SUSAN MALLERY

The Sheik & the Princess in Waiting

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The Sheik & the Princess in Waiting

Аннотация

“I'M WHAT…?”No, not pregnant, thank heavens. Emma would have known that. But married? Well, if the man standing before her–the very love of her college life–was to be believed, she was. And suddenly he was claiming to be a desert prince, too. Sure, they'd had a “pretend” ceremony and honeymoon in the Caribbean. But it was pretend, wasn't it?Prince Reyhan claimed his father, the king, had decided it was time for him to marry. There was just one little glitch–Reyhan was already married. So, the king ordered Reyhan's wife–Emma–to a two-week trip to paradise before he would grant a royal annulment. But wasn't paradise the perfect place for love?

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Chapter One

A fter a long day of working in the delivery room, Emma Kennedy was ready to spend her evening with her feet propped up, the TV on and a bowl of ice cream in her hand. Okay, yes, she would probably eat something decent for dinner first but the ice cream was a must. It had been that kind of day.

Nothing had happened all morning, then right at noon, four women had decided to deliver. One had been a terrified teenager, and Emma had stayed with her as much as possible. At twenty-four, Emma had been closest in age of all the nurses, although a lifetime of experiences away from the street-wise, body pierced and tattooed patient.

Emma opened her mailbox, pulled out the cable bill and a flyer for a sale at Dillard's, then walked toward her apartment.

She was tired, but content. It had been a good day. A happy day. One of the things she loved about her job was the joy new mothers experienced when their babies were born. Being part of the process, even on the periphery, was all the thanks she needed. When she thought about all the—

Emma suddenly stopped in the hallway. Two men in dark suits stood by her front door. They looked respectable enough—clean, short haircuts, polished shoes—but they were definitely lurking.

She'd taken several self-defense courses over the years, but she wasn't sure how helpful the information she'd learned would

be against two large men.

Glancing first left, then right, she calculated the distance to her nearest neighbor. How long would it take her to run to her car, and what kind of reaction she would get if she screamed?

One of the men looked up and saw her. “Ms. Kennedy? I’m Alex Dunnard from the State Department. This is my associate, Jack Sanders. May we have a moment of your time?”

As the man spoke, he pulled out an ID card complete with picture. His companion did the same. Emma abandoned the idea of bolting and approached her front door.

The pictures matched the men and the cards looked official enough, but it wasn’t as if she’d seen a State Department ID before and would know the difference.

Alex Dunnard slipped the ID back into his jacket pocket and smiled. “We have some official business to discuss with you. May we come inside, or would you be more comfortable if we met at the coffee shop on the corner?”

Emma noticed that neither option allowed her to get out of talking with them. Which was crazy. What would the State Department want with her?

She gave them the once-over and decided to let them in. Her Dallas suburb was safe, quiet and ordinary. No doubt these men had the wrong person. Once they straightened that out, they would be on their way.

“Come on in,” she said, inserting her key in the lock.

They followed her into the smallish living room. It was already

dusk, so she turned on both floor lamps and the light in the hall, then motioned to her sofa.

"Have a seat," she said as she plopped down in the club chair opposite.

As she set her purse on the floor, she noticed several stains on the front of her brightly patterned scrub shirt. The pale green pants were also dotted and streaked. Occupational hazard, she reminded herself.

Alex perched on the edge of her sofa, while the other gentleman stood by the sliding glass door.

"Ms. Kennedy, we're here at the behest of the king of Bahania."

Alex kept on talking, but Emma was too caught up in the word behest. She wasn't sure she'd ever heard someone say it in normal speech. It was more of a book word. Then the rest of the sentence sunk in.

"Wait a minute," she said, holding up her hand. "Did you say the king of Bahania?"

"Yes, ma'am. He contacted the State Department and asked that we locate you and then offer you an official invitation to visit his country."

Emma laughed. Oh, sure. Because that sort of thing happened all the time. "Are you guys selling something? Because if you are, you're wasting your time."

"No, ma'am. We're from the State Department, and we're here —"

She cut him off with a wave. “I know. At the behest. I got that part. You have the wrong person. I’m sure there’s another Emma Kennedy floating around who has lots of personal contact with His Royal Highness, but it’s not me.”

She looked at her modest apartment. If only, she thought humorously. Maybe a small money grant or two could have taken care of her student loans. And she desperately needed new tires for her ten-year-old import. Oh, well. In her next life she would be rich. In this one she was just a single woman struggling to pay the bills.

Alex pulled a piece of paper out of his outer jacket pocket. “Emma Kennedy,” he read, then went on to list her birth date, place of birth, her parents’ names and the number on her passport. A passport she’d had since she was eighteen, young, innocent and foolish and had thought…Well, she’d thought a lot of things.

“Just a second,” she said, and rose to walk into her bedroom.

Her passport was tucked in the back of her sock drawer. She pulled it out and returned to the living room where she had Alex read the number again. It matched.

“This is creepy,” she said. “Look, I don’t know the king of Bahania. I’m not sure I could find Bahania on the map. There really has to be some kind of mistake. What would he want with me?”

“You are to be his guest for the next two weeks.” Alex stood and smiled. “There’s a private jet standing by to take you to his

country. Ms. Kennedy, Bahania is a valuable ally in the Middle East. Like their neighbor, El Bahar, they are considered the Switzerland of that region. These progressive countries offer a haven of peace and economic stability in a troubled part of the world. They also provide a significant percentage of our country's oil."

Emma might have only taken one political science class at college, but she wasn't stupid. She got the message. When the king of Bahania invited a young Texas nurse to vacation in his country for a couple of weeks, the United States government expected her to go.

Was she being kidnapped?

The idea was both insane and terrifying.

"You can't make me go," she said, more to hear the words than because she believed them. She had a feeling that Alex and his friend could make her do just about anything.

"You're correct. We would not force you to accept the king's invitation. However, your country would be most grateful if you would consider granting him this request." He smiled. "You'll be perfectly safe, Ms. Kennedy. The king is an honorable man. You're not being sold into a harem."

"The thought never crossed my mind," she told him hotly, even though it had. Sort of.

A harem? Her? Not on this planet. Men didn't find her especially appealing, and she…Well, she avoided matters of the heart. She'd fallen in love once and it had been a complete

disaster.

"This is a great honor," Alex said. "As a personal guest of the king, you'll be staying at the famed pink palace. It is quite extraordinary."

Emma walked back to her chair and sank down. "Can we stop for a second and reflect on the reality missing from this situation? I'm a nurse. I deliver babies for a living. Unless the king has a pregnant wife or something, why on earth would he be interested in me? I'm assuming if you know my passport number, you also know I've only been out of the country once and that was six years ago. I live a quiet life. I'm boring. You have the wrong person."

Alex's good cheer didn't waiver. "Two weeks, Ms. Kennedy. Is that so much to ask? Those volunteering for military service give much more."

Oh, darn the man. He was going for guilt. She really didn't like that. Her parents had been experts at it and she hated the sense of having disappointed anyone.

"I'll accompany you to Bahania," Alex continued. "To assure your safe arrival. Once you're settled, I'll return to Washington." He paused. "You're being given a wonderful opportunity, Ms. Kennedy. I hope you'll consider it. If we can leave for the airport in the next hour, we will be in Bahania by sunset tomorrow."

Her mind swirled. "You want me to go with you right now?"

"Please."

Emma glanced from Alex to his friend by the sliding glass door. She had a bad feeling that if she refused, she would be

taken against her will. Not exactly thoughts to warm her heart. It looked as if she were going on a trip.

Two and a half hours later, Emma found herself sitting on a luxurious private jet as the lights of Dallas disappeared below. She had a large suitcase in the cargo bay, a small overnight case next to her feet and, as promised, Alex Dunnard in the seat across from hers.

She still wasn't sure how it had all happened. Somehow Alex had gently ushered her through the process of calling the hospital for time off, packing and leaving a message for her parents that she'd gone away with a friend. The white lie had been his suggestion, made so that her parents wouldn't worry.

Then she'd showered, changed and found herself in a limo the size of a football field. Now she was on a plane and sitting in leather seats so soft and comfy, she wouldn't mind having the material made into a jacket.

On the bright side, if she was being kidnapped, it was by someone with money and style. The downside was that she'd managed to put her entire life on hold for two weeks with exactly two phone calls and a request that her neighbor pick up her mail. What did that say about her world?

Before she could decide, a uniformed young woman approached. "Ms. Kennedy, I'm Aneesa and it will be my pleasure to serve you on our flight to Bahania."

Aneesa rattled off the expected flying time, mentioned a stop

for gas in Spain and offered selections for dinner.

"When you're ready to retire for the evening," she continued, "there is a sleeping compartment for your use." She smiled. "Along with a bathroom, complete with shower."

"That's great," Emma told her, trying to sound calm. As if this sort of thing happened to her all the time.

"Shall I serve dinner?" Aneesa asked.

"Uh, sure. Why not?"

When the attendant had disappeared to what must be the plane's galley, Emma turned to Alex.

"Are you going to tell me what's really going on here?" she asked.

"I've told you all I know."

"That the king wants me as his guest for two weeks," she summarized.

"Yes."

"And you don't know why?"

"No."

Not exactly helpful.

She returned her attention to the countryside below and wondered if she would ever see Texas again. Then, determined not to wallow in unpleasant and scary thoughts, she pulled out the entertainment guide and pretended interest in the various DVDs available for her viewing pleasure.

A half hour later, the meal was served. The food was beautifully prepared and delicious, if Alex's speed of

consumption was anything to go by. Emma picked at the baked chicken dish and refused wine. She studied her travel companion—a well-dressed man in his mid to late forties. Nice looking, married—if the wedding ring was anything to go by. Did Mrs. Dunnard mind her husband flying off at a moment's notice? Had it been a moment's notice for him or had he known about the trip in advance? And why on earth did the king of Bahania want to meet with her?

More questions she was unlikely to get answered. When she tried pumping Alex for information, he remained pleasant but uncommunicative.

One restless night in a luxury cabin, several time zones and a pit stop for gas later, Emma didn't know any more than she had when she'd stepped onto the plane in Dallas. The difference was they were coming in for landing at an airport on the edge of the desert.

She stared out the window and tried to keep her mouth from falling open. The sights beneath were so beautiful they nearly took her breath away.

Turquoise-blue water lapped up against a pure white beach. There were miles of buildings, lush foliage and sprawling suburbs that gradually gave way to the endless beige and browns of the desert. Emma could see pockets of industry, large buildings that appeared ancient and what looked like dozens of parks throughout the city before the plane banked and headed for the airport.

They landed with a light bump, then taxied to a low one-story building. As Alex picked up his small overnight case, Emma fumbled for her purse.

She was escorted onto the tarmac where the late afternoon was warm, sunny and dry. And bright. After the confines of the plane, she found the sunlight nearly blinding. Three steps later, she entered a pleasant room where a man in uniform actually bowed when she presented herself and her open passport.

"Ms. Kennedy," he said, flashing a smile, "welcome to Bahania. May your journey be pleasant and blessed."

"Thank you," she murmured, wondering if everyone was always so polite. Not that she was going to complain. She could get used to this level of service.

The surprises weren't over. Minutes later Alex escorted her to another large limo. Inside she found a bottle of champagne sitting on ice and a small bouquet of flowers.

"For me?" she asked as Alex sat next to her.

"I doubt the king meant them for me," he told her.

Good point. Emma sniffed the roses. When Alex pointed to the bottle of champagne, she shook her head.

"I didn't sleep," she admitted. "Between being exhausted, the strange circumstances and the time change, the last thing I need is liquor."

She already felt woozy enough.

As they pulled out of the airport, Alex began to talk to her about the city. He pointed out the financial district, the old

shopping bazaar, the entrance to the famous Bahanian beaches. Emma did her best to pay attention, but the longer they were on the road, the more she regretted her decision to come. Sure, Bahania was beautiful and all, but she'd just traveled halfway around the world with a man she didn't know to meet a king she'd barely heard of, and aside from her traveling companion and the king, no one on the planet knew where she was.

It was not a situation designed to make one relax.

Forty minutes later, the limo drove through an open gate, past several guards and what felt like miles of manicured grounds. She stared out the window until she saw the first hints of the fabled pink palace.

"This is so not happening," she murmured, still unable to believe this was real.

The limo pulled up in front of the entrance. At least she assumed that's what the arched doorway and alcove big enough for a marching band was for.

"We're here," Alex said, confirming her suspicions.

She glanced at him. "What happens now?"

"You meet the king."

Great. If there was a survey at the end of this, she was going to mention Alex's lack of information as one of her complaints.

The limo door opened. Alex climbed out, then stepped aside so she could exit. Emma smoothed down the skirt she'd changed into on the plane and sucked in a breath for courage. It wasn't close to enough, so she wasn't surprised to find herself shaking

as she stepped out in the warm afternoon.

Several people stood by the palace: Alex, the limo driver, a few uniformed men who could have been servants, but no one who looked like a king. So did royalty wait indoors for their visitors? Shouldn't Alex have briefed her on that sort of thing?

Before she could ask him, there was a movement to her left. Emma turned and saw a man step out of the shadows. He was tall, darkly handsome and almost familiar. Then the sun hit him full in the face and she gasped in stunned amazement. It couldn't be. Not after all this time. She'd thought…He would never…

The combination of shock, lack of sleep and food, and jet lag, conspired to increase her heart rate from nervous to hummingbird speed. The blood rushed from her head to her feet in two seconds flat. The world spun, blurred, then faded completely as she collapsed to the ground.

Prince Reyhan glanced at his father, the king of Bahania, and shook his head.

"That went well."

Chapter Two

S everal servants rushed toward the fallen woman. Reyhan brushed them aside and crouched beside Emma. He took her wrist in his hand and felt her pulse.

Rapid, but steady.

“Call a doctor,” he said firmly.

Someone went scuttling to do his bidding.

“She didn’t hit her head,” a young woman told him as she gently touched Emma’s forehead. “I was watching as she fainted, Your Highness.”

“Thank you. Are her rooms prepared?”

The woman nodded.

Reyhan gathered Emma into his arms. She lay limp, one hand pressing against his chest, the other dangling by her side. Her skin had paled and her breathing slowed.

He took a moment to study her long lashes and the fullness of her mouth. The thick, red hair he remembered hung in loose waves around her face. So much was the same, he thought. No doubt if he counted, he would find that there were still eleven freckles on her nose and cheeks.

How much had changed? Even as he silently asked the question, he found he didn’t want to know. He rose and walked into the palace.

The king fell into step with him.

“At least she remembered you,” his father said.

“Obviously with great joy.”

“Perhaps she fainted with relief that you were to be together.”

Reyhan didn’t bother answering. Emma hadn’t seen him in six years, and from what he’d been able to find out, she’d never made any attempt to get in touch with him. He had no idea what she recalled of their brief…relationship, but he doubted her fainting had anything to do with relief.

The guest quarters were on the second floor. Reyhan went directly there, wondering if his father would mention that other arrangements could have been made. Fortunately, the king remained silent.

Reyhan swept inside the suite of rooms he’d had prepared for Emma and set her on the sofa. A maid hovered in the corner.

“Find out when the doctor will arrive,” he said.

The woman nodded and picked up a phone from the small table in the corner.

Reyhan returned his attention to Emma. She lay perfectly still. She hadn’t moved at all while he’d carried her.

He sat next to her on the sofa and took her hand in his. Her fingers were cold. He brought them to his mouth and breathed on them.

“Emma,” he murmured. “You must awaken.”

She moved her head slightly and moaned.

“The doctor will be here in fifteen minutes,” the maid told him.

“Thank you. A glass of water, please.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Someone else could have carried her,” the king said from the seat he’d taken across from the sofa. “Someone else can care for her now.”

Reyhan narrowed his gaze. “No one touches my wife.”

His father rose and crossed to the door. “It has been six years, Reyhan. Are you sure you still wish to claim the title of husband?”

Wish it or not, it was his. As was she.

Emma felt as if she were swimming against a very strong tide. But instead of water, she was trapped by air she had to push through to reach the surface. Thoughts formed and separated, her body felt heavy. Something had happened. She remembered that much. But what?

A cool, smooth surface pressed against her mouth as a strong, male voice demanded, “Drink this.”

She parted her lips without considering refusing the request.

Water slipped into her mouth. She drank gratefully, then sighed when the glass was removed. Better, she thought, and opened her eyes.

Oh, my—it was him! Her eyes hadn’t been playing tricks on her. She could feel the heat and strength of him as he sat next to her on the sofa. His hip pressed against her thigh. One of his hands held her own, while his dark gaze trapped her as neatly as

a cage held a small bird.

Reyhan.

She wasn't sure if she said the name or merely thought it. Was it possible? After all these years?

She blinked and wondered if this was nothing more than a vivid dream. Only, her luck wasn't that good. No, the truth was he was real and she was in his presence, which didn't seem possible. It had been six years, she reminded herself again. Six years since he'd used her and tossed her aside. Six years since she'd hidden at her parents' house, crying for what could have been, secretly waiting for him to come and claim her, only to find out she'd waited in vain. He'd never come, and eventually she'd returned to her life—older, wiser and emotionally battered.

"So you return to us," he said, his low voice rumbling like distant thunder. "I don't remember you fainting before."

She bristled at the assumption that he knew things about her.

"I don't faint," she told him.

"Recent events suggest that you do. It was a long trip. Were you able to sleep at all?"

He spoke so casually, she thought in amazement. As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. As if it had been a few days rather than years since they were last together.

Outrage blossomed into fury. She wanted to yell at him, to scream or maybe even throw something. But years of being told that a lady didn't show her anger made it difficult for her to do more than glare.

Reyhan lightly touched her cheek. “I see by the shadows under your eyes you did not sleep on the plane. At least not for long. Hardly a surprise, I suppose. You were not told why you were brought here. As I recall, you were always impatient and eager to find out things.”

Her attention split neatly between his words, which annoyed her, and the light stroking of his fingers against her skin. When his thumb grazed her lower lip, she was stunned by a jolt of awareness. The sensation cut through her like lightning, heating and melting everywhere it touched.

No! She would not react, she told herself. She wouldn’t feel anything. She refused to. If this man really was Reyhan, then he filled her with nothing but contempt. He was beneath her notice.

One corner of his firm mouth turned up slightly. “I see you want to spit at me like an ill-tempered kitten,” he murmured. “There is anger in your eyes.” He glanced at her fingers. “No claws. I doubt you can do much damage.”

Then he stunned her by kissing her knuckles.

She felt the warm brush of his mouth clear down to her toes. The hot, melting sensation grew until she wanted to purr like the kitten he’d mentioned. She thought about—

“Stop that right now,” she said, snatching her hand back and folding her arms across her chest. The instruction was meant for both of them. In the past twenty-four hours, her world had taken a turn for the confusing, but she was determined to figure out what was going on. Which meant staying focused on the task at

hand and not getting caught up in being in the same room as Reyhan.

She shifted away from him and pushed herself up into a sitting position. When he took hold of her arm to help her, she shook off his hand.

"I'm fine," she told him, her tone as icy as she could make it. "What I need from you is information. What is going on? What am I doing here? And while we're on the subject, what are you doing here?"

Before he could speak, there was a blur of movement, then a long-haired cream-colored cat with nearly violet eyes jumped up on her lap. She stared at it in amazement. Cats in the palace?

Reyhan grabbed the animal and set it back on the floor. The cat glared at him, gave a sniff of disgust and stalked off.

"Are you allergic to cats?" he asked.

"What? No."

"Good. The palace is filled with them. They are my father's."

His father? She rubbed her temple and tried to decide if she wanted to ask who his father was. While she would like the information, she was also afraid of it. Because crazy as it sounded, she had a feeling there was a better-than-even chance that Reyhan was somehow related to the king of Bahania.

Don't go there, she told herself as Reyhan held out the glass of water again. As she took it from him she found herself caught in his gaze.

She remembered his eyes most of all, she thought. How dark

they were. How well they kept secrets. She'd once thought that if she could learn to read his eyes, she would know the man. But their few weeks together had not given them the time to learn very much about each other.

Sadness threatened. She tried to banish it by recalling what Reyhan had done to her—how he'd left and how she'd been alone and so afraid. Better to be angry. There was energy in anger and she had the feeling she was going to need it.

"I don't know what this game is," she told him, "but I'm not going to play. I wish to return home immediately. Please call Alex and have him take me back to the plane."

"Your escort from the State Department has already left the palace. He will spend the night at one of our most beautiful oceanside hotels, then fly back to your country in the morning." Reyhan dismissed the man with a flick of his wrist. "You will not see him again."

Anger faded as fear took its place. Alex was gone? So she was truly alone in the palace? Alone in this country?

Emma didn't know if she should try to bolt for freedom or bluff her way through. Her head was still spinning and she didn't look forward to trying to stand up, so that left bluffing. Something she'd never been very good at.

"What am I doing here?" she demanded. "Why did the king of Bahania ask me to come here for two weeks? And what are you doing here? You can't have anything to do with what's going on with me."

That last bit was more plea than forceful statement.

Reyhan stared at her. His strong, handsome features could have been set in stone—or steel—for all they gave away.

"Haven't you guessed?" he asked with quiet amusement, as if she were a child who had just performed the alphabet song flawlessly for the first time. "The king is my father, and the invitation is as much mine as his."

Her mind went blank. Completely and totally. It was like losing the lights during a thunderstorm.

The man next to her rose and squared his shoulders. Then he stared down at her with a haughty expression possibly honed through a lifetime of royal arrogance.

"I am Prince Reyhan, third oldest son of King Hassan of Bahania."

She blinked. Not possible, she told herself as some semicoherent thought process began in her brain. Not possible, not likely and she refused to believe it.

"A p-prince?" she asked, stumbling over the word.

No. No. No. Emma stared at the man standing in front of her. He couldn't be. A prince? Him? But they'd met at college. They'd dated. He'd taken her away with him and…hurt her dreadfully.

"The king decided it was time for me to marry," Reyhan told her. "There was no way I could agree to any match as I was already married. To you."

He kept on talking, but she wasn't listening. She couldn't. A prince? Married?

"But I…" She swallowed and tried again. "That wasn't real. Not any of it."

She remembered the quiet of the Caribbean island, the soft breezes, the lap of the ocean outside their hotel room. Reyhan had asked her to go away with him, and she'd agreed because she could refuse him nothing. At eighteen, she'd been more innocent than he'd realized. She'd been too ashamed to tell him she'd never dated before. He'd been her first, in every sense of the word.

Years later, when she'd looked back on the blur of hot days and long, endless nights, she'd comforted herself with the fact that she'd been too swept up in thinking she was in love to refuse Reyhan anything. She would never have considered asking him to go more slowly, to give her time to adjust. As for their marriage—her parents' lawyer had told her that had been a fake.

For a long time the realization had nearly destroyed her. She'd hated her weakness where he was concerned. Hated that she could still want him, even as he'd used and abandoned her. Time had healed her enough to give her perspective.

Reyhan's dark eyebrows drew together. "What wasn't real?"

"Our marriage. You just did that to get me into bed. Or get a green card."

As soon as she spoke the words, she realized she might have made a mistake. Reyhan seemed to get bigger and taller as his temper grew. His anger was as tangible as the sofa she sat on, but a lot more frightening. His gaze narrowed and his mouth twisted into a disapproving and scornful line.

“A green card?” he asked, his voice thick with tension. “Why would I need that? I am Prince Reyhan. I am heir to the king of Bahania. I have no need to seek asylum elsewhere. This is my country.”

He spoke proudly and with the confidence of who knew how many generations of royalty behind him.

“Yes, well.” She cleared her throat. At the time, him wanting a green card had made sense. But now…“So that’s not why you married me.”

“It was not. I was in your country to continue my education. I earned my master’s degree there.” His expression turned contemptuous. “I honored you by giving you my name and my protection. As for trying to get you into my bed, the effort was hardly worth the meager reward.”

She shrank back into the cushions. Humiliation joined the fear. As much as she tried to block out their nights together, they continued to haunt her. She supposed her part of it could be an illustration of what not to do on one’s wedding night and the few nights that followed.

Not that it was her fault, she told herself, trying to grab on to a little temper to give her courage. She’d been the virgin. He should have done better, too.

But if Reyhan hadn’t married her to get a green card or to sleep with her, why had he?

“Are you sure the marriage was real?” she asked. “My parents’ lawyer said that it wasn’t.”

“Then their lawyer was mistaken.” Reyhan glared at her. “You are my wife. That is why you were brought here. Now that you are in my country, in my home, you will treat me with respect and reverence. Is that understood?”

The need to bolt for freedom grew exponentially.

“Reyhan, I—”

But she never got to say whatever she’d been about to blurt out. For just at that moment, a petite, curvy, beautiful young woman walked into the room.

“This isn’t good,” the woman said. “I heard Emma had arrived and fainted at the sight of you. Is that true?”

Reyhan turned his attention from Emma to the woman. His glare only deepened.

The woman rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re insulted. But don’t forget, I gave birth to your older brother’s firstborn, so you have to be nice to me.”

“One wonders what Sadik sees in you.”

The woman leaned close and smiled. “I’m a hottie. It’s a curse, but there we are.”

Emma didn’t think things could get more shocking, but she was proved wrong when Reyhan actually smiled at the woman, then kissed her forehead.

“Can you fix this?” he asked the woman.

“I’m not sure if you mean Emma or the situation. If you ask me, the one who needs fixing is you.” She held up her hand before he could speak. “I’ll do my best. I promise. Now why don’t you

give us some girl time together? I'll answer Emma's questions and make her feel at home. You can go work on your charm."

Reyhan raised his eyebrows. "I'm very charming."

"Uh-huh. Just a tip here. The 'I'm Prince Reyhan of Bahania' thing gets old really fast. Trust me. Sadik tried it on me, too."

"You're a troublemaker."

"That's true."

Reyhan nodded at Emma, then at the woman and left. Emma watched him go.

"Is this really happening?" she asked, feeling both weary and more confused than ever.

"It sure is," the other woman told her. "Right down to you sitting in the middle of the Bahanian royal palace." She plopped down next to Emma on the sofa and smiled. "Let's start at the beginning. Hi. I'm Cleo."

"I'm Emma. Emma Kennedy."

Cleo looked her over. "Love the hair. My sister-in-law Sabrina puts red highlights in hers, but the color is nothing like this. Is it real?"

It took Emma a second to process the question and realize Cleo wasn't asking about the hair itself, but the color.

"Yes, it's natural."

"Me, too," Cleo said, tugging on her short, spiky blond hair. "I put in gold highlights once, but was that a mistake. I thought I'd look more elegant and classy, which is so not going to happen. I'm stuck being a tacky bottle blonde for the rest of my life. No

biggie. I mean I'm a princess, so now I can be royal and tacky, which I like."

Emma felt as if she'd fallen into an alternate universe. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

Cleo grinned. "I know. I'm rambling. Plus, do you really care about my hair? So here's the thing. You're in Bahania, and Reyhan really is a prince. There are four of them altogether. Murat is the oldest and heir to the throne. Then Sadik, my husband. He's in charge of finance. Reyhan is next. He runs the whole oil thing, and let me tell you, do they have a bunch of that floating around under the sand. Then Jefri, who is putting together a joint air force with El Bahar. There's also Zara, who was my foster sister and didn't know she was a princess until about a year ago, and Sabrina, the king's daughter. She lives in the desert, but that's a whole other story."

"Oh." Emma wasn't sure what to say. Her level of confusion had just gone off the scale. "That's a lot of people." She swallowed. "And you're Princess Cleo?"

"In the flesh." Cleo leaned close. "I'm from Spokane, Washington. That's right by Idaho. I know—not exactly the birthplace of a lot of royals. I had a ton to learn—protocol and how to address everyone. I've gotten involved with some charity work, which is pretty cool, and I have a new baby. Calah." Cleo's expression softened. "She's a dream. Just three months old."

Emma wanted to ask for note cards so she could write all this down and try to keep everyone and everything straight.

Reyhan, a Bahanian prince? Was it possible? And if he was, why had he married her?

"Do you know—" Emma cleared her throat. "There was a wedding a few years back. I thought maybe…My parents hired a lawyer and he thought it wasn't exactly real."

Cleo patted her arm. "Sorry. From what I've heard, it was plenty real. You're well and truly hitched to Reyhan. And he's just like his brother. All stuffy with an 'I'm the prince' attitude. That reverence and respect stuff. Oh, please. Okay, I'll do the respect thing, but reverence? It is so not going to happen."

So she was married. To a prince. Her.

"None of this makes sense," she whispered. "I don't understand."

Why had Reyhan done any of it? Why had he married her and disappeared from her life? And why, all of a sudden, did he pick now to get in touch with her? Did he want to marry someone else? The thought of it gave her an odd squeeze in her empty stomach, but still she had to know.

"Is he engaged?" she asked.

Cleo shook her head. "It's not like that. After Calah was born, the king decided it was time for Reyhan to tie the knot and give him more grandchildren. That's when he had to fess up about his relationship with you. That there was already a Mrs. Reyhan floating around."

Emma felt the room begin to fold around the edges. She had a feeling that if she'd been standing, she would have fallen again.

Cleo grabbed her hand. “Keep breathing,” she instructed humorously. “I’m supposed to be making things better, not worse.”

“It’s not you,” Emma told her. “It’s everything. I can’t believe what’s happening.”

“Hardly a surprise. The good news is, the palace is beautiful and Reyhan is pretty easy on the eyes, too. If you can get past all that honor and tradition, he has a wicked sense of humor. Won’t that be nice?”

Nice? As in Emma would enjoy spending time with him? Was that the plan?

She shook her head. This wasn’t happening, she told herself. None of it.

A tall man carrying a black case entered the room. Cleo waved a greeting.

“Dr. Johnson. You’re still making house calls.”

The older man smiled. “Yes, Princess Cleo. As I will continue to do.”

Cleo leaned close to Emma. “Dr. Johnson is on call for the royal family. He’s pretty cool. You’ll like him.”

Emma stared into the man’s warm blue eyes and felt some of her anxiety fade.

He sat on the coffee table in front of her and reached for her hand. “How are you feeling? I heard you fainted.”

“I don’t know what happened,” she admitted. “One second everything was fine, and the next, I was falling.”

“Prince Reyhan filled me in on what occurred.” He released her wrist. “Your pulse is normal. Have you blacked out since regaining consciousness?”

“No.”

He glanced at Cleo. “Is she speaking coherently?”

“Yup. She’s a little shell-shocked, but under the circumstances, who can blame her?”

Dr. Johnson made a noncommittal noise, then pulled out a stethoscope.

Fifteen minutes later he pronounced Emma exhausted, a little dehydrated, but otherwise fit. After giving her something to help her sleep, he said he would check on her the next day.

“Everything will be better in the morning,” he promised as he left.

Emma watched him go, then nodded as Cleo excused herself to return to her baby. When Emma was finally alone, she stared around at the luxurious suite and the view of the ocean in the distance.

As much as she would like to believe Dr. Johnson, she had a feeling that the passage of night wasn’t going to change one thing about her situation.

Reyhan did not want to speak with his father, but the request had been worded such that he’d known he didn’t have a choice in the matter. So he’d appeared on time in the king’s private rooms and now paced the length of the salon, all the while stepping to

avoid the half-dozen or so cats milling around.

"What do you think now that you've seen her?" his father asked.

"That Emma should not have been brought here. A divorce could have been arranged without her presence."

"You defied me by marrying this young woman. Six years have passed, and you never mentioned her or spent time with her. I want to know why."

Reyhan had no answers to the questions, nor did he want to make up any. Thinking about Emma, being with her…He reached the window and stared out at the garden below. Seeing her again—it had been worse than he'd imagined.

His father stood and crossed the room to stand next to him. "You are my son and a prince," he said. "As such, you were not permitted to take a wife without my permission. Now it is done. Before I approve your divorce, I will get to know this young woman. Two weeks, Reyhan. Surely that is not too much to ask."

Reyhan knew it was not. His father's request was more than reasonable, and yet he would have given much to keep Emma away.

He nodded once and walked to the door. "Excuse me, Father. My presence is required at a meeting."

The king nodded, and Reyhan left.

As Reyhan walked toward the business wing of the palace, he wondered how he would endure the next fourteen days. There was much to occupy his time—negotiations for oil purchases,

dealing with a small band of renegades, reviewing a list of potential brides. Yet he knew none of that would fill his mind. Instead he would think of a woman—the woman he had married. Emma. Their time apart had done nothing to diminish his need for her. Six years ago she had been his greatest weakness, and so she remained.

He paused at the door to his office. No one would ever be permitted to know, he promised himself. Wanting her, needing her, had nearly destroyed him once before. That would not happen again. In two weeks the king would grant their divorce, she would be gone and he, Reyhan, would be allowed to remain strong. That he would live the rest of his life without her was of little consequence. He had survived this long. He would survive the rest of his days. Survive—not live. He reminded himself that most of the time, enduring was more than enough.

Chapter Three

Emma awoke to the not-so-surprising realization that, despite the doctor's promise, little about her situation had changed or improved during the night. Not that she'd expected either, although it would have been nice.

She sat up in the huge bed and pulled her knees to her chest. She remembered the doctor insisting she take something to help her sleep, then she'd changed into her nightgown and nearly collapsed into bed. Then nothing.

The good news was she felt more rested. The bad news… well, where exactly was she going to start? There was so much to consider. That she might really be married to Reyhan and might have been married all this time. That she was in Bahania and he was the son of the king.

She shook her head. Way too many difficult thoughts for first thing in the morning. She should take a few minutes and get her bearings, then deal with the weirdness that was her life.

Emma rose. Her toes curled in the plush carpet that was thick enough to serve as a mattress in a pinch.

The bedroom had been decorated in pale yellows and blues. Ornate, carved dark wood furniture made up the elaborate headboard, footboard and matching nightstands. An armoire stood across the room. When she crossed to it she found a large television inside, along with a DVD player and a wide

assortment of movies. There was also a detailed listing of the various channels available via satellite.

"Amazing," she murmured as she touched the carved birds and flowers on the door.

The bedroom itself was about the size of the average three-bedroom house back home in Dallas. She remembered the living room had been equally huge. With two parts anticipation and one part trepidation, she walked into the bathroom.

Huge didn't begin to describe it. Her entire apartment could have fit inside, with room to spare. The long marble vanity was about twice the length of her main kitchen counter. The tub had whirlpool jets and could have served as a playground for an entire water park full of seals. There was a glass-enclosed shower, towels as big as bedsheets and every toiletry known to womankind.

Emma turned in a slow circle and tried to imagine what it would be like to live somewhere like this permanently. Was it possible to get used to this level of luxury, and would the palace continue to be a delight?

Twenty minutes later she'd showered and washed her face. After dressing, applying mascara and some lip gloss, she returned to the bedroom and put away the rest of her clothes. With that done, there was little to do but explore the rest of the suite and try to figure out what she was going to say when she next saw Reyhan.

In the light of day she knew that there was more to their

relationship than her parents had told her six years ago when she'd returned home brokenhearted. But what exactly?

She left the bedroom and walked into the living room of the suite. The shutters were open and pulled back. The view was so amazing—blue ocean, bright sky, the tops of several trees—that she hadn't noticed Reyhan. But when she turned, she saw him seated at the dining room table in the corner. He studied the newspaper in front of him and hadn't seen her, either.

Her first thought was to bolt for the safety of her bedroom, but before she could get her feet to move, she found herself mesmerized by the man himself.

He was so handsome, she thought, remembering how his dark good looks had stunned her the first time they'd met. His hair was cropped short, in a stylish cut. Strong cheekbones emphasized the leanness of his features. His eyebrows were pulled together, giving him a stern expression. He looked intense and dangerous, something she remembered from their past together. Being around him had always left her tongue-tied and feeling more than a little foolish. That sensation returned big-time.

She winced as she recalled accusing him of marrying her to get a green card. He was a member of the Bahanian royal family. No doubt he could come or go at will just about anywhere in the world. As for wanting her in his bed…she had her doubts. The experience had been a disaster and after those first couple of nights, Reyhan had never come looking for her again.

"How long are you going to stand there?" he asked without

looking up from his paper. “I have ordered you breakfast, Emma. You didn’t eat before or after you arrived at the palace. I don’t want you making yourself ill.”

He set down the paper and looked at her. His dark gaze seemed to see all the way inside to her quivering heart. He raised one eyebrow.

“Are you so afraid of me? I swear that I have never attacked before ten or eleven in the morning. It is not civilized.”

She glanced at the antique grandfather clock by the entryway. “So I’m safe for another ninety minutes?”

“At least.”

He rose and pulled out a chair. Not knowing what else to do, she settled in it then watched as he lifted the tops off several serving dishes on the sideboard.

“What would you like?” he asked.

She blinked at him. “You’re going to serve me?”

“You are my guest. In the interest of privacy I sent the maid away, so there is just the two of us this morning.”

The implication being she was his responsibility? Reyhan had always had the most amazing manners. Apparently that hadn’t changed.

She stood and crossed to the sideboard where she studied the assortment of offerings. There were eggs and bacon, fresh fruit, croissants, Danish and a selection of cereals, both hot and cold.

“I can’t eat all this,” she told him.

“I’ll help.” He motioned to the plates stacked on the left.

“Please begin.”

She reached for the plate. As she leaned forward, Reyhan moved and her hand grazed his arm. The instant heat nearly made her stumble. Awareness rippled along her skin like a sudden cool breeze, making her shiver and break out in goose bumps. She found herself wanting to touch him again, wanting to move closer, to have him touch her. Erotic images sprang into her mind, and before she knew what was happening, she realized it was difficult for her to catch her breath.

All of this happened in a matter of seconds. Then she became aware of herself, of Reyhan’s expression of polite interest and she quickly stepped back and turned toward the food.

This was not good, she thought frantically. Not good at all. She didn’t like how her heart raced whenever he was nearby. That hadn’t happened before. If anything, he’d terrified her as much as he’d intrigued her. Not that she was any less terrified, it was just now she was frightened for a different reason.

She scooped fresh fruit onto her plate, along with some eggs. After taking a biscuit and butter, she returned to the table and poured them each coffee. Reyhan waited until she was seated before claiming his chair.

“You slept well?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Dr. Johnson said that your fainting was not likely to reoccur. He decided it was the combination of lack of food and sleep, along with minor dehydration and the shock of seeing me again.”

Reyhan's steady gaze never left her face. "Had I known you would react so strongly, I would have given you some warning. Stunning you into fainting wasn't my goal."

"Imagine what you could do if it was," she said lightly.

She noticed his single raised eyebrow again, but Emma refused to be intimidated, despite the instinct to cringe and apologize. She turned her attention to her breakfast instead and plunged her fork into a piece of mango. Sexual awareness swirled through the room like an erotic mist, but she was determined to ignore it.

Maybe she always had reacted so strongly to Reyhan but wasn't aware of it, she thought wryly. Maybe when they'd first met there had been this same powerful physical attraction between them but she'd been too young and innocent to recognize it. All she'd known back then was that she loved him and feared him with equal intensity. It was amazing she'd managed to find the strength to leave him.

Then she reminded herself that she hadn't left him. He'd left her and she'd hid out at her parents' home. Any additional contact had been through them. She hadn't even had the courage to tell him she didn't want to see him again. Not that he'd tried very hard.

"Why the heavy sigh?" he asked.

She looked up. "Did I sigh? I didn't mean to."

"You were thinking of the past."

"It's a logical place to go."

He nodded. “We will speak of it.”

A statement or a command? “And if I don’t want to?”

The words were out before she could stop them.

His mouth curved up in amusement. “You defy me?”

“Will that get me fifty lashes or time in the tower?”

“Nothing so boring.” He sipped his coffee. “Why do you not wish to talk about our situation?”

“I do.” She shrugged. “Knee-jerk reaction, I guess. My parents were always so protective. They meant well—they still do. My independence is hard-won and I get my back up when someone gives me orders.”

“I see.”

She had no idea what the silken words meant, nor did she want to ask for an explanation. She doubted whatever contact Reyhan had had with her parents had been especially pleasant.

“You’re right,” she said. “We need to talk about what happened and what’s going to happen.”

He nodded slightly. “If you wish.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“I am terrified by your steely will.”

Emma doubted anything terrified Reyhan. Which meant he was teasing her. Interesting. She wouldn’t have thought royal princes had senses of humor.

“Do you believe our marriage was real?” he asked.

“I don’t want to, but, yes. You have no reason to lie, and my presence here is more than enough proof.” She shifted in her

seat. She'd been married for six years and hadn't known. Talk about being a fool.

"Why did you marry me?" she asked him, knowing it hadn't been for any of the usual reasons. At the time she'd thought Reyhan had loved her, but his behavior proved otherwise.

He chewed and swallowed. "You were a virgin," he said calmly. "I would not have defiled you."

Ten simple words that made her drop her fork, push back her chair and spring to her feet.

"What?" she demanded. "You married me to sleep with me? The whole thing was about sex?"

If love was out of the question, shouldn't he have at least liked her? Shouldn't he have pretended to care?

"Sit down, Emma. You're overreacting."

She took her seat before she remembered she wasn't going to let anyone run her life ever again. Once seated, it seemed silly to stand up and make a fuss. She settled on glaring at him.

Reyhan looked at her. "Why are you so outraged? Do you think there are any men who marry without the thought of their wives being a sexual partner?"

"Most men think about more than just doing it."

That made him get stiff and stern. His gaze narrowed. "I am Prince Reyhan of Bahania. When I married you, I not only gave you my name and protection, but honored you by making you a princess of my country. Had you been willing to continue our relationship, I would have brought you here where you would

have lived in this palace. Neither you nor our children would have wanted for anything. I would have been faithful to you until I breathed my last breath. Who and what you are would have been passed along to our children, and through that, you would have joined in the history of my people. I believe that would be defined as more than just doing it."

"But you never told me any of this," she reminded him, feeling more than a little embarrassed. "Nor did you ask me if this is what I wanted with my life. What about my plans? My dreams? Marrying you could have changed my world forever."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

She thought of her small apartment and her quiet life. She remembered her conversation with Cleo the previous night and what she'd said about the palace and the princes.

"You didn't give me a choice," she said. "Not about staying or going. You married me without telling me the truth, then you disappeared without a word."

Reyhan leaned back in his chair. "Our recollection of the events that happened are very different, but that is of no consequence. What matters is our present circumstances. We are married—something neither of us wishes to continue. The king's permission is required for a prince to divorce, and he has insisted you spend two weeks here until he will grant the decree."

Countless years of having her life run by her parents had made Emma hypersensitive to being told what to do. Her first instinct was to tell Reyhan that maybe she didn't want a divorce, thank

you very much. Maybe she wanted to stay married.

She stopped herself before she could blurt out the irrational statement. She didn't know the man. She didn't want anything to do with him. Of course she wanted to go get a divorce and go back to her life.

"You didn't need his permission to get married, but you need it for a divorce," she said. "That doesn't make sense."

"I did need his permission to marry. I defied him."

Simple words, she thought, but stunning. He'd defied the king? To marry her? Which brought her back to her original question—why?

For sex? He was a handsome, wealthy, royal guy. Couldn't he get any woman he wanted? So why her?

She had a feeling that the earth would stop turning before she found out the answer to that one, so she chose another topic of conversation.

"So after the divorce you'll marry someone else." A thought occurred to her. "Have you already chosen your new bride?" Cleo had said he wasn't engaged, but was he already in love?

Reyhan shook his head. "My marriage will be arranged."

Emma blinked at him. "You mean she'll be picked by someone else? What if you don't like her?"

He shrugged. "That is of little consequence."

It felt like a really big consequence to her.

"But she could make you crazy."

"Then we will have little contact. My duty is to produce heirs

for the kingdom. I will not turn my back on my responsibility."

He had a duty? But where had all that duty been when he'd married her? And why would he agree to a wife he might not even like?

"Do you get to spend time with the potential brides in advance? Like The Bachelor for royalty?"

"No."

"But—"

He rose, cutting her off. "I have a meeting," he said politely. "Please think of your time here in Bahania as a vacation. In two weeks you can return to Texas as if nothing ever happened. In the meantime, if you need anything, please ask one of the servants. You are an honored guest of the king."

With that he nodded and left.

Emma stared after him. She might be going home, but she doubted she would ever forget what had happened here. In a matter of hours, her world had turned upside down.

She rose and crossed to the French doors that led to a beautiful balcony. When she stepped outside, she saw the balcony stretched the length of the palace, perhaps even circling around it. A nice place to take a walk, she thought as she moved to the carved railing and leaned down to inspect the wonderful gardens below.

Stone paths meandered through what looked like a formal English garden. A fountain gurgled, while birds sang from nearby trees.

Hardly what she'd expected for a desert nation, she thought, then remembered the desalinization plant Alex had pointed out on their drive from the airport. Bahania created much of the fresh water her people used. Interesting, but hardly what was on her mind.

She turned her attention from the garden to her left hand. Reyhan had placed a simple gold band there after the ceremony. He'd kissed her and promised to replace it with any ring she would like. At the time she'd thought he'd been caught up in the romance of the moment, making promises he could never keep. Now she knew he'd been telling the truth.

But why hadn't he told her the rest of it? About him being the prince and that he'd always planned to return there? And why hadn't her parents been able to find out that she was really married? Who had told them the ceremony had been a sham and why hadn't they questioned the information?

Would it have made a difference? After the fact, she could say yes. But at the time? She'd been hurt and afraid and not that interested in being Reyhan's wife. Their few days together as husband and wife had been spent in bed. He had wanted her with a passion that had terrified and confused her. While she hadn't minded him touching her, she hadn't much liked it, either. He'd been too intense, too hungry, too everything.

Now the thought of those dark eyes gazing at her with unmistakable desire made her breathing quicken. Which so did not make sense. She had no reason to be attracted to Reyhan.

She barely knew him. She wasn't even sure she liked him. So why was she anticipating the next time she saw him?

Reyhan walked from the residential wing of the palace toward the business wing, moving quickly but with his thoughts still outpacing his steps.

There wasn't a part of him that was not on fire with desire for Emma. He needed her as he needed the wide spaces of the desert. She was as much a part of him, and yet as out of reach as the stars.

If only he'd been able to keep her from coming to Bahania. But his father had insisted on meeting the woman Reyhan had married and then left behind. Royal pronouncements could only be avoided for so long, and in the end he had run out of excuses. So Emma was here—haunting him. He wanted her with a grim desperation that threatened his world, and he could not have her. Not before and not now. She was, he acknowledged, the one woman on earth who could bring him to his knees. Him—a prince. A man of power and action. If she knew how he really felt…

He reminded himself she did not know, nor would she be affected if she did. She'd made her feelings clear six years ago and there was no reason to think they would have changed.

Only twelve more days, he told himself. He could survive that, especially if he avoided her.

He reached the business wing and asked his assistant to come

into his office. When the young man was seated, Reyhan pulled out his schedule. He was about to find himself very, very busy.

Emma restlessly wandered around the suite. She might be an honored guest of the king, but she wasn't sure what that meant in terms of what she could and could not do. Were there self-guided tours of the palace? The maid had disappeared and she didn't know who else to ask. The last thing she wanted was to wander into some forbidden room and find herself at the wrong end of a pointy sword.

She stared at the phone and wondered what would happen if she picked it up. Did the palace have an operator? In movies, the White House always did, and the palace was at least twice as big. Wasn't an operator required?

A knock on the suite's main door saved her from finding out. For a split second, her heart fluttered in anticipation. Reyhan? Had his meeting ended early and had he decided to return to speak with her? Had…

She pulled open the door and tried not to look disappointed when she saw Cleo standing there. The petite blonde had a baby in her arms.

"Remember me?" Cleo asked. "We met last night."

"Of course," Emma said with a smile. "You came to rescue me."

Cleo grinned. "Someone had to. These princes," she said, shaking her head. "They have no idea how intimidating they can

be, and between you and me, we can't ever let them know."

She walked into the suite and held out her daughter. "This is Calah. I'm going to say 'Isn't she beautiful?' and I really need you to agree with me. I know, I know. Every mother thinks her baby is beautiful. I hate being a cliché, but there it is."

Emma glanced at the sleeping baby. "She is beautiful. You and your husband are going to have to beat boys off with a stick."

"I suspect Sadik will just glare menacingly and that will be enough." Cleo plopped down on the sofa and held out the baby. "Are you a cuddler or do infants make you uneasy?"

Emma sat next to her and took Calah in her arms. "I love holding babies. I'm a delivery room nurse so I'm around newborns all the time. It's a great specialty and I love it, but every now and then I get the urge to move to pediatrics."

Cleo's eyebrows arched. "Ah, so you love children. Does Reyhan know?"

"I don't think so." The information would hardly matter. He might want heirs but not with her.

"Interesting. So tell me everything about your life."

Emma gently rocked the baby and breathed in the sweet scent of her. "There's not much to tell. I'm a nurse, I live in Dallas and now I'm here. But what about you? How did you come to be here, and married to a prince?"

Cleo drew her feet up and leaned back against the sofa. "Well, I already told you I'm from Spokane. I grew up dirt-poor and without much family. Eventually I went into the foster care

system, which turned out to be a good thing because I got to meet Zara. She was the daughter of the woman who took me in. Anyway, we became good friends, then practically sisters. Years after her mother had died, Zara went through her things and found these letters to her mother from the king of Bahania."

Emma stared at her. "You're kidding."

"Nope. He'd met her when she'd been a dancer and he'd fallen for her big-time. Apparently theirs was a great love, but Zara's mom knew it would never last so she bailed without telling him."

"How sad," Emma said.

"I agree. I mean she could have tried to make it work. Anyway, Zara found the letters and the two of us headed over here to see if the king really was her father. And he was."

"That must have been a shock for both of them."

"It was. I mean viola`, instant princess. She also met Rafe, who is American but also a sheik, and she married him—but that is a more complicated story."

Emma laughed. "Oh, right. Because this one isn't. So you stayed with Zara and then married Prince Sadik?"

"Not exactly. He and I—well, it was sort of spontaneous combustion. But he was a prince and I worked at a copy store. I mean until I'd come to Bahania I'd never been anywhere. I knew I wasn't princess material. So I went home. But I had to come back for Zara's wedding to Rafe, and I was pregnant and I didn't want anyone to know. The king found out, then Sadik, then we got married, but he wouldn't admit he loved me and it was horrible,

but he came to his senses and now we're blissfully happy."

Emma didn't know what to say. "That's an amazing story."

Cleo grinned. "I know. I can't wait until Calah is old enough to hear the romantic bits. I won't tell her about getting pregnant or anything." Her eyes widened. "Oh, I should warn you. Both Zara and Sabrina are pregnant. I think there's something in the water, so don't drink anything but bottled." She glanced at her daughter. "Unless you want one of your own."

Emma was dealing with enough changes right now, although a child…She shook off the thought. No point in going there. Not now.

"I don't think this is a good time for me," she said. "Plus there's the whole needing-a-man thing."

"Is this where I point out that you have a husband?"

One who had made it plain he'd found her anything but interesting in bed? "No, thanks."

Cleo nodded. "I understand. But that doesn't mean I won't think it. So how did you and Reyhan meet?"

"It was at college. My first semester." Those days felt like a lifetime ago. "I was a brand-new freshman—technically an adult, but not emotionally. Not even close." She shrugged. "I'm the only child of older parents. They'd given up on ever having children when I came along. I was a surprise, but a happy one. My parents were so thrilled, they were determined to keep me safe no matter what. Which meant keeping me sheltered. It took my entire senior year of high school to convince them to let me

go to a college that required me living a couple hundred miles away."

"Reyhan's older, right?" Cleo asked. "You couldn't have had a class together."

"We didn't. I was socially backward, and I would never have had the courage to talk to an actual man. I was walking home from the library when a couple of drunk guys started hassling me. I'm sure it was harmless, but I was too inexperienced to know what to do. I panicked and started pleading with them, which they found pretty funny. I was terrified and took off running. I ran smack into Reyhan. My books went flying, I'm sure I screamed and it was a mess. By the time it was sorted out, the guys were long gone and I was convinced Reyhan had rescued me from certain death."

Cleo sighed. "That sounds romantic."

Emma hadn't thought of it in that way. "I thought he was handsome and mysterious. Very attractive, of course. I was stunned when he asked me out." She shifted the baby, taking more of her weight on her lap.

"But you said yes."

"Would you have said anything else?"

"Probably not. The rescue would be really tough to ignore. It's very princely." She laughed. "I say that so calmly, but I'm used to Sadik being royal now. At the beginning it was a big deal to me."

"Do you miss your old life?"

"Not even for a minute. Not just because this is so much

nicer—which it is. But because of Sadik. I love him." Her dark blue eyes glowed with affection. "He makes me insane, but that's okay. I drive him crazy, too. Besides, being different keeps things interesting. And he loves me." She glanced at Emma. "Handsome, arrogant prince types may be hard to tame, but when they love, it's with every part of themselves."

Emma fought against a surge of envy. She had always wanted to be loved like that by a man. It wasn't that her parents hadn't cared for her, they had. But their love had been about protecting her from a difficult and frightening world. She'd always wanted just to be loved for herself.

Cleo shrugged. "Okay, I get carried away. That's part of my charm. So enough about me and my past. Are you excited about living in the palace?"

"It should be an interesting vacation. At least that's how I'm trying to look at it."

"Your one chance to be a princess?"

"Something like that."

Cleo grinned. "What if you find you like it so much, you want to stay?"

"Not an option. As soon as my two weeks are up, I'm heading back to Dallas." And her regularly scheduled life. There was nothing for her here in Bahania. She ignored the little voice inside that whispered there wasn't much for her back in Dallas, either.

Chapter Four

R eyhan had hoped the large palace would provide enough room for him to avoid Emma, but he had not taken his father's need to meddle into account. Now that the king had passed control of much of the day-to-day details of the country on to his sons, he had far too much free time to plan ways to torment them. His newest strategy began with an invitation for both Reyhan and Emma to join him for dinner.

Reyhan studied the casually worded e-mail and knew the phrase "if it's convenient" was there for show. Should Reyhan protest it was not convenient, his father would change the request to an order. Defying one's father was easily accomplished. Refusing the king was another matter, especially when Reyhan needed the monarch's agreement to the divorce.

Which was why he found himself walking toward his father's private quarters that evening, trying not to think about how he would survive several hours in Emma's company.

Before she had arrived, he had nearly convinced himself that everything was different. That he no longer had feelings for her, and even if he did, that she was not the same woman. But a few minutes with her had told him that not only did she still have that ultimate power over him, she had somehow retained the gentle sweetness that had first drawn him to her.

When he reached his father's suite, he squared his shoulders.

He was Prince Reyhan of Bahania. Royal, powerful and without weakness. He would survive this meeting and any others. He would endure and in the end, Emma would be out of his life forever.

"My son," his father said happily as Reyhan walked into the main salon. "How good to see you."

"And you, my father."

The king's cheer warned Reyhan that his father might have a trick or two coming during the dinner and that he would be wise to stay alert.

He crossed to the wet bar and poured himself a Scotch, then walked to the large sofa facing the French doors leading to the balcony. Only one cat lay on a center cushion. Reyhan avoided it as he sat down.

"Emma should be here shortly," his father said, stroking the large Persian draped across his lap.

Reyhan had offered to escort her himself, but the king had said he preferred to speak with his son privately first. Now Reyhan waited patiently.

"Your wife is a very pretty young woman," his father said.

Reyhan nodded. He never thought of Emma as "his wife." If he had, he would have claimed her, despite her wishes to be as far away from him as possible. He would have wanted to have her, take her, be with her. It had been safer for them both to be on opposite sides of the planet. Literally. He'd forced himself to think of her only on rare occasions, usually at night, when he

couldn't sleep and the sounds of the Arabian Sea had echoed with her soft voice.

"I arranged tonight's dinner so I could get to know her," his father said.

Reyhan didn't like the sound of that. "She will be leaving in a few days."

"Until then, she is my daughter-in-law. A relationship of some importance."

Reyhan wasn't sure if his father meant that or was trying to make trouble. On the king's side was his close ties with Cleo, Sadik's wife. She was a favorite and spent much time in the king's company. If that happened with Emma, as well, his father might not want to agree to the divorce. Reyhan knew he could not stay married. Not to her. Not with his need burning so hotly inside.

Before he could come up with a reason to keep them apart, there was a knock at the main door. He rose, bracing himself for the impact of seeing her again.

"Come in," the king called.

A young woman pushed opened the door, entered and bowed her head. Emma followed her, pausing uncertainly just past her escort.

Reyhan set down his drink, then crossed to her. As he approached, he took in the emerald-green sheath that clung to her sensual curves, the elegant upswept way she'd styled her dark red hair and the makeup emphasizing her eyes and mouth. She needed no artifice to make her more beautiful, yet he appreciated

the effort…and the results.

Wanting flared, as did heat. He ignored both, concentrating instead on the excitement and apprehension battling in Emma's green eyes. A tentative smile tugged on the corners of her mouth, as if she wasn't sure which emotion would win.

When he stopped beside her, he reached for her hand. The second his fingers closed around hers, the ache inside of him increased to unbearable. Still, he dismissed the painful need and settled her small hand in the crook of his arm. He urged her toward his father, who had put down the cat and risen.

"Father, this is Princess Emma, my wife. Emma, this is King Hassan of Bahania."

He felt her stiffen at "Princess" and wondered if she'd considered her position here. As long as they were married, she was a member of the royal family. Bahania was a long way from her life in Texas.

"Enchanted," the older man said as he took her free hand and lightly kissed the back of it. "Would you like something to drink? Champagne? We should toast the moment."

"No. I—I'm fine."

The king drew her from Reyhan and settled her on the sofa, next to the sleeping Siamese. He took the opposite side of the couch, leaving Reyhan the chair.

Not difficult duty, Reyhan thought as he sat. Emma was in his direct line of vision. He could visually trace her profile, the line of her neck, the length of her bare arms. And while looking at

her, he could remember their few nights together. How she'd felt when he'd touched her. How she'd tasted when he'd kissed her. The tight dampness of her virgin body when he'd first claimed her as his own.

The images had an expected result, and he was forced to shift slightly in his chair. Stop, he ordered himself. Thinking about what had been once and never would be again offered torment but little else.

"Tell me about yourself," the king said. "You are from Texas?"

Emma nodded. "The Dallas area. I've lived there nearly all my life. Except when I was at college."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"No. My parents had actually given up on ever having children when I came along." She smiled. "I was a surprise."

The sweet pull of her lips hit Reyhan like a punch in the gut. He consciously relaxed his muscles and sucked in a breath. Soon she would be gone and then he could forget she had ever lived, he told himself.

"A happy one," his father said.

Emma laughed. "You're right. My parents have made it very clear how much they adore me." Her humor faded slightly. "They are extremely protective."

"As they should be. A daughter such as yourself is a rare treasure."

"Thank you," she murmured as she bowed her head.

Reyhan caught the light flush on her cheek. So she still

blushed. When he had first met her it seemed that everything he did caused her to blush. A compliment, a kiss, a whisper of desire. She had been the most innocent woman he'd ever met.

"Treasure or not, they made it difficult to have a life," she said. "Not that I don't love them dearly. But there were things I wanted to do." Her voice had turned wistful. "They were very strict about things like school dances and dating."

His father raised his eyebrows. Reyhan stepped into the conversation.

"Many Western high schools offer chaperoned dances for the students," he said.

"A dangerous practice," the king said. "Now you know why I sent you to England for much of your education."

"An all-boys school," Reyhan said dryly. "It was thrilling."

Emma glanced at him and smiled. For that second, there was a connection between them. He could nearly see the sparks arcing across the room and feel the temperature increasing.

"Where did you meet my son?" the king asked, breaking the spell.

Emma returned her attention to the monarch. "At college. It was my first year there. I'd had to beg my parents to let me go. I was very excited, but scared, too."

"And did he sweep you off your feet?"

She swallowed, blushed, then nodded. "Yes. He was very charming. Very…worldly."

Reyhan thought of the young man he'd been at twenty-four.

Hardly worldly, except in Emma's inexperienced view. He'd wanted her and he'd pursued her with a single-minded focus that had left her nowhere to escape. He'd been determined to have her, and, upon discovering she was a virgin, he'd married her.

"Yours was a brief courtship," the king said.

Emma glanced at Reyhan. "I…we…"

"She knew nothing of who I was," Reyhan said, interrupting her hesitation. "I alone defied you, Father. The blame, the responsibility, is mine."

Emma's eyes widened slightly, but she didn't say anything. The king nodded.

"You stayed together only a short time." The king's words were more statement than question.

"You know this," Reyhan said as he stepped in again. "I was called home because of Sheza's death." He glanced at Emma. "My aunt."

"But you did not return to your wife."

He had tried, Reyhan thought bitterly. He had called and attempted to see her, but she refused to have anything to do with him. Eventually her father had ordered him to stay away. No explanation save that Emma regretted the marriage and never wanted to see him again.

He'd told himself the sting he'd felt was little more than wounded pride. That he hadn't actually cared about her. Loved her.

He shrugged with a casualness he didn't feel. "The past is

finished. What value is there in discussing it now?”

“I wish to know,” his father said. He looked at Emma. “So after things did not work out with Reyhan, you returned to your parents?”

Reyhan didn’t save her from that probing question mostly because he wanted to hear her answer.

“I, ah, stayed with them until the new semester started, then I returned to college. By then, Reyhan was gone.”

True enough. Once he’d realized he’d lost her, he’d finished the requirements for his master’s and had gone back to Bahania. He’d never tried to see Emma again.

“And what do you do now?” the king asked. “How do you spend your days?”

Emma looked confused, as if she expected them to already know this. “I’m a delivery room nurse. I received my RN and went to work in a Dallas hospital.” She shifted in her seat and smiled. “It wasn’t easy, let me tell you. My parents really hated the idea of me living on my own, but I knew it was time. I have a good job. I can support myself.”

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