

ABBY GREEN

Secrets of the Oasis

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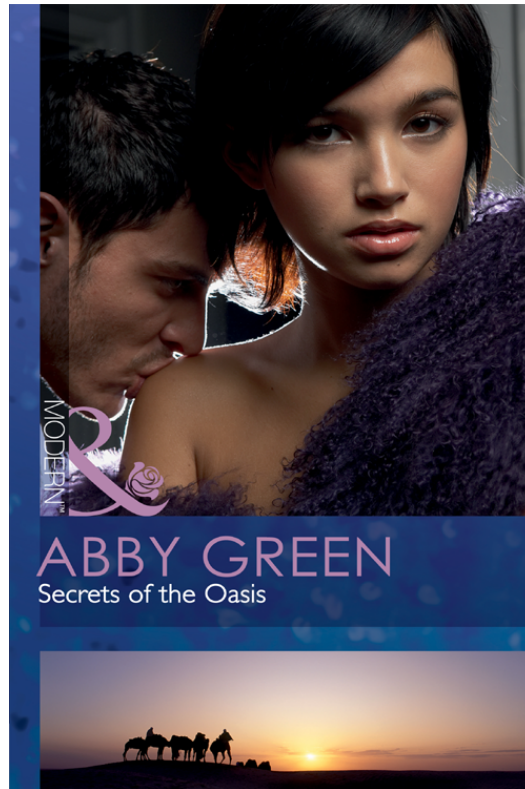
Shocking secrets of the sands! When she gave herself to Sheikh Salman in Paris five years ago, Jamilah Moreau fantasised about wedding dresses and happy endings. But Salman was driven by desire, not diamond solitaires... Now, Sheikh of a desert kingdom, Salman can have anything he wants – and, as Jamilah discovers when he spirits her off to a desert oasis, it's still her! However, time has wrought changes, and their lovemaking is no longer enough... Something happened back in Paris that had everlasting consequences for both of them...

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‘Are you sure you really want to know, Jamilah?’

She faced him and could see the intense glitter of his eyes, the way a muscle pulsed in his jaw. Slowly, as if she might scare him off, she nodded her head. ‘Yes, I want to know, Salman.’

Salman looked into Jamilah’s eyes. He had a bizarre sensation of drowning, while at the same time clinging onto a life raft. Did he really think that he was about to divulge to her what no one else knew? His deepest darkest shame? Yet in that instant he knew an overwhelming need to unburden himself to her. It could never be with anyone else. He saw that now, as clear as day.

About the Author

ABBY GREEN got hooked on Mills & Boon® Romances while still in her teens, when she stumbled across one belonging to her grandmother, in the west of Ireland. After many years of reading them voraciously, she sat down one day and gave it a go herself. Happily, after a few failed attempts, Mills & Boon bought her first manuscript.

Abby works freelance in the film and TV industry, but thankfully the four a.m. starts and the stresses of dealing with recalcitrant actors are becoming more and more infrequent, leaving her more time to write!

She loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her through her website at www.abby-green.com She lives and works in Dublin.

SECRETS OF
THE OASIS
ABBY GREEN



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PROLOGUE

A SIX-YEAR-OLD girl stands at a graveside, on her own. Her face is deathly pale, her blue eyes huge and shimmering with unshed tears, her hair a sleek waterfall of black down to her waist. A dark, handsome boy, Salman, detaches himself from the larger group and comes over to take her hand.

He looks at her solemnly, too solemn for his twelve years. 'Don't cry, Jamilah, you have to be strong now.'

She just looks at him. His parents died in the same plane crash as hers. If he can be strong, so can she. She blinks back the tears and nods briefly, once, and doesn't take her eyes off him even when he looks away to where his own parents have just been buried. Their hands stay tightly clasped together.

CHAPTER ONE

Six years ago, Paris.

JAMILAH MOREAU had to restrain herself from turning her walk into a light-hearted skip as she walked up the French boulevard with the Eiffel Tower in the distance. She grimaced at herself. It was such a cliché but it was Paris, it was springtime, and she was in love. She wanted to throw her bags of shopping in the air and laugh out loud, and turn her face up to the blossoms floating lazily to the ground from the trees.

She wanted to hug everyone. She forced back an irrepressible grin. She'd always thought people over-exaggerated Paris's romantic allure, but now she knew why. You had to be in love to get it. No wonder her French father and Merkazadi mother had fallen in love here—how could they not have?

She was unaware of the admiring looks her jet-black hair, exotic olive-skinned colouring and startlingly blue eyes drew from people passing by—both men and women. Her heart was beating so fast with excitement that she knew she had to calm herself. But all she felt like doing was shouting out to the world with arms wide: *I'm in love with Salman al Saqr and he loves me, too!*

At that thought, though, her step faltered slightly and her conscience pricked. He hadn't actually *said* he loved her. Not even when she'd told him she loved him that morning, as they'd lain in bed, when Jamilah had felt as if she'd expire with happiness and sensual satedness. She couldn't have held it back any longer. The words had been trembling on her lips for days.

Three weeks. That was all it had been since she'd literally bumped into Salman in the street, when she'd emerged from the university where she'd just finished her final exams. She'd practically grown up with him, but hadn't seen him in a few years, and a seismic reaction had washed through her at seeing the object of her lifelong crush. As darkly handsome as he'd ever been, and even more so. Because now he was a man. Tall, broad, and powerful.

His hands had wrapped around her arms to steady her, and he'd been about to let her go, with a thrillingly appreciative gleam in his dark gaze, when suddenly those black brows had drawn together, his eyes had narrowed and he'd snapped out disbelievingly, '*Jamilah?*' She'd nodded, her heart thumping and a hot blush rising up through her body. She'd fantasised about him looking at her like that for so long...

They'd gone for a coffee. When they'd stood in the street afterwards she'd been about to walk away, feeling as though her heart was being torn from her chest, when Salman had stopped her and said quickly, 'Wait...have dinner with me tonight?'

And that had been the start of the most magical three weeks of her life. She'd said yes quickly. Too quickly. Jamilah grimaced again as a dose of reality hit. She should have been more cool, more sophisticated...but it would have been impossible after years of idolising him from afar—a childhood crush which had developed into teenage obsession and now adult longing.

That first weekend Salman had taken her back to his apartment and made love to her for the first time ... and even now a deep flowing heat invaded her lower body, making her blush as X-rated images flooded her mind.

She shook her head to dispel the images, kept walking. She was on her way to his apartment now, to cook him dinner. Her conscience struck again. Salman hadn't actually invited her over this evening—in fact he'd been unusually quiet that morning. But Jamilah was confident that when he saw her, saw the delicious supplies she'd bought, he'd smile that sexy, crooked smile and open his door wide.

As she waited to cross the busy road across from his imposing eighteenth-century apartment building she thought of the instances when she'd seen an intense darkness pervade Salman—whenever she mentioned Merkazad, where they were both from, or his older brother Sheikh Nadim, ruler of Merkazad.

Salman had always had an innate darkness, but it had never intimidated Jamilah. From as far back as she could remember she'd felt an affinity with him, and had never questioned the fact that he was a loner and didn't seem to share the social ease of his older brother. But in the past few weeks Jamilah had quickly learnt to avoid talking of Nadim or Merkazad.

She was due to return to Merkazad in a week's time, but she was going to tell Salman tonight that if he wanted her to stay in Paris she would. It wasn't what she'd planned at all, but the anatomy of her world had changed utterly since she'd met him again.

She arrived at the ornate door of Salman's building, where he lived on the top floor in a stunning open-plan apartment. The concierge started to greet her warmly when she came in, but then a look flashed over his face and he said, *'Excusez-moi, mademoiselle, but is the Sheikh expecting you this evening?'*

Hearing Salman being described as 'the Sheikh' gave Jamilah a little jolt; she'd almost forgotten about his status as next in line to be ruler of Merkazad after Nadim. Merkazad was a small independent sheikhdom within the bigger country of Al-Omar on the Arabian peninsula. It had been her mother's home and birthplace, where Jamilah had been brought up after her birth in Paris. Her French father had worked for Salman's father as an advisor.

Jamilah smiled widely and held up the bulging bags of shopping. 'I'm cooking dinner.'

The concierge smiled back, but he looked a little uncomfortable, and a shiver of unease went down Jamilah's spine for no good reason as the lift ascended. When it came to a smooth halt and the doors opened the trickle of unease got stronger. Salman's door was partially open, and she heard a deep-throated, very feminine chuckle just as she pushed it open fully.

It took a few seconds for the scene in front of her to register. Salman was standing with his head bent, about to kiss a very beautiful red-haired woman who was twined around him like a climbing vine. Jamilah suddenly felt stupidly self-conscious in her student uniform of jeans and T-shirt.

Their mouths met, and Salman's hands were on the woman's slender waist as he hauled her closer. Exactly the way he had done with Jamilah. She must have made a sound or something—it was only afterwards that she'd realised that was the moment she'd dropped the shopping.

Salman broke off the kiss and looked round. But, Jamilah noted, he didn't take his hands off the woman, who was now looking at her, too, her beautiful green eyes flashing at the interruption.

Jamilah barely registered Salman's thick dark unruly hair, which had always curled a touch too near his collar, or his intensely dark flashing eyes, which she'd always thought held a universe of shadows and secrets. The hard line of his jaw, and his exquisitely sculpted cheekbones which somehow didn't diminish the harsh masculinity of his face, were all peripheral to her shock.

Numb with that shock, and a million and one other things all at once, Jamilah just stood stupidly and watched Salman say something low and succinct to the woman, who gave a little moue of displeasure before she stepped back and picked up her bag and coat.

She brushed past Jamilah on her way out, trailing a noxious cloud of perfume behind her, and said huskily, *'Je te voir plus tard, cheri.'*

See you later, darling.

The door closed behind Jamilah and reaction started to set in. Salman faced her now, hands on narrow hips, dressed in a dark suit, crisp shirt and tie. It was the first time she'd seen him dressed so formally, and it made him look austere. She knew that he was an investment banker, but he'd never really discussed it. She realised now he'd never really discussed anything personal with her—just seduced her to within an inch of her life.

Jamilah could feel a trembling starting up in her legs, but before she could speak Salman said curtly, 'I didn't expect to see you this evening. We made no arrangement.'

They'd made no arrangement to turn her life upside down in the space of three weeks, either! Jamilah's numb brain was trying to equate this distant stranger with the man who had made love to her less than twelve hours before. The same man who had whispered words of endearment in her

ears as he'd thrust so deeply inside her that she'd arched her back and gasped out loud, raking her nails down his back to his buttocks.

She fought to block the images and felt like crying. 'I...wanted to surprise you. I was going to cook dinner...'

Jamilah looked down then, to see carnage. Broken eggs seeped all over the parquet floor. A bottle of wine, which thankfully hadn't broken, lolled on its side. She looked up again jerkily when Salman said, 'You can't just wander in here when you feel like it, Jamilah.'

A muscle ticking in his jaw showed his displeasure. And, from a depth she'd not known she had, a self-preserving instinct kicked in. Jamilah hitched up her chin minutely, even as her world started to crumble around her.

'Of course I wouldn't have come if I'd known that you would be...*busy*.' And then she couldn't help asking. 'Were you...?' A poison-tipped arrow pierced her heart. 'Were you seeing *her* while you were seeing me?'

Salman shook his head briefly, abruptly. Impatiently. 'No.'

Jamilah said through numb lips, 'Clearly, though, you're seeing her *now*. Evidently you've already grown bored. Three weeks must be your limit.'

She was aware of the raw pain throbbing through her voice. She couldn't hold it back. Not for the life of her. All she could think of was how she'd bared her heart and soul to this man in the early dawn hours. She'd said hesitantly, huskily, '*I love you, Salman. I think I've always loved you.*'

He'd smiled his lopsided smile and said, 'Don't be ridiculous. You barely know me.'

Jamilah had been fierce. 'I've known you all my life, Salman...and I know that I love you.' And that was when he'd pulled back and become monosyllabic. She could see it now, clear as day.

Salman asked now, with fatal softness, 'Just what exactly were you expecting, Jamilah?'

Jamilah shut her emotions away. 'Nothing. It would have been stupid of me to expect anything, wouldn't it? You're already moving on. Were you even going to tell me?'

Salman's mouth thinned. 'What's to tell? We've had an enjoyable fling. In one week you're going back to Merkazad, and, yes, of course I'll be moving on.'

Jamilah felt herself recoil inwardly, as if from a blow. This man had been her first lover...to call what had happened between them a *fling* reduced every moment to a travesty. Reduced the gift of her innocence that she'd given him to nothing.

Salman frowned and took a step closer. 'You *are* going back to Merkazad, aren't you?' He cursed under his breath—an Arabic curse that Jamilah had only heard in the souks of Merkazad amongst men—and said harshly, 'You didn't seriously expect anything more, did you?'

Her face must have been giving her away spectacularly, despite her best efforts, because then he said, with chilling devastation, 'I never promised you anything. I never gave you any hint to expect anything more, did I?'

She shook her head on auto-pilot. No, he hadn't. The utter devastation of his words sank in somewhere deep and vulnerable. It took all of Jamilah's strength just to stay standing. He couldn't know how much he was hurting her. She'd played with fire and she was getting burnt by a master. Every day had been heady, magical, but at no point had Salman made a plan anything more than twenty-four hours in advance. Now she just wanted to leave and curl up into a ball, far away, where she could curse her own naivety. But she couldn't move.

Salman watched the woman before him. He'd cut himself off from any kind of emotion so long ago that he almost didn't recognise it now, as it struggled to break through. An aching pain constricted his chest, but he ruthlessly pushed it down. For the past three weeks he'd indulged in a haze of unreality, in believing that perhaps he wasn't as damned as he'd always believed. Bumping into Jamilah, seeing her again—seeing how utterly beautiful she'd become—had broken something open inside him. He'd had the gall to think for a second that some of her innately pure goodness could rub off on him.

When he'd seen Jamilah cross the street minutes before, a huge grin on her face, he'd realised that she'd meant what she'd said that morning—she *was* in love with him. He'd tried to block her words out all day, tried to reassure himself that she hadn't meant it...tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling of guilt and responsibility.

He'd felt in that moment as he'd watched her approach his apartment as if he was holding a tiny, delicate butterfly in his hands, which he could not fail to crush—even if he wanted to protect its fragile beauty.

Eloise, his colleague, who had followed him up to his apartment on the flimsy pretext of getting a document, had come on to him at that exact moment, her brash, over-confident sexuality in direct contrast to the subtle sensuality of the woman approaching his apartment. In that moment he'd known he had to let Jamilah go. so comprehensively that she would be left in no doubt that it was over. So when his concierge had confirmed that Jamilah was indeed coming up, he'd felt something shut down inside him. He would crush the butterfly to pieces. Because he had no choice—had nothing to offer other than a battered soul riven with dark secrets. He could not love.

For a long moment Salman said nothing, just looked at Jamilah until she felt dizzy. Perhaps she'd imagined the awful scene? His frosty manner? *That woman* ... For a second she thought she saw something like regret in his eyes, but then Salman finally spoke, and he stuck the knife in so deep that Jamilah felt her heart slice in two.

'I knew you were coming up. The concierge warned me.' He shrugged, and she knew in that moment what real cruelty looked like. 'I could have stopped myself from kissing Eloise, but I figured what was the point? Better that you find out now the kind of person I am.'

He twisted the knife.

'This never should have happened. It was weak of me to seduce you.'

Immediately Jamilah read between those words: what he meant was it had been all too *easy* to seduce her.

'You should leave. I imagine you have plenty to prepare for going back to Merkazad.' His mouth was a thin line now. 'Believe me, Jamilah, I'm not the kind of man who can give you what you want. I'm dark and twisted inside—not a knight in shining armour who will whisk you away into a romantic dream. This is over. I'll be taking Eloise out tonight and getting on with my life. I suggest that you do the same.'

Numb all over, Jamilah said threadily, 'I thought we were friends ... I thought...'

'What?' he said harshly. 'That just because we grew up in the same place and spent time together we would be friends for life?'

Something inside Jamilah wasn't obeying her mental command to just shut up. 'It was more than that. What we had was different. You spoke to me, spent time with me when you wouldn't with anyone else. This last three weeks...I thought what we'd always shared had grown into something...'

A look of forbidding cold bleakness crossed Salman's face, and finally Jamilah curbed her tongue, wondering why on earth she was laying herself bare like this.

'You followed me around like a besotted puppy dog for years and I never had the heart to tell you to leave me alone. This last three weeks was about lust, pure and simple. You've grown into a beautiful woman and I desired you. Nothing more, nothing less.'

That was it. Whatever feelings Jamilah might have harboured for Salman over the years froze and withered to dust inside her. He'd also destroyed any halcyon memories she'd had of a bond between them. She forced words out through the excruciating pain. 'You don't need to say any more. I get the message. Whatever heart you may have once had is clearly gone. You're nothing but a cold bastard.'

'Yes, I am,' Salman agreed, with an indefinable edge to his voice.

Jamilah finally managed to move, and turned round to go, stepping out of the destruction of the fallen shopping around her. She couldn't even attempt to pick it up.

At the door she heard Salman say, with cynicism ringing in his voice, ‘Say hello to my beloved brother and Merkazad for me. I don’t intend seeing either any time soon.’

Or you. He didn’t have to say the words. They hung in the air. Jamilah opened the door and walked out, and didn’t look back once.

One year ago.

The Sultan of Al-Omar’s birthday celebrations were as lavish as ever. They were taking place in the stunning Hussein Palace, which was in the heart of the glittering metropolis of B’harani, right on the coast of the Arabian peninsula, about two hours drive from mountainous Merkazad.

One of the Sultan’s aides had been pursuing Jamilah on and off for years, and she’d finally relented and agreed to come to the party as his date. Her belly clenched now, because she had to acknowledge that the main motivation behind her decision to come was because Salman was going to be there.

Each year the tabloids across the globe exulted in reporting feverishly on which A-list beauty he’d decided to take as his new mistress. He never came to the party with anyone, but he always left with someone.

Her date had left her side for a moment in the thronged ballroom. It was the first night of celebrations which were meant to be for family and close friends only, but approximately two hundred people milled about the room.

Jamilah’s skin prickled, and she cursed herself for her rash decision. She’d taken it because in all the years since she’d last seen Salman in Paris she hadn’t been able to get him out of her head, and she’d started having dreams again. Dreams of when she was six years old and standing at her parents’ grave, when Salman had come to take her hand and infused her with a strength so palpable she’d never forgotten it.

She knew it was ridiculous, but she’d fallen in love with him at that moment. And even though she’d long since disabused herself of the notion that that childish love had grown and developed into something deeper, she couldn’t help her heart clenching at the evocative memory.

She cringed inwardly now when she thought of how her teenage years had been lifted out of the doldrums every time Salman had made a visit home from school in the UK, and she, tongue-tied and blushing, had been reduced to a puddle of hormones. But then his visits had become more and more infrequent, until he’d stopping coming home at all, turning her world lacklustre and dull.

She didn’t have to be reminded of how Salman had regarded her lovesick attentions. It was bad enough that her motivation for going to Paris to study had had as much to do with the fact that Salman lived there than because it had always been her father’s wish that she study in his home city. And she’d paid heavily for that decision.

Bitterness flooded her.

The dreams were the last straw. She couldn’t go on like this, so she’d hoped that if she came to the party, if she saw Salman living the debauched lifestyle of the notorious playboy Sheikh that he was, he’d disgust her and she’d be able to move on. At least enough to feel some measure of closure.

She’d imagined greeting Salman with a look of practised surprise, a tiny smile of recognition. Not a hint of the emotional turmoil she’d suffered these past years would show on her face or in her eyes. She’d ask him how he was, while affecting a look of mild boredom, and then, with a perfunctory platitude, she’d drift away and that would be it. She would be over him. And he would be left in no doubt that their brief affair meant nothing to her at all.

Except it hadn’t happened like that. As she’d been leaving her room she’d looked up from her bag, distracted, to see a tall, dark, broad figure in a tuxedo ahead of her. She’d nearly called out, because she’d thought it was his brother, Nadim. They shared the same height and build. But then she’d realised her mistake and it had been too late as a sound emerged from her mouth.

She’d had a first fleeting impression of him, cutting a lonely, solitary figure, and then he’d turned round with a frown on his face which had only grown more marked as he’d registered who

she was. Jamilah had been too shocked and stunned at being faced with him like that in an empty corridor to say anything.

He'd rocked back on his heels, hands in the pockets of his trousers, and whatever fleeting hint of vulnerability she might have sensed about him had been smashed to pieces as his gaze had dropped down her body with lazy, sensual appraisal. 'Jamilah...we finally meet again. I was wondering if you'd been avoiding me.'

His deep, drawling voice had impacted upon her somewhere deep and visceral, and for one awful moment Jamilah had been transported back in time to that devastating evening in Paris, in his apartment. She'd given up any hope of sticking to the script she'd perfected in her head. With an iron will, she'd struggled to regain composure and sent up silent thanks for the armour of a designer dress and make-up. She'd forced herself to move, stride forward, fully intending to walk past him, but he'd caught her arm and the feel of his hand on her bare skin had caused her to stumble.

She'd looked up at him, and her treacherous heart had beat fast—too fast. 'Don't be ridiculous, Salman. Why on earth would I be avoiding you?'

An inner voice answered: *Because he broke your heart into tiny pieces and you've never forgotten it.*

Jamilah noticed then that faint grooves were worn into the brackets of his mouth. His eyes were hard—far harder than she remembered them being.

'Because I've never seen you at the Sultan's party before.'

Jamilah wrenched her arm free. 'This isn't exactly my scene. And, not that it's any of your business, I decided to come tonight because I was invited by—'

'Ah, Jamilah, there you are. I was just coming to collect you.'

With a rolling wave of relief, Jamilah saw her date approach. She let him come and put a proprietorial arm around her shoulder, for once not minding the way men seemed to find it impossible not to stake their claim. And with a few words of muttered incoherency to Salman she let herself be led away, leaving Salman behind.

Now she stood amongst the throng that had gathered after the sumptuous dinner—a dinner Jamilah had had to force down her throat—horribly aware of Salman's intense and assessing gaze from across the table.

To her utter relief, at that moment she spotted Sheikh Nadim and his date, an Irish girl called Iseult, who had come to work in Nadim's stables after he'd bought out her family's stud farm in Ireland.

Jamilah went to join them, and she could see their concerned looks as they took in her pale features. She felt light-headed. And then Iseult confirmed it by asking, 'Jamilah, what is it?'

Jamilah smiled tightly. 'Nothing at all.'

But Jamilah could feel whatever blood was left in her face drain southward when she saw Salman approach with narrowed eyes. No escape. *How* had she ever thought this would be a good idea?

Muttering something about finding her date, Jamilah fled across the room and out to the patio through open doors, where thankfully few people milled about. She rested her hands on the stone balustrade and sucked in deep breaths, only to feel every cell in her body react when she sensed his presence behind her.

She turned slowly and saw that the patio was now empty, as if the sheer force of the tension between her and Salman had repelled everyone else.

Not caring how she might be giving herself away, Jamilah said unevenly, 'Leave me alone, Salman.'

His voice was harsh against the silence. 'If you'd wanted to be left alone you should have stayed in Merkazad.'

Jamilah's mouth twisted to acknowledge that uncomfortable truth. To think she'd ever thought that she could cope with this ... 'Ah, yes, because you never come home.'

His eyes flashed but he didn't deny it. 'Exactly.'

For a long moment neither one said anything, and then Salman took a step forward. Jamilah's heart lurched, and she noticed that the patio doors had been closed.

He said, with a rough quality to his voice that resonated deep inside her, 'You're even more beautiful than I remember.'

Jamilah forgot about escape and glared at Salman. His compliment fell on deaf ears. There was an unmistakably predatory gleam in his eyes and Jamilah railed against it. He had no right. His face was cast into shadow, so she couldn't make out his expression. 'The last time you saw me you told me I was beautiful, Salman—or don't you remember telling me why you took me to bed?'

'You were undeniably beautiful then, but now there's a maturity to your beauty...an edge.' There was something achingly wistful in his voice for a moment, which caught Jamilah off guard.

She forced a mocking smile to numb lips. 'You should be able to recognise cynicism when you see it, Salman. After all you're the King of the Cynics, aren't you? Always coming to the Sultan's party empty-handed and walking away with the most beautiful woman here. Do you still stick to your three-week rule, or was that privilege afforded just to me? Tell me, how long did the lovely Eloise last?'

'Stop it.'

'Why should I?'

Salman stepped closer then, out of the shadows, and when Jamilah saw the starkness of his beautiful features she nearly forgot everything. He blocked out the light behind him.

'I thought you would have got over that by now.'

Jamilah emitted a strangled laugh. 'Got *over* it?' She crossed her fingers behind her back. 'I got over you long ago. I don't have anything to discuss with you—so, if you don't mind, my date will be looking for me.'

'He's no man for you. He's a runt—an obsequious yes-man to the Sultan. What are you doing with him?' Salman asked.

Jamilah was belligerent. 'What do you care? He's perfect. The alpha male lost any fascination for me a long time ago.'

She went to walk around Salman, but once again he caught her arm. 'Tell me, do you shout out his name in ecstasy?' he asked silkily. 'Do you rake his back with your nails, pleading with him never to stop?'

He didn't have to say it, but the words hung between them: *do you tell him you love him?* As if held back by the flimsiest of walls, images and sensations flooded Jamilah's body and mind. She was unaware of Salman putting his hands on her arms and drawing her back in front of him. Unaware of the intent in his dark gaze. Unaware of the way his eyes dropped down her body, and unaware of the guttural moan as he drew her into him and his head lowered to hers.

She only became aware when the hot brand of his mouth seared hers, plundering and demanding, forcing her soft lips apart so that his tongue could snake out between her small teeth and suck hers deep. Jamilah had no defence. Desire burned up through her like a living flame and hurled her into the fire.

It was shocking how well her body remembered his touch—and how hungry she was for it. His hands on her back felt so wonderful. Even more so when they went lower and cupped her buttocks through the fine silk of her dress. He pulled her up and into him, where she could feel the hardening ridge of his desire, and with a soft mewl of frustration she arched against him, wanting more. Burning up with it. It was as if no time had passed at all.

And all the while their mouths clung feverishly, as if taking a first long drink of water from an oasis in the desert. It was only when Salman pulled her in even closer that an insidious image inserted itself—that of a red-haired woman being held in his arms, being made love to in exactly the same way.

Suddenly as cold as ice, Jamilah wrenched her head away and pulled free. She stood apart, aghast at how out of control she felt and how hard she was breathing.

‘Stay away from me, Salman. There is nothing between us. *Nothing*. And there never was. You said it yourself. It was just a fling, and I’m not in the market for another one.’

She whirled around, her dark blue silk dress billowing about her as she stalked to the doors, praying he wouldn’t stop her again. And then she turned back. ‘You had your chance. You won’t get another one. And for your information I’ve called out plenty of names in ecstasy since you, so don’t think what happened just now was anything special.’

Salman watched Jamilah stalk back into the party and for a moment an almost unassailable wave of despair washed over him. Seeing her again had provoked a maelstrom of emotions within him—emotions he’d not felt since he’d last seen her. He sagged back against the wall, his legs suddenly weak as he registered how intoxicating it had been to kiss her, hold her in his arms.

How *familiar*. And how necessary it had been—as necessary as taking another breath. It was as if no time had passed. He wanted her with something close to desperation. On that thought he resolutely stood to his full height again. He’d already seduced her and then rejected her. He had no right to want her again. He never wanted women after he’d had them. So why should she be different?

His mouth was a grim line as he followed her back into the party. He hoped that she’d been telling the truth when she’d claimed those numerous lovers, because then it would mean that his impact on her had been minimal, and he could ignore the fact that he thought he’d seen vulnerability and hurt in those stunning blue eyes.

Jamilah knew her parting words to Salman had been a cheap shot, but they’d felt good for a moment—even if they weren’t remotely true. Giving up any pretence of wanting to stay at the party, within an hour she had changed, her face scrubbed clean, and was in her Jeep and heading back to Merkazad.

Eventually she had to pull over on the hard shoulder of the motorway when tears blurred her vision too much. She rested her head on her hands on the steering wheel. She had to concede that she’d been hopelessly naïve in having thought she could remain unscathed after seeing Salman—and, worse, after *kissing* him, which she was sure had been nothing more than his cruel experiment to see how she still hungered for him.

On some level she’d never been able to believe how he’d turned into such a cruel and distant stranger that day.

She ruthlessly stopped her thoughts from deviating down a self-indulgent path where she’d try to find justification for Salman’s behaviour. He was cold and heartless—he always had been. She’d just been too naïve to see it before.

She’d often speculated if the cataclysmic events that had once taken place in Merkazad had anything to do with Salman’s insularity and darkness. Years before Merkazad had been invaded by an army from Al-Omar, which had been against its independence. Salman, his brother and their parents had been locked up in the bowels of the castle for three long months. It had been a difficult time for the whole country, and must have been traumatic for Nadim and Salman, but Jamilah had been just two at the time—far too young to remember the details.

Years after their liberation she’d always been the one allowed to spend time with Salman, when he hadn’t even let his own brother or parents near. He’d never said much, but he’d listened to her inconsequential chatter—which had developed into tongue-tied embarrassment as she’d grown older. Yet he’d never made her feel uncomfortable. He’d even sought her out the day he left Merkazad for good. She’d been sixteen and hopelessly in love. He’d touched her cheek with a finger, such a wealth of bleakness in his eyes that she’d ached to comfort him, but he’d just said, ‘See you around, kid.’

It was that bond that she believed had flared to life and blossomed over those three weeks in Paris. And yet if she believed what Salman had said to her there—and why wouldn’t she?—it had all been a cruel illusion. She had to get it through her thick skull that there could be no justification for Salman’s behaviour, and after tonight she *had* to draw a line under her obsession with him.

CHAPTER TWO

Present day.

SHEIKH SALMAN BIN KALID AL SAQR looked at the shadows of the rotorblades of the helicopter as it flew across the rocky expanse below him. They undulated and snaked like dark ribbons over the mountaintops, and when he looked further he could already see minarets and the vague outlines of the buildings of Merkazad—and the castle, where he was headed. His home and birthplace. He was coming back for the first time in ten years. Ten long years. And he felt numb inside.

He could remember the day he'd left, and the blistering argument he'd had with his older brother Nadim, as if it had happened yesterday, despite every attempt he'd made to block it out in the interim. They'd been standing in Nadim's study, from where he'd been running the country since the tender age of twenty-one. His older brother's responsibility had always struck fear into Salman's heart because he'd known he would never have been able to bear it.

Not because of a lack of ability, but because at the age of eight he'd borne a horrific responsibility for his own people that he'd never spoken about, and since that time he'd cut Merkazad and everyone associated with it out of his heart.

As if to contradict him a memory rose up of Jamilah—the kinship he'd always felt with her, the way that for a long time she'd been the only person he could tolerate being near him and, in Paris, the ease with which he'd allowed her to seduce him to a softer place than he'd inhabited for as long as he could remember. *If ever.* And then the way he'd callously told her that it had been nothing, that she'd imagined them having some sort of bond. His skin prickled at being reminded of that now, and with ruthless efficiency he pushed it aside and focused on that moment with his brother again.

'This is your home, Salman!' his brother had shouted at him. 'I need you here with me. We need to rule together to be strong.'

Salman could remember how dead he'd felt inside, how removed from his brother's passion. He'd known that day would be his last in Merkazad. He was a free man. Since he'd been that eight-year-old boy, since the awful time of their incarceration, he'd felt aeons older than Nadim. 'Brother, this is your country now. Not mine. I will forge my own life. And I will not have you dictate to me. You have no right.'

He'd been able to see the struggle that had run through Nadim, and silently he'd sent out a dire warning: *don't even go there.* And as he'd watched he'd seen the fight leave Nadim. The weight of their history ran too deep between them. Salman felt bitter jealousy every time he looked at his brother and knew his integral goodness had never been compromised, or taken away, or violated. Salman's had when his childhood had been ripped away from him over a three-month period that had felt like three centuries.

Salman knew Nadim blamed himself for not protecting him all those years before. And even though Salman *knew* that it was irrational, because Nadim had been as helpless as he had, he still blamed Nadim for not saving him from the horrors he'd faced. In a way, he wanted his brother to feel that pain, and he inflicted it with impunity, knowing exactly what he was doing even while hating himself for it.

Blame, counter-blame and recrimination had festered between them for years, and it had only been last year, when Salman had seen Nadim at the Sultan of Al-Omar's birthday party, that he'd noticed a subtle change within himself. They'd spoken for mere tense moments, as was their custom when they met once or twice a year, but Salman had noticed a sense of weightlessness that he'd never felt before.

He grimaced, his eyes seeing but not seeing the vista of his own country unfold beneath him in all its rocky glory. The fact that he was flying over it right now, about to land in mere minutes, spoke volumes. A part of him still couldn't really believe that he was coming to Merkazad for a month in

Nadim's stead, while he and his pregnant wife went to spend time in Ireland, where she came from, before they returned to have their first baby.

A ridiculous and archaic law said that if Merkazad was without its Sheikh for a month then a coup could be staged by the military to seat a new ruler. This law had been put in place at a time when they'd faced numerous and frequent attacks, to protect Merkazad from outside forces.

They'd been in this position only once before, when their parents had died and an interim governing body had been set up until Nadim had come of age. Luckily the army had been steadfastly loyal to their deceased father and to Nadim.

But Nadim had confided to Salman that since his marriage to Iseult some people were proving hard to win round, were disappointed that their Sheikh hadn't picked a Merkazadi woman to be his wife. He'd been concerned that until his heir was born their rule might be vulnerable for the first time in years. But if Salman was there in his place there would be no question of dissent.

Salman had found himself saying yes, bizarrely overriding his conscious intent to say no. He'd known on some deep level that one day he'd have to come home to face his demons, and it appeared the time had come. He'd put his completely incomprehensible decision down to that, and not to a latent sense of duty, or to passing time...or to the fact that since he'd seen Jamilah at that party a year ago he'd felt restless.

Even now he could remember the visceral kick in his chest when he'd turned in that corridor in the Hussein Palace and seen her standing before him like a vision, like something from a dream he'd never admitted having.

He'd only realised in that moment, as a kind of sigh of relief had gone through him, that in all the intervening years since Paris he'd gone to the Sultan's party every year hoping to see Jamilah... and he had not welcomed that revelation.

Salman's face darkened. She should have always been firmly off-limits—a woman he *should* have turned his back on—but he hadn't been able to resist. Even though he'd known that she'd been way, way too innocent for his cold heart he'd still seduced her in Paris, taken her innocence, proving to himself once again how debauched he really was.

And, not content with that, then he'd cruelly broken her heart. A bleakness filled his belly at remembering the pale set of her features that day. The incredible hurt in those beautiful eyes. He'd watched her innocence and joy turn into an adult's bitter disillusion right in front of him, even as he'd been telling himself that he was doing her a favour.

He reassured himself that he'd saved her—from him and other men like him. Because he himself was beyond saving. He'd seen the face of evil and that would taint him for ever, and anyone around him, which was why he never allowed anyone too close.

Yet all that knowledge hadn't stopped him from kissing Jamilah at the Sultan's party. He'd only had to imagine her with that ineffectual date of hers and he'd been overcome with a dark desire to stamp her, brand her as his. His body throbbed to life now, making him shift uncomfortably; she'd tasted as sweetly sensuous as she had when he'd first kissed her in Paris, when he'd known he was doing the wrong thing but had been overcome with a lust so intense it had made him dizzy.

With an effort he forced his mind away from the disturbing fact that in the past year no woman had managed to arouse his once insatiable libido. But merely thinking of Jamilah now was doing just that, as if to taunt him, because she was the last woman he could ever touch again. If he had any chance of redeeming a tiny morsel of his soul it would be in this.

Salman knew Nadim suspected something had happened between them, and of course he didn't approve. The protective warning had been implicit in Nadim's voice in their last conversation. 'You're unlikely to see much of Jamilah. She lives and works down at the stables, and is extremely busy with her work there.' And that, Salman told himself now, suited him just fine—because the mere thought of even seeing a horse or the stables sent clammy chills of dread across his skin. He wouldn't be making a visit there any time soon.

With that thought lingering as the helicopter started to descend over the lush watered Merkazadi castle grounds, reality hit Salman, and claustrophobia surged along with panic. He fought the urge to tell the pilot to turn around. He was strong enough to withstand a month in his own country. He had to be. He'd heard far worse stories than his; he'd been humbled over and over again. He owed it to those who had trusted him with their stories to face this.

Not for the first time in his life did he wish that he could resort to the easy way out of drugs and alcohol.

He sighed deeply as the distinctive white castle came into clear view, the ornate latticed walls and flat-roofed terraces all at once achingly familiar and rousing a veritable flood of memories, some terrifying. He would get through this as he'd got through his life up to this point—by distracting himself from the pain.

'Miss Jamilah—he stumbled out of the helicopter with his shirt half undone and torn jeans. He looked like a... a rock star, not the second in line to rule Merkazad.' The main housekeeper screwed up her wizened face and spat out disgustedly, 'He is nothing like his brother. He is a disgrace to—'

'Hana, that's enough.' They were in a meeting to discuss the domestic schedule of the castle while Nadim and Iseult were away, and Jamilah was having a hard enough time just functioning since she'd heard Salman's arrival in the helicopter the previous day.

The older woman flushed brick-red. 'I'm sorry, Miss Jamilah. I forgot myself for a moment...'

Jamilah smiled tightly. 'It's fine. Don't worry. Look, he's only here till Nadim and Iseult get back...and then everything will be back to normal.'

Yeah, right.

The housekeeper's face lit up. 'And next year we will have a new baby in the castle!'

Jamilah let her prattle on excitedly, and hoped the dart of hurt she felt lance her wasn't apparent on her face or in her eyes. She loved Nadim, and she loved Iseult, who had become a very close friend, but much to her ongoing shame she couldn't help but feel a little jealous of their exuberant happiness.

In truth, when Nadim had told her they would be going to Ireland to see Iseult's family while they still had time before the birth, Jamilah had felt a tinge of relief. To bear witness to their intense love and absorption every day was becoming more and more difficult. And it had only intensified with news of Iseult's pregnancy some six months previously. Nadim hardly let Iseult out of his sight, and cosseted her like a prize jewel. Jamilah knew it drove Iseult crazy, but then she was as bad he was—visibly pining for her husband if he was away from her side for more than an hour.

Jamilah's relief that she would have some respite had been spectacularly eclipsed when Nadim had casually mentioned over dinner that Salman would be taking over as acting ruler while they were gone.

She'd not missed the way Nadim and Iseult had looked at her intently for her reaction; they hadn't asked questions after her bizarre behaviour at the Sultan's party last year, but it had been obvious it had something to do with Salman.

She was proud of the way she'd absorbed the shock into her body and kept on sipping her wine, willing her hands not to show a tremor. She'd said nonchalantly, 'That's nice. It's been so long since he came home...'

Nadim had said gently, 'You could go to France, if you like. Check up on the stables there?'

Jamilah had tensed all over and sat up straight. *No.* She was aghast that they might think she would crumble, or that she would let Salman's presence affect her work. She'd shaken her head and sealed her fate. 'Not at all. I won't be going anywhere. We're far too busy here...'

But now, when Hana stood up and asked, 'Will you come to the castle to talk to the staff?' Jamilah almost shouted out another visceral *no*, and had to calm herself.

She smiled and said, as breezily as she could, shamelessly playing to Hana's pride, 'Why would I need to come to the castle when you have it all in hand so beautifully? We're busy here at the stables with some new arrivals... you can call me if anything comes up.'

To her intense relief Hana didn't argue, and left. Jamilah sank back into her office chair, feeling as edgy as a new colt, her heart racing.

A month.

One whole month of avoiding going anywhere near the castle and Salman. At least here at the stables where she lived she was relatively safe. For as long as she'd known him he'd had an abhorrence of horses, so she knew he wouldn't come near them.

She was over him, so the fact that he was right now less than ten minutes away meant nothing to her. Nothing at all.

* * *

Jamilah's phone rang at five-thirty a.m.—just as she was about to go out and do her morning round of the stables to check everyone was where they should be. She was grouchy from lack of sleep and the constant feeling of being on edge. And for the past few days there had been the non-stop clatter of helicopter rotorblades, as numerous choppers took off and landed in the castle's grounds. Even though it was a fair distance to the stables, some had flown close enough to the horses to spook them for hours. Jamilah had heard through the robust grapevine that Salman was hosting an unending series of parties at the castle.

Now she gritted her teeth and answered the phone in the office, which was part of her private rooms. All she heard on the other end was hysterical sobbing, until finally she managed to calm Hana down enough to listen for a minute.

With an icy cold anger rising, she eventually bit out, through a break in the tirade, 'I'm on my way.'

Clinging on to that cold rage, to distract her from the prospect of seeing Salman again, Jamilah went outside and got into her Jeep, making the ten-minute journey to the castle courtyard in five minutes, where Hana was wringing her hands.

As soon as Jamilah stepped out of her Jeep Hana was babbling. *'All night, every night...such loud music—and the food! It's too much...couldn't keep up with the demands and then they started throwing things...in the ceremonial ballroom! If Nadim was here...'*

Gently but firmly Jamilah cut through Hana's hysterics. 'Get the staff organised for a clean-up, and get Sakmal here with a coach. I'll have all these guests out of here this morning.'

By the time Jamilah had reached the quarters Salman had commandeered for his private use about an hour later her rage was no longer icy but boiling over. She'd just seen the devastation caused by what appeared to be half of Europe's Eurotrash party brigade, and she'd just supervised about fifty seriously disgruntled, still inebriated people onto a coach, from where they would be delivered into Al-Omar and back home.

She pushed open the door to Salman's suite and slammed it back against a wall. The immediate dart of hurt at what she saw nearly made her double over, and that made her rage burn even brighter. At the evidence that he was still affecting her.

Two bodies were sprawled on an ornately brocaded couch. An empty champagne bottle and glasses were strewn around them. The nubile blonde woman was caked in make-up, wearing a tiny sparkly, spangly dress. She looked up drunkenly from where she lay beside a sleeping Salman, one arm flung across his bare and tautly muscled chest. Thankfully he was at least wearing jeans.

'Excuse me,' she slurred in cut-glass tones, 'who do you think you are?'

Jamilah strode over, trying to block out the sensually indolent olive-skinned body of Salman, and took the woman's skinny arm, hauling her up.

'Owl'

Jamilah was unrepentant as she marched the sluggish woman over to where two maids hovered anxiously at the door, clad head to toe in black, their huge brown eyes growing wider and wider. Jamilah said with icy disdain, 'Girls, please escort this guest to the coach, after she's picked up her things, and then tell Sakmal he can go. That should be everyone.'

Jamilah shut the door firmly on the woman's drunken protestations and sighed deeply. She turned round and Salman hadn't budged an inch. Her heart clenched painfully; he'd always slept like the dead, and now that was obviously exacerbated by his alcohol intake. Her eyes roved over his hard-hewn muscle-packed form. She hated to admit it, but for an indolent, louche playboy he possessed the body of an athlete in his prime.

Dark stubble shadowed his firm jaw, and a lock of black hair had fallen over his forehead, making him look deceptively innocent. Long black lashes caressed those ridiculously sculpted cheekbones. He looked like a dark fallen angel who might have literally just dropped out of the sky.

But an angel, fallen or otherwise, he most certainly was *not*.

Jamilah clenched her jaw, as if that could counteract the treacherous rising of heat within her, and went to the bathroom where she found what she was looking for. Coming back into the main drawing room, she said a mental prayer for forgiveness to Nadim and Hana for the damage she was about to do to the soft furnishings, and then she threw the entire bucket of icy cold water over Salman.

Salman thought he was being attacked. Reflexes that had been honed long, long ago snapped into action, and he was on his feet and tense before he really knew what was happening.

In seconds, though, he had assessed the situation and forced locked muscles to relax. Jamilah was standing in front of him with an empty bucket and a belligerent look on her beautiful face, and something inside him rose up with an almost giddy surge. For the first time since he'd returned he felt centred—not rudderless and scarily close to the edge of his control.

With her hair tied back, no make-up, dressed in a white shirt, jeans and riding boots, she might have passed for eighteen. Her stunning blue eyes were glittering like bright sapphires, and a line of pink slashed each cheek with colour. She was a veritable jewel of beauty compared to the artificially enhanced women who'd been vying for his attention these last few days, and self-disgust curled inside him when he remembered the one who'd eventually fallen into a drunken slumber beside him earlier that morning.

He'd vowed to order his private jet and get rid of the horde of unwanted guests, realising what a mistake he'd made, but it would appear by the look on Jamilah's face that it had already been taken care of.

'How dare you?' Jamilah was saying now, in a suspiciously quivery voice which he guessed had more to do with anger than emotion. 'How *dare* you come back here and proceed to turn this castle into your personal playground? Poor Hana is distraught. She has quite enough to be doing without pandering to you and all the Little Lord Fauntleroy's you invited to join in the fun. And apart from the chaos and destruction here, your *friends*' constant arrival by helicopter has been spooking the horses at the stables.'

Energy crackled between them.

Salman rocked back on his heels and surveyed Jamilah with a lazy sweep, up and down. He seemed to be oblivious to the fact that he was soaking wet, and with a gulp Jamilah could see that this was not proceeding the way she'd expected at all. Salman didn't look remotely contrite, or even drunk. His eyes were as sharp as ever. And on *her*. She had to consciously not let her gaze drop to where his jeans must be plastered against his crotch and thighs.

He crossed his arms nonchalantly across his chest, making his biceps bulge, and Jamilah had the very belated realisation that she'd just wakened a sleeping panther. He drawled, 'Not even a kiss hello to greet me? That's not very nice, now, is it?'

Jamilah put the bucket down because she was afraid she'd drop it. She stood up to see Salman staring at her with a disturbing glint in his eye. Feeling the sudden urge to escape, and fast, she said glacially, 'Clearly you feel that Merkazad is too boring to sustain your attention. I'd suggest that if you're looking for entertainment you should follow your friends to B'harani, where they're headed right now on a tour bus.'

For a second Jamilah could have sworn she saw the merest smile touch Salman's lips, but then it was gone. And the urge to escape grew more acute. She whirled round to leave the room, but before she could reach the door she was whirled back again by a strong hand gripping her arm and a guttural, 'Where do you think you're going?'

'What the—?' she spluttered ineffectually.

Salman knew he should be letting Jamilah go. He'd *told* himself that he would not pursue her. But faced with her now, her timeless beauty, that sleek curvaceous body, he knew it was too much for his battered soul to resist.

Salman arched one ebony brow. 'Like I said, can't you even greet me with a civil hello?'

Jamilah glared up at him, already cursing herself for having come here to deal with this. 'Why would I want to bother saying hello to someone who can't even treat his own home or staff with any respect?'

His eyes flashed blackly. 'Exactly. This is my home, and you would do well to remember that.'

Jamilah spat out, 'You mean remember my *place*? Is that it, Salman? It's been a long time since anyone had to remind me that I'm not part of your family.'

She tried to break free, but his grip was too strong, and then two hands drew her round in front of him, and his gaze fairly blistered down into her defiant one. Of course she wasn't a member of their family; for all of Nadim's care, inclusion and protection after her parents had died Jamilah had always known her place—so why was she provoking Salman like this now?

'That's not what I meant at all, and you know it. The fact is that this is my home and I shall do as I like here. As acting ruler I don't have to answer to anyone.'

Jamilah stuck her chin out pugnaciously, something deep and visceral goading her on. 'You'll answer to *me*. I may not be the ruler, but the staff here know who is in charge and it's not you. You need to earn their respect first. And I won't stand by and watch you come in here and desecrate Nadim and Iseult's home.'

Before Jamilah could even question where that urge to provoke had come from suddenly they were a lot closer, and her breath faltered as Salman's unique and intensely male scent washed over her. Dimly she recognised that she couldn't smell drink on his breath. He hadn't been drunk? That didn't fit with the scene she'd just witnessed.

'Like I said—' his voice was as glacial as hers '—this is my home as much as it is Nadim's, and I will invite whomever I want, whenever I want.'

Unable to articulate a response, and quickly becoming overwhelmed by Salman's intoxicating proximity, Jamilah tried to break free of his hold again, twisting around in his hands.

All it did, though, was force her back into his hard chest—and then she heard a muttered curse. Suddenly strong arms were below her breasts, and she was being lifted clear off her feet and carried bodily towards the bathroom. She kicked out with her legs, but her struggles were futile and puny in the face of Salman's overpowering strength. She was plastered against a hard, *wet* body. And that was entirely her fault.

She couldn't even get a word out before they were in the bathroom, and Salman easily held her with one arm while he turned on the shower. Both her hands were trying to free herself, to no avail. His arm was like a steel bar. She could feel her hair loosening from its untidy ponytail.

The water was running, and steam had started to rise around them when she finally spluttered out, 'What the *hell* do you think you are doing? Let me down this instant!'

In that moment Salman walked them both under the warm spray of the huge shower, and she heard him say grimly over her head, 'Giving you a little taste of your own medicine, Miss High-and-mighty.'

CHAPTER THREE

THE inarticulate rage that had risen up within Salman seconds ago was already diminishing, and he knew it had had more to do with this woman's effect on him than her belligerence and anger. And now he couldn't see anything but Jamilah, her clothes already soaked through and sticking to that glorious body.

Jamilah was gasping in shock, her back against the wall of the shower. Water was streaming over her head, face, into her eyes, and Salman's hand was splayed across her abdomen, holding her in place. Through the steam she could see his glittering obsidian gaze, his hair plastered to his skull, and water sluicing down that powerful chest, through the dark smattering of hair, over his blunt nipples.

She tried to smack his hand away, but he merely put it back and said grimly, 'You're not going anywhere.'

Humiliation scorched up through Jamilah as she became very aware of how drenched she was, and how her clothes were plastered to her body. As if reading her thoughts, Salman dropped his eyes, and she could feel her breasts respond, growing heavy, her nipples peaking almost painfully against her wet bra and shirt. She could only imagine how see-through the flimsy material must be under the powerful spray. A flash of fire lit his eyes, and they went darker in an instant—and, *awfully*, she felt an answering rush of heat.

Once again she tried to get free, but Salman merely moved closer and took her hands, raising them above her head. She struggled in earnest now, feeling intensely vulnerable, but it was a struggle against the fire that was gathering pace inside her body, in her blood. She had to stop abruptly when her hips came into explosive contact with his.

'Let me go.'

She longed to go for his vulnerable area with a knee, but he quickly manoeuvred them so that he could thrust a thigh between her legs and shook his head, saying, 'Ah-ah...'

The shock of feeling that powerful thigh between hers rendered her mute. All too easily he held her two hands in one of his, like an iron manacle. His other hand drifted down to cup her jaw and turn her face up to his. The spray bounced off him, cocooning them in steam. She gritted her jaw and tried to turn away, but he ruthlessly turned her head back.

He smiled down at her, and it was the smile of a dangerous predator. 'Aren't you even a little bit glad to see me?'

A treacherous kick of her heart made Jamilah all but spit at him. 'You're the last person I'd be happy to see, Salman al Saqr.'

He shook his head mock-mournfully and tutted. 'All those strong feelings still under the surface, Jamilah?'

Cold horror snaked through her, despite the heat around them. She had to protect herself. She forced her body to relax and mirrored his own easy demeanour. She even smiled sweetly. 'On the contrary. I don't have feelings for you, Salman. I never did. Whatever you saw in Paris was a very transitory and misplaced affection for a first lover. That's all. You mean nothing to me. I am merely angry because you disrespect your brother and sister-in-law, who I care about greatly, and your home. You've caused chaos in the castle, and I refuse to stand by and watch it for a moment longer.'

Salman's gaze glittered down. His jaw clenched. It was getting harder to keep her body relaxed as he came even closer and she felt his hips grind into hers. And then it was all but impossible when she felt the thrillingly hard evidence of his arousal. Heat climbed upwards and she lashed out. 'You're an animal.'

Salman growled, 'I agree. I feel very animalistic at the moment.' His eyes had grown heavy and dangerously slumberous, but still with that provocative fire igniting in their depths.

He tightened his hold on her jaw and swooped down, his mouth a searing brand over hers before she could take another breath. Their bodies touched, chest to chest, hip to hip, and Jamilah felt an immediate wild excitement coursing through her blood.

She wanted to rip the wet clothes from her body and arch closer to Salman, to feel wet skin on wet skin. A vivid memory of another shower, another time, flared up. He had lifted her naked body against the wall and urged her to wrap her legs around his waist. He'd found the hot wet core of her and had surged up and into her, making everything blur into a heat haze of passion.

Anger at her reaction and at the vividness of the memory made her kiss him back, defiantly at first, and then she realised the folly of that when Salman pulled her in even closer. She had to battle harder than she'd ever done in her life not to respond, not to let him suck her under to a dark vortex where past and present might merge and make her forget where she was and what he had done to her.

She seized her opportunity when he lifted his head momentarily. With an abrupt move she snaked out from under him and out of the shower, dripping water everywhere and only then realising how much the wall had been supporting her when her legs felt like jelly.

Salman turned slowly under the spray of water and looked at her. She fought the wild clamour of her pulse. As she watched his hand snaked down to his jeans. He flipped open the top button and drawled, 'I'm going to make myself more comfortable, if you'd care to do the same and join me?'

Jamilah dragged her gaze back up and shook her head, feeling as if she were on fire inside. 'I wouldn't join you if we were the two last humans on earth and the future of civilisation depended on us procreating.'

Salman smiled and lazily pulled down his zip. Jamilah could see the whorls of dark hair which led to his sex in her peripheral vision. Heat threatened to engulf her completely. She wondered why she couldn't move.

And then Salman said, 'But wouldn't we make beautiful babies?'

Jamilah made a garbled sound. She was so mad she wanted to cry, or slap Salman's mocking face. And through that emotion, completely unbidden, came the sudden *awful* yearning to be heavy with this man's child. That brought with it the return of bitter reality and the sharpest pain of all—because she *knew* what it had felt like to carry this man's child for the briefest time, before nature had taken its tragic course. She could still feel that dragging pain, the wrenching sense of loss, and he would never know.

Even now he was still mocking, taunting, pulling his wet jeans down over lean hips and off, blissfully unaware of the nuclear implosion happening within Jamilah. Before he could see any of it she tore her gaze away and grabbed a towel hanging on a nearby rail. While she still could, she walked on wobbly legs out of the bathroom to the sound of a dark, mocking chuckle and a softly intoned, 'Coward.'

Salman stood in the shower after Jamilah had walked out, his hands against the wall and his head downbent between them. Only minutes before he'd held her captive. Dripping wet and the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. He finally turned the water to cold as he faced the prospect that for the first time since his teens he might be forced to pleasure himself just to reclaim some sanity. But he had to acknowledge now that his sanity had fled along with Jamilah.

Her white shirt had turned see-through the minute the water had hit, clearly showing her white lace bra and the puckered tips of her berry-brown nipples. Her breasts were still beautifully round, firm and high. And he knew that they would fill his palms like succulent fruits.

He groaned softly when his wayward body persisted in responding, despite the stinging cold spray, and he valiantly resisted the urge to wrap his hand around himself and seek all too transitory relief. There was only one way to relief now. Past or no past, history be damned, one thing was clear: he *would* have Jamilah back in his bed until he'd sated himself—until he'd sated them both. Because their desire was mutual, explosive and unfinished. And there was no way he could survive a month here without taking her. He'd go crazy.

All concerns for Jamilah's emotional welfare and the state of his soul were dissolving in a wave of heat. He took some reassurance from the way she'd stood up to him. He could be in no doubt that she was no longer some shy, timid and idealistic virgin. *And you did that to her.* He blocked out the voice.

His mind stalled for a moment. *Dammit*, she had been a virgin. He'd assumed that she'd been at least a little bit experienced. He could still remember his shock when he'd thrust into that slick tightness and felt her momentary hesitation, seen the fleeting pain on her face. And then heard her husky moans and pleas for him to keep going. She'd just been too seductive. He was only human, and he hadn't been able to stop.

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