanding of the way she might think.

She turned, hiding her hands behind her back. “Your Highness, I’m already—”

“You’re not married, Tara,” he interjected, leaning back against the leather sofa. “You might have gone through some petty ceremony, but the tech team has combed through the court documents. There was never a marriage license submitted for you.

Nor would there be. If a license was submitted, then someone would have been arrested. Nor would a county clerk issue a license.” He tilted his head slightly. “Did you sign a marriage license after whatever ceremony you went through?”

He watched as her eyes slid out of focus as she thought back. Then she slowly shook her head. “No. I’m positive that I didn’t sign anything after the ceremony. I was just told to head over to Elijah’s house and wait for him. I remember clutching the bouquet of daisies to my stomach during the ceremony. I never let them go until I walked into Elijah’s house. And I only put them down then because Kaia was urging me to climb out the bedroom window.”

Zayed shrugged. “Then you were never legally married.” He leaned forward again. “I suspect that you feel as if you were married though. So, how about if we take things slowly?”

Tara considered, then shook her head. “Your Highness, you need someone like Princess Ciara to rule by your side. I’m just a nobody. I didn’t even attend high school!”

“You are one of the most intelligent assistants I’ve ever had. Plus, every time I bring an issue to you, I notice your incredibly thoughtful comments in the margins. You speak four languages not including English.” He paused in that moment, tilting his head. “How in the world did you manage that, by the way?”

Tara was now clutching her hands together. “Well, Kaia said that we couldn’t count on anything. So, part of our efforts to prepare for our next hiding place was to learn Spanish. That waseasy enough to learn, especially since, where we were hiding at the time, there were several Spanish speaking people. They are incredibly hard workers and love to share their language.”

“And French?”

She blushed and he loved the pink tinge to her pale cheeks. “Oh, French was simple after learning Spanish. Some of the words are even spelled the same.”

“I can’t imagine that there are many French speakers in the United States.”

She shrugged. “One summer, we snuck into Canada. In Montreal, almost everyone speaks English and French.”

“How did you learn Arabic then?”

“Arabic was harder.”

“Arabic and English are very difficult languages to learn.”

“Kaia and I studied the verbs together, then went to the library and watched videos,” she admitted. “It was harder, but whenever Kaia and I learned a new language, we spoke only that language to each other. It helped us learn things faster.”

“That’s impressive.” He stood up and came to her side. “I’m serious about marriage, Tara. You are a very beautiful woman. Not only that, I’m sexually attracted to you.” He took her hands. “I suspect that you are attracted to me as well, am I correct?”

She stared up into his eyes, swallowed hard, then nodded slowly.

“Good.” He lifted her hands again. “How about this? Why don’t we finish work today and, no matter what happens during the day, we will have dinner together, just the two of us, tonight?”

She smiled, amused by his suggestion. “Didn’t you try to have a quiet dinner last night?”

He gave her a teasingly mock glare. “Yes, and I believe you are the one who scheduled the ambassador to speak with me over dinner, thereby escaping a private conversation with me.”

She blushed again and Zayed was learning to truly enjoy that telltale sign.

“Do you deny it?”

She shrugged and looked away.

“I thought so.” He chuckled and tucked her arm onto his elbow. “Also, since the people in your apartment aren’t related to you, I will have the police arrest them.”

“For what?” she asked, intrigued. “Elijah truly believes that he’s my husband. He honestly believes that he has the right to enter my apartment.”

“Delusions aren’t justification for breaking the law, Tara. I don’t care if he believes he is king of the jungle. He broke into your home and that’s against the law.”

She shrugged, obviously unconcerned. Then she stopped and looked at him again.

“He wasn’t alone?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You said that you’d arrest them. Not him.”

“Right.” Zayed shrugged. “I don’t know who is living in the place, but I was under the impression that he had some people with him.”

Her eyes were wide and terrified then. “It wasn’t Ethan, was it?” she whispered.

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out. I can attend the interrogation personally.”

“You can’t! You’re not law enforcement!”

He blinked at her, then threw back his head and laughed. “Tara, you know who I am, right?”

“Of course I do. You’re the ruler of Pitra.”

His laughter softened to a chuckle. “Exactly. So if I want to sit in on a police interrogation, I guarantee that no one will stop me.”

She rolled her eyes as she slipped away to her office. “Don’t abuse your power, Your Highness.”

“Oh, and that’s another thing,” he started, leaning against the frame of her office doorway. “Since we are officially engaged, you need to call me Zayed.”

A moment later, he stepped out of her office, whistling as he walked down the hallway to his first meeting. Hell, he wasn’t even sure where his next meeting was being held since Tara usually directed him. And she was looking beautifully stunned back in her office.

Didn’t matter that he might be heading in the wrong direction. He felt good!

Chapter 17

Elijah huffed as he watched his sister and mother being lead to a police car. He’d gone out for a walk in the park down the street, trying to clear his head. He’d arrived back at Tara’s apartment building just in time to see his womenfolk being arrested!

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How dare they touch his women! But now that another man had laid hands on Nora and Beth Ann, they were sullied. They were worthless. They'd allowed another man to touch them, so he was fully justified in dismissing them from his life.

Of course, Beth Ann was already dirty since she'd been married before. He thought about the situation for a moment, then nodded his approval. The two women were useless members of the congregation since neither were able to procreate. Nora was still a virgin, but since her husband had died before their wedding night, no other community member was willing to risk marriage to her. Hence, why the woman had been a burden to his household for the past several years.

Beth Ann, his mother, was useless as well. Oh, she cooked and cleaned adequately. But she wasn't a pure woman any longer. She couldn't remarry since she was no longer a virgin. And therefore, she was a burden to the community as well.

Without the women slowing him down, Elijah knew that he could make better progress in finding his wife. Tara had to be close by. He wasn't sure where exactly, but eventually, she'd have to come home to him. And if she was no longer a virgin, if Tara had allowed another man to steal her virginity...? Well, then he'd have to bring her back home so that she could be appropriately disciplined. Stoning was still an adequate punishment for hussies. It wasn't used often, but when it happened, the stoning process was a sight to behold!

Not only did the stoning send the adulteress to her fiery, bruised afterlife, but it also reminded the other women in the group to obey their husbands and the male elders. It was a powerful lesson for any woman who dared to step out of line.

Kaia adjusted her blond wig, hoping that she could get to her hotel room quickly. She wanted a shower and a glass of wine. And she needed to find Tara so that she could ensure that her baby sister was safe.

Goodness, it had been so long since she'd seen Tara. The warning had been delivered and received, but Kaia had a bad feeling. She hadn't heard Elijah on the digital feeds lately and that worried her. What orders had Ethan given Elijah?

It didn't matter. Kaia needed to see Tara anyway. She needed to see with her own eyes that her baby sister was safe from her certifiably insane "husband".

The taxi ride from the airport to Tara's apartment building was short, but she still hated the blond wig. It itched and, with the intense sunshine, the wig kept in all of her body heat. However, she knew that, in just a few minutes, she'd be able to see Tara and toss the wig into the trash!

"Thank you," she told the taxi driver and paid him, giving an extra tip.

Chapter 18

Tara slapped the file folders down onto her desk, grumbling about obnoxious men and their highhanded tricks.

"Ready for dinner?" Zayed asked, poking his head into her office.

Tara spun around and glared at him. "No!"

Zayed merely grinned and stepped into the office. "Shut down everything, Tara. You will no longer be working over a hundred hours a week for me."

She leaned back in her chair, narrowing her eyes at him. "I don't work that many

hours, Your High..." She stopped when he lifted an eyebrow at her. "I don't."

He chuckled and stepped closer, pressing the button on her laptop that would save her work. "Actually, you do. I asked the other people that work around you to estimate the number of hours. Then I went to the security office. There are some weeks when you work more than a hundred hours a week." He took her hand and guided her out of her chair and around her desk. "Did you know you work more than sixteen hours a day most days?"

"I don't!"

"You do," he confirmed with a nod, tucking her hand onto his arm once again. "Hayim, the head of the human resources department, has already started interviews for the three assistants that will help you."

Tara walked alongside him down the hallway, feeling self-conscious as the others in the administrative office looked up from their work areas to watch the procession. It wasn't just herself and Zayed. Nope! There was an entire entourage of bodyguards surrounding them!

"This is embarrassing," she whispered up to him.

"Get used to it," he whispered back.

Tara stayed silent during the trek along the ornately decorated hallway. She breathed a sigh of relief when they finally entered the dining room. He led her over to a chair and held it for her until she was seated, then sat down on the opposite side of the table. With a nod, the servants stepped into the room with the first course.

"What's this?" she gasped, staring down at the salad in front of her, excitement growing in her chest. "Is this...?"

Zayed eyed the wilted lettuce with a grimace. “I’m not sure. It looks...!” He lifted his eyes to look at her, chagrin changing his handsome features. “I asked the chef to make traditional Kentucky favorites, but I didn’t ask for details.”

Tara laughed with delight. “This is a killed salad,” she explained, poking her fork at the wilted lettuce. “The hot bacon grease dressing wilts the lettuce. It’s absolutely delicious. There’s a touch of sugar, or most likely, honey to the dressing. But it’s probably bacon grease and vinegar, which was what most of the people had on hand when the state was in it’s infancy.” She stabbed a few of the lettuce leaves, took a bite, then closed her eyes as the memories and delicious flavors washed over her. “Oh, this is delicious!”

When she opened her eyes, it was to laugh at Zayed. He’d lifted several lettuce leaves from the plate, his fork hovering in the air as he stared at the droopy food. “It looks disgusting.” But he put it in his mouth, chewed slowly, then nodded. “Huh. Not bad!”

She laughed and started eating with gusto. “I remember the first time I was allowed to eat the killed salad. I’d snuck into the kitchens while the ladies were cooking.”

“How old were you?”

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “About ten, I guess. Rarely was any of the fresh food leftover after the men had eaten.”

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He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “Why weren’t the children fed first?”

“Oh, the children were always fed first, but in a different room. The children weren’t allowed near the men.”

“You know that’s ridiculous, right?” he asked, trying to decipher her hopes for their future family.

She grinned and stabbed a cherry tomato. “Yes, I am fully aware of how backwards my community’s traditions are. I’ve read many books about changes every society needs to make in order to create a more equal community.”

“What are some of the family traditions that you’d like to maintain in our family?”

“None,” she admitted without hesitation.

“Nothing at all?”

She tilted her head slightly. “The first twelve years of my life, every moment of our existence was focused around making the man the center of our universe. We were taught at an early age never to anger a man because the consequences could be dangerous.”

“That’s abuse,” he argued, pointing his empty fork towards her.

She smiled, obviously relieved that he understood that. “Yes, it is. I read a book on

how to anticipate the signals of an abusive personality.”

“Last year, you mentioned that my economics advisor was probably the type to smack his wife around.”

“Yes?”

“I had the police investigate. He regularly beat his wife while his two sons watched. The man was arrested and the woman now lives in the country, trying to recover from her ex-husband’s abuse.”

Tara smiled approvingly at him. “That’s good. I’m relieved that she was able to escape.” She put her fork down. “Most women don’t have someone as powerful as you on their side, ensuring that their cases are adjudicated fairly.”

“Most people don’t have you watching out for them either, Tara. It was you that brought the possibility to my attention. Apparently, when one grows up with the constant threat, and reality, of assault, one learns quickly how to identify that trait in others.”

“That’s true. Assault survivors are intimately aware when there is a potential abuser in their midst. The abuser gives off...signals, for lack of a better word.”

“Well, he’s in prison now.”

“But what about the other victims?”

He looked at her intently. “If you have suggestions on how to stop abusers, identify them and/or their victims, then I’m happy to listen.” He leaned back as one of the servants took their plates and another stepped up with the next course. “In fact, as my wife, you’ll have the power to set up your own system. With me backing you, I

suspect that you could be a very strong advocate for domestic abuse survivors.”

She considered that for a moment, then shook her head. “I receive a great deal of satisfaction from my current job.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, then merely nodded and said, “We’ll see.”

The main course that night was barbeque, which was more interesting than she would have expected, mainly because of the debate. “Dry rub barbeque is better,” Zayed announced as he poured some of the sauce onto the chicken barbeque.

Tara gasped in horror, causing Zayed’s fork to freeze. “Take. It. Back!” she hissed.

He looked confused, looking around as if he’d insulted someone. “Take what back?”

Her eyes narrowed on him in mock anger. “Take back what you said about dry rub,” she ordered, glowering at him.

He chuckled, lowering his fork. “Are you serious?”

“Yes!” she said, trying to hide her laugh. “Absolutely serious. Take it back.”

The fire of challenge sparked in his eyes. “Nope. Dry rub is better.”

“You’re wrong.”

Zayed laughed, then piled more barbeque onto his fork. “I prefer the dry rub because cooking the meat in a tomato based sauce is basically boiling the meat. A dry rub style means that the meat is grilled slowly, which adds more flavor.”

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“A tomato based sauce adds more zing to the meat,” she argued. “The sauce is cooked in its own juices, adding flavor and tenderness.”

Back and forth, they argued about the pros and cons of dry rub versus sauce-cooked barbeque, both forcefully adamant that they were right.

When the bread pudding with bourbon icing was placed in front of Tara, she nearly moaned with delight. “You’re spoiling me!” she gasped.

“That’s the point,” he replied, that heat returning to his eyes.

Tara was frozen for a moment, understanding what that light meant. Was she afraid of that desire? Or was she intrigued?

Both, she realized. He watched her and Tara felt suddenly felt too hot. “I...uh...don’t know how to react to comments like that, Your Highness.” She thought about lowering her lashes, of demonstrating her submissiveness. But she’d hated the way the community leaders had always demanded submissiveness. She’d wondered why the women had to literally bow down whenever a man entered a room. They weren’t royalty.

Okay, so Sheik Zayed el Mastrion was literally royalty. He was king of Pitra. He ruled every single centimeter of this country, as well as several miles out into the surrounding sea.

And yet, she’d never bowed to him. At her interview, she hadn’t realized that she should have bowed. After she’d started working at the palace, she’d just...never done

it.

So why was she considering doing it now, if only with her eyes?

Instead, her chin jutted higher, silently showing him that she wouldn't, couldn't, be a submissive woman if that's what he was hoping to marry.

"I don't want a fake response, Tara," he told her, his voice huskier than before. "I want honest reactions between us." He tilted his head slightly. "Why would you think I'd expect something different now that we're engaged?" he asked. "You've been my assistant for the past two years. During that time, you've never held back your reactions or opinions." He grinned when Tara's pale cheeks warmed with a blush. "You think I've missed those sarcastic eye rolls whenever you thought I was doing something stupid?"

Her hands clenched together under the table. "We aren't engaged. However, I am always respectful," she countered. "I'd never roll my eyes—"

"The defense budget conversation," he interrupted. "I suggested that we increase the defense budget by thirteen percent."

Instantly, her temper flared. "In the education budget meeting, you only increased that department's funding by two percent."

"You don't think that the citizens deserve a strong military?"

Tara clenched her jaw at his stupid question. "You and I both know that comment is a 'straw man' argument. Don't belittle my intelligence by distorting the issue."

Zayed threw back his head, laughing at her challenge. When he'd regained control, he was nodding. "You're right. But that's the argument I hear all the time. As soon as

someone suggests that we should take some of the money from the defense budget and apply it to other agencies, their primary attack is to say that I'm soft on defense and catering to one political group or another."

"If you know what your opponents are going to say, then shift your public relations people to start planning the messaging sooner rather than needing to be on the defense."

He grinned at her point, nodding. "You're correct, of course."

She sighed and leaned forward, releasing her hands to place them on the table. "Your Highness, I don't know all of the decisions that you have to make in a day. So, I'm not criticizing your plans."

"All evidence to the contrary."

At his uplifted eyebrow, she blushed again, but continued. "However, you've had the same advisors on your council ever since you came into office."

"They are highly experienced men."

"Yes, yes," she sighed, lifting her hand. "That's the same argument that the senators and congress people in my country use to halt any kind of term-limit legislation. And some of them have been in office for half a century."

"There is something to be said for consistency and experience."

"There's also something to be said for new energy and new ideas, Your Highness," she shot back. "Plus, who are the people that are advising your advisors?" She waited, her expression turning smug at his stunned expression. "Exactly. The people who used to advise your advisors have moved on to other positions. So, why

shouldn't your advisory council change too?"

Zayed leaned back, his eyes contemplative. Slowly, he nodded his agreement.

"You make an excellent point, Tara."

That's when they looked down at the dessert. "Goodness, we've been arguing about politics all the while this has been waiting for us to notice." Tara lifted her spoon and took a bite, then closed her eyes. "I've had bread pudding before, but we weren't allowed to have alcohol. The bourbon in this is...delicious!"

"Why weren't you allowed alcohol?"

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“Because we were female,” she explained. “Women in my church group were told that drinking alcohol would cause us to lose our inhibitions. If we had even a sip of anything alcoholic, we would be throwing our bodies at whatever male was nearby.” She shook her head as she scooped up another bite. “When my sister and I escaped from that horrible place, we tasted beer.” She shook her head while staring at the bite of sweetness. “Nothing happened.” Then she squinched up her nose. “And we didn’t like the flavor either.”

“How many other rules did you and Kaia break after your escape?”

Tara thought about that for a moment while enjoying another bite of the bread pudding. “Both of us hated sewing so we both vowed to never sew anything again. But that’s not really a rebellion. We read as many books as we could get our hands on because women weren’t allowed to read. Since we couldn’t afford a television and could only afford the cheapest phone, which meant we couldn’t afford social media, we read whenever we weren’t working. The public libraries were our saviors during our time on the run. We didn’t always have a permanent address, but the librarians usually made exceptions for us.”

“You weren’t allowed to read?”

She shook her head. “Not in our old community. Educating women meant that we might argue. Arguing with the head of our household or, worse, the community leaders, would result in a fractured home. We would be disciplined severely for daring to challenge any leader.”

“What were some of the disciplines in your community?” he asked, and Tara could

see the anger simmering in his eyes.

“Whippings. No food for a certain number of hours or days.”

He paused his spoon as he stared at her. “Are you kidding?”

“No,” Tara replied, carefully cutting another bite of the bread pudding and ensuring that there was the perfect amount of icing on it.

“How often were you whipped?”

She shrugged. “Only twice. My sister...” she stopped, resting the spoon on the edge of her plate. “Kaia was much more rebellious than I was.” Tara abandoned the dessert completely.

Chapter 19

“Tell me about your sister,” Zayed urged, seeing the pain in her pretty, green eyes. He needed to bring back the defiant woman. Right now, he could only see the terrified Tara and he hated it. His gut clenched as he pictured Tara being whipped. And yet, her only thought now was the safety of her older sister.

Slowly, Tara breathed in, then slowly released the breath. Her lovely features shifted from pain at the past memories to a soft smile. “Kaia was amazing! Even from a small age, I admired her. She loved running around the farm, chasing the chickens.” Tara laughed. “We were in charge of collecting the eggs each morning and afternoon. I was always terrified of the hens because they were mean peckers! They didn’t like it when we stole their eggs.”

“I’ve heard that,” he replied, amused.

“I would tentatively reach underneath their feathered bellies, pleading with the chickens not to peck me. But, of course, they did. On the other hand, Kaia would shove her hand under their bellies and take the eggs before the hens realized what was going on.”

“She’s a warrior.”

“Exactly! Kaia, the Chicken Warrior princess!”

They both laughed and Zayed reached over to take her hand, gently guiding her out of her chair.

“Don’t get nervous now,” he cautioned, leading her out of the dining room. “Tell me more about how Kaia defied the rules.”

“Oh, she disobeyed in just about every way. I don’t know how she survived the punishments. Whenever our father took her meals away, I would sneak her food. If Kaia was banished to sleep on the porch, I’d sneak blankets out to her.”

“That only happened in the summer months, right?”

“Nope! The elders ordered my father to discipline Kaia during the winter months too, all year round. Sleeping outside on the porch was a favorite, second only to whippings, for the elders.”

“That’s barbaric, Tara. You know that, right?”

“Of course. Although, it was all we knew when we were kids, but even as kids, we understood that there was something...off...about our father and the other leaders.”

He took a deep breath, leading her through a set of double doors. Zayed watched as

Tara looked around. Did she realize that this was his private suite? At the moment, they were in the living area with sofas and chairs. There was a library off to one side, an office, and a theatre area where he could watch any movie that had been released, and some that hadn't yet been released. There was a private kitchen and dining room, and a pool just for his exclusive use that was surrounded by a lush courtyard.

“Tell me more about your rebellions. What were other ways you rebelled?”

She thought about that for a moment. “Well, Kaia wears jewelry every day now. Even if she is working and not in a place where she's allowed to wear jewelry, she'll wear something and hide it from her supervisors.”

“Why weren't you allowed to wear jewelry?” he asked, leading her to one of the sofas. He sat down, but realized that she was still nervous. So instead of sitting next to her, he walked over to one of the cabinets and pulled out a deck of cards. When he once again sat down across from her, he heard her quiet sigh of relief.

Hopefully, by the end of the evening, she wouldn't be so nervous.

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Shuffling the cards, he watched her.

“First Timothy in the Bible specifically states that women should ‘adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works’,” she quoted from memory. “What are we playing?”

Zayed stared at Tara for a long moment. “The Bible says that women aren’t allowed to adorn themselves with pearls or gold?”

“Yep!” She took the cards he’d dealt her and fanned them out, sorting them by suit and number. “No braided hair, no gold, no pearls, no nuthin’ other than good deeds.” She lifted those lashes, her green eyes flashing at him. “That’s one of the reasons Kaia always wears jewelry. Sometimes it’s just gold earrings. Other times, she’ll deck herself out with gold hoops, a gold necklace, rings, and even a gold chain around her waist.” She moved a five of clubs in her hand so that it was nestled next to the eight of clubs.

“We’re playing ‘gin’ and I’m going to beat you,” he announced. “Eventually, I will teach you chess.” He looked at her over his fanned out cards. “Unless you already know how to play?”

“I’ve played chess before,” she replied, still moving her cards around now that she knew what game they were playing. “But only a few times.” It was the truth, but she didn’t mention that she’d read several books about chess strategy and had played the game in her head multiple times.

“We’ll start that tomorrow night,” he promised, shuffling his cards in his hands like a veteran from Vegas. “Tonight, we’ll play gin and you’ll tell me more about your childhood.”

She glanced at him over the cards, then focused on shifting her hand so that her cards were ready for her strategy. “What do I get if I win?”

He laid the remaining cards down on the table between them, then flipped the top card over before taking his own cards and sorting them. “What do you want?”

Before she could think better of it, she blurted out, “How about a kiss!” she blurted, referencing the movie from that crazy director.

Zayed’s eyes lifted from his cards and he watched her, a startled expression on his face.

Tara suddenly realized what she’d just blurted out and shook her head. “I didn’t mean that! I meant to say that I wanted...!”

“Deal!” he agreed without another moment’s hesitation.

Tara instantly started shaking her head. “No, really, Your Highness. That was just a stupid joke.”

He grinned, leaning back in his chair. “You don’t want to kiss me?” he teased back. “I think I’m insulted.”

Tara’s mouth fell open and she tried to find an appropriate response. “Your Highness, I just...I was...It was just...!”

He shook his head, still smiling. “You offered the terms,” he interrupted her

sputtering. “I’ve wanted to kiss you ever since the moment I met you.” He shifted two more cards in his hands. “And it’s all your fault.”

“My fault?”

He nodded slowly, moving another card to the end of his hand. “Yes. I remember the way you sat in the chair during our initial interview.” More shuffling and Tara shifted in the chair. “You did that.”

Tara froze, looking around in confusion. “What did I do?”

He jerked his chin towards her. “You looked so prim and proper, while shifting uncomfortably in the chair. Then you told me how I should run my education department.”

Tara remembered that moment and bit her lip. “That was...outrageous of me. I apologize.”

“Don’t apologize. I can’t remember what you said, but I remember staring at your lips during the entire interview, wondering what it would be like to kiss you.”

Tara stared at him, then her eyes dropped to his lips. There was a long, tense moment while they both absorbed that bit of information.

Thankfully, he broke the silence. “And if I win, I get to ask a question and you have to tell me the truth.”

He watched with increasing pain to his groin as her lips pressed together. “A kiss is just....”

“Necessary,” he replied, appreciating the blush that stole over her features. Finally, he

picked up the face card on the table, then discarded one from his hand.

There was a long stretch of silence as they played out the game.

Sooner than he expected, Tara looked up at him. He knew in that moment that she'd won, but didn't want to say it. "Tara?" he prompted, enjoying the confusion in those beautiful, green eyes.

"Your turn," she replied in a choked voice, even jerking that cute chin towards the pile of cards between them.

“You won, didn’t you?” he asked.

After another hesitation, Tara laid down her hand and reluctantly announced, “Gin.”

He looked at the set of cards. Sure enough, she had three eight cards, three tens, and four kings splayed out over the table.

He lifted his eyes, noting that she looked nervous again.

“You don’t...!”

He was already leaning over the table, his hands braced on the polished surface. Zayed hesitated for only a moment, recognizing that Tara was holding her breath, their mouths barely an inch apart.

“You win,” he whispered just before his lips brushed over hers. He lingered there for a moment, appreciating the softness of her lips against his, the trembling of her mouth, and the soft exhalation of her breath as she kissed him back.

Zayed drew back, not wanting to scare her with the depths and intensity of his need. Taking up the cards, he tapped them on the table and began shuffling as he said, “Your deal.”

For a long moment, Tara didn’t move. Zayed watched as her fingers gently touched her lips. She looked stunned, then her lashes lifted and...the surprise in her eyes warned him of something. But he wasn’t sure what the message was about.

Suddenly, she jerked out of her contemplation and started dealing the cards for the next game. She handled the cards just a little clumsily, which fascinated Zayed. He'd watched her hands before. When she typed on her laptop, she was fast and furious, without hesitation or backstrokes to correct spelling or a thought.

Had the brief kiss affected her to the point that she was fumbling?

He grinned at the possibility.

"Are you going to look at your cards?" she prompted.

Zayed suddenly realized that she'd dealt the cards while he was lost in his thoughts. Reluctantly, he looked down at the table. Sure enough, ten cards were splayed out in front of him.

He pulled in his cards, then sorted them, all the while, contemplating her reaction to just a simple kiss.

That's when it hit him. Had that been her first kiss? With her childhood, it was certainly possible! Not just her horrible childhood, but also the constant struggle to move from one hiding place to the next. Tara wouldn't have been in one place long enough to form a romantic connection with a man.

His body tightened at the thought that Tara, his beautiful, green eyed Tara, was so sweetly innocent that she'd never even kissed another man before.

"Tara, was that...?" He stopped when she lifted her hand in the air, silencing him.

She shifted a card from one place to another, her gaze intent on whatever strategy she was planning. "Our agreement is that you may ask a question only if you win." She folded her cards and looked at him. "You go first."

Damn, he wanted her! Right now! He wanted to toss the cards away and haul her into his arms. He wanted to make love to her, touch her, show her every damn thing she'd been missing all these years. Then he wanted to spoil her with rich foods and beautiful clothes. He wanted to take her shopping in Paris and Milan. He wanted to show her the world! And then strip off all of those wonderful clothes and make love to her all over again!

But first, he needed to win this damn game. Mentally, he cursed his idea to play cards. It would have been better if he'd simply encouraged her to talk about her past more so that he knew the battles he'd need to fight in order to win her heart.

And her trust.

Trust. That's what he needed first. He had to prove to Tara that she was safe. That she didn't need to bolt out of Pitra to find a new hiding place.

Chapter 20

Tara trembled as she watched Zayed take the card that had been laid face up next to the stack of cards. She wanted another kiss! Her lips still throbbed from that brief brush of his mouth against hers. Somehow, this silly game between them had morphed into an almost life or death struggle for her. For another kiss! She felt her whole body shaking with anticipation. Never before had she even contemplated kissing another man. No other male had ever tempted her like Zayed did.

Oh, she'd looked at other men and thought, "Hmm...I bet he'd be a good kisser." Or "Hey, why not just take this guy up on his obvious interest and find out what all the fuss is about." However, her life hadn't allowed her to follow up on those thoughts. Her life had been a constant, desperate attempt to keep one step ahead of a maniacal bastard.

Every time she and Kaia had started to feel safe, Ethan had shown up. Maybe he'd been knocking on a neighbor's door. Or perhaps they'd see him sitting in a coffee shop near where they'd been working.

It didn't matter how or where they'd seen him, she and Kaia had packed up and left, leaving everything behind that didn't fit into a small backpack, which was always kept packed so that they were ready to leave in moment's notice.

So yes, Zayed was the first man who truly, sincerely, interested her on a level that was more than just vague curiosity. Until now, she'd always considered the man to be forbidden. He was her employer. He was a royal. He was the freaking leader of the country!

But he'd introduced this game. And now, it felt imperative for her to win another kiss from him.

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“Your turn,” he announced, laying down a four of diamonds.

Tara glanced at her hand and mentally calculated the risks. The challenge of the game was to get two sets of three of a kind and one set of four of a kind. Or a run up of cards all in the same suit.

Obviously, Zayed wasn’t collecting fours; she had one in her hand. She could grab the four, but she had two nines, two kings and two jacks. She hadn’t planned on collecting fours. She picked up the four and slid it next to the other four, then discarded an eight.

He grabbed the eight! Darn it! She’d just given him a card that he needed.

Heart pounding in her chest, she waited, breath held, until he discarded the jack of clubs!

Bonus!

Tara grabbed the card and slid it in beside the other two in her hand, then discarded a three of spades.

Back and forth, they picked up one card, then discarded another. Usually, Tara could eventually figure out her opponent’s strategy. When they picked up one card or discarded another, it was easy to figure out what the other person was collecting. Then she could hold those cards until she didn’t have any spare “discard” options any longer.

But Zayed's strategy was a mystery. And perhaps because of her confusion, it was harder for her to focus on her own cards. She completely missed one of the cards she needed, mentally chiding herself for watching his hands too closely. Not because she was trying to see what he might discard, but because his hands were incredibly appealing!

Distraction wasn't an option, she told herself firmly. She wanted that kiss!

Finally, he picked up from the deck, then discarded another four. That was the last card she needed and she picked it up, added the card to the appropriate place, then fanned out her cards. "Gin," she whispered, nearly out of her mind with the need to kiss him again.

The first time, she'd been too startled to truly concentrate on the man's kiss. This time, she was going to savor the moment! She was going to analyze why his kiss made her feel so jittery. She was going to...!

He leaned forward, bracing one hand on the table and reaching out with his other hand to curl his fingers around her neck, gently pulling her towards his mouth.

And then he kissed her! This time, it wasn't just a soft kiss. This was...sublime! His mouth lingered over her lips, teasing and brushing against hers as if trying to tempt her to open her mouth. She did and...!

Tara was lost in the shockingly erotic moment. His tongue brushed against her lips, then against her tongue. She was so shocked by the touch that she pulled back, their eyes clashing. But a moment later, with the gentle urging of his hand on her neck, she kissed him again. This time, she left her mouth open, gasping when he angled his head and deepened the kiss.

Tara had no idea what to do, so she just followed his lead, copying anything he did to

her, assuming that he would like the same. She reached out, clutching at his shoulders. She knew that touching wasn't part of the deal. This was supposed to be just a kiss. But her fingers were itching to touch him, to explore the strong muscles in his shoulders and neck. Tara was mindless with desire now, her fingers inching towards the warm skin, exploring, needing more but not sure what that "more" might be.

When he pulled back this time, Tara felt as if her whole body were tingling, sparkling. There was a hot throbbing low in her belly that she didn't quite understand, but was certain that Zayed could fix.

"Another game?" he asked softly, his voice low and husky.

"Yes!" she whispered back, licking her lips as if she could still taste his kiss.

Slowly, they separated, her fingers releasing his shoulders reluctantly. It took monumental effort to sit back in her chair.

Thankfully, it wasn't Tara's turn to shuffle the cards, because her hands were shaking so hard, she knew she'd drop them.

Apparently, Zayed wasn't as affected as she was because the cards flew from his nimble fingers, each of them landing in a messy, but small, pile in front of her.

Frustrated now, Tara wanted to kiss him in a way that would make him just as flustered as she felt. Of course, she wasn't exactly sure how to do that. She sifted her cards, arranging them in...well, not in order, she realized and started over. When she looked at her hand again, she realized that she had a very good hand.

"You go first this time," he announced.

Tara glanced down at the card on the table, then at her hand. Yep, she needed that card. She tossed out another card, relieved when he chose from the deck. Over and over, she tossed out a card, then waited, breathlessly to see if he would take it.

How could he make her feel this anxious, this desperate for another kiss? What was it about Zayed? He was driving her wild!

Thankfully, none of the cards she discarded were things he could use.

It seemed that everything he discarded was helpful to her and it took her only ten minutes to win this hand.

“Gin!” she announced with pride as she fanned her cards out on the table.

“Excellent,” he growled, then stood up. Instead of leaning over the low table to kiss her this time, he came around the table. Tara was shocked by this unexpected change, but she didn’t have time to resist before he took her hands and pulled her to her feet in front of him. But Zayed didn’t stop there. He pulled her into his arms, carefully placing her hands on his shoulders.

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In this position, she felt small and vulnerable. But when he lowered his head to kiss her, those sensations changed. As soon as their lips touched, she felt powerful! Her hands automatically moved to his neck, needing to feel his bare skin. At her touch, he deepened the kiss even further, his mouth moving back and forth over hers, kissing her again and again as if he were starving and she was his only sustenance.

He groaned and pulled her closer, his strong hands pressing her more firmly against his body. That's when she felt his erection throbbing against her stomach. She'd always been warned that a man's reaction was dangerous, but this didn't feel wrong. It felt so completely right! So right that she shifted her hips against his, needing to understand more, to feel more.

A knock on the doorway stopped the kiss. She stared up at him as they both caught their breath. Tara was relieved that she wasn't the only person in this embrace that felt it this time.

Slowly, she released his neck, letting her fingers slide down his chest, still staring into his eyes.

"You won," he muttered, his voice deeper than usual.

Carefully, he stepped out of her arms and Tara felt cold and...abruptly angry! Why was she angry?

"Come in!" he bellowed, still staring into Tara's eyes.

The door opened and she stepped back, wrapping her arms around her waist and

turning away from Zayed. She'd just...kissed a man that wasn't her husband! That was...?

No! She wasn't going to slip back into that old way of thinking. Ethan and her father had no control over her life now! She was free! And kissing wasn't wrong. In fact, the way she felt at the moment, she would swear on her life that it was very, very right!

Tara was just about to leave the room when she turned back to the table. The cards were still splayed out at his place at the table. Out of curiosity, she picked up Zayed's cards and turned them over. She nearly gasped out loud when she noticed that none of the cards matched! The man had lost on purpose?

She set the cards back down, then hurried from the room, her head spinning.

Chapter 21

Elijah stared out the window, furious that he was reduced to living in this hovel of a hotel. He pulled the phone from his pocket, relishing the moment when he would find Tara and bring her back home. He would enjoy explaining to her all of the various ways she had disobeyed the rules! He would be very enthusiastic on how he would temper her rebellion in the future.

Thirteen years. He'd been married to the woman for thirteen years! None of the other fathers had allowed him to marry any of the remaining young girls in the community. Nor had Ethan given permission for Elijah to take another wife. Apparently, the community thought he didn't have the capacity to protect his women. About once a month, Ethan would give a sermon to the church members about the sanctity of marriage, about how men should protect their wives from the outside world, even if their wives or daughters wanted to experience the outside world. He preached about hellfire and brimstone that would consume anyone who left the sanctity of their

protected world.

The other fathers pulled their daughters close whenever Elijah walked by, almost as if the shame of losing his wife was contagious.

Ethan had explored the world outside of their community several times, always bringing back evidence of Tara's current location. He'd then ordered Elijah to retrieve his wife and explain how their world worked.

However, every time Elijah had gone out to find Tara, going to the exact location Ethan had given him, the girl had already vanished. There was evidence that Tara had been there, but every time, Tara and that bitch of a sister had escaped Elijah's grasp.

He understood that they were terrified of the lessons that would need to be re-taught over and over once they were brought back to the protection of their home. And yes, Kaia would need to live with Elijah as well. Kaia was now Elijah's sister-in-law and, therefore, under his authority. He would teach the bitch her place in their world. He would enjoy teaching Kaia how to behave properly as a woman. Yes, he would love to discipline that bitch, since he knew that Tara never would have left if her older sister hadn't helped her. Tara was a timid little shrew.

Elijah rubbed his beard, thinking of all the wonderful, delicious ways he would discipline his wife. Yes, he'd seen a flash of Tara. She'd been on the news earlier tonight during some sort of press conference. He hadn't understood the language, so Elijah had no idea what was being said. The only good thing he could say about his wife was that she was dressed modestly and her hair was pulled back appropriately. She hadn't been wearing jewelry, which was also good, but he didn't care about her adornment. It was her behavior that infuriated him the most.

No, to be honest, it was the fact that he hadn't been allowed another wife. The fact

that Ethan wouldn't let him have a new wife after his first one ran away was the reason he was so angry with Tara.

But he would fix it. Eventually, Tara would return to her apartment. When that happened, he had everything in place. She would be trapped! He would then notify Ethan, who had arranged a way for him to get his reluctant wife home. Elijah had no idea what Ethan had planned, but was assured that it would make it so that he could get Tara out of the country without the airport security personnel stopping him.

That was all Elijah needed to know.

Now he needed to figure out where his mother and sister had been taken. The police had carted his women-folk away in handcuffs. Elijah suspected that his women had been taken to the police station, but he would worry about that later. Once he had Tara back under his control, then he could worry about his mother and sister. He figured that, at the moment, they were protected by the police and therefore couldn't possibly be in danger.

Chapter 22

Tara gave up trying to sleep when she saw the sun starting to lighten the morning sky. The bed was too soft and unfamiliar, and there was no traffic noise to lull her to sleep. Plus, she felt...nervous. No, not nervous. But odd. She didn't quite understand the sensations, but she was angry and...grumpy. Probably because she hadn't slept at all last night.

Throwing the silky soft bed sheets off of her legs, Tara stood up and padded barefoot through the impossibly thick carpeting. She'd found the bathroom last night but had been too nervous to touch anything. Everything in that bathroom was clean and shiny. Even touching the countertop with her fingertips might smudge the surface.

She wasn't used to this kind of luxury and it made her uncomfortable.

She grabbed the toothbrush and toothpaste that had been left out for her. Brushing her teeth, Tara glared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair looked wild! She'd tossed and turned last night, trying to find a place on that ridiculously soft bed that would allow her to fall asleep. There were no lumps in that stupid mattress! None! How was a body supposed to get comfortable if there were no lumps?

Quickly, Tara showered, then wrapped a towel around herself, ignoring the too-gorgeous silk robe that had been left draped over a chair, and padded back into the bedroom. She didn't have any clean clothes and she tapped her finger on her hip as she considered her options. That's when she realized that the bed was already made and there was a beautiful pink dress with lovely undergarments laid out on the bed.

Tara crept over to the dress as if it was a wild animal and it might flutter away if startled.

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Slowly, she reached out, her fingers touching the soft, pink material.

Tara had never worn pink. Mainly because pink was a color that stood out in a crowd and her life was a constant effort to avoid detection. But also because pink was a soft, romantic color. She'd been taught from an early age that pinks and reds were immoral colors. Red more than pink, but women still shouldn't draw a man's gaze.

During the women's Sunday studies in her old life, women were taught that men were sexual beasts and it was a woman's responsibility to never tempt a man. She'd been taught that men had no control over their baser instincts. Anything that a woman said, wore, or did could tempt a man to sin and it was a woman's responsibility to help him avoid sin.

Kaia had helped Tara understand that women were not responsible for men's desires. Men should learn to be responsible for their own actions and thoughts.

That message had resonated, but because Tara hadn't ever wanted to bring attention to herself, she'd always stuck with grey, brown, black, or dark green and, rarely, softer mauve colors. Anything that was muted helped her and her sister to blend in with the crowd and would help them escape if there was ever a need to run.

Pink. Tara bit her lip, more tempted than she would have expected.

Plus, the material was soft and of a better quality than she would be able to afford.

That wasn't quite true. Tara and Kaia had learned to save every penny of their income. They both had a large balance in a bank, readily available for an emergency.

Stepping back from the dress, Tara shook her head. "I can't!" she whispered to the silent room.

But when she looked over at the chair where she'd draped the brown dress she'd worn yesterday, it was gone. So were the panties and bra that she'd laundered by hand last night, then hung up to dry on a hanger. Biting her lip, she glanced at the pink dress again. She didn't really have a choice, she thought to herself, unconsciously smiling at the idea.

Pink. She'd never worn pink! And the undergarments were lacy and sexier than anything she'd ever dared to consider.

On impulse, she dropped the towel and pulled on the sexy underwear, then closed her eyes as she slipped into the pink dress.

When she'd finished pulling up the back zipper, Tara turned to face the mirror. She couldn't hide the shock at seeing the pink against her pale skin. Except, her skin was no longer pale. With the warm shade reflecting onto her skin, she looked less pale and more...shiny? Tara laughed at the adjective. No, not shiny but...happier! Yes, she looked happier! Her grumpiness from this morning evaporated, leaving the joyous feeling of looking pretty for once in her life.

Without hesitation, she searched under the cabinets, straightening with triumph when she found a hair dryer. Instead of pulling her hair back into the customary tight bun, she dried her hair so that it floated around her shoulders in a soft, brown cloud.

Wow, she looked dramatically different. She could definitely use a haircut since her hair hadn't seen a pair of scissors in a while, but that was fine. Her hair had also been protected, so it was healthier than it would have been if she'd been using heating tools on it.

She added a touch of lipstick and wished that she had some mascara. She and Kaia had occasionally worn makeup, but normally didn't bother with it because they hadn't wanted to spend money.

Turning away from the mirror, she slipped her feet into the matching shoes and walked out of the bedroom, a bit tenuous in the heels, but they weren't as difficult to walk in as she'd assumed. The suite that the palace guards had shown her to last night after Zayed had gone off consisted of a large sitting room, a kitchenette, and a bedroom. Other palace guests might think the suite small, but her entire apartment would have fit into the bathroom with room to spare. So, this was a palace compared to what she was used to.

Except that she wasn't used to sleeping in a palace. So, she was tired and in desperate need of coffee.

She entered her office and looked around, startled to notice that she was even earlier than normal. But Tara quickly settled into her work, ignoring the guards who stood outside of her office doorway as she prepared for Zayed's meetings.

Chapter 23

"She's in her office, Your Highness," one of his guards announced.

Zayed exhaled heavily under the strain of one final repetition with the fifty pound hand weight, then returned it to the metal rack. "Thank you," he replied and grabbed the towel off the weight bench, rubbing it over his face. Normally, he would work out for another thirty or forty minutes, but knowing that Tara was finally awake and in her office spurred him into the shower.

It took less than fifteen minutes to clean up and get ready for the day. He was too eager to see Tara.

“Has she eaten anything?” he asked one of his guards.

“No, Your Highness.”

Zayed shook his head in disapproval. “Call her and tell her to meet me in the breakfast room.”

“Your Highness,” another guard called out, lifting his hand while listening to his earpiece.

Zayed paused, waiting for the man to receive the information being conveyed. Then he nodded and looked up. “My apologies, Sire, but Sheik Abuzman has arrived.”

Zayed let out a string of epithets at the reminder of the summit he’d called for with his bastard neighbor. Running a hand through his hair, he tried to think, tried to figure out how to romance his pretty assistant while, at the same time, kick his neighbor’s ass for the unacceptable activities taking place on the border as well as the economic shenanigans Abuzman was initiating.

“Right. Tell Tara that—”

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“Tell me what?” the woman in question asked, stepping into the hallway with her ever-present notebook pressed to her chest.

Zayed took in her gorgeous figure draped in pink and he nearly groaned as the lust from last night came back at him, as powerfully as if he’d just kissed her.

“You left your hair down,” he commented stupidly. “Braided. I like it.”

Tara ran her fingers down the thick braid. He hadn’t realized how long her hair was. “I might need to put it up later if it gets in my way.”

He moved closer to her, towering over her slender figure as he noted how soft her green eyes looked while she wore the delicate color. “I like it.”

“You mentioned that,” she replied, her voice sounding breathless.

“It bears repeating.”

She smiled and he cursed when he noticed the matching pink of her cheeks.

“You can’t do that when we’re not alone, Tara,” he muttered softly. Taking her hand, he started to lead her down the hallway, only to come to a stop when he noticed a tall, dark haired man standing in the doorway with a cup of coffee in his hands. He looked smug with narrowed eyes, watching the interaction between himself and Tara.

“Right!” Tara hissed. “I was coming to tell you that Sheik Abuzman has arrived.” She glanced at the handsome man over her shoulder. “I suggested that he wait in the

dining room for you.”

Zayed muttered something under his breath and Tara suspected that it wasn't anything polite. She knew Arabic, but hadn't bothered to learn the naughty words. Still, his clenched jaw made her smile for some reason.

“Abuzman!” Zayed called out, walking over to the man with his hand extended. “Thank you for coming today. It seems that we have several issues to discuss.”

The man shifted the coffee cup in one hand and shook Zayed's with the other. He had a firm grip, which Zayed appreciated. That hadn't really been in doubt since the man stood as tall as he did. Zayed figured he had about twenty pounds of muscle on the bastard. But that didn't make Abuzman any less of a threat.

“It was such a pleasure to agree to your kind invitation,” the man replied smoothly.

Zayed understood the sarcasm in the words and couldn't help the chuckle. “It worked, didn't it?” referring to the challenge that had gotten him to agree to the negotiations.

“Only because I'm curious. We've never spoken face to face.”

“I figured that it was time to resolve some of our differences instead of lobbing diplomatic obstacles in each other's ways,” Zayed replied. “Why don't we have some breakfast and discuss the issues?”

Abuzman looked around. “You didn't invite your friends, Ramit and Falk?”

They moved into the dining room where a pretty new waitress stepped into the room to pour coffee. Zayed watched the woman, wondering why she looked so familiar. But the woman kept her eyes lowered as she expertly poured the steaming hot coffee

before stepping back to press her back against the wall. Zayed started to dismiss the woman, until he realized that his “friend” was staring at the waitress as well.

“Your plan to decrease the border agents is going to slow down the commercial trucking industry,” Zayed interjected, shoving a plate into Abuzman’s hands, hoping to distract him from the pretty waitress. “That’s going to increase the labor costs, which will, in turn, increase the cost of products to your people.”

Zayed looked around for Tara, wondering where she’d gone. She generally sat in on meetings like this one. Had something happened to her?

A moment later, the woman in question rushed in and perched on a chair near the wall.

“Tara, get some breakfast and join us,” Zayed commanded.

She hesitated, then stood up, looking confused and nervous. “I’m fine, Your Highness.”

Zayed’s eyes narrowed and he looked over at her again. Then something occurred to him. “Abuzman, I should introduce you to my fiancée, Ms. Tara Treon. She’s been...” He paused when he heard a gasp. Glancing over at the wall, the waitress who had been holding the coffee urn had vanished, the door to the kitchen swinging closed.

That was odd. But he ignored the disturbance and reached out a hand, waiting patiently until Tara put her cold fingers into his hand. Only then did he pull her forward. “Tara, this is...”

“I’m delighted to meet you, Ms. Treon,” the man replied. “Please, call me Riaz.” He glanced over at Zayed with an oddsmile to his features. “After all, I am here to figure

out how to work through the obstacles between our two countries, correct?”

He was right, but Zayed wasn't sure that he wanted Tara to be on familiar terms with the man. However, it seemed petty to object, especially over breakfast.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness,” Tara replied, adding a pretty curtsy. “However, the relationship between myself and Sheik el Mastrion has not yet been finalized.”

Zayed didn't like that. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her against his chest. “We have a few minor details to work out, but we'll be married very soon.”

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The other man eyed them carefully, then smiled. “I understand.”

“I’m sure that the two of you have several issues that you need to discuss,” Tara inserted. “In fact, I’ve made a list.” She slipped out of Zayed’s arms. “Your Highness,” she smiled prettily to the other man, “I know that our ambassador worked with your staff to come up with a list of topics that are important to both countries,” she started, pulling out two neatly typed pages, handing one to each of them. “I’ve met with your assistant, Sheik Abuzman, and we have the main conference room set up for these conversations.” She moved to the other side of the table, looking for coffee. The person who normally stood sentry by the buffet table, ready to pour the coffee, was missing. Tara was aware that there was some sort of virus going through the staff, so perhaps they were just short staffed.

Focusing back on the two men who were sitting down with full plates, she continued. “I also arranged for you to have some down time together.” She looked over at Zayed, triumph in her eyes as she added, “The stables have been informed, and are ready to saddle horses if you are up for a ride.”

“That sounds perfect,” the other man replied, sipping his brew.

Over eggs benedict and fresh fruit, Tara took notes on the conversation between the two men. Initially, it seemed as if Zayed and Riaz Abuzman were trying to be contentious. But as the two men debated the issues, both seemed to realize there weren’t as many obstacles towards a healthy, more positive relationship. Slowly, their discussion shifted to a more animated, productive exchange.

Tara tirelessly took notes, relieved that her coffee cup was constantly refilled. They

didn't move to the conference room where the other members of Abuzman's staff were waiting. Tara didn't dare interrupt the discussion since the two were making so much progress. Instead of arguing, the two powerful leaders pushed their chairs back and faced each other, tossing out ideas, discarding some and expanding on others. It was one of the most productive meetings Tara had ever sat in on since she'd started working in Pitra.

Chapter 24

"How about a game of pool?" Riaz suggested, his eyes sparkling with eagerness for the competition.

Zayed looked at the man, a slow, brutal smile forming. "I think that would be an excellent idea!" he replied, and even reached out to slap the man on the shoulder. He looked around for Tara, but didn't see her. "Where's Tara?" he asked one of his guards.

"She's in her office, Your Highness. She mentioned something about updating a database."

Zayed's mouth thinned, but he turned to face his opponent. "We'll dine with Tara tonight."

The other man nodded. "And the cute waitress?" he offered. "What's her name?"

They'd already turned to walk towards the billiards room but Zayed paused to look at Riaz. "Waitress? Which...?" He thought back, a cute, too-slender woman with dark, curly hair. "The one from breakfast this morning?"

"That's the one." They resumed their walk. "I found her intriguing." He looked at Zayed. "She seemed different from the other staff members. Where is she from? Do

you know?”

Zayed’s instincts were on high alert. The fact that they both had noticed the woman sounded alarm bells in his head. Once again, he stopped and looked at one of his guards. “Find the woman who was serving coffee this morning. I’d like to speak with her.”

The guard immediately conveyed the information through his microphone and everyone resumed walking.

“What about her caught your attention?” he asked of Riaz. Zayed wasn’t ready to think of Riaz as a friend. Not yet. But the man was very different from what he’d expected. The man had risen to power six years ago and had been a thorn in Pitra’s side ever since. Perhaps that irritation was mostly because the previous ruler, Riaz’s stepfather, hadn’t been an effective ruler. Riaz had sharpened the political climate, which had created a diplomatic distance between the countries.

That had been the wrong approach. Or maybe not. Perhaps their bitter irritation with each other over the past few years was needed for Bidar’s ruler to bring his country to a place where negotiations made sense.

However, now that Riaz had mentioned her, the woman in the breakfast room bothered him. But he wasn’t sure why.

Chapter 25

Tara’s fingers flew over the keyboard, entering the information from the morning’s long conversations to her database. She was so focused on typing, that she didn’t notice her office door closing until she heard the snick of the latch.

For a long moment, her terror wouldn’t allow her to turn towards the door. But

eventually, the dark blob in the corner of her eye warned her that she needed to look in that direction. From experience, Tara knew that it was better to be warned than to be surprised.

Slowly, Tara lifted her gaze to the person standing in the corner of her office. Whoever it was, they'd been hiding behind the door and, with the snick of the door, had locked her in here.

Was it Elijah? Or worse, had Ethan found her?

When her eyes focused on the smiling visage, she was so tense, it took her brain several moments to process the fact that it was her sister, Kaia, wearing a huge, excited smile.

"Kaia!" Tara gasped, then jumped to her feet, wrapping her sister in a tight hug. "Kaia, it's been so long!"

Kaia laughed, bouncing slightly as the sisters hugged and laughed and cried. "You completely missed seeing me earlier in the dining room," her sister admonished with a hearty laugh.

Tara pulled back, looking at her big sister more carefully. "Kaia, how did you get into the palace? And why are you here?"

Kaia flounced Tara's braid then stepped back, surveying Tara's appearance more thoroughly. "I love the dress!" she gasped with approval. "When did you start wearing flattering colors?"

Tara laughed. "Today. And I didn't decide. I haven't been back to my apartment since I got your message. These clothes were delivered to the room here in the palace where I stayed last night."

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Kaia's features turned serious and she held onto Tara's shoulders, looking deeply into her sister's eyes "This man, your fiancé, he's a good man? You love him?"

Tara's jaw dropped. "You...know about Zayed?"

Kaia's dark eyebrow flew upwards. "Seriously? You had no idea I was in the breakfast room this morning?"

Tara was stunned. "You were in the dining room?" she gasped. "For breakfast?" She blinked a moment, then continued, "That's how you know about my possible engagement!"

"Possible? The man speaking earlier today was pretty emphatic. And that made me feel a little better. I've seen Elijah. His sister and mother were arrested two days ago. That's when I saw him. They had been staying in your apartment. I saw Elijah standing on the far side of the road, hiding behind a tree, as the police led his sister and mother out of your apartment building in handcuffs."

Tara grimaced, her shoulders tight with tension. "I know. Zayed sent the police to arrest them."

Kaia turned contemplative, her green eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "So this Zayed man...heknows? He understands the danger you're in?"

Tara smiled, leaning against the corner of her desk. She folded her hands on her thighs as she nodded. "Yes. I've told him everything. He was pretty angry when I told him I was married but-

“You’re NOT married!” Kaia interjected emphatically.

She smiled gently, nodding. “I know that now. Zayed explained it to me.” She sighed, her back slumping with the relief that she felt every time she remembered the fact that she truly wasn’t married to Elijah. He was such a disgusting excuse of a man!

Kaia shifted, moving to lean against the desk next to Tara. She crossed her arms over her palace wait-staff uniform. “He’s right. We didn’t discuss your marital status while you were growing up because I didn’t know myself. And then I didn’t want to traumatize you by bringing up that ridiculous ‘wedding’.” She snorted, shaking her head so her dark curls danced around her shoulders. “That community isn’t a religious organization, Tara. The elders are just a bunch of pedophiles who manipulate people with religious words in order to justify their perversions.”

Tara smiled gently, reaching out to squeeze her sister’s shoulders affectionately. “I know, Kaia.” She grabbed her sister’s hands. “We’re safe here,” she whispered, tightening her grip. “Neither Elijah nor Ethan can get to us here.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Kaia replied with a grim tone. “There is a miserable virus traveling through the palace staff. While not fatal, the victims reportedly yearn for it to be during the approximately twenty-four hours they have it. Apparently, the virus is so bad, it’s taking the staff out of commission.”

“I’ve heard something along those lines, but I thought that the palace guards were keeping the staff home if there was even a hint of a problem.”

“They are,” Kaia confirmed. “But that also means that I was able to get a job with the palace fairly easily.”

“You’re...workinghere?” Tara gasped, her tension instantly on high alert. “You got into the palace legally?”

Kaia grinned, but there wasn't much amusement to her expression. "I interviewed two days ago and I was called last night and told to report for service this morning at five o'clock."

"That's...!"

"Not great," Kaia said, finishing Tara's sentence.

Tara rushed to the door, ripping it open. For a moment, she didn't see the bodyguards that Zayed had assigned to her protection. But then he came around the corner. "The staff..." she whispered through numb lips. Then she remembered all of the times she and Kaia had been discovered and her training kicked in. "The staff are getting sick. The man who has been after me might have gotten into the palace. I don't know for sure, but because of the stomach virus, the serving staff are too sick to report for service. The kitchen or serving division is bringing in temporary employees."

The guards immediately understood her worry. One of the guards was already muttering into the microphone hidden on his wrist.

"You'll need to come with me, Ms. Treon," the other guard stated, his arm extended as if he were trying to herd her in a specific direction.

"I'm not leaving without my sister!" Tara told the man.

The man's eyes shuttered and he shook his head. "We are ordered to protect you and..." He stopped, then realized what she'd just said. "How did your sister get into the palace?"

"That's what I just told you!" Tara replied impatiently, her fear of Elijah nearly overwhelming her. "Kaia is here," she said, then pointed behind her. But when Tara looked over her shoulder, Kaia wasn't there. There were no windows in Tara's office.

Was she behind her desk?

“Ms. Treon,” the bodyguard snapped, his voice more commanding this time. “I need you to come with me.”

“But...!”

“I will carry you if you don’t cooperate, Ms. Treon.”

Tara knew the man wasn’t bluffing. Still, she hesitated, unwilling to leave Kaia behind. How could she leave her sister when there was potential danger lurking nearby?

Before she could peer under her desk, Tara was literally lifted off her feet. She wasn’t tossed over the man’s shoulder, but close enough. Her feet just touched the floor, but there was a guard on each side of her and they carried her off down the hallway towards a more secure area of the palace. They didn’t stop until they were in the living quarters of the palace and, even then, they wanted her in the private suite where she’d slept last night.

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Tara didn't argue, even though the rough treatment made her hackles rise. She doubted Zayed's bodyguards treated him in the same manner! Then she smiled, crossing her arms over her stomach as she pictured Zayed's guards struggling to lift the man.

"Tara?" Zayed called out a moment after he burst into the suite. He looked her over carefully, obviously looking for damage. "Are you okay? I heard that the man you've been running from broke into the palace."

"Mighthave broken in," Tara clarified. "I don't know if Elijah is inside the palace. My sister got in after being hired by the palace wait staff manager."

Zayed looked around. "Your sister is here? I'd love to meet her."

Tara turned, unconsciously wringing her hands. She walked over to the window, then turned back to him. "I'd like to see her again as well, but she's gone."

"Gone? Where did she go?"

"I don't know. And worse, I don't know why she hid from me again."

"Why would she hide from you?"

Tara shook her head, closing her eyes again with a heavy sigh. When she opened them again, she explained, "Kaia wouldn't ever hide from me unless she knew that her presence near me was dangerous."

“Why do you say it like that?”

Tara smiled, but there was bitter sadness and resentment in her eyes. “Kaia was my savior, remember? She’s the one that snuck me out of Elijah’s bedroom on the night of the wedding ceremony. She’s the one that hid me away, hid both of us away, until she knew it was safe to move on to a new location.” She lifted her hand, shaking her head. “Don’t ask me how Kaia knew. She never told me how she did it. But I suspect that she uses technology these days to monitor Elijah and Ethan’s movements and conversations.”

“Good for her,” Zayed replied, sitting down. “So what’s next? Where will she go now that she knows you are safe?”

“I don’t know,” Tara replied, lacing her fingers together as she stood nervously in front of him. “But I...um...have a request of you.”

“Anything,” Zayed replied, leaning forward so that his elbows were braced on his knees. “Tell me and I will make it happen.”

Tara stood in front of the man that intrigued her more than any man ever had. But could she truly ask for this? Did she dare?

That’s when she remembered the card game last night. He hadn’t even tried to win. He’d wanted to kiss her just as much as she’d wanted to kiss him.

Tara straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and asked, “Would you...make love with me?”

Zayed stared at her for a long moment and she thought that he was going to reject her request. So before he could do that, she stepped forward. “It’s just that...well, if something happens and Elijah finds me, and if he discovers that I’m still a...” she

swallowed, hating to have to admit this next part to Zayed, "...if he somehow finds out that I'm still a virgin," good grief, she hated that word! It was such a ridiculous term! "He will force me back to his home and will take what he considers his rights as a husband." She was shaking now. She needed him to understand. Zayed had to grasp what she was telling him! "He will rape me, over and over. Then he will beat me, claiming that it's my just and righteous punishment, that his divine right commands that he discipline me with a whip or a cane, then he will rape me again." She was violently shaking now, images of Elijah's furious face flashing through her mind.

"He's not going to get to you," Zayed declared firmly, standing up and wrapping his arms around her. "I won't allow that to happen."

"But...if he does, I'd rather be safe from him." She buried her face against the warmth of his chest. "He won't rape me if I'm...no longer pure."

Zayed looked down at her, confusion and disgust in his eyes for a brief moment. But then his handsome features cleared. His touch gentled.

"Tara, I will make love to you, but not because you need to become a sullied woman." He tightened his arms around her when she started to pull away. "I will make love with you because I want to give you so much damn pleasure that you are wild with it. I want to make love with you so that you never think of this pedophile ever again. So that you think only of me."

"That's...!" she tried to speak, but the trembling was too intense.

He pulled away, but kept his hands on her waist. "You're scared. Will you tell me why?"

She shrugged, staring at his chest. "I could give you dozens of reasons."

“Do any of them include a fear of what might happen between us?”

Tara considered that question carefully. “Yes.” She felt him tense, but put a reassuring hand on his chest. “But not in the same way that I would be afraid of another man touching me.”

“Can you explain a bit more?”

Her fingers trembled as she pressed her hand against his chest. “You...the way you make me feel...is scary, Your...Zayed.”

“In what way?” he asked, his voice rough but his hands were gentle as they stroked her back.

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Was he trying to soothe or entice her? Tara wasn't sure, but she knew that his touch felt good. Very good!

"When you touch me....," she whispered, resting her hands lightly on his biceps as she savored the sensation of his hands moving over her back.

"What happens when I touch you, Tara?" he whispered as if he were telling her a secret. His lips were very close to her ears and she gasped when he nipped at the too-sensitive shell of her ear.

"You make..." she couldn't finish her explanation because his mouth had moved down to her neck. Tara moaned, leaning her head back to give him better access. Closing her eyes, she tried to remember the question.

"What do you feel when I do this?" he asked, scraping his teeth against her neck, then sucking lightly on the spot.

"Good!" she hissed, tilting her head again. Unconsciously, her hands moved along his arms, exploring the ridges and bulges of his arms through his shirt.

"You like that?"

"Yes!" Her hands moved higher, wanting to feel the heat of his bare skin. She was suddenly conscious of that part of him against her stomach and she pulled back. With curiosity, she looked down at his erection pressing against the charcoal colored slacks he wore. It was intriguing, but she blushed, realizing what that erection was all about.

“You can touch it, Tara,” he groaned, waiting patiently for her to do something.

She lifted her eyes up to his, curious and horrified at the same time. “I couldn’t!” she replied, pulling back further.

Zayed laughed softly and his arms gently pulled her back. But he took one of her hands and guided her fingers towards his erection. “You can. I want you to feel free to touch all of me.”

At first, Tara kept her fingers straight out, not sure how to touch him. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she whispered, still staring down at her hand as he pressed her palm against his throbbing hardness.

“The only way this could hurt is if you stopped,” he told her, his voice rough now. They both watched as her fingers slowly explored, her palm pressing lightly. Then she allowed her fingers to wrap around the length, but his slacks stopped her from exploring properly.

Quickly, he took her hand away, but he laced his fingers with hers. “Let’s do this in private.” He led her into a large bedroom with an enormous bed. Zayed dropped her hand and stepped back, quickly stripping off his shirt.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, but couldn’t stop from staring as every inch of skin, muscle and sinew was exposed.

“I’m letting you see all of me, Tara.” He leaned forward and gave her a kiss, a brush of his lips that lingered, gently coaxing a reaction from her. When her mouth opened just like last night, her tongue tentatively brushing against his, he groaned. But then she stepped closer, her hands touching his bare skin and he had to control himself, to stop his hands from pressing her back against the mattress.

Take it slow, he reminded himself. Slow and easy. Don't scare her. This was her first time and he had to show her that sex could be wonderful. He knew that a woman's first time wasn't always magical, but for Tara, he wanted it to be as close as possible.

"Touch me anywhere that sparks your curiosity, Tara," he encouraged, then kissed her again.

Unfortunately, he wasn't prepared for her delicate fingers to unzip his slacks. Her fumbling was so damn arousing that he almost roared with the lust her touch unleashed in him. Clenching his teeth, he pulled back, watching as she shoved the pants away and released his erection.

Not good enough, he thought and shoved his slacks and the boxers down, then stepped out of his clothing. When he stood up, Zayed was completely naked, standing before her and waiting for whatever interested her.

Those pretty fingers curled around his shaft, stroking, exploring, and driving him wild with her tentative brushes. Tara's fingers had magic in them, every touch of her fingertips was intoxicating!

"Tara!" he groaned, leaning his forehead against hers. "I need to see you. Will you let me?"

She hesitated for barely a moment before nodding her head. Then she stepped back, her jaw clenching as if she were preparing herself for a firing squad.

"You've enjoyed everything we've done so far, right?" he asked, sliding his hands around her waist.

"Yes," she admitted freely. "It's been...better than I'd anticipated."

“What were you preparing for a moment ago?”

“Pain,” she admitted without hesitation. “The women used to gossip about how much they hated doing...this.”

“Sex, Tara.” He lifted her fingers to his lips, nipping on the palm of her hand. “Say it.”

“No!” she blurted out, then laughed nervously.

“By the end of this night, you’re going to say the words.”

She shook her head. “Probably not.”

His lips hovered just over hers as he said, “You’ve just given me another goal.” Then he kissed her. His mouth devoured hers, enticing her to participate and, when she did, his tongue mated with hers, showing her exactly what their bodies could do for each other. All the while, his hands were pulling down the hidden zipper of her dress and letting it fall to the floor. As much as Zayed wanted to survey her soft curves in the lacy bits of nothing that he’d selected this morning, he also wanted to show her that sex and intimacy weren’t to be feared. He wanted to demonstrate that this kind of activity could be fun and passionate. And definitely not painful.

When her dress was off, he lifted her into his arms, then carefully set her down in the middle of her bed, shifting her braid out of the way. With deft fingers, he tugged on the band that held her hair back, then sifted his fingers through her silky locks. When she moaned, he continued, using the sounds from her to guide his hands.

But after several strokes of her hair, he couldn’t ignore the allure of her breasts. Looking down, he noticed that the pink lace perfectly cupped her breasts, but the nipples peeked out just over the top of that lace, making his mouth water to taste those perfect peaks.

When his mouth moved over her nipples, his tongue teasing, his teeth nipping, she arched against his mouth while her hands moved from clutching the bed covers, to tangling in his hair. Zayed enjoyed the way she tugged at his hair, adding a bit of spice to the moment. But he wasn’t ready to be pulled away from those breasts. They were perfect! The small nipples were puckered, silently begging him to suckle them. And when he did, she cried out, her legs sliding against his hips and providing a

perfect space for his own hips to enjoy.

Zayed absorbed her gasp of surprise into his mouth as he shifted against her, pressing his abdomen against that sensitive nub. He could feel her reaction to the movement, so he did it again. And again. Slowly, he felt her hips move in time to his and after only moments, she cried out with surprise. While his mouth teased her nipples, he continued to shift against that nub, needing to hear that cry again.

“Zayed!” she gasped, her hips lifting with almost frantic desperation.

But that wasn’t enough. He wanted to give her more than just lust. He wanted her to experience the bliss of making love.

So he moved lower, kissing his way down her stomach, smelling her arousal. The scent was intoxicating! Honing in on that scent, he moved even lower, shifting her legs so that his shoulders fit between her thighs.

With her spread out before him like this, he could see everything. The glistening folds of her arousal was beyond enticing. Licking his way inward from her inner thigh to that pink heaven, he enjoyed her soft sighs and her growing excitement. When his mouth finally covered that nub, he slipped a finger into her body, stroking her from within while his tongue did the same to the external nub. He brought Tara closer to that pinnacle and....just when he was about to pull away, she cried out, her inner muscles clenching tightly around his finger and he felt a surge of lust so overwhelming, he could barely see straight as he felt her climax for the first time.

After soothing her back down, he reached into the pocket of his slacks to grab protection. Since Tara hadn’t ever considered having sex with a man before, he was certain that she wasn’t on contraception. Rolling the condom down over his shaft, he watched as Tara came back to the present. Her soft lips curled into a completely satisfied smile and he groaned, his erection becoming even harder at the sight.

“That was...better than expected,” Tara commented.

Zayed moved over her, bracing his hands on either side of her head. “It’s not over yet,” he warned her. With one hand, he reached down and lifted her knee up so that her hips were once again cradling his body.

“This is going to hurt, isn’t it?” she whispered, her eyes wide with fear now.

“No, it’s not going to hurt because you’re going to guide me into your body so that I know how deep to go.” He moved his hand down over her outer thigh, soothing her with soft caresses designed to ease her nervousness. “You’re in charge, Tara. Just show me what your body tells you it needs.”

He placed both of her hands on his hips. “Remember, you’re in charge. If you want to stop, we stop. Understand?” he asked, his voice a husky tone now.

“Yes.I understand.”

“Good.” He nodded, clenching his jaw tightly as he pressed just the tip of his shaft into her heat. Before she could worry, he pulled away, waiting for her hands to guide him. When he felt her pulling him closer, he eased into her slick folds again. This time, she urged him a bit deeper and he nearly lost his mind at the tight fit of her body as it clenched around his erection.

“More,” she whispered, staring dreamily into his eyes. The worry seemed to be gone, but there were still soft tremors in her legs. She lifted her hips this time, inviting him deeper still. But then her fingers pushed him out. What she didn’t realize was that she was stroking just the tip of his shaft...the most sensitive part of him.

This time, she took him deeper. It was Zayed who pulled out, then moved slowly into her sheath again, deeper this time.

It took several minutes of this before he came to the evidence of her virginity. Since he'd never been with a virgin before, he wasn't exactly sure how to break through. And he knew that was going to hurt her. He'd give anything to stop that from happening. Cradling her as gently as possible, he looked down into her eyes. "This is it, Tara. Are you sure?"

"Yes!" she whispered, bringing her legs up higher. "Do it!"

He pressed deeper into her heat and...he was fully embedded into her body. Zayed stilled, waiting for her shock to dissipate. Her smile came faster than he would have anticipated. And it was lovelier than he could have imagined!

"That wasn't nearly as bad as I'd been told," she announced in an awed whisper. She wiggled her hips, completely unaware of how good that felt for him. "I like this!"

Zayed threw his head back, trying to regain a bit of control. The way she was squirming, he could climax immediately! But he wanted this to be good for her. He wanted to give her all the pleasure in the world. So he forced himself to pull back, then thrust deeply into her heat. Again and again, he thrust into her, holding back his pleasure as he watched her face light up with surprise, then excitement. Then frustration. He knew what was happening and reached down between their bodies. They were slick with sweat now. He pressed his thumb against that nub and continued to thrust into her. Within moments, Tara cried out, shuddering with another climax as she clung to him. And that was all it took for him to release his control and bury himself in her heat, roaring with the release of his orgasm as he drained into her tight, beautiful body.

Chapter 26

A long time later, Zayed lifted his head up and looked down at Tara. There was a smile on her face that...hell, seeing her satisfied expression made his body start to

harden all over again.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered into her ear, then kissed her cheek and walked into the bathroom. That’s when he noticed that the condom had broken. Looking down at the prophylactic, his mind froze at the possible repercussions. Then he thought of Tara, ripe and joyful with their child, and his tension dissipated. No, he didn’t want to pressure Tara into having children right away. But nor would he mind if that happened. He’d love to marry her and have a dozen children with her!

Okay, perhaps not a dozen. Four. Maybe five.

He’d have to ask her how many children she wanted. Since she’d bear the burden of carrying their children, Tara had to make the final decision.

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Grabbing a washcloth, he cleaned up himself, then rinsed out another cloth with warm water, bringing it back to the bed. He smiled as he watched Tara pull the bed covers up over her nakedness. Did she not realize that he'd seen every part of her? And wanted to do it all over again?

She'd understand that very soon, he thought and kissed the tops of her breasts. "Open your legs,habibi."

Her startled expression caused him to chuckle. "Open my...why?"

"Because the condom broke. It was an accident, but you might feel a bit sticky soon. I'm going to clean you up."

She reached for the cloth, shaking her head. "I can do that. You don't need to bother yourself."

"Not a bother," he replied, pulling the rapidly cooling cloth out of her reach. "We won't have any secrets between us, Tara. Open your legs and be bold. Don't be ashamed of anything between us."

She laughed. "Oh, I have a lot of secrets, Zayed," she told him, and grinned triumphantly when she plucked the cloth out of his fingers. She reached under the sheet and wiped between her legs, but Zayed wasn't having any kind of shyness between them. He easily pulled the sheet away and he watched as she finished wiping the stickiness away. She dropped the cloth onto the floor beside the bed. "I'll take care of that later."

“Much later,” he commented, pulling her into his arms. “How do you feel?”

Tara tilted her head slightly, considering her answer. “I feel good, actually. I remember the women talking about how badly they ached the day after any sort of intercourse. But I feel...!” She took a deep breath, then laughed. “I feel incredible!”

“Good,” he replied, laughing with her as he pulled her onto his chest. “Now perhaps we can explore some variations on the same theme.” He let his hands move over her thighs, his thumbs pausing at the juncture of her thighs. He heard her sharp intake of breath and chuckled as he let his eyes move over her naked body. “You’re absolutely beautiful, Tara. You know that, don’t you?”

“I don’t know any such thing,” she countered, but smiled as she lowered herself to plant a kiss in the middle of his chest.

He was just about to shift her body when a knock sounded on the door.

Tara almost laughed when she saw his irritation. She couldn’t blame him since she was thinking the same thing.

Then she gasped, remembering the man who Zayed had personally invited to the palace for talks. “Sheik Abuzman!” she hissed.

They stared at each other for a stunned moment, then Zayed muttered a series of curses and they both jumped out of bed. “He’s going to be furious with me for forgetting our meeting,” Zayed replied in an amused whisper.

“Surely the guards explained that there was a security threat inside the palace, right?” she asked as she rushed into the bathroom and flipped on the water. Tara didn’t bother to shampoo her hair, but instead washed off the scent of lovemaking and jumped out again, grabbing a towel. She glanced behind her and couldn’t stop from

appreciating the impressive physique as Zayed rushed as well to dry off and pull on clean clothes.

But Tara lifted the pink dress up, surveying the damage caused by the dress laying in a pile on the floor for...she wasn't even sure what time it was.

Zayed came out of a dressing room, quickly buttoning a shirt. He'd already pulled on a pair of slacks and looked magnificent! He must have noticed the wrinkles in the soft, wool dress and smiled. "You should have more clothes in the dressing area of the room you slept in last night."

"Didn't sleep," she grumbled, and pulled the dress on anyway. She'd have to wear something to get to the other suite, even if it was obviously wrinkled.

Zayed paused, one hand on the doorknob. "What was that?"

Tara was busy running her fingers through her hair, searching the floor and the bedclothes for the band so she could pull her hair back into a neat braid. "Nothing," she replied, wiggling her free hand in the air. "Go! Give your almost-friend a good enough story about why you'd abandoned him."

Zayed remained, watching Tara for a long moment, then he simply smiled and left the bedroom.

Tara finally found the band and restrained her hair, then pulled the sheets and comforter back to a semblance of tidiness. It wasn't as neat as the palace staff would do, but it was the best she could accomplish at the moment.

Tara hurried down the hallway, her bodyguards more obvious now, to the other suite. At the doorway, she paused and looked at the three men. "I'll just be a moment. I need to change my dress and I'll be back out."

Tara knew Zayed never explained his activities to his guards. In fact, they were trained to react to anything he might do. But she just couldn't leave the men standing outside waiting on her. So she gave them a friendly wave, then rushed into the suite. Zayed said that there were outfits in her suite, and she desperately hoped that one of her old dresses was available. She needed clean underwear as well. As sexy and comfortable as the bits of lace were, she always put clean panties on after a shower.

But when she walked into the dressing room, she couldn't find her old, dull dresses. Instead, there was a complete rainbow of clothing available for her to choose from. The array of clothes was so stunning, so overwhelming, she wasn't sure what to do. How did one choose a single outfit when presented with so many options?

"Where have you been?" a female voice hissed.

Tara spun around and nearly jumped out of her skin when she spotted Kaia sneaking out from behind her clothes.

"You're safe!" Tara gasped, rushing over to hug her sister. When she pulled back, Tara looked in her sister's eyes. "Where do you go? Where did you hide earlier today?"

"It doesn't matter," Kaia replied, staring into Tara's eyes. "Elijah is here in the capital city. I've seen him three times now."

“He’s here? Are you sure?”

Kaia gave her a look that spoke volumes. Tara sighed, nodding her head. “You’re right, of course. In fact, Beth Ann and Nora were arrested a couple of days ago. So, I know that Elijah is here. Either him or Ethan.”

Kaia visibly shuddered at the other man’s name. But she recovered quickly, grabbing Tara’s hand. “It’s Elijah. But he is just as dangerous as Ethan. Besides, Elijah has much more to lose if he doesn’t return to Kentucky with you. The elders haven’t allowed him to marry anyone since you escaped.”

Tara stared at her sister in stunned horror. “That’s crazy! Why not?”

Kaia sighed and pushed her dark curls behind her ear. “Tara, we don’t have time for this.”

“When did you pierce your nose?” Tara asked, distracted by the silver ring on her nostril. Normally, Tara wasn’t fond of nose piercings, but she had to admit that Kaia looked sexy with the sparkly ring.

“It’s actually not pierced,” Kaia replied, then demonstrated by pulling it off. “It’s just another disguise for me. I’ve been trying to get inside the palace to help you escape for the past week.” She huffed a bit. “This place is tough!”

“But you did it,” Tara replied with a chuckle. “And your presence here has put the guards on high alert.”

“I still have a way out. Come on.”

Tara thought about that for a long moment. But in her mind, she pictured Zayed and the way he'd looked at her several minutes ago. He hadn't looked at her as if she were a burden. He'd held her in his arms as if she were...a lover. Did he love her? She wasn't sure, but he had proposed to her.

But her sister was already tugging her out the door. “I can't leave!” Tara hissed, tugging on Kaia's hand. She placed her fingers over her sister's grip, gentling the ferocious beauty. “Kaia, I can't leave Zayed.”

Kaia's green eyes widened and Tara was once again amazed at how beautiful her sister was. She was wild, beautiful, and incredibly intelligent. The fact that her sister was here, inside the palace, was proof of her brilliance.

“What do you mean? Of course you can leave!” She looked at Tara with horror. “Does this man have something on you? I know that he's powerful, but the research I did on the man made me think that he's fair.”

“He's wonderful, Kaia. He's one of the most amazing people I've ever known.” She smiled gently at her sister. “Except for you. You saved me from a nightmarish life and I'll never forget you. But Kaia, Zayed is a good man.”

Kaia's eyes turned angry. “He's aman, Tara. You can never trust a man!”

“I always thought that men were untrustworthy as well, until I met Zayed.” She gestured to the padded bench in the middle of the closet. They both sat down, Kaia reluctantly. “You got me this job and I've loved it. Every moment while I've been here in Pitra has been...a beautiful challenge.”

Kaia grinned. “I suspected that you would be perfect for the job. Plus, I've gotten to

know the man over the past couple of years.” She smiled, thinking of all the things she knew about him. “He’s a good man, Kaia.”

“I don’t trust him.” Her sister was stubborn, which was one of the reasons she’d gotten them to this point.

Tara covered her sister’s hands with her own. “Kaia, you’ve done a wonderful job of protecting me. Why don’t you let me take over the role for a while?”

Kaia laughed. “Tara, it’s my job as your big sister to watch out for you.” She leaned forward, a teasing glint in her eyes. “And my instincts are telling me that we need to move, now!”

“But we don’t!” Tara insisted, with identical urgency. “Kaia, Zayed heard that I was in danger and moved me into the palace.” She tightened her hands over her sister’s grip. “You could move in here as well. He will protect you!”

Kaia stared at Tara for a long, stunned moment, shaking her head, unaware of the way her curls danced around her face. “You’re in love with him!” she gasped.

Tara opened her mouth to argue, but the denial wouldn’t come.

Kaia gasped and stood up, backing away from Tara. “You fell in love with the man and now you’re just going to stay here and let him control you?” She shook her head again, pacing the large area, the thick carpeting softening her sister’s footsteps. “You fell in love with a man!” She said the last words with a sneer of disgust.

“I...!” Tara replied, not sure what to say. It was true. She was madly in love with Zayed!

“Tara, how many times have I told you that men are abusive, horrible bastards?” she

hissed, coming over to kneel in front of Tara. “They don’t have the ability to love anyone but themselves! The men we grew up with, Ethan Howell specifically, doesn’t have the capacity to love. He takes bible verses and twists them around to suit his pedophile desires. And how many times has he threatened to whip you?”

Tara’s eyes filled with tears. She reached out, cupping Kaia’s cheek. “How many times did he whip you?” she whispered, her voice a mere croak as she suddenly realized what her big sister had gone through. Kaia’s eyes filled and she shook her head, but Tara could see the truth in her eyes. “How many times, Kaia?” Tara demanded. Her fury was barely contained now. “I know that Ethan and the other husbands and elders would whip girls and women whenever we didn’t follow their rules.” She let her thumb move over Kaia’s cheek. “How many times?”

Kaia stood up, backing away as she angrily wiped the tears from her eyes. “It wasn’t just when we disobeyed!” she whispered.

Tara stood up as well, reaching for her sister’s hands. “Tell me!” she pleaded. “I need to know how many times he beat you!” She clenched her jaw, trying to control the rage. “Because I’m going to find him and I’m going to beat him twice as many times as he hurt you!”

“I think I would like to help,” a deep, masculine voice broke in.

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Both women turned to discover not just Zayed standing in the doorway, but the other man. Sheik Abuzman's tall, powerful body blocked the rest of the world from entering the closet and he was currently staring at Kaia with an oddly stunned expression.

Tara stepped protectively in front of her sister. "We were having a private conversation," she said to Zayed, ignoring the other man.

Zayed stepped closer, his eyes bright and equally confusing. "You love me." He stepped even closer, reaching out and taking her hands. "You never said the words, but you love me. Your sister could see it in your eyes."

Zayed's arm whipped out, wrapping around Tara's waist and pulling her in closer. "Tell me!"

Tara balanced herself with a hand to his chest...or maybe she just enjoyed touching him. Still, she couldn't admit anything.

"Zayed, you just broke off your engagement to Princess Ciara a couple of weeks ago."

"I never loved her," he countered. "We were engaged for ten years so that Ciara could avoid other men." He lowered his head so that he could look directly into her eyes. "We were just friends. We were betrothed when we were too young to know any better and we remained betrothed because it was convenient." He kissed her softly. The caress was just a brush of his lips, but she felt the sensation all the way down to her toes. "I love you, Tara. I've always loved you. Ever since you first ordered me into a meeting, admonishing me for being late and making people wait, I

fell in love with you.”

Her mouth fell open at this admission. “You love me?” she whispered, shifting even closer to him. “But...how?”

Zayed chuckled. “Tara, you’re so brainwashed from your childhood trauma that you can’t see that not all men are like the warped bastards from your past.” He lowered his head and kissed her again. “I’m not like the man that tried to rape you as a child. I vow right here and right now to protect you, to cherish every moment with you. I will never put you into a role that you don’t want. If you want to work, then you will do whatever job you wish to do.” He pulled her closer, burying his face against her neck. “For two years, I’ve dreamed about making love to you and earlier today...you finally let me!” he whispered into her ear. “I promise to show you every decadent, naughty activity that you can imagine. You won’t be held to an impossible standard. And I won’t ever beat you if you do something that threatens me. I promise you this!”

That was all she needed to hear. Tara lifted up onto her toes and kissed him, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I promise to love you better than any woman ever could! I will make you so happy!”

“You already do, love!” he told her. And then he kissed her deeply. Tara inhaled as he pulled her more firmly against his tall, muscular body, reveling in the delight of his kiss.

However, after only a few moments, the clearing of someone’s throat interrupted their moment.

Tara looked around, but noticed that Zayed kept her close with his arm around her waist.

“Go away,” he growled, barely glancing over his shoulder.

The laughter brought Tara's gaze towards the man still standing in the doorway. Why was Sheik Abuzman still here?

"If I might offer a solution?" the man offered.

Zayed sighed and turned, but kept his arm around Tara. "What?"

The man's dark eyes zeroed in on Kaia. Tara glanced over her shoulder and noticed that her sister was glaring up at the man, but...was there a softness about her mouth? Or maybe...interest?

"Marry Tara immediately," Sheik Abuzman suggested. "Marry her today and protect her from this maniac who thinks to steal her away." He looked over at Kaia. "Your sister and I will act as witnesses. After the wedding, I will sneak Kaia out of the country, take her back to Bidar with me." He looked back at Zayed. "I will protect Ms. Treon, then you and I will both send contingents to Kentucky to apprehend the men who might still want to capture either sister."

Zayed looked down at Tara, an unspoken question in his eyes now. She only nodded slowly and his grin widened. "I think that's a perfect plan. I've had my men out in the city looking for this Elijah person, but so far, he has eluded my officers."

"He can't hide for forever." Tara peeked around Zayed's shoulders. "They don't have a lot of money."

"He will stay hidden for as long as it takes to find you, Tara," Kaia replied. She crossed her arms.

"He'll eventually run out of money. He doesn't have a lot to begin with."

Kaia shook her head. "Ethan controls all of the money in the community, Tara.

Everyone brings their crops and their products to him. He's told everyone that he will sell the products at market price, but no one knows how much money he receives for the grain and corn crops, or the livestock that were sold at market. Everyone just trusts the bastard to be fair. But that man parses out money to each member of the community so that they remain loyal only to him. Everyone is completely dependent on him and the money he allows them to have. And you can bet that he uses that money to strictly control everyone."

"That's...so awful!" Tara gasped suddenly realizing that Kaia was right. There wasn't any real need for money in the village because...well, because Ethan controlled the grocery store and everything else. Wow!

"Is that true?" she whispered, stunned by the man's audacity and control.

Kaia lifted an eyebrow at her sister's outrage. "You are talking about a man who marries children off to old lecherous men. A man who enjoys beating women and children. And when he isn't doing the actual beating, he enjoys watching other people beat anyone who steps out of line. He doesn't think that people should be beaten in order to keep them loyal to his divine being, Tara," she spat out. "He encourages the beatings because he likes watching. He enjoys seeing the blood."

"He's a monster!" Sheik Abuzman hissed.

Kaia glanced at him and Tara noticed her sister blush. She tried to feign indifference, but Tara knew her sister too well. She was intrigued. Tara doubted that Kaia would ever relent enough to appreciate the man's positive qualities. And now, Tara understood why. Kaia had been physically and psychologically beaten by Ethan far more times than she'd realized.

"I think that's a good plan," Zayed replied, his voice firm and he looked down at Tara. "What do you think? You have the deciding vote. Will you marry me? Today?"

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Tara knew she should pause and really consider the offer of marriage. But she couldn't wait any longer.

“Yes!” she gasped. Then she laughed as she was enveloped by strong arms, Zayed peppering her neck with kisses as she closed her eyes, savoring the moment.

Chapter 27

Married. Tara turned and gazed up at Zayed. She was...married! Dear heaven, she was married to this wondrous man!

“Hello, wife!” he teased, obviously seeing the surprise in her green eyes. He lowered his head and kissed her. This time, it wasn't just a brief kiss. This time, he slowly eased her into the kiss, taking his time for a more thorough caress. His strong arms held her securely against his hard body as he nipped and teased and kissed her until she was completely lost in the moment.

Only then did he lift his head and nod approvingly. “Say it,” he grumbled.

Tara wasn't sure what he meant, but she beamed and said the only thing on her mind. “I love you.”

He growled, his eyes heating with desire. “Close enough.”

Tara laughed and he pulled her closer. Leaning her head against Zayed's shoulder, she turned to her sister. Somehow, a white, silk dress had appeared, carried by a palace staff member. It wasn't a wedding dress, but it was perfect. Tara wasn't one to

enjoy being in the spotlight, so this small, delightfully romantic wedding was exactly what she would have wanted. The speed with which it had taken place was truly a testament to the efficiency of the staff. They'd had mere hours to put together the flowers and someone to officiate the ceremony.

"Congratulations," Kaia announced. Tara laughed, feeling giddy as her sister hugged her close. "If you ever need me, you know the code," Kaia whispered in Tara's ear.

Tara tightened her arms around her sister's slender frame, then pulled back. "I know the code. And the same in return, big sis!"

Kaia wiped a tear from her cheek. The palace had found a lavender dress with a ruffled neckline and pretty, matching heels. Kaia had pulled a double strand of pearls and pearl stud earrings from a backpack which were the perfect match for the lavender ensemble. Kaia had never looked more lovely!

"Congratulations," Sheik Abuzman said, bending to give Tara a gentle hug. "Now that you are here, I believe that Pitra and Bidar can have a much more productive and positive interchange of goods."

Tara laughed when she heard Zayed growling behind her. "That's very kind of you, Sheik Abuzman."

"Please, call me Riaz." He glanced over his shoulder at Kaia, then back at Tara with a mysterious look in those dark eyes. "I have a feeling that we will become very well acquainted with each other over the coming years."

A split second later, she was pulled back into her new husband's arms.

"She's not a negotiating tool," he snapped.

“Of course not,” Riaz replied. “However, her presence means that Pitra is in much more capable hands.” He winked at Tara. “And I like her. I’d like to see more of her.” He then looked at Zayed. “So that means we’re going to have to become friends.” He offered a teasing grin at Kaia who simply glared in return.

“Let’s eat!” Zayed announced, giving the other man a mock glare before he extended his elbow to his new wife. “Hopefully, it’s not poisoned.”

Riaz threw back his head, laughing at the taunt. Then he offered his arm to Kaia. Tara wasn’t so smitten with her new husband that she didn’t notice Kaia hesitate before accepting the proffered arm. The quartet moved into the small dining room where a beautiful dinner was laid out. The room had been decorated with pink roses and candles. As soon as they stepped into the room, a waiter arrived with sparkling glasses of champagne.

Zayed waited until everyone had a glass, then he lifted his and said, “To my new wife!”

Kaia and Riaz cheered, then delicately clinked glasses and sipped the delicious champagne.

Another waiter arrived bearing a tray with sumptuous appetizers. The man bowed low, offering the tray in one hand with a stack of napkins in the other.

“Oh!” Tara started, surprised at the awkwardness of the waiter’s movements. “Thank you.” Carefully, she selected one of the small bites, but she had no idea what it was. She suspected that the cracker had salmon and something else, but she wasn’t particularly hungry for food. After yesterday’s introduction to the delights of the bedroom, Tara wanted nothing more than to disappear with her new husband and explore more. In fact, she was looking forward to exploring this man and all of the sexual possibilities in detail!

She looked up at Zayed and nearly choked on the bite of...whatever. She could see desire equal to her own in his eyes.

Tara was just about to say something, anything, to ease the sexual tension that suddenly made her feel hot and constricted. But before she could speak, her arm was wrenched behind her. The pain in her shoulder was unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

“What...?”

Then a knife was placed against her neck. She smelled the man before she recognized his voice.

“Stay back, or I'll kill her!” Elijah announced. He pressed the knife against her neck and Tara felt a pinprick of pain. Obviously, he'd broken the skin, but she kept her features bland, unwilling to give this subhuman any indication that he'd hurt her.

“Tara!” Kaia gasped, dropping her glass of champagne to the floor. It shattered, but no one moved.

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“This is my disobedient wife!” Elijah explained in a sneering tone. “You are a bigamist! The divine creator will have you burn in hell for stealing my woman from me!” He turned to Kaia, his grin widening. “Ethan has special plans for you, girlie! You’ve infuriated him to the point where he must bring you back into the fold of our community. Just as I will do to Tara, we must bring you back and teach you the right path!”

Elijah started moving backwards, still pressing the knife against Tara’s throat. Kaia stepped forward, but Riaz wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her back. He whispered something in her ear, and as Tara watched, Kaia seemed to relax. Of course, Kaia never fully relaxed. Tara’s sister was always tense, always on the lookout for danger.

So the fact that Kaia had allowed herself to be held back instead of breaking the man’s arm, told Tara that help was close by. She wasn’t going to have to leave with Elijah.

With her hands still gripping Elijah’s forearm, she released one hand and let it drop to her side. Then she watched Kaia, waiting for her signal. Two more steps and Tara saw it. The short nod was barely discernable. But Tara saw it. And she reacted immediately!

The yelp of pain echoed in her ear, but Tara was careful not to let it distract her. In fact, she tightened her grip around Elijah’s testicles, even twisting to increase the pain. As she continued to grip the man’s balls, she turned, not surprised to find two of Zayed’s body guards less than a foot away.

They both moved quickly, securing Elijah's arms behind his back. Tara heard something snap, but wasn't sure if the sound was caused by breaking bone or torn cartridge. If Elijah was lucky, the bodyguards had merely dislocated his shoulder.

However, Tara didn't release her grip. She didn't care that Elijah was secured with handcuffs and pain. She kicked him in his already injured groin. The man curled into the fetal position on the floor, no longer yelling. Apparently, the pain from Tara's kick had stolen his voice.

Before she could take another breath, Tara was scooped into Zayed's arms and carried to the far side of the dining room. Tara shifted so that she could watch as the guards lifted Elijah onto his feet. The man couldn't hold his weight, but the guards didn't care. They picked him up by his arms and dragged him out of the dining room, away from Tara and Kaia.

There was a long silence after the guards had departed with their prisoner. Tara was shaking, shocked by the scene. But there was an enormous surge of relief. She hadn't realized how worried she'd been over the past few days, wondering where the bastard was, waiting for Elijah to find her.

"Well, that was a surprise!" Kaia said, her voice completely deadpan.

Tara glanced over at her sister, then she burst out laughing. Slowly, Zayed lowered her feet back to the floor, but didn't release her and Tara didn't move out of the circle of his arms. A moment later, everyone was laughing.

Several hours later, Tara stepped into the extremely large bedroom that she hadn't really explored the first time she'd been in here. But for some reason, she felt more nervous than the last time.

"What's wrong?" Zayed asked, taking her hands and leading her away from the bed.

Tara glanced over her shoulder, surprised at their direction. “I don’t know,” she told him honestly.

“You’re nervous,” he stated, sitting down in an overstuffed chair, then pulled her onto his lap. “Talk to me, Tara. You’ve always been so confident about work issues. It’s just the personal stuff that gets you confused.”

She looked down at his hand resting on her knee and remembered the moment several days ago when her hand had rested on his knee. She’d been so curious then.

“Tara?”

She lifted her gaze from his hand, looking into his eyes. “I don’t understand why I’m so nervous.”

“I love you, Tara,” he told her, his voice velvety with sincerity. “Since the moment you walked into my life, I can’t remember a moment when I didn’t love you.”

That warmed her heart in ways she couldn’t put into words. Twisting, she cupped his face with her hands. “I love you, Zayed,” she whispered back. “Not because you saved me from that horrible creature. But because you are a good, kind, compassionate man, who genuinely tries to make the lives of your people better.” She kissed him softly. “That’s not been my experience. The men I’ve known have been self-centered, manipulating people and systems so that they gain more power and more money.”

He covered her hand with one of his own. “You never have to worry about anything again. I’m going to take care of you, Tara.”

She smiled gently. “I’m going to take care of you as well.”

He chuckled. "I will enjoy your efforts."

She cocked an eyebrow. "You don't think I can?"

His hand stroked her knee. "Tara, I want to spoil you and make you so deliriously happy that you'll never want for anything ever again. I want to make up for all the pain you've endured in your life."

She kissed him sweetly then. Not because of his promise, but because of his sincerity. No, she couldn't spoil him with material things. But she could spoil this man with her love and affection.

That kiss was a lingering, gentle caress. It was the first time she'd initiated a kiss and she wanted to explore, to experiment. And he let her. Zayed didn't move while she kissed his lips, remembering how he'd nibbled on her lips and she mimicked that movement, smiling when he groaned. She felt his hand tighten on her knee and blinked. "Are you holding back for some reason, Zayed?" she whispered and kissed him before he could reply.

His answer was to leap up from the chair, lifting her with an arm under her knees and behind her back. Gently, Zayed laid her on the bed, then braced his hands on either side of her, looking at her from her head all the way down to her toes still enclosed in shimmering heels.

"I think I want to see you in nothing but those shoes," he murmured, pushing away from the bed and lifting one leg as he examined her heel. "How in the world did they fit so many little rhinestones on one shoe?"

She laughed, feeling silly, but his playful examination of her shoe helped her relax. "I have no idea, but they are surprisingly comfortable."

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“They make your legs look incredible,” he replied, sliding the chiffon wedding dress higher. He then proceeded to examine her legs. “Nice.” He moved higher, causing Tara to gasp when he exposed her upper thigh and the material tickled her bare skin. “Very nice.”

His voice was grumbly now as he lowered her leg and stepped back. Within moments, he was completely naked, the suit that he’d worn for their wedding in a crumpled mess on the floor with no concern for the tailor who had created such a masterpiece.

Tara had pushed herself up onto her elbows, watching as all of those delicious muscles came into view.

“Nice,” she whispered, then licked her lips as he tossed his slacks over the pile. “Very nice.”

“Are you mocking me, wife?” he teased, coming back to loom over her.

Tara gasped, shocked by how much she wanted to touch him.

“Never,” she replied, her breath catching in her throat as she waited tensely for him to lower himself down over her. When he merely waited, Tara whimpered. “Why aren’t you touching me?”

“Because I want you to set the pace,” he told her.

Tara blinked, confused. “What do I do?”

“Anything you want,” he replied with complete seriousness.

She stared at his naked body for several more moments, remembering all of the lessons she’d been taught in her youth. In that moment, she decided that she needed to do the opposite of everything she’d learned. The only way to have a happy, healthy relationship with this man was to follow her instincts. And her instincts were telling her that she wanted to enjoy sex and not be ashamed of her needs. So instead of retreating into herself, she took a breath and blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.

“I want to touch you, Zayed,” she told him. She didn’t wait for permission as she’d been taught all those years ago. Instead, she raised her hands and let her fingertips slide slowly over his chest, exploring, testing, and enjoying this kind of freedom. His body was fascinating and she wanted to know everything about him.

Zayed growled at her touch, then rolled so he was flat on his back while Tara straddled his hips. “Is this better?” he asked, grabbing handfuls of her dress and pushing it out of the way.

“Yes,” she replied, ignoring his struggles with her dress as she let her fingertips move more freely over his chest, arms, and abdomen. She felt his erection throb against her bottom and shifted, moving so that she was awkwardly straddling his thighs. With frustration, she shoved the chiffon out of her way since it was covering the very part of him that she most wanted to see.

“How about if we dispense with the dress?” he asked, sitting up. He deftly found the zipper and, with a swish, pulled it all the way down, releasing the tension that held the bodice against her chest.

For a terrified moment, Tara grasped the material, holding it in place. But when Zayed didn’t immediately grab handfuls of the chiffon to pull it off her, she felt more

comfortable. Slowly, she lifted the diaphanous material over her head. Zayed took over, his longer arms able to free her.

With a sigh, she released the material to him, and he gave the piece of art that was her wedding dress the same treatment as his formal attire. Tara might have protested, but his hands, now free of white chiffon, returned to cup her breasts.

“I like this,” he rasped, his thumbs coming to slide over her nipples, encased in silver mesh. “I like this a lot!”

Tara let out a sound that might have been a laugh or a sigh. She wasn’t sure, and with her eyes closed, she couldn’t really think. Not when his fingers kept doing that to...! The heat was a shock and her eyes flew open. Looking down, Tara realized that his mouth had covered her nipple and it felt...divine! Instantly, she wrapped her arms around his neck, grinding her hips against him. “More!” she whispered.

So he lightly bit down on that puckered tip. The sensations were instant and shocking! And oh so good! “I like that,” she told him, biting her lip as she shifted her body, silently pleading with him to do the same to her other breast. And of course, Zayed obliged. Enthusiastically.

“I thought I was going to be allowed to explore,” she gasped.

He laughed, then leaned back down. “Explore away,” he replied, then groaned when she immediately leaned down to tease his nipple. His hands dove into her hair, displacing the pins that had been holding her locks in place. The dark tresses tumbled down over Tara’s shoulders, but she ignored it, determined to get to know her husband’s body.

When she moved from his nipples to his stomach, Tara couldn’t stop touching the ridges and lines. Every part of him was fascinating. But her true goal was that part of

him that still slightly terrified her, but also intrigued her.

“Growing up, women were taught to fear this part of men,” she whispered, then wrapped her hand around his shaft, watching intently. “We were told that it was our responsibility to be demure, so that men wouldn’t be overcome with lust and hurt us.” She rubbed her thumb over the top, exploring the ridge. “We were told that men couldn’t control themselves if we tempted them too much.” She looked up to find him watching her. “That was all a lie, wasn’t it?”

He groaned, covering her hands with his to show her how he liked to be touched. “Men can control their lust if they want to, Tara,” he explained. “I love when you touch me like this.” He took her thumb, showing her how to touch the place right under the ridge, stroking it gently. His chest was heaving with his breaths and Tara took control, stroking him the way he’d just showed her. He groaned again, letting his hands move to her thighs.

Then he shook his head and pulled her hands away. “I need to...” he hissed and sat up again. Before she understood what he was going to do, Zayed had lifted her up so that her thighs framed his head.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked, flattening her hands against the wall. Before he could reply, he’d torn away the pretty panties she’d been wearing. She started to protest, however, his finger...no, his tongue, was there, licking her aching core.

Tara gasped again, then moaned when he pulled her closer. Everything after that was instinct. She shifted her hips, silently showing him what felt best. “There!” she hissed. “Right there!”

Without conscious thought, her hips moved, shifted, angled so that his mouth and his tongue hit that spot exactly as she needed it. Before long, she cried out, her body shuddering as that beautiful pleasure washed over her.

The world seemed to fly around her, but when Tara opened her eyes, she realized that she was now on her back and Zayed was looming over her. She was barely able to realize that he was rolling protection down over his shaft, then she felt him pressing into her. After the last time, Tara now knew what would come and she grabbed his hips, pulling him in closer, deeper. She lifted her legs, angling her hips so that he could reach even deeper.

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“Like that!” he groaned, then started thrusting. His movements were long and deep and every time he filled her up, Tara gasped at how perfect it felt. When he started to get closer, his thumb moved and she pressed her hand against his, showing him what she needed just as he’d done for her earlier.

It took only a few more thrusts before Tara gasped, arching her back as her body throbbed with another climax. And her inner muscles clenching around him took him over the edge with her. Zayed stilled for a moment, then he thrust once, twice and called out her name as his orgasm consumed him as well.

A long time later, Tara shifted, opening her eyes to realize that he’d been watching her this whole time. “Thank you,” she whispered, her smile widening. “That was...perfect.”

Zayed chuckled, still deeply connected with her as he stroked her back. “You’re beautiful, Tara.” He kissed her deeply. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Epilogue

“No! No, you cannot bring your pony in for show and tell!” Tara exclaimed to her three year old son, waddling over to perch on the dining room chair.

Zayed entered the dining room, heading straight for his wife. “Trouble in paradise?” he asked, bending to kiss her lightly before walking to the other side of the breakfast table.

“Just a minor disagreement, of sorts,” Tara replied, resting her hand over her swollen belly. “Kayan wants to bring his pony in to his classroom today to show his tutor. Apparently, they are studying the animal kingdom this week.”

Zayed bend down to kiss his son’s chubby cheek and ruffle his dark hair. “No ponies inside, son,” he told him and sat down next to Tara. “How do you feel?” he asked.

“Fat,” she grumbled and shifted again, trying to get comfortable. “I’m more than ready for this bundle of joy,” the last word laden with a heavy dose of sarcasm, “to be born.”

Zayed lifted his son onto his lap. “This is one of the benefits of being a man,” he told his son as they both admired Tara’s huge belly. “Being pregnant is a lot of work!”

Kayan nodded, his eyes big and round. “Is there really a baby in her belly?” he asked, leaning against his father’s chest. “It doesn’t look like a baby.”

Zayed chuckled and kissed the top of his head. “There is definitely a baby, hopefully, a baby girl, in her belly. And she is going to be born any day now.”

There was a moan from the other side of the table. “I don’t care if it’s a boy or a girl,” Tara grumbled, lifting her cup of herbal tea. “I just want to not be pregnant any longer.”

Kayan tilted his head. “But, I thought that you liked being a momma,” he asked.

Tara’s cup froze an inch from her mouth. Kayan was thinking about the five or six month point in her pregnancy. That was when she’d still been able to walk easily and she’d had a voracious sexual appetite. She’d seriously worn Zayed out during those heavenly weeks, feeling alive and healthy and sexy!

“She does,” Zayed explained cautiously, winking at Tara. She snorted as she sipped her tea and Zayed continued to explain. “See, the baby grows slowly inside momma’s tummy. Remember how she was really sick all the time?”

Kayan nodded, his little lips forming an O. “Yeah.”

“Well, then the baby grew more, and she didn’t throw up anymore.”

“Yeah?” he said, more hopeful now and he twisted his head to look up at his dad. “And now?”

Zayed gulped down his coffee. “Now, the baby is bigger and it’s more uncomfortable.”

“When is the baby going to come out?” he asked, taking Zayed’s tie and sliding his fingers over it.

“That’s the special part,” Zayed started to say, but the rattle of Tara’s porcelain cup warned him that something was very wrong.

“Umm...!” she gasped, feeling a hard slash of pain across her abdomen. “Wow!”

“Tara?” Zayed called out. Immediately, one of his son’s bodyguards moved forward. His nanny appeared too, taking his hand.

“Daddy?” Kayan called out, a hint of nervousness in his voice.

Zayed took a moment to bend down on one knee, coming to near eye level with his son. “Kayan, I think that your baby sibling is ready to come into the world. But don’t worry. It’s going to be okay. Will you go with your nanny for a bit? I’ll come and get you with news, okay?”

Kayan looked over at his mother, then relaxed when she smiled at him. “You okay, Momma?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, her voice only slightly tighter as her little boy watched. “Why don’t you build me a huge castle with your toy blocks?”

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The idea of building something definitely caught his attention. “Yeah!” he said, taking his nanny’s hand. “I could build a new home for my baby brother!”

The nanny replied, obviously saying something to encourage Kayan to follow her out of the dining room.

Only when the door was closed behind her son, would Tara let loose a groan of pain.

“Zayed! This is bad!” she gasped, huffing air. “Bad and fast!”

“It’s going to be okay!” Zayed assured her, grateful when one of the bodyguards appeared with a wheelchair. “I’m going to take you to the doctor now, okay?”

Her only response was a pained whimper as Zayed picked her up and carefully set her down in the wheelchair. Moments later, they were hurrying down the long hallway towards the delivery room set up in the palace.

Ten hours later, Tara gasped with the last ounce of her energy, screaming as she pushed.

“Almost there!” the doctor called out. “I see the head.”

The nurses were rushing around the room, but Tara was beyond noticing anything other than the pain ripping her apart. She pushed, needing this to end.

“I see the shoulders!” the doctor called out. “One more push and this will all be over!”

Tara wanted to hit the woman! She'd been pushing for hours now. She didn't want to push any longer. But her little baby was nearly here.

"Just one more push, Your Highness!"

Even after all these years, Tara still wasn't used to the title. But she ignored it and gathered her last of her strength. Looking to Zayed, he squeezed her hand. "You can do it," he assured her.

Tara had learned several expletives while living with Zayed. And this moment seemed like the perfect time to use every one of them at him. How dare he tell her that she could "do it" when she'd been trying to "do it" this whole time!

But the urge to push overwhelmed her and she gathered all of her strength for one final push. Squeezing Zayed's hand with all her might, she pushed and...!

"It's a girl!" the doctor announced. "A healthy baby girl with ten toes and ten fingers!"

Tara gasped, leaning back against the delivery table, exhausted.

It might have been moments, or an hour, Tara wasn't sure. But finally, a tiny bundle was placed in her arms. Tara stared down at the squinched, red face of her brand new daughter and, suddenly, all the pain of the past hours faded away.

"She's perfect!" Tara sighed, still exhausted but also, somehow revived.

"A girl!" Zayed breathed, beaming down at her tiny face.

An unexpected noise alerted both parents that something was happening. Tara, Zayed and the entire medical team turned in unison as the door to the delivery room was pushed open by...!

“Momma! My pony wants to meet my sister!” Kayan announced, leading the animal through the doors.

Immediately, the medical staff, horrified at the possibility of an unsanitary farm animal coming into the room, jumped into action.

Even Zayed raced over, stopping Kayan from bringing the pony into the delivery room.

But Tara just laughed, holding her precious daughter close as she reveled in how wonderful her life had become. Ponies and all.