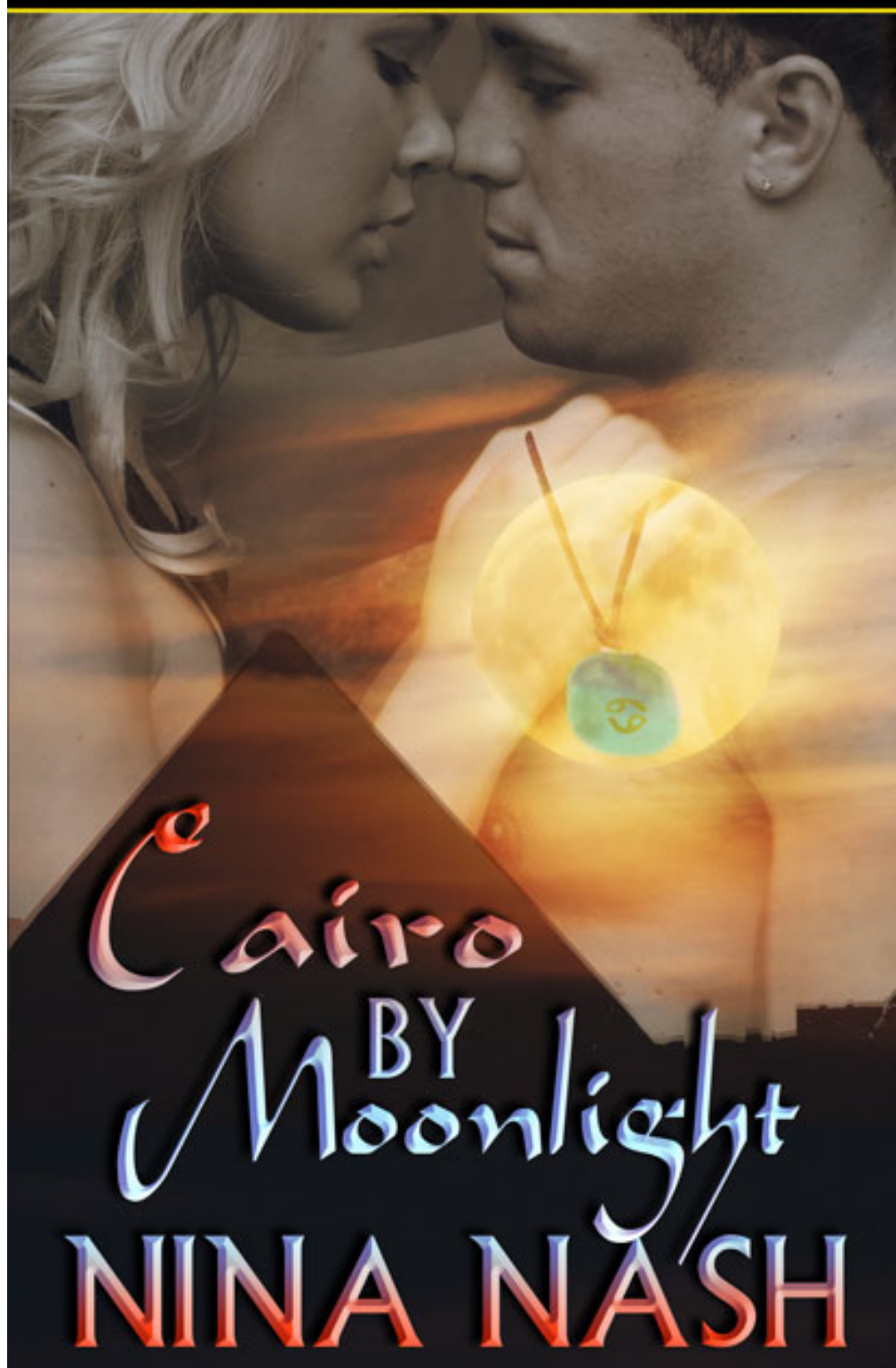


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Cairo by Moonlight

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CAIRO BY MOONLIGHT

Nina Nash

Dedication

Dedicated to all those who yearn for love amidst the sands of time.

Chapter One

"You've got to be kidding—you can't be serious," he said, staring at the battered cedar and steel cabinet. "You don't mean to actually send this-this-this monstrosity home, do you? I mean, it's going to cost a fortune to send this piece of—"

"Caleb!"

He grinned, a whiter than snow flash that looked out of place in the eternally dun-colored market. "*Junk*—I was going to say *junk*—that's all. Although I don't know why you're so concerned with offending the locals, anyway." He waved his arm toward the activity that surrounded them, so loud that he had to raise his voice to be heard. "People are swearing in ten languages all around us and you're worried about being offensive. And some of them are supposed to be dead languages, too! But you don't want me to call an ace an ace, a spade a spade, or a piece of sh—"

"I get your point already. You don't like it. So what else is new? You haven't liked much of anything since we've been here, have you? God forbid you should actually *agree with me* on anything. Fine, forget it. I've had enough," she said.

Turning to head back to the hotel, Layla felt her emotions threaten to bubble over like ice cream in root beer, barely noticing the rush of people trying to get home to avoid the blistering sun. The heat in her head and the ice in her heart made the hovering orb above her seem inconsequential.

She heard the robe-clad vendor behind her trying to call her back. He'd known a sure sale when he saw one—until Caleb appeared, that is. Then everything had changed.

Caleb's presence was enough to change the world around him in a New York minute. One withering look, one scathing remark—that was all it took for Layla to plummet to the depths of despair or the seething, anger-filled pit she now found herself in.

The turmoil that lived inside her, the sadness and anger that Caleb generated deep in her soul, was her constant companion—it had been for a long time.

Walking through the dusty market, studiously avoiding the lascivious stares of the gap-toothed locals, Layla assessed the state of her life. It was something she had grown accustomed to doing, but no matter how endlessly she searched within herself for an answer to the unhappiness that haunted them, she couldn't find a solution. Not one that she wanted to pursue.

How had this happened to us? I remember when we were happy...it's been ten years and we're both miserable. We can't even find compatibility—let alone contentment—in Cairo! If we can't find it here, in the shadows of the pyramids, we won't find it anywhere.

"Kofta! Kofta here...hot kofta! Kebab— anyone for kebab? Good, hot kebab! Kebab, pretty lady?"

She forced herself to meet the eyes of the man who was holding skewered meat in her direction and waving it enticingly as he smiled broadly at her. One gold tooth flash in the sun and she wondered yet again how a group of people who were obviously financially-challenged could afford to have gold teeth. They were everywhere, the glittering teeth. There were more gold smiles in Cairo than there were at a hip-hop awards ceremony, despite the poverty that couldn't be hidden on the cobblestone, dust-and dung-filled streets.

"*La, shukran,*" Layla murmured. *No, thank you.* Smiling grimly, she nodded and hurried past him.

The local merchants were not shy, especially with tourists and it was impossible to hide the fact that Layla was a foreigner. In a land filled with tan skin, dark eyes and curly black hair, she was an anomaly, her creamy complexion and straight blonde surfer-type hair a dead giveaway to her visitor status.

And that was long before she looked anyone in the eye. Her nearly teal eyes were so far removed from the chocolate-colored hues of the Egyptian people that she would never pass for anything other than what she was—one of the curious visitors that flocked to the site of the last testament to the existence of the Seven Wonders of the World.

She sidestepped, narrowly avoiding a collision with one of the donkeys that ferried everything in the city. People, goods, literally everything moved on the plodding backs of the tireless animals. They, too, were everywhere.

Gold teeth and jackasses. It's too bad I'm married to an American ass—the little donkeys seem much more agreeable than the one I'm chained to. At least they know when to keep their mouths shut.

"Ah, Mrs. Greer. *Ahlan wa sahlán...* Hello. Beautiful day, eh?" Aman asked.

Wondering how he could stand to wear the heavy blue and gold uniform in the dense heat, she smiled, knowing that Aman's uniform would leave her a soggy mess if she were forced to wear it. As it was, Layla was having trouble enough wearing the amount of clothing considered proper attire for women on the streets of the city but if she had her way she would have worn far less.

"*Ahlan biki,*" she answered. *Hello.*

Most of the locals who were in contact with visitors spoke English, but she thought that it never hurt to learn a few native phrases, a fact that Aman's smile reinforced. She was sure her pronunciation left much to be desired but that, she knew, was inconsequential.

Caleb hadn't bothered to learn one phrase of the exotic tongue—not even one solitary word. It was a fact that made Layla angry, but what could she do about it? She knew that it was nearly impossible to try and change a person completely to fulfill your

expectations of them. Besides, she just didn't believe that her husband would ever see that his indifference was something that annoyed her.

He just didn't have it in him to see her point. She knew it.

"Yes, it is beautiful today. But it's beautiful every day in Cairo, isn't it?" Weather was a safe topic for idle chitchat in any country. In this one, especially, a woman alone had to be careful to watch what she said.

The doorman held the glass door open and she entered the lobby of the King's Palace Hotel and was immediately wrapped in cool air. The hush inside the building was in sharp contrast to the sights, sounds and smells of the street.

That's the way Cairo was, on so many levels. A mixture of hard pyramids and soft sand, the scent of unwashed bodies heightening the fragrance of cascading bougainvillea. The searing noonday sun forgotten in the chilliness of the desert night. This was a land of opposites, some so subtle that they were barely noticed, while others practically shouted their differences for all the world to see.

She had the elevator to herself and she took the opportunity to plow her manicured fingers through her hair, pulling it up off her neck and holding it high behind her head for a moment. The air on her neck felt refreshing, but it wasn't cold enough to quench her temper.

Shooting out of the silent sliding doors and into the hallway, she strode toward the suite. The floral carpet muffled the sound of her leather sandals—had it not been there her feet would have sounded like the rat-tat-tatting of gunfire.

The suite had been cleaned in their absence. She hit it with the force of a hurricane.

I've had enough...ten years is long enough to know when things aren't going to work out. Things with Caleb are just not going to get any better, no matter what we do...where we go...how hard we try. No, it's better to just end it—what's the sense in torturing each other any longer?

She grabbed her suitcase from the closet, tossed it on the bed and flung it open. It gaped on the bed and she felt as if it was accusing her of running away with its wide, empty stare. Turning to the chest of drawers she yanked the top one open and pulled out a lacy red nightgown, staring at it for a long moment.

What was I thinking? Caleb and I are so far apart at this point—how could I have thought it would only take a romantic vacation and some sexy clothes to fix our problems? There is no fix for this mess—not without a lawyer.

She dropped the filmy creation in the leather wastebasket.

The sound of a key in the door startled her. When she lifted her eyes toward the sound and was even more surprised by what she saw.

"Hey...I tried to catch you. You move pretty fast," Caleb said. His chiseled features looked weary. His brow furrowed at the sight of the open case. He held out the enormous bouquet of orchids he held. "These are for you. Listen, Layla. I'm-I'm sorry I

was such an idiot back there. I don't know what happened...what came over me. I don't know what I was thinking —"

"You weren't thinking — that's the problem!" she snapped.

Instantly she regretted her words. They had become adept at hurting each other with sarcastic remarks. They had done it for so long that it had become a standard part of their conversation.

What the hell is wrong with me? He's trying to apologize and I'm being a shrew. Why can't I just learn to let it go? How can we ever move forward when all we seem to do is hurt each other?

"You're right," Caleb admitted. His expression reinforced his words. The college football hero still had the rugged good looks that had first caught Layla's eye, but the cockiness was long gone. "I didn't think. Look we're not going to just change everything overnight. Bear with me, okay? I'm trying — really, I am."

She reached for the flowers. "I know. Me, too," Layla buried her face in the blooms. "They're beautiful flowers, Caleb. Thank you."

Knocking at the door saved them from the need for further conversation. She headed to the bathroom in search of something to hold the flowers and from the modern, marbled room she heard voices. The owners of the voices were gone when she returned to the living area.

What she saw made her heart jump.

"By the time I paid for it, you were gone," he said, standing beside the wooden cupboard that had seen better days. She hadn't thought she'd ever see it again. "I think it's going to look good in the house, don't you? And I was thinking that we should be able to crate it and take it in the cargo hold on the plane, rather than shipping it. Would be a little more expensive, but at least you'll know it's going to get there in one piece."

Layla crossed the large room in an instant, set the flowers on the cupboard and threw herself at him. Instinct took over and he caught her firmly in his arms.

Hell, if I knew she was going to be this excited about a broken-down old chest of drawers, I would've agreed to it before she stormed off. Maybe we can figure this out. Maybe there's hope for us yet. God, she feels good...

She buried her face in his thick neck, inhaling deeply the heady masculine scent of him, feeling the solid strength of his body against hers, realizing that their hearts were beating in unison. It had been so long since she had let herself feel a moment of unguarded spontaneity with him — she had forgotten how liberating it was.

Why couldn't he have cared for my feelings in the first place? Why did I have to get so upset for him to care? Oh, what's the difference...he might just be getting a point or two, after all. Maybe there's hope for us. Maybe we can work things out. I forgot how great he feels, how big and safe...

Caleb felt himself responding physically to her nearness. It had been a long time since they'd been this close and he was shocked at the sudden snugness of his jeans. His cock was stiffening and he was powerless to stop it.

Hell, no—she's just happy with me again. If I put the moves on her I'm liable to be shot down. No, better to just bask in the happiness for a while. Not pushing my luck here.

Her feet gently landed on the carpet. Caleb brushed his lips with hers and was surprised at the pressure he felt from her lips in return. He was red in the face and breathing rapidly.

I wonder...would she let me get close to her again? She looks ready for something...could it be me? Hell, it's worth a try...

He probed her warm mouth gently with his tongue and when she opened herself to him he became bolder. Their tongues danced in the age-old dance of exploration and passion. Their kisses grew deeper, more passionate, as their bodies heated and their inhibitions left them.

"Layla?" he asked against her neck, his voice hoarse and ragged as he bit gently on the warm, soft skin near the vein that pulsed beneath the surface of her long, graceful neck. "Babe?"

Nodding silently against his chest, she pressed herself to his hard body. Desire welled within her as she felt Caleb's hard, thick cock beating against her hip.

Oh Caleb, I had forgotten how wonderful it feels to be near you like this. I want you—I want you more than I've wanted you for years.

He tugged her gently toward the butter-soft leather sofa that faced the balcony. The pyramids were outside the window, but neither of them noticed them as he reached to pull her shirt over her head. Raising her arms for him, she let him slip her shirt over her head, remove her bra and brush his fingers across her taut nipples. With a swift movement, he pushed her pants and panties down and she stepped out of them.

Naked, she stood before him without moving while his eyes danced across the contours of her body. Caleb hadn't seen her undressed for far too long and he took his time examining her.

Good God, she's beautiful. How had I forgotten how perfect she is? And she's mine—all mine...if I can manage to hold on to her. I'll show her how much I love her, how much I've missed her. I'll show her how much I care for her.

His clothes joined hers on the floor in a New York minute.

Caleb's wide shoulders, lightly-haired chest and rippling stomach muscles made Layla's heart give a quick flutter. Time had been kind to him and his body was as hard and muscled as it had been when they first met. Maybe more so, as he had traded the younger man's suppleness for an older, thicker presence. He took up more space than she remembered, his wide stance almost intimidating. Dropping her eyes to the thatch of hair at the top of his thighs made her gasp. Straight, firm, hard and thick, his arousal was evident. Well-endowed, Caleb had a cock that commanded attention and begged to be touched.

Layla had forgotten how just the sight of Caleb in the nude was enough to make her wet with desire. She had forgotten, but it was a memory – and an experience – that was returning to her quickly.

A shiver passed down her spine. Her nipples puckered and she felt the wetness between her legs, felt the tingling begin and knew that she wanted his touch. Now. It had been too long since she'd been near him, she couldn't wait any longer.

Looking up into his face she knew that, in that instant, his wasn't the face of a stranger but the face of someone she knew intimately. And loved, at least for now.

"Caleb..." she whispered.

His arms pulled her close and lifted her feet from the carpet, carried her across the room and lay her down on the wide sofa, settling her into the rich, supple leather before he lay down beside her. His hard cock rested against her thigh.

"I know," he said as he leaned close to kiss her. "I want you, too."

"Take me, Caleb. Make love to me the way you used to, remember? Love me, Caleb."

His fingers on her wet pussy were confident, sliding into her most secret places and making her ache with desire. She pushed against him, rubbing herself into his palm as the sensations grew within her.

They hadn't made love in so many months – she wondered fleetingly how long either of them could last before they fell over the edge into the madness of orgasm. It didn't matter. Whatever time they had would have to be time enough.

Layla reached for his cock. He pressed himself against her fingers, moaning softly against her neck as she stroked him, his turgid organ throbbing in her hand as she tugged him gently, squeezing the tip between her fingers.

"Oh, babe, that feels so good. I don't know how long I can hold out. I want you so badly, I want to feel myself inside you. Oh! Babe, I'm so close," he moaned. She could feel his arousal, but she didn't want the glorious sensations to end. Not yet.

Releasing his cock, she pushed herself up on the sofa, turned her body around, straddled his chest and put her wet folds close to his face. She stared at his dancing penis for a few beats of her heart before she leaned over and took him in her mouth.

Caleb tasted warm and spicy and she remembered that he always tasted exotic. His skin was smooth against her tongue and she pushed her lips up and down on his shaft, sucking him harder and harder every time she got to his straining head. She tasted the first drops of his arousal, swirling her tongue over the little hole and down the length of him.

Layla loved the feeling of his heavy cock in her mouth. She loved the way he squirmed beneath her, loved knowing that she could push him to his inevitable climax if she wanted to. She didn't want to, though. She wanted to savor these moments for as long as she could.

When he pulled her hips toward his mouth she reluctantly released his cock, slid lower along his body and put her pussy onto his mouth. When he touched her warm wet folds with his hot tongue, she arched against him and shuddered as his tongue lapped her clit, drinking the sweetness that was gushing from her. He tortured her with his mouth until she felt the first waves of pleasure building up deep inside her. Pulling away from him with a stifled cry she held her quivering flesh inches from his face, willing her body to relax. She didn't want to come, not yet. After waiting so long, she didn't want the exquisite feel of his touch to end too swiftly. Who knew when it would come again?

His hard cock, nearly purple and bouncing with unreleased desire, teased her and she gripped it tightly with her fist, sliding her hand down his length over and over. Caleb moaned, shifted beneath her and pressed himself toward her mouth but she resisted. She knew that if she touched him again—even briefly—he would come and she didn't want that. No, Layla wanted every inch of his hardness buried deeply within her—and she wanted it now.

I can't wait any longer. I've waited too long already. I need that big cock inside me. I need it.

Positioning herself over his hardness, she slid onto it, coating him with her slick juices. When he filled her with his ample flesh she paused, breathing deeply and searching for control. It would have been effortless to climax the instant she felt his hot cock fill her but she wanted, so desperately, to make the experience last.

With a growl, Caleb began to move his hips against hers, pumping his cock like a piston into her center, taking care to press the wide, hard base of his shaft against her clit with every stroke. He knew it was the surest way to satisfy her, he had done it enough times to know that it was a maneuver her body couldn't resist. He was right—Layla's body began to move with frantic movements above him.

Reaching up to fondle her breasts, he wrapped his fingers around her taut nipples and pinched them. Throwing her head back, her silky throat open to his sight, she climaxed. Caleb watched the spasms hold her body, felt the clutching grip of her slick folds on his erection and heard the stuttering moans of her passion.

It was enough to push him over the edge, past the boundaries of his self-control. With one final thrust he buried himself in her body and released the flood he'd been holding at bay. In fast bursts his cock loosed its stream of cum and for several long seconds he stopped breathing. They were focused on the spasming flesh that joined them, his orgasm so forceful that it was a shock to both of them.

It wasn't until Caleb's softened penis began to slide contentedly from her satisfied centre that either of them remembered the little chest of drawers.

Chapter Two

"I'll grab a wet towel. Maybe we can clean it up some so we can get a good look at the wood. I think it'll match the stuff we've already got really well, don't you?" asked Caleb, heading for the bathroom and coming back with a dampened towel.

Layla watched him as he kneeled before the piece of furniture, the muscles of his back rippling as he began to work. A shiver of excitement passed through her body as she surveyed his back.

He was wearing his jeans again and she had pulled on panties and a t-shirt. After they made love neither of them felt the need to dress fully again. It was a comfortable kind of intimacy that they hadn't shared in a long time, something that neither of them took for granted but both of them enjoyed.

Together they scrubbed the piece of furniture which obviously hadn't been cleaned in ages. By the time it was presentable the once-white towel was blackened.

"Guess we'll have to throw this out," said Caleb. He held up the towel. "Probably want us to pay for it if they see it, don't you think?"

She nodded. "Probably. They'll tack it onto our bill somehow, I'm sure of it. Let me just get the underside before we toss the towel."

Layla stuck the towel beneath the piece and ran it across the bottom surfaces. Her hand met with something she hadn't expected. Something unusual. Something...square.

"I think there's something under here," she said. "Let's turn it over. Help me, okay?"

Caleb tilted the piece of furniture forward and they peered beneath it. Built into the base of the wooden cabinet was a small rectangular box.

"What the...?" Caleb tried to pull the box away from the old wood, but it was solidly in place. His fingers searched for an opening but there was none. No finger hole, no knob or visible means of opening the box—not even a slit for a prying fingernail. "Wonder what this is all about?"

"Strange, isn't it? A little box on the bottom of the—oh! Look, it opens!" said Layla. The small front panel had slid forward, revealing a tiny nook within the wood.

"How'd you do that?"

"Don't know...just sort of slid open when I pushed on it." She pushed her fingertips into the recess and gasped. "There's something in here, Caleb. I can feel it...wait, here it is."

They stared at the tiny leather pouch cradled in her palm. It was ancient-looking, cracked and scuffed and secured by a length of leather cord. Even the knot on the parcel looked old, as if it had been tied by fingers long since turned to dust.

Caleb put the cabinet down and turned to Layla's hand. He knew that had he found the pouch first, it would be open already.

What the hell is she waiting for? Just open it already!

Layla looked up at her husband. It was hard to believe that just a few short minutes ago she had been determined to leave him. It felt like ages since she'd thrown her nightgown in the garbage.

Cherish the moment. Times like this don't come very often for the two of us.

Caleb grinned and she found herself grinning in return. A cheek-twisting, tooth-baring, childish sort of grin. The I've-got-a-secret kind of smile that the two of them hadn't had together for too long to remember.

It feels good to be in on something with her again. How have we let this get away from us? What the hell have I been thinking?

Layla fingered the pouch. She could feel something inside the aged leather. Suddenly she was chilled, colder than the air-conditioning warranted. She couldn't explain it, but for an instant she considered not opening the pouch. She wondered if it wouldn't be better if they just dumped it out the hotel window and forgot about it.

Suddenly she was scared.

"So are you going to open that up, or what? I don't want to rush you, but I'm dying to see what we've found. Could be anything," Caleb said.

Could be anything.

With shaking fingers she managed to untie the cord. The bag opened and she tipped it forward, urged the contents into her palm with a gentle shake.

They stared at the brilliant-colored, rounded stone that she held. It had a hole in the top of it and one smooth side. When she turned it over, they saw that the other side had a carved hieroglyph on its face.

"Wonder what that means? Could be anything, you know," repeated Caleb in a whisper. The discovery seemed to require hushed, almost reverent, tones. They both felt it.

"No idea," said Layla. She pushed a lock of hair behind one ear, giving herself an unobstructed view of the treasure she held. "Looks old, doesn't it? I think it's an amulet of some kind, but I don't know what purpose it could serve. Strange hieroglyph, don't you think?"

She held the stone out to him and he took it carefully. In his huge hand, it looked tiny.

"They all look strange to me, babe. I never could understand how anyone could decipher the wiggles and stick drawings on the temple walls. All looks like Greek to

me," he said. He looked up at her and saw that her eyes were filled with tears. Alarmed, he put a hand on her shoulder. "What is it? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Babe. You haven't called me that since we were first married. God, I've missed it. I didn't know how much I missed it until this very moment.

"Nothing." Layla wiped her eyes with the palm of her now-empty hand. "Just happy, I guess. Started out as a lousy afternoon and now...well, it's turning out to be a great day, isn't it?"

He rubbed his thumb beneath her left eye, lifted the moistness from her skin to his own. "It is turning out to be a good day. I'm sorry for what happened before...I don't know why I'm such an ass sometimes. Forgive me?"

"Yeah."

Caleb pulled the gold chain he was wearing around his neck over his head, carefully threading the chain through the hole in the amulet and placing it around Layla's neck. The chain was long on her—the amulet hung between her breasts, just above her heart.

"We'll find a shorter one for it soon," he said. "Until then, at least you can wear it. Happy anniversary, babe."

* * * * *

"Dinner was good, wasn't it? We should go to that place again before we leave Cairo," said Caleb.

They'd dined in a small restaurant off the beaten track. They had spent an enchanting couple of hours beneath the stars, with the pyramids in the distance, surrounded by the sounds of live sitar music. Caleb knew he'd have to compensate the bellhop who had given him the tip on the restaurant. The kid had recommended a place that couldn't have been more authentic—or more romantic.

He turned the key in the door lock, pushed the door open and stood aside. Layla brushed against him as she passed and he followed the gardenia-scented air into the hotel suite.

"We should. The food was great and the music was incredible. It's hard to believe that such haunting melodies come from such a small instrument. And the company...well, let's just say the company was wonderful," said Layla.

She kicked off her high-heeled black leather sandals and walked barefoot to the large wall of glass. The light show in the distance highlighted the pyramids. The nightly light show might be an over-the-top tourist attraction but it was still a pretty way to view the ancient structures.

Caleb crossed the dark room and stood behind her.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Layla asked.

Looking down at the tendrils of soft blonde hair that curled delicately at her neck he felt his cock jump inside his trousers. He knew the contours of her body like he knew

the planes of his own face. As he glanced down the bodice of the simple black dress she'd worn to dinner and saw the tops of her creamy breast something stirred deep within him.

"Yes, very pretty," he murmured as he felt his breathing quicken.

Before he had a chance to consider what Layla's reaction would be, he acted on the impulses coursing through him. He pushed his hand down the bodice of her dress, slid his fingers beneath the fabric of her lacy bra and touched her nipple, rubbing his finger across it as it rose in response.

Layla pushed against him and felt his erection against her ass. The hardness made her smile in the darkness and at that moment it felt as big and impressive as the cock of the Sphinx must have been. She reached behind her and grasped it, squeezing it gently as he tilted his hips against her body.

The travel agent was right. Cairo is a lovers' paradise, isn't it, Caleb? We're acting the way we used to act, doing the things we used to do. I'm having desires I used to have, long ago...right now I'm going to suck you until you scream. I'm going to push you until you lose control and then I'm going to love you some more.

She turned, kissed him quickly on the lips and dropped to her knees before him, smiling at the startled expression on his handsome face. It was no secret that her move was one that he'd never expected, not even in his wildest dreams.

As she tugged open his zipper, reached inside his trousers and grabbed his erection she heard a low groan come from deep within him. He stood completely still as she maneuvered his penis out into the open and gave it a pull. There was a tightening in his testicles as she gave him a few fast strokes.

When Layla wrapped her lips around his hot, hard flesh she knew that they had turned a corner in their relationship. The feeling of control was intoxicating and although she knew, as she tasted the hot spiciness of his skin, that it might not last it was, at least for now, all she could have dreamed of. And more.

Caleb stood with his hands in her long, soft hair and watched the lights dance on the ancient pyramids in the distance while Layla's tongue danced across his throbbing member. The lights matched her movements and, as he arched his hips and filled her mouth with his hardness, he lost himself in the beat of the moment. There was no reason to fight the urges of his body, she brought him to the brink of release rapidly and he let her.

The first spasms of his orgasm sent creamy jets of his cum into her warm throat and she swallowed eagerly, knowing that in that instant, those few seconds in time, her husband was at his most vulnerable. She drank greedily of his flood, sucking him until the last drop had been swallowed, then suckling him until his penis began to soften. From experience she knew that if she kept him in her mouth for a few minutes longer, the blood would surge back into his cock and he would stiffen beneath her lips.

The knowledge of her control over him made her hot with desire.

But Caleb had a few ideas of his own and he gently removed his growing cock from her mouth, coaxed her to her feet and turned her to face the pyramids outside the huge window. It was her turn to see the colored lights crossing the velvety black night sky, a sight that was breathtaking, mesmerizing and distracting.

Caleb slid her lacy panties down her thighs to her ankles, then held them as she stepped out of them. Hitching her black dinner dress up her hips and parting her legs, he knelt between them. Inhaling the powder-fresh scent of her, he kissed her plump lips with his mouth, as tenderly and as passionately as he would have kissed her mouth.

The first touch of his tongue on her clit nearly made her legs fold, but he held her up with his face and the strong hand he had on her hip. His tongue lapped at her wetness and he drank her warm sweet juice eagerly, pushing his tongue deep inside her while he stroked her with his thumb.

Layla felt the pressure of his finger on her throbbing center increase as he filled her warm entrance with his tongue, felt the surge of her orgasm break over her in huge, thundering waves. As she stared at the pyramids she shuddered against Caleb's mouth, wondering all the while if the magic—or madness—that was Cairo had taken them hostage.

When he rose before her and she saw the huge hard-on that stuck out of Caleb's pants, she realized that she didn't care what it was that had gripped them. She only hoped that it wouldn't let them go—ever.

She put her hand on him and pulled him by the cock to the bedroom. At the doorway she undressed them, pushing his hands away when he tried to help her with their buttons and zippers.

In this instant I'm in charge, Caleb. Believe me, darling, your time is going to come—in a few short minutes. You'll be the one on top soon, but for now I'm calling the shots. And I'm going to undress you—so keep your hands by your sides and watch.

Just watch.

When they were nude she grabbed his throbbing member and walked into the room, giving him no choice but to follow her. She pushed him down into an armchair, raised her foot to the arm of the chair and exposed her slick pussy to his eyes.

"Look at what you did to me, Caleb," she said seductively, stroking herself. "Look at how wet I am. You did that, with your hot cock. You made me horny, Caleb. Now I have no choice..."

"No choice?"

"No choice, I'm afraid. Now you'll have to make me come again. I can't stand to be so warm and wet and slippery—feel me, Caleb, feel this," she said, putting his hand on her wetness. His fingers began to move instantly, slipping into her as she moaned above him. "Oh, it feels so good, so hot and sexy and—oh! I want you. I want your cock in me—now."

Pulling her body from his touch was a tease, straddling him and sliding her wetness onto his bouncing tip was delicious torture, but removing her pussy from his heat was sheer agony. When she stood and turned away from him he inhaled sharply.

“Babe?”

With a throaty laugh she got on her hands and knees and crawled a few feet from where he sat. Turning to look over her shoulder at his shocked expression, she grinned and said, “Catch me. Take me. Fuck me.”

In a flash he was on his knees behind her and they crawled, giggling, around the carpeted room for several minutes. Caleb caught her several times and brushed his cock against her wetness possessively before he let her go, slapped her on the ass and the game continued. Finally he grabbed her by the hips and put his mouth to her from behind, tickling her ribs and making her squirm.

“Caleb! Don’t do that, don’t—”

“Don’t what, babe? Don’t do this?”

He lapped at her wetness, pressing her clit with his thumb and heard her moan. Then he moved his fingers and, smiling against her pussy, tickled her in the spot he knew was the most ticklish one on her body. She wiggled and her wiggling made his cock tremble.

“Or this?”

“Caleb!”

Seizing an opportunity that had never been available to him before, he took his fingers from her ribs, clutched her hips and pulled her backside to his face. Burying his mouth between her round cheeks he extended his tongue and licked the length of her crack as she lay still. He wondered what she thought of the idea but couldn’t bring himself to ask her.

His cock couldn’t wait any longer, anyhow. It was nearly bursting, the first wet drops of his cum seeping from his hole and sliding across the straining head.

“I can’t wait any longer, babe. Now, it’s got to be now,” he moaned, covering her body with his own and pushing his cock into her pussy. He rode her from above, his hands on her breasts as she ground herself against his hands. They came together, their cries muffled by the carpet.

Chapter Three

"How did you sleep, darling?" she asked. She looked up from the fluffy nest of pillows and smiled at him.

Caleb was already showered and dressed. He looked so openly athletic in his jeans and light blue cotton button-down shirt that she considered luring him back to bed. After last night's lusty adventures, she was confident that she could think of a thing or two that would entice him. Besides, the only thing she was wearing beneath the 220-count Egyptian cotton sheet was the blue stone. And he'd already made it abundantly clear that he enjoyed watching it swing between her breasts...

But they had some interesting things planned for the day. No, better to get up and out and on their way. Romance could wait for later.

"Should I call down for breakfast, or would you rather eat in the dining room?" asked Caleb. She watched him comb his hair at the gilt-edged mirror above the dresser, his muscles flexing beneath his shirt.

And yesterday I was ready to give you the old heave-ho. Things can certainly change quickly in Cairo. And no doubt, yesterday you wouldn't have given a thought to whether or not I wanted breakfast. Forget about where I would rather eat—you wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't eaten in days. Yes, things can really change here.

"How about the dining room? I can be ready in a few minutes." Layla threw the covers back, pushed herself out of the big bed and walked unselfconsciously to the marble bathroom.

Caleb watched her movements. She was as strong and sure as a large cat. He was startled to realize that he hadn't noticed his wife enough before now, hadn't known that she was able to move with the grace of a cheetah. Especially so early in the morning.

When he heard the sound of the shower being turned on and the splashing noises that meant that she had begun bathing he considered tearing off his clothes and joining her beneath the steamy water. It was an idea, but he restrained himself.

She has plans for today and I'm not going to spoil them with my selfishness. No, it's bad enough that I put the hex on yesterday with my bad attitude. I think she may have been going to leave me yesterday afternoon. What else could the suitcase have meant? And the nightgown in the trash can—what was that all about? Why did she throw it out?

Stepping out onto the balcony, he looked at the street below. Despite the early hour, it teemed with life. Camels and donkeys walked freely beside luxury cars and battered trucks. Street vendors pushing carts headed to the marketplaces to set up and sell their wares beneath the unforgiving sun.

He saw two of the tiny black-and-white police cars that sped through the streets parked in front of the hotel and wondered briefly why they were there. He hadn't remembered hearing any sirens, but with the commotion of the busy street sirens might not have stood out to the untrained ear.

At the early hour there were even kebab merchants, holding filled skewers of grilled meat high in the sultry air to passersby. He could see a few turbaned, long-robed locals eating from fat, dripping skewers as they walked beneath the balcony.

Caleb shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't imagine how anyone could consume grilled lamb before they'd had a cup of morning coffee.

* * * * *

The ornate King's Palace dining room was buzzing with activity. Waiters in starched dress shirts practically ran between the tables with silver pots of tea and coffee. Nearly every table was filled with diners who hailed from all corners of the globe. The multilingual chatter sounded like a strange, but interesting, symphony.

Caleb and Layla were seated at a small table in a corner. Caleb immediately ordered coffee—American coffee, not the dark, almost black, brew that the Egyptians drank like it was mother's milk. He hadn't learned to enjoy the strong stuff and had noticed that Layla was less than thrilled with it as well. No, American coffee—even if it did announce their tourist status to anyone who was paying attention.

Coffee arrived almost instantly. The smiling waiter poured their first cups, left menus on the table and disappeared with a well-practiced flourish. Caleb and Layla opened their menus before the man was two feet away from their cozy table.

"I don't know about you, but I'm pretty hungry," he said. As if on cue, his stomach rumbled and they grinned at each other across the compact table. "Told you."

"I guess so. Well, you *did* work up an appetite last night—or at least I'd think all that activity would make a man hungry," she said. She held her menu high, nearly covering her face with the large black and gold laminated folder. She hoped no one could see the flush she felt creeping up her neck and spreading slowly across her face. Every time she thought of last night she had to smile. It had been so unexpected, but so *good*.

Caleb lowered his voice. "I'd think that if that's the basis for appetite judgment, you, my dear, are pretty hungry yourself this morning." He winked at her over the menu.

The silent-footed waiter returned before they had considered the menus for more than a moment. It was as if the nervously-smiling young man was in some sort of rush to get this part of his day, at least, over with. They noticed that his hand shook as he took their orders.

"Ma'am? What can I get for you this morning?" His English was flawless.

"I think I'll try the Nile Nougat. That's made with figs, isn't it?" asked Layla. She shut her menu with a snap. "Local figs, right?"

The black-haired man nodded. When he grinned they saw his sparkling gold tooth. The teeth glittered against the sultry dark skin, making him look even more exotic in the crowded dining room.

"Yes, the figs are grown right here in the Nile River basin. Hand-grown and hand-picked and hand-delivered to the King's Palace. They are a specialty of the hotel. You have made a wise choice, ma'am. I think you will be happy with your meal," he said. He took the menu from Layla's outstretched hand and turned to Caleb. "And for you, sir? Will you be having the special Nile Nougat pastry as well?"

Caleb shook his head as he spoke. He didn't leave any room for uncertainty, neither by his words or actions.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'll stick to the usual."

The waiter didn't miss a beat. "The usual, sir?" He held his gold pen poised above the leather-wrapped order pad and waited.

"Two eggs, scrambled lightly. Wheat toast, heavy on the butter. And home fries—do you know what home fries are? American potatoes? Fried?"

The man jotted a note or two on the small sheet of paper. He nodded, an abrupt up-and-down motion that looked as if it was used repeatedly. It was as if the well-trained staffer had replied unconsciously, as if his mind was already on the next moments of his day.

"Of course, sir. American home fries."

"Nothing with figs or lamb or anything else in it, right?"

The man's eyes were dancing as they met Layla's clear blue ones. They seemed to say "So, you've got one of those never-try-new-things men, don't you?"

She shrugged. What could she do? Some things couldn't be changed. Some things weren't as important as other things, after all.

"No, sir. No figs or...anything else. Just American-style home fries. Our chef is familiar with this item," he answered. He palmed Caleb's menu and left with a practiced smile.

Layla and Caleb looked at each other and grinned.

Today looked like it was going to be another glorious day.

Chapter Four

Layla put her fork down on the edge of her plate, placed her knife beside her fork and swallowed. No matter how delicious the fig pastry was, she couldn't eat another bite. Not one. She was completely sated – on many levels.

She wiped her mouth with the soft white napkin.

Caleb's eyes watched every delicate movement. As he felt heat rise within him he wondered, for the first time in his life, what it felt like to be a piece of table linen. He imagined the feel of his wife's warm lips as they fluttered across the fabric.

He shifted in his seat. His pants seemed to be getting tighter with every passing second. They were nearly uncomfortably tight as his eyes watched the tip of her small pink tongue dart out of her mouth and flicker across her lower lip.

Think of something else, man. I'm going to embarrass myself at the breakfast table – if I'm not careful I won't be able to get up and walk out of here. I'll be sitting in this damn chair until the lunch crowd arrives!

"You done with that, babe?"

Layla glanced down at the sliver of pastry on her plate and nodded. She watched as her husband reached across the table and speared it with his fork. He put the small morsel in his mouth, chewed and smiled.

"Like it?"

"Very much."

"Ever had figs before?"

"Nope," Caleb said. His grin made him look boyish. "Got to try new things, you know. Can't be afraid to go in new directions...branch out, so to speak. Might find something that I've overlooked...or neglected. Might find something that needs to be paid closer attention to..."

"Figs? Are we talking figs here, darling? Or something else?" Layla felt a fine sheen of perspiration on her temple, felt her heart beating like the bass drum in a calypso carnival and felt her lungs tighten as she held her breath and stared into Caleb's face.

I think last night's scuffle on the floor may be your way of trying to tell me something. Do you want what I think you want, darling?

His eyes were open and honest as he met hers. Their gaze locked and held and it was as if the dining room had emptied. They were alone, but neither of them was lonely.

And they were, miraculously, speaking the same language, a feat they hadn't accomplished in a long, long time.

"Figs. And other things, more important things. People...a person. I've been stupid, Layla. So stupid, for so long. I'm praying that we can figure things out here. I'm willing to try – willing to eat figs – and any other damn thing in this place – if I have to," Caleb said. His eyes danced at the last words.

She reached her hand toward his and his fingers met hers in the center of the table.

"I don't think too many figs will be necessary," said Layla. She felt a surge of warmth fill her body and was shocked when she felt the flutterings of what could only be desire building in her center. She felt her panties grow moist—it wasn't an unwelcome feeling. Merely unexpected.

What's happening to me? I want him – now. I want him – not just in my heart and mind, but my body wants him, too. It's been so long, I had forgotten how this feels. Hmm... Kind of nice, actually. But I wonder what the waiter would say if I jumped on Caleb in the dining room? Doubt that they do that sort of thing in Cairo. Besides, it seems like the place is already buzzing about something – what's going on here, anyway?

"Caleb?"

"Yes?"

"Did you notice that this place is—I don't know – buzzing? Like there's something going on here?"

Caleb glanced around before answering her question.

"I did, actually. I've been wondering what the fuss is about. There seems to be an awful lot of chatter, doesn't there? More than just the ordinary should-I-have-eggs-or-figs breakfast chatter, don't you think?" he asked.

"Exactly! What do you think it is?"

"I don't know," Caleb said.

The waiter appeared with their bill. As Caleb took the slip of paper, he questioned the young man.

"What's going on this morning? It seems like there's something that's got everyone in a bit of excitement. Do you know what it is?"

Their waiter looked over his shoulder before he answered, as if to check for eavesdroppers. When he spoke, it was with measured words. Listening to him, the couple wondered if the young man had been coached on what to say to inquiring diners.

"There was an accident at the King's Palace Hotel last night. A very sad, very tragic accident. That is probably what the-the-the interest is about. Yes, very sad," he said. He lifted the empty coffeepot and turned to leave, as if his strained explanation was sufficient.

Caleb reached out and put his large hand on the man's arm.

"What sort of an accident? What happened?"

They saw the waiter's shoulders slump, almost as if he was caving inward upon himself. It was easy to see that he wasn't enjoying explaining the situation, but they

didn't much care. There was obviously something going on and they both wanted to know what it was.

"A murder" was the resigned answer. "A woman was murdered here last night. An English woman, from England. She was sleeping in her bed and someone cut her throat. She was found dead this morning by one of our staff. Very bad, very sad for everyone." He shook his head mournfully and stared at his polished black shoes.

When Layla spoke, he looked up at her. His deep brown eyes showed a level of compassion that was unexpected. She hadn't known that hotel employees cared so much for the visitors who stayed with them.

"Who was she? Does anyone know?"

"No, not really. Her name was Linda Grayer. She was traveling alone. She looked very much like you, now that I—" The waiter stopped speaking abruptly and his mouth snapped shut. With one final glance at Layla, he bowed and hurried off.

Caleb was on his feet in a heartbeat.

"I'll be right back," he said tersely.

What the heck was that about? That guy looked like he had seen a ghost.

She watched her husband speaking with the waiter. Initially Caleb did all the speaking, but the man finally began to speak. They had an animated conversation, with a few covert glances in her direction. She saw the dining room manager join the pair and the trio spoke for a while longer. Finally Caleb shook hands with both men and headed back to the table where she was sitting.

Her patience was beginning to run out.

"What's going on, Caleb? What is it?" Layla asked.

She could see he had something on his mind. His handsome face was no longer playful and teasing, but serious and troubled-looking. He appeared to be considering his words carefully before he spoke.

"It's nothing, really. It's stupid, actually," Caleb said.

"What? What is it?"

"The woman that was killed last night? Well, she looked very much like you...straight blonde hair, attractive, with a good figure. She matched your description almost perfectly. Except for the eyes—she had brown eyes and yours, well, you know yours are that uncommon shade of blue. I guess the poor waiter got himself all shook up when he looked at you and realized just how closely you resemble the dead woman. Some people can be really superstitious, you know. Our waiter is one of them, it seems. But the manager is calming him down and there's no harm done. Just an unfortunate coincidence, I think."

Unfortunate? Definitely. In Layla's mind it was a creepy coincidence, too. It got even creepier when she looked back into the dining room as she was walking through the wide glass door toward the hotel lobby.

The waiter was still staring at her.

Chapter Five

"Stay close, all right? Don't go wandering off anywhere. This place is a zoo," said Caleb. He pulled her close against his side as they stepped out of the King's Palace and onto the main street, Said al Farquad.

Aman held the door open for them, smiling his gold-toothed smile despite the oppressive heat. Layla smiled and nodded in return.

"*Ahlan wa sahlán*. Hello and good day. It is a beautiful day, eh?" asked the doorman. His gold tassels looked like they had been made just minutes ago. They swung from his shoulders like proud peacock feathers. Layla still hadn't discovered how the man stayed continuously fresh and starched while all around him the world was melting. She wished she could borrow one or two of his secrets.

"*Ahlan biki*," she answered. "Yes, it is another beautiful day in Cairo, Aman. It seems like that's all you ever have here—just a string of beautiful days. Cairo is like paradise, isn't it?"

The man's olive complexion took on a decidedly pinkish cast. His grin widened and he had the grace to shake his head.

"Ah, we try to please where we can. After all, how would it be if we had visitors from all across the globe and when they came to Cairo the weather was less than perfect? No, that would not do, not at all. So." He shrugged, his tassels dancing. "We try. We try to have clear, sunny days for those who visit with us. Enjoy your day, madam."

Aman bowed slightly toward Caleb and Layla. She inclined her head. It annoyed her that her husband barely acknowledged the kind man. He seemed to be self-absorbed again, or at least concentrating more on the swirling mass of humanity in the road than he was on social protocol.

You don't have to learn the language, but you could at least learn something about human interaction, Caleb. I'm embarrassed by this type of behavior—it's just so rude!

Caleb's fingers on her elbow guided her into the flow of traffic. It seemed that the city and its inhabitants awoke with the dawn. Donkeys and camels filled the street and each animal had at least one handler. It made for an interesting mix of foot traffic.

It also made for an interesting walking experience.

Layla stifled a gasp as she watched Caleb's handmade Italian loafer barely miss a pile of dung. She made sure to step around the pile without pointing out his near-miss.

Karmic retribution perhaps? I'm thinking we've all got to pay our way sometime, darling. Maybe your time is coming. At least it would have been the same color as your I'm-a-successful-

businessman shoes. Maybe no one would have noticed the camel crap on your toes. No one but me, that is.

If you step in it you might be forced to learn to say shit in Arabic, at least. One word is better than none.

Remorse for her sarcastic thoughts hit her as hard as a load of hand-woven *kilim* rugs. She felt buried by her pettiness and was filled with private embarrassment at her own bad behavior.

Layla reached out and grabbed Caleb's hand, threaded her fingers through his and felt a reassuring squeeze from him. He was still concentrating on the traffic.

I've got to stop being such a bitch. It's not my problem if he doesn't want to learn a new language. It has nothing to do with me if he doesn't care about saying "good morning" or "have a nice day" to Aman. That's his choice, not mine. I've got to worry about making my own good choices and let Caleb make his own decisions. I'm his wife, not his mother.

"The clerk at the desk said that the tea shop wasn't too far up the street," said Layla. "It should be one of these places the ones that are just coming up. He promised me that it was close."

She scanned the shops on the side closest to them, peeking inside the interiors of the crudely-constructed storefronts as she walked, looking for some sign of tea or the infamous white china teacups that filled the city's cafes, tearooms and hotels. The backward-read Egyptian-lettered signs that were hanging above the doorways leading from the street were no help. She had learned to speak some of the language but hadn't even begun to master the written word.

"I don't see it. Won't they have tea for sale in the bazaar? Do we really need to make a separate trip for this?" asked Caleb. His grip on hers was nearly bone-crushing.

His tone left no room for doubt—he was annoyed by Layla's request to visit the highly-recommended tea shop.

Patience. I'm supposed to be cultivating patience with this man, aren't I? Damn, it's so hard not to snap at him when he's being such a jerk.

Layla took a deep breath before she answered. When she spoke there was no trace of annoyance in her voice.

"There probably is tea at the bazaar, but it won't be anything special. Just ordinary tea. I was hoping to get something a bit more...more exotic. I thought I'd be able to find it in the tea shop that everyone at the front desk was talking about. It's supposed to be a great little place—I bet I can find something really exotic in there. And it's got to be close by, Caleb."

"Exotic? Buying tea bags in Egypt is exotic enough for me," he muttered. His voice was low but she had heard him—and she wasn't amused.

Layla stopped in the middle of the stream of traffic. Long-robed headwear-wrapped locals walked around her as easily as if they were water in a stream and Layla was a

boulder. Her sudden halt didn't seem to affect anyone, not even the brass jug-burdened donkey that plodded past her solid form with just inches separating their bodies.

The only one who was annoyed by her abrupt lack of motion was Caleb—the cause for her firmly-planted feet.

He was pulled up short by the hand that he was holding.

“Hey! What’s up—why did you stop?” he asked. He turned to look at her and was startled by the scowl on her face.

Uh-oh. I thought I was in a primo spot this morning...after last night's long-overdue fun, this morning's intimate breakfast...yeah, I thought I had it made. I'm trekking through camel crap early in the morning searching for friggin' tea bags for God's sake! It's ridic—uh-oh. That's it. She heard the comment about the tea bags. Great. Hours of positive direction spoiled by one idiotic remark. Shit.

“You know what, Caleb? Why don't you just head back to the hotel—I know I can find the tea shop without you,” she said, seething. She felt the sun suddenly hotter on her blonde head. The air felt closer and the noise of the street seemed louder.

She needed time on her own.

“No, no—I don't want to do that,” he answered, shaking his head. He looked at the crush of people that swarmed around them like buzzing bees and shook his head a second time. “No. I don't think that that's a good idea, babe. Just stay close and I'll find it for you. Leave it to me, all right?”

When he tried to grab her hand from the spot on her hip where she had planted it after she stopped walking, he had little success. Actually, he had no success. Her fists felt glued to her hips and the more insistently he attempted to capture one, the more stubbornly she pressed them to her hips.

“You sound like an overprotective, middle-aged, out-alone-with-my-kid-for-the-first-time-ever neurotic father! ‘Stay close’—‘Stay by my side’—and the always-popular, completely demeaning ‘I'll find it for you’—do you know that I'm getting ready to smack you? Do you realize that? Do you have any idea that you've pushed me over the edge—and it's not a good edge, either!”

Layla's attempt to keep her voice within some sort of normal range was failing miserably. It had risen to a pitch that was loud enough to garner attention. Passersby didn't bother to hide their amusement as she began to gesture at Caleb, punctuating her words with staccato pokes and waves of her hands.

Marital discord was a familiar sight the world over. There was no need for translation.

“I didn't mean it that way. I only meant—”

Her hand flew up between them and he found himself staring at her palm. He saw the small callus near her fourth finger from the constant rubbing motion of the platinum and diamond wedding band she wore.

"Enough! Maybe I don't want to hear about whatever it was that you meant right now. Maybe I just need some time on my own. I've had it, Caleb. I can find the tea shop by myself," she said.

She crossed her arms over her breasts and stared into the handsome face of the man she thought she knew so well.

Maybe I don't know you after all, Caleb. Or maybe I do know you — too well. And maybe I can't live with what I know. Whatever it is, I need some space. Back off, buster, before I really blow.

"But, babe, be reasonable," Caleb began. He was speaking in a soothing voice, the kind of voice one would use to calm a tense animal or a crying child.

She heard him, his let's-be-reasonable tone of voice, and wanted to tear his head off with her bare hands.

"Stop it! Stopit-stopit-stopit! I am not a spoiled child who needs to be settled down. I am a grown woman who has had it up to here," she made an abrupt slashing movement with her hand in front of her neck, "with you and your overbearing, overprotective garbage. I can find the tea shop on my own, thank you very much. I don't need your help, Caleb. Can't you get that through your big, fat, self-inflated head? What the hell do I have to do to make you understand — I can do it by myself."

The look of confusion, mixed with remorse and tinged with restrained anger, that she saw in his eyes softened her heart a little. But just a little. She was angry and needed the chance to get over her anger if the day wasn't going to be an even bigger disaster.

"Listen, I just need some time to myself, that's all. I'll meet you back at the hotel in a little while. But now, I need some space," she said quietly. She felt like a deflated balloon as she turned and began to walk away from Caleb. She left him standing in the center of the flow of traffic that he had been so determined to forge his way through. She left him, but his words reached her across the widening space between them.

"If that's what you need, then that's what you should have," he said.

The resignation was something that he couldn't hide, even if he tried. He didn't try to hide it, though. Not from himself or from her or from the nameless people who swallowed her up as she disappeared from his sight.

* * * * *

"Ah, that is a good choice, *Sayyida*. A very good choice," said the shopkeeper, a swarthy man with a turban on his head and a mustache bushy enough to conceal a small household pet. The mustache bounced up and down as he spoke and Layla found herself itching to ask him questions just so he would continue talking.

Sayyida. Sounds so much less dancing-grannyish than "madam". Less little-whorehouseish, too. I like it.

"You think?" she asked. She held up a small metal tin of tea. The label on the tin was in the magical-looking writing of Egypt. She had no idea what it said but it was an

attractive tin with a sketch of the great pyramids of Giza on the black and gold label. It was attractive enough to be displayed rather than drunk.

"Ah, yes, *Sayyida*. That is one of our finest blends. That tiny tin contains the mystery of the pharaohs within it. It is an open portal to the times of our ancestors, a link to the secrets of those who have come before us and a connection to those who will follow in our footsteps. Yes, that is a very good choice."

Layla's mood had improved almost instantly after she walked away from her husband. It had not been a difficult task to find the tiny, nearly-concealed shop without Caleb. It had been easy, in fact, to locate it—without any help. She thought that Caleb's incessant veiled orders and not-so-veiled disdain for the adventure had been enough to camouflage the tea haven from their view.

She believed that they would have never found the tea seller, even with his prodigious mustache, while they were so intently playing at the same power struggle that had been plaguing their marriage for nearly a decade. No, they would have missed it for sure. And that, Layla knew, would have only made Caleb even more agitated.

It was a good thing that she had decided to go it alone. Some things seemed to work out better when she didn't have his "help".

"All that inside this compact tin? That's quite a feat within itself," she said, grinning.

His blue-checkered turban bobbed when he nodded vigorously and smiled broadly. "Here in the land of the pharaohs we do our best to be accommodating. In every way. Even with, as you say, our compact tins of tea. Besides, you must have noticed, pretty lady, that here in Egypt we take our tea seriously. Very seriously."

"I did notice that," she answered. She handed the tin to the man. His long, thin fingers took it from her grasp so gently that she didn't feel it leave her grip. "I'll take it. I'll take two, actually."

"Very good, *Sayyida*. You will not be sorry. Your choice is a fine one."

The man reached beneath the long, low wooden counter and pulled out a length of hand-woven fabric. The blue material was faded but appeared to be clean and he used it to wrap the tins of tea, creating a small bundle that looked like something a hobo would poke a stick through and carry slung over his shoulder.

"Anything else today? Is there anything else that you need?"

"No, I don't think—well, wait," Layla hesitated. She looked around the cluttered shop, scanning the shelves for the item that appeared in her mind as she reached for her wallet. Unfortunately, the item seemed to be only in her mind. There was no sign of the coveted object anywhere on the shelves. They were packed with a vast array of tins and pouches filled with regional teas, but little else.

"Yes?"

Her eyes traveled around the room before settling on the man's face. He and his mustache waited expectantly. His eyebrows, nearly as bushy as the mustache hiding his upper lip was, were arched above dark, almost ebony-colored, eyes.

"Yes?" he repeated.

"I...I don't see what I'm looking for," Layla began. "It's nothing, really. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part to hope that you would have it here. It's fine."

She opened her wallet and waited to hear the price of the tea.

It's no big deal. Caleb probably would have given me grief about it anyway. And really, who needs that?

"Sayyida, how will you know if it is available to you if you do not ask for it? Sometimes all we need is a tiny bit of help from another to fulfill our heart's desires," said the shopkeeper, placing his hands across the wooden counter and waiting. He looked like he could wait until the Sphinx grew wings and flew into the sunset above the desert sand. He looked like he wasn't going to reveal the price of the tea until she revealed the desire of her heart.

Is that all it takes, then? Just ask and somehow someone will help me get what it is that I want—that I so desperately want? I doubt that asking could bring my heart's desire to me. But this, this smaller thing...well, maybe that could be found.

Layla knew she wouldn't be getting out of the shop until she asked for what she wanted. And she was just beginning to recognize the fact that she missed her husband. Suddenly she was anxious to return to the hotel and straighten things out with him.

"All right, then. I was hoping to find something that I don't think you have," she began.

"And that would be?"

"You know those little tea sets that are all over Cairo? I've seen them in nearly every dining room, tea shop or restaurant I've been to. They're everywhere. Little white cups? Delicate and so thin you're sure they'll break as soon as you lift them but they seem to never be chipped or broken?"

The man nodded sagely, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"White, small white cups and little white pots?"

"That's it! You do know what I'm talking about," said Layla. She didn't feel so foolish now.

"Of course. The tea service you describe is standard in Egyptian homes. We all own them. Some sets have been passed down in families for generations—from the times of the ancients, almost. And the china is deceiving in its appearance. Sometimes what looks to be delicate is strengthened from within. The source of its strength is hidden from view, but it is there nonetheless. That is the case with the white tea sets. They are more sturdy, more durable, than they appear." He folded his hands across his midsection and rocked back on his sandaled heels, looking very pleased with himself for having shared his philosophical views with her.

But he still hadn't answered her question, philosophy lesson or not.

"So," she persisted. "You don't carry them, then?"

"Ah! Forgive me, please. Of course we carry them. I keep the sets in boxes beneath my table, right here," the shopkeeper said. He bent down and rummaged beneath the wooden counter. When he emerged he held a battered-looking cardboard box. There were bits of the Egyptian newspaper, crumpled and dusty, poking out of the open flaps of the box. Layla could see cups and a teapot nestled inside its confines. "I keep them beneath the table so that they do not get broken. They are strong, yes. But even strong things need the proper care and attention, do they not?"

Layla reached out a finger to stroke the teacup closest to her. It felt soft and smooth beneath her skin, yet hard and rigid as well. The man with the mustache knew his business.

"I'll take it," she said. "Can you have it delivered to the —"

"King's Palace Hotel," he finished. He began to seal up the brown box, oblivious to Layla's puzzled expression.

"How did you know?" she asked. "That I am staying at that hotel? How did you know?"

Cutting a length of red-striped twine with a pair of enormous scissors before answering, he shrugged and said, "You look like a woman who would stay at our finest hotel. I would expect nothing less of a woman as refined as yourself. I will send a bill to your hotel. They will add it to your accommodations statement—it is a standard arrangement we have here in Cairo. Cooperation between merchants, you understand."

Cooperation. What a quaint idea. Too bad it doesn't extend to my husband. Maybe you could teach him some of that Egyptian cooperation? I'd pay dearly for that. Who knows...maybe I already have paid dearly. Much too dearly.

The mustache didn't seem as overwhelming when the tea expert handed Layla her change with a smile. She folded the strange paper money and stuck it in her purse.

Layla was taken off guard when the shopkeeper slid a small pouch across the table toward her, a drab brown burlap bag with an unlikely-looking crimson ribbon holding its top edge closed. There were no markings on it.

She reached for it without hesitation. It looked harmless.

Too small for an asp. Could be a scorpion, I guess. How big are those things anyway?

It was neither of those things. Layla could tell by the lightness of the bag and the softness of its contents beneath her probing fingers that it was something much less threatening.

"What is this?"

"A gift. A small gift, that is all."

"Why? I mean, that is very nice of you, but do you give gifts to all of your customers?"

The man folded his hands across his stomach and nodded. He looked like a new-age Buddha.

"I would hope so, *Sayyida*. I would like to think that every person who enters my shop leaves with some kind of enrichment," he said. He flashed his gold tooth before he continued. "In this case I have just given you a sample of tea. That is all. It is a very old, very sacred infusion. Used to keep those that drink it..."

He waved his hand vaguely in the air above the table. When she realized that he wasn't going to elaborate, she pushed him. She couldn't let him leave her hanging, even if it was only about tea.

"Keep them what?"

His dark eyes seemed to penetrate her calm exterior like a beetle boring into an oak tree. She could feel his gaze stirring up something within her, something that had been, before his look, lying peacefully.

Now nothing felt peaceful.

How quickly things can change. Over breakfast I thought that I was as serene as the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. Now I feel decidedly shaken. Maybe it's still the whole Caleb-as-dictator husband thing. Maybe that's it.

"Keep them safe," he said.

Layla heard a noise behind her and turned. A trio of garishly-overdressed tourists, expensive cameras swinging from their necks, had entered the small shop. They were speaking in rapid-fire German and their laughter and words left little room for further discussion.

"Yalla," said Layla. *Let me get going.* She nodded at the owner and took one step toward the front of the shop.

His response, although standard, made goose bumps rise on her bare arms. She resisted the urge to shiver.

"Allaa yibaarik fik." May God bless you for it.

* * * * *

The street seemed less crowded when Layla emerged from the tea stall. Instead of heading back in the direction of the King's Palace, she turned in the opposite direction—away from the confrontation with Caleb that she didn't feel like having just yet.

Let him wait. I'm sure he doesn't care whether or not I get back to him soon. He's probably watching television in our suite. Or maybe he's packing his bag to go home. Either way, it's fine with me.

A fruit vendor caught her eye with an exaggerated salaam in her direction. It was hard to resist his obvious friendliness, so she strolled over to his cart. He was stationed outside a *kilim* shop, his wide once-white umbrella shading his display from the grueling sun.

"Sabaah al kheyrr," said the vendor, dipping forward from the waist in greeting. *Good morning.*

"Sabaah an nuur," answered Layla. *Good morning.* When she inclined her head her hair fell forward against her flushed cheeks. She pushed the stray lock behind her ear and swiped her forehead with the back of her hand. It was hard to believe that it was already so hot.

When she looked up she caught the vendor staring at her. She assumed that he was staring at the color of her hair, maybe even her teal blue eyes. She knew that in a world filled with black hair and brown eyes she must seem strange and smiled as she turned to look at his fruit and vegetables.

The assortment on the cart was staggering, much more than Layla was used to seeing at the grocery store back home. She let her eyes dance over the seller's wares before she reached for the one item that was new to her.

She picked up a string-wrapped bunch of greenery. Initially it looked like thin, stringy spinach or maybe even spindly chard. She sniffed it. A spicy odor filled her nose.

"Muluukhiyya," the cigarette-strained voice of the vendor said. She watched as he lit a brown-papered unfiltered Turkish cigarette and inhaled. *"Muluukhiyya."* When he repeated himself in was in a louder voice. It was as if he thought her to be slightly deaf or perhaps mentally challenged.

It took but a moment to cipher out what the greenery was.

"Mallow?"

The vendor smiled, showing not one but two gold teeth. *"Mallow!"*

Layla knew that the vegetable was widely used among Egyptians to flavor their delicious soups and stews. She, however, had little use for it.

Instead, she chose two other items. She paid for them and dumped the *fakka*, small change, from the vendor into her purse. As she walked back into the crowd she didn't notice the vendor's gaze as it followed her movements.

She didn't feel the hidden eyes of others on her, either.

There was no sense in putting off what she knew to be inevitable. Layla walked back to the hotel. As she went she went over in her mind the words she knew she would say to Caleb.

I can't continue to allow you to treat me like I'm a small child. You were dragging me along the street like I was a toddler and you were my father. This type of behavior has got to change. It's got to stop. You're not my father, Caleb. You're my husband. You need to treat me with respect. I won't tolerate anything less.

It sounded great in her mind, strong and forceful without being bitchy. No pettiness, no finger-pointing...well, none that wasn't justifiable, at least.

When Aman opened the sparkling glass door for her Layla felt like she could move mountains. She hoped that feeling wouldn't disappear on the elevator ride up to their suite.

"*Ahlan wa sahlam,*" said the doorman. He inclined his head with the greeting.

"*Ahlan biki,*" she answered automatically. She flashed a brief smile in Aman's direction and would have headed straight for the bank of glass elevators had he not stopped her with his voice.

"*Sayyida?* Madam?"

Layla stopped.

"Aman? What is it?"

The doorman cleared his throat and lowered his voice, although there was no one else in the immediate area. The lobby's only other inhabitants were stationed behind the wide reservation counter at the far end of the room. Regardless, years of training had taught the man to be discreet.

His carefully-modulated tone passed no judgment on his message. He delivered it without giving away any of his personal leanings toward the matter.

"You are...ahem, your presence is requested in the Sultan's Conference Office, madam," he said.

"The Sultan's Conference Office?"

"*Na'am.*" Yes.

"May I ask why?"

Aman interrupted their conversation to open the door for a well-heeled matron. The woman carried a toy poodle beneath her arm and barely looked at either the doorman or Layla. Instead, she clack-clacked on fashionably high heels toward the elevators. When one opened almost instantly for the woman and her dog, she stepped in without a backward glance.

Layla imagined that she kicked off her shoes the second the silent doors closed behind her.

Aman waited until Layla gave him her full attention before answering her last question.

"That is, *Sayyida*, a matter that I cannot make comment on. It is a matter of which I have no knowledge," he said. His calmness led her to believe that whatever was waiting for her in the conference office wasn't horrible. "I only know that your presence is requested. I can tell you, however, that the Sultan's Office holds no danger for you. It is safe for you to go in there. The private office is just down the hall, that way. You will see the sign on the door. I suggest that you just enter—you need not knock."

She looked in the direction that he indicated and saw a row of wooden doors on either side of a long corridor.

"*Shukran, Aman,*" Layla said. She adjusted the bundle in her arms and headed down the hallway toward the doors.

"Afwan, Sayyida," said Aman. You're welcome, madam.

He watched her as she walked. It was impossible for him not to follow her with his eyes. Her lithe, athletic body encouraged attention, whether she knew it or not.

Aman suspected she did not know it. He suspected that the only male attention the hotel guest craved was that of her husband.

Well, in Cairo all wishes can come true, he thought as he turned back to open the door for yet another of the King's Palace many guests.

* * * * *

He stood when she entered the tidy office. He had been perched on the edge of the desk, beside the old-fashioned rotary phone and a leather desk blotter.

They looked at each other for a long moment before either of them moved.

She remained by the door and let her eyes travel over his body. He looked decidedly flustered—his usually-perfect hair was tousled, as if his fingers had pushed themselves through its thickness too many times, his clothing was uncreased but his face was lined. She recognized the worried expression that hung on his handsome face like a suit hangs on a storefront mannequin. It fit but the lines would fit better on someone else.

"Caleb. I didn't expect you. What are you doing in this office?"

"Waiting for you. Praying that you would come back quickly. Hoping that you would come back at all," he said.

"Of course I came back."

He crossed the room and stood before her. His nearness made her heart thud so solidly in her chest that she thought she could feel the amulet bouncing on the skin over her heart.

Ridiculous. How can he have such an effect on me? I'm angry, remember? Angry. Ready to read him the riot act, remember? I've got to get myself under control. Damn thudding heart, anyway.

"Thank you. Honestly, I wasn't sure that you would," he said, his eyes searching hers. He wanted to reach for her but he was suddenly afraid that she would push him away. It was a chance he couldn't take.

Don't be an asshole. She doesn't want to touch you. She doesn't want to speak to you. She stormed away from you, remember? You treated her like shit and she's pissed. Get yourself under control, man. You've got to apologize before you can touch her.

"Don't be silly, Caleb. Where else would I go?" Layla passed him and walked to the desk. She dropped her purse and the fruit vendor's bundle on the desk. When she turned to face him she was prepared to give him "the speech".

She wasn't prepared for the sheen she saw in his eyes.

"Babe, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was an overbearing, overprotective idiot before. I don't know what the hell I was thinking of when I grabbed you and pulled you through the street like that. I treated you like a kid—a little kid, for God's sake. What the hell is wrong with me?"

Caleb pushed his fingers through his hair, making it look even more porcupine-like. She swallowed a laugh and concentrated on keeping a straight face.

"I guess...I guess I'm just scared, that's all," he said quietly. It was an admission that he didn't make lightly. In fact, she had never before heard him make a confession similar to the one he was making now.

"Scared?"

Caleb nodded. "I guess I feel like we've just found each other again. I don't want to lose you, Layla. And the streets of Cairo are so—I don't know. The languages, there are so many of them. And the people and the camels and the damn donkeys with their piles of sh— So loud and busy and filled with people I can't understand...threatening I guess."

She leaned against the edge of the desk, knowing that she couldn't possibly deliver her speech, not when he'd realized so much without her having to tell him.

"Threatening? And the streets of New York or Los Angeles or any of the other places we've been to aren't threatening? You expect me to buy that?"

Grinning, he said, "At least the streets of New York don't have camels on them. Or camel sh—camel waste."

He looked down ruefully at his loafers. She looked and saw that they were freshly polished but she wished she could have seen what they looked like before they were polished. Even more, she wished she could have seen his face when he realized that they needed to be polished.

Karmic retribution, Caleb. That's what this is.

"I'll give you that much," she said, returning his grin. "There aren't any camels in New York. But Caleb, you've got to lighten up. I'm a grown woman, capable of taking care of myself, whether or not you choose to believe that. I don't need you hovering like a schoolmarm or treating me like a spoiled brat. Respect, Caleb. I need—I deserve—respect."

He stood in front of her and looked down into her eyes.

"I know you do. I'm sorry I haven't been giving it to you," he said. "That's going to change. Give me a chance, babe. Please. I'm working on it, I promise you. I am working on it."

You really are, aren't you? I can see it in your eyes. And I can feel it in my heart. And...my body is betraying me again. I want you, Caleb. What the hell is happening to me? I can't keep my mind out of your pants.

Layla stood up and put her arms around his neck, pulled his head to hers and covered his lips with her own. Their kiss was tentative at first, but it became familiar

within seconds and heated the air around them as surely as if the furnace in the hotel had been turned on.

She felt her insides begin to quiver as she kissed him. Her pulse quickened, her knees wobbled beneath her and she felt as if she was a pat of butter on a hot griddle as she clutched his body to hers for support.

"The door..." Caleb's voice was ragged against her ear.

"Is locked." She had heard it click when she walked in. It was locked...she was certain of it. Well...nearly certain. She had reached a point where she didn't give a damn whether or not the door was locked—or even if the office had a door at all.

All she knew was that she wanted Caleb. And she didn't want to wait for him. And honestly, she didn't give much thought to what he thought about her idea. Although his body wasn't doing a good job of hiding its response to her need.

Layla felt his erection pressing insistently against her hip. It throbbed beneath the fabric of his jeans tapping out a pulse of its own that matched beat for beat the steady tempo of the blood in her veins.

She reached between them and cupped his throbbing member in her hand, wasting no time on preliminaries—she pulled his zipper down and reached inside his pants without hesitation, pushing well-worn soft cotton fabric aside until her fingers felt the hot, silky hardness they were seeking. She pulled his stiff cock out of his pants and gave it a fast squeeze.

"Oh baby..." Caleb gasped.

His breath caught in his throat as Layla twitched aside her clothing and positioned herself so that the tip of his penis was just outside her moist center. He watched, fascinated, as she stared into his eyes and slid herself onto his thick shaft. She left no room for doubt. She was running this show. Again.

He liked it. In fact, he liked it so much that he nearly came before the first thrust.

Respect, Caleb. I want respect. And love. And all the rest of it. But first I'm going to come. Right here. Right now. Right—ohh!

A few rapid bounces were all it took to send her body toward a shuddering climax. Hot waves of satisfaction filled her as she bit down on her bottom lip to keep herself from making undue noise. It wouldn't do to have a concerned hotel employee come crashing through the door just now.

She clenched her muscles around his hot shaft, knowing as she did that he was going to surrender to her—and his cock—whether or not he was ready. With controlled squeezes she milked him until she felt the first flood of his orgasm splash deep inside her.

Layla looked into Caleb's face as his penis convulsed, watching with a grin as he filled her secret spaces with his wetness, seeing his eyes echo the shuddering spasms of his body. She watched until she knew that his orgasm was over before she relaxed against the desk.

When she did, the bag from the fruit vendor rustled behind her hands.

Caleb looked over her shoulder at the small sack on the desk. With his penis still buried inside her, he reached for the bag.

"What is this?" he asked, smiling. "Another surprise?"

Layla giggled. She felt him beginning to relax and knew that it would be a short moment before the bag was the only diversion left in the room. For a while at least. The thought made her giggle again and she felt Caleb's penis begin to slip from her body.

"Figs," she said. "I thought that since you enjoyed breakfast so much you would enjoy those, too. It seemed like a good idea to bring back a treat for you. What do you think?"

He kissed her. A fast, friendly kiss. He set the bag down on the desk and pushed his soft penis back into his jeans with a grin, pulled his zipper closed, adjusted his belt buckle and ran his fingers through his hair. His ministrations had no effect on the hairdo that had grown wilder in the last few frenzied minutes.

"I think," he said, chuckling, "that you've already given me a treat, babe. But thanks for the figs, too."

* * * * *

"Are you almost ready to go?" he called, pulling on a pair of casual loafers, the kind more suited to traveling through dusty, dirty streets than those he had worn earlier. Caleb looked at the expensive shoes and hoped that they, too, wouldn't need an emergency polish job before the day was out. "Or do you need me to come in there and...help you?"

His grin was wicked as he walked into the marble bathroom and stood behind her as she applied a fresh coat of mascara to her lashes. When he waggled his eyebrows at her she nearly poked herself in the eye with the mascara wand.

"You've already given me enough help for this morning, thank you very much." Layla capped the mascara and reached for a pot of lip gloss. She applied a shimmery layer to her lips with a soft brush, noticing how the pinkish cast looked enticing with her slightly-tanned skin.

Not bad at all, if I do say so myself. The sun-kissed look without any of the annoyance of tanning. It seems to happen by magic here. Or maybe it's the glow of sex that's got my skin looking so moist and full? Like a ripe peach ready to be picked...or one that's just been picked...really well...for a second time in less than an hour...

"If you help me any more, darling, I won't be able to walk straight," she said. She put the brush and gloss on the marble vanity beside the sink and turned to face him. "I'm ready to go. Are you?"

Caleb inched his face closer to hers. He could see her toned back, soft hair against her shoulders and rounded backside in the reflection in the mirror. The sight of her body had an effect on him. A growing effect.

What's happening to me here? Every time I look at Layla my cock gets stiff. Not that I'm complaining—I don't think we've had this much sex—or sex this good—since we've been married. But hell, I can't walk around all the time with a hard-on like this. I feel it growing now, just because she put the lip stuff on with that teeny-tiny little brush thingy. Makes me want to rub my thingy across her lips, too...rub it across those wet, warm lips and into her—

What the hell am I thinking? We'll never get to the bazaar at this rate.

He straightened, cleared his throat and smirked. The bulge in his pants was obvious.

"I'm...ready," he answered.

Layla's gaze flicked downward.

She wondered how his cock could be hard again so quickly. After she had practically attacked him in the Sultan's Conference Office they had come up to the suite. Her intention had been to freshen up but they had showered together and they had made love in the huge, multi-jetted shower.

Her back might still have the imprint of the tile's grout lines on it, she couldn't be certain without checking her skin. But she hadn't really minded and still didn't mind if there were indentations left by the grout lines. The earthshaking, mind-blowing, fuse-popping climax that had felt like it would go on and on without end was more than enough to make up for any silly little lines. More than enough.

How can your cock be hard again, Caleb? My pussy is still tingling and my legs feel like I'm experiencing the aftershocks of an earthquake. But you—you're ready to go again. How do you do it?

"You look ready," she said, looking pointedly at his crotch. "Are you sure you can walk with that like that? You won't hurt yourself, will you?"

Layla didn't bother to hide her amusement at his condition. To his credit, Caleb looked as proud of himself as if he had just answered an eighty-five-letter spelling bee competition word. His chest was sticking out so far it could have pushed open doors if he wanted it to.

"There's nothing painful about it," he said, grinning like a schoolboy. "And you're responsible for it, anyway. You're to blame—don't try to get out of it."

"Me? How do you figure that? I didn't even touch it!"

He reached out and took her hand, pulled it to his mouth and gently placed his lips against her skin. His kiss was sweet and chaste.

Then he nipped her with his teeth.

"Hey!"

"Lipstick," said Caleb as they walked out of the room hand in hand. "You should stop putting that stuff on in front of me. I just can't take it."

Chapter Six

Khan el-Khalili, the main bazaar in Cairo, was crowded. People pushed and shoved almost as a matter of course and Layla was certain that by the time they finished their shopping expedition she'd be bumped and bruised for sure.

Caleb took her small hand in his large one, held her tightly and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

She felt a shiver of excitement travel up her spine, loving the way Caleb's hand felt strong and warm against her skin. It made her think of other strong, hot parts of his anatomy...

What's wrong with me? I've turned into a sex maniac in Egypt! I'd better get my mind back on shopping and off Caleb's –

"Stay close, all right?" He leaned close to her ear and spoke loudly to be heard above the din.

"Excuse me? Sorry, I wasn't listening," she said. She looked up at his face and smiled. "I was...thinking."

Caleb's thick eyebrows came together on his handsome face as he tilted his head quizzically, looking down into her fire-filled teal eyes. Her smile gave nothing away, yet he sensed that her thoughts weren't about shopping but about something more...physical. Much more physical, if the glow in her cheeks could be believed.

He felt his cock twitch. Just a small jump, but one that left no doubt in his mind about how he felt about his wife's thoughts. He didn't think his cock had twitched so often in all the years before they had come to Egypt. It seemed that every other second it was either twitching or stiffening or straining for release. Or, even better still, it seemed that his cock had spent an inordinate amount of time coming in Cairo. Coming in waves and waves of delicious pleasure.

He loved the whole experience.

It was hard – and getting harder by the second – to resist the urge to scoop Layla up and head back to the hotel. He wondered what the locals would think if he took his wife in his arms and carried her through the crowd, his erection evident in his tight jeans. He wondered if the camels, donkeys and throngs of smiling faces would pay any attention at all to a pair of love-struck foreigners.

The realization that he was, once again, love-struck hit him like a two-ton brick.

"Caleb? Are you all right? Is anything wrong?" Layla's face had lost its come-hither look and had been replaced with an expression that echoed her words – an expression that was filled with concern.

The care he saw in her face was more affirming than the imagined sexual innuendo had been. Without thinking he pulled her body against his and gave her a gentle squeeze before he released her.

I love her. God, I love her. How could I have forgotten that I love her? Tell her — no, I just can't tell her. She'll think I want more sex if I just tell her — won't she? What the hell would Oprah do now? What would Oprah want now? Actions! Louder than words, right? I'll show her how much I love her. That's the ticket.

"Let's stick together, okay? I don't want to lose you in this place," he said. "And I'm not trying to tell you what to do, either. I'm...I'm sorry if it sometimes sounds overbearing or insulting when I say things like that. I didn't mean anything this morning, Layla. I just — honestly — don't want to lose you here, that's all. I was nearly frantic before when I looked up and couldn't find you."

He pulled her body out of the path of a camel with what looked to be a bad head cold. As it passed, they heard the unmistakable sneeze.

She looked up at him, saw the concern in his eyes and recognized his desire to be caring without condescending.

Maybe I'm too hasty sometimes, Caleb. But you sound more like my father than my husband when you say crap like what you said before. And just when I thought we were figuring things out, too. Well, I guess Rome wasn't built in a day. Or Egypt, either. Maybe we both have to learn how to change — together.

"I don't want to lose you, either. This place is packed." Layla stepped into a booth that sold brass pots and looked up at Caleb. "Are you sure you don't mind doing this? We don't have to if you really don't want to. It's not that important."

His heart lurched. Had he been such a jerk that she naturally assumed that he wouldn't want to do anything with her? He could see by her earnest expression that he had given her that idea and it was an idea that had not only taken root, but had flourished.

He felt shame — there was no other word for it. It was shame that flitted into his conscious mind. Shame that they had neglected each other. Shame that they had nourished their hurtful assumptions about each other. Shame that he, at least, hadn't recognized their issues before now. Well, it was time to begin changing their preconceived notions about each other.

"I want to be here with you. I think we'll have fun together and I don't want you speeding through this place, either. There looks like a lot to see and I want to see it all — with you. I just don't want to lose you, is all. Nothing more than that. So let's stick close to each other and poke around. Who knows what we'll find?"

Layla felt her heart expand with every word that came out of his mouth.

We should have taken this trip years ago, when we first began to lose each other. Oh well, that can't be helped. But at least we're finding each other again and that's the important thing. And I'm liking — very much — what I'm finding in my husband. God, I hope he's liking what he's finding, too.

* * * * *

"Oh! I love it," said Layla.

Caleb had gone in search of a men's restroom, leaving her to browse at a glassblower's stall. The items were so intricately created and stunning in their ethereal beauty that she hadn't gotten far into the stall when she spotted it.

"You like? You touch. You will like the way it feels in your hands, I think."

"It's beautiful, so vibrant and rich. And the light seems to dance on its surface," said Layla, holding up the soft blue vessel so that the sun shone through its delicate shape. She was rewarded with a prism of colors that touched her wrist as if anointing her with their luminous presence. "It's hard to believe that it's made by human hands. It feels so light and airy that I would expect it to be made by fairies or spirits."

Across the cluttered table the thin, conservatively dressed woman smiled. She was serious, quiet and watchful, until Layla picked up the jug. When she saw that the tourist had excellent taste in pottery she became friendlier.

"You have chosen well, madam," the woman said, her accent thick but her English words spoken slowly and clearly. "You have chosen the best piece on display."

Layla smiled. "It's beautiful. The color is incredible, isn't it?"

With a nod of her head the woman spoke volumes. "It is. It is a special color to us, to our people. That blue is prized for its clarity. For its honesty. For its never-ending faithfulness."

Blue? Faithful...honest...clear? How about just plain pretty. That's enough reason for me to like it.

"And it matches your eyes, madam. It matches your eyes almost perfectly," the woman said in a low voice.

Layla looked from the vessel to the seller but the woman gave nothing away with her bland expression. If, in fact, there was anything to be given away.

Just an observation. She didn't mean anything by it. It just sounded weird, that's all. How does she know what my eyes look like, anyway? I don't think I've looked at her for more than ten seconds. Observant, I guess. Very observant.

"I suppose," said Layla.

She turned her attention back to the elegant object that she held. The jug was about fourteen inches in height. Rounded at the bottom, it arched upward to a thick neck which was attached to a curved handle. The wide-lipped rim had a slight, almost nonexistent indentation. Layla assumed the dent in the glass was intended for pouring from the jug's interior.

The delicate glass was the color of the ocean near tropical shorelines. Clear and blue, wavering and shimmering while seeming to hold layer upon layer of iridescence within its depths. The color drew and held the eye. Hand-painted swirls and jiggles decorated the glass. Initially they seemed to be placed randomly on the surface of the

piece, but with closer scrutiny Layla could see that they followed some sort of orderly pattern. The pattern on the glass looked like it, too, was in constant motion.

The piece was enchanting.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" asked Layla. She had no intention of putting it back on the glassware table for someone else to pick up and perhaps purchase. She knew that she was going to buy it, regardless of its price. She hadn't yet asked the seller about the cost of the object – Layla didn't care what it cost. She knew it was going home with her.

"It is an amazing piece of fine Egyptian glass. It is a copy of a piece that was found in the chapel of Thutmose III. He is, you realize, the boy king whose mother Hatshepsut had herself crowned as king. She ruled, you know," the thin woman said. She seemed genuinely happy to be able to report that Thutmose had needed the assistance of a woman to rule his kingdom. "One just like this one is in the Cairo Museum. You can see it on display there, behind a thick wall of protective glass. This one, just as beautiful, you can hold in your own two hands."

Layla ran her fingers over the piece. It felt cool beneath her touch, as if it was separated by the heat of the day by some unseen shield.

"I didn't realize that the Egyptians made glass that long ago. Wasn't glass-making begun in Mesopotamia, not Egypt?" asked Layla.

The woman shrugged. Her expression seemed to say "Why quibble?"

It was hard not to smile at the woman's attitude. It was apparent that pride would not allow her to admit that perhaps glass-making was not her ancestors' invention.

"Ah...who is to know for certain? Only the spirits of those who have traveled this plane before us can truly tell. But there is evidence, madam. Evidence that Armana had facilities – furnaces and faience workshops – that would support theories suggesting that ancient Egyptians did make glassware," she said. She nodded at the piece that Layla was still clutching. She was holding it tightly against her breast, as if sheltering it beside her heart. "That piece, I can assure you, was made in Egypt by the finest craftsmen. It is one of a kind. It is, as so many things here are, a gift from those who walked these sands long before we did. It is a link to those who will walk it long after we have departed from this world."

The woman's speech surprised Layla. So, too, did the carefully-chosen words.

Gifts, links, before us, after us... Egyptians are even more genealogy-conscious than Americans, I think. Maybe because they're surrounded by the treasures of the past? We're more used to keeping ours out of sight, in museums, under lock and key. It's different here.

When the seller named her price for the jug Layla didn't bother trying to negotiate with her, holding out the requested money. The woman made the notes disappear into her pocket faster than a pizza disappears at a tailgate party.

Layla asked that the jug be wrapped and delivered to her hotel. Giving the woman her name, she was about to give her the name of the hotel.

"The King's Palace Hotel," said the woman. She scrawled it on the slip of paper below Layla's name and shoved the slip of paper into the neck of the glass jug, looking up with a smile. "All good, eh?"

"How did you know?" asked Layla. She felt like she had the name of the hotel branded across her forehead. "About the hotel—how did you know?"

Shrugging, the woman said, "I could tell. You look like the kind of well-bred visitor who would stay at the King's Palace. I am correct, am I not?"

"Yes."

"See? All things are obvious in Cairo. Nothing can be hidden."

* * * * *

The hours flew at the exotic bazaar. The blistering sun was masked by the tented booths. The crowd seemed friendlier with each passing moment, no longer pushy and jostling but welcome and familiar. They blended seamlessly into the stream of humanity.

Caleb and Layla leisurely examined the wares in the myriad booths. They examined brassware of all sizes and types, fingered soft, hand-tooled leather items, held delicate finely-woven fabrics designed for ornate belly-dance costumes and tested so many different perfumes that their heads began to spin.

Layla bought a brown leather purse for herself and an intricately-detailed camel-skin wallet for Caleb. He laughed when she told him the expensive-looking billfold was made entirely of camel leather.

"Seems like a good way to end your days, doesn't it? After a lifetime of traveling across the desert you get to travel the globe in a man's trousers. Not bad," he said, grinning.

They spent a good deal of time at the jewelry stalls. There were classic designs as well as more unusual types of rings, bracelets, amulets and earrings for sale.

Caleb was determined to buy something unique for Layla, something that she would love so much that she would want to wear it all the time. He wanted to find something that would remind her forever of the time they were spending—and loving—in Cairo.

When he had chosen the perfect gift and was paying for it, Layla stepped across the dusty street to look at some tapestries that were hanging from high poles stretched above the stalls. The brightly-colored fabrics swayed in the slight breeze and she reached out to touch them.

So soft. These would make beautiful curtains...so sheer that they'd let the light into—oof!

Layla suddenly was shoved from behind. She didn't see who pushed her into the tapestries but felt hands, strong and hard, holding her against one of the poles. Yards of fabric enveloped her and for a moment she nearly panicked.

Thoughts of suffocation and strangulation flashed through her mind as she felt hot breath filter through one of the tapestries. It washed over her cheek, the stench of digesting meat made her gorge rise—she came close to fainting and vomiting in the beat of a heart.

Somehow Layla managed to stay on her feet as her head filled with the garbled sounds of a tongue she didn't recognize. The words were fast and furious. As they were still echoing in her mind, she felt the hands leave her waist. She heard feet slapping against the hard-packed red dirt and raised voices. She felt hands upon her body—gentler, but frantic, hands. She let herself be unwrapped from the twisted tapestries.

When the last piece of colored fabric was pulled from her face, she cried in relief.

"Caleb!"

"Oh, babe—oh my God, I thought you were lost for sure. I saw that guy in the black robes grab you from behind and push you but I couldn't get around the donkeys and camels. And there was a rush of people, all wearing black—like it was a parade of pallbearers or something. I jumped over a donkey to get to you. Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

Caleb's eyes scanned her face as his hands felt her arms, torso and hips. He put his hands on either side of her face and kissed her lips. He felt his heart lurch at the thought of what he had just witnessed.

"I'm fine, I think. It all happened so fast. I was just minding my own business, then—wham! It happened so fast, I didn't have time to think."

Layla's hands shook and her heart thumped twice as fast as it should have.

The entire episode had lasted but scant seconds, but it felt, for both of them, that it had stretched on for hours. They stood in the crowded bazaar holding tightly to each other. They were still clutching each other, not speaking but not needing words, either, when they heard the heavily-accented voice.

Turning, they saw a smartly-dressed policeman with a concerned expression on his dark face. His so-brown-they-were-nearly-black eyes scanned them quickly from head to foot before coming back to rest on their faces.

"A tourist told me that there had been some sort of scuffle over here, by the tapestry stall. Was that you?"

Layla nodded.

"Are you all right, madam? Do you need any assistance? Medical help, perhaps?" the policeman asked.

His voice held the sound of newly-acquired authority and they could see that despite his by-the-manual words and actions he was very young.

He was most likely just out of the police academy, if the look on his face could be taken as an indication of his recent graduation. He hadn't yet adopted the hardened look common to those law enforcement officials who had been on the job for years—the resigned acceptance that the world had good guys and bad guys and that even being

one of the good guys couldn't always keep bad things from happening to good people. No, this young man was far from resigned. Far from hardened. Definitely not immune to the bad guys yet.

Layla was relieved to find that her voice wasn't nearly as shaky as she'd feared. "No, I'm fine. Not hurt—just frightened, I guess. No medical help will be necessary."

The young man removed his black-and-white hat and stuck it beneath one arm. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a compact pad and a pen. He depressed the end of the pen and held it above a clean sheet of paper.

"I must take some information from you, if you do not mind. It will only take a few minutes. First, I need your name and the name of the hotel where you are staying," he said.

They provided the standard information. He scribbled furiously on the piece of paper, taking down every word they said.

"Did you know the individual who assaulted you, madam?"

"No. I never saw his face, so I have no idea who it was."

"I saw him," said Caleb. "He was dressed entirely in black—in one of those long robe things—do you know what I mean?"

"He wore a *galabiyah*?"

"Yes, if that's what you call them. Like that fellow over there," said Caleb. He pointed to a man who was dressed in the traditional manner, with a flowing striped garment and headwear to match.

"A *galabiyah*."

"Right. So I couldn't see who he was, not really. And there was a pack of guys just like him, dressed the exact same way, who swarmed the street when the first guy grabbed my wife. They all looked identical. Unidentifiable," he finished.

"Unless you can identify someone by their breath," joked Layla. Standing in the crowded bazaar she felt safe again. The shakiness had nearly passed and it almost felt as if the whole thing had happened to someone else.

"You mean he spoke to you?" asked the policeman.

"Oh. Yes, he did. Didn't I already mention that?" Layla asked. She could barely recall what she had said within the first few minutes after the attack. She thought she had told them that he had spoken, but maybe she had only told Caleb before the cop had arrived.

Who knows? All I know is that I'd kill for something cold to drink. Terror scares a person's throat dry. I'm parched.

"No, madam. You did not. First let's address the issue of his breath. You say it was identifiable?" He wrote quickly on his notepad.

"I guess." She smirked.

"How so?"

His seriousness made her feel silly but she had started this line of questioning, so she knew she had to follow through with it.

"It reeked," she said.

The police officer looked up from his paper and pen. His heavy brows came together across his forehead, forming a solid line of black hair that looked suspiciously like a fat black worm. Layla swallowed a giggle.

"Reeked? Forgive me, madam, but I am not familiar with this term. Could you please explain this to me?" He seemed embarrassed that he had a language difficulty.

"Sorry. I should have explained myself more...well, it means that his breath stank, that is, smelled bad, that it was unpleasant," she offered.

That I wanted to puke at the stench.

"Oh, I see. He had a bad odor in his mouth?" The police officer jotted what they assumed to be the last bit of information in his notes.

"Exactly."

Caleb looked around at the people as they passed them. Most shoppers didn't even stop and gawk, the way people would have done in the United States. No, it was as if they were used to seeing blonde-haired women talking to policemen in the bazaar. No one batted an eye or gave them one bit of serious scrutiny.

He was glad he hadn't suggested Layla go shopping on her own.

"So the unknown man spoke to you? Is that correct?"

"Yes. But I didn't understand him," she volunteered. She wanted nothing more than to walk away from this experience—and quickly. Visions of iced tea and lemonade danced in her mind's eye.

"A language not familiar to you?"

"That's right. It was all a jumbled mess of words. I didn't get any of it," Layla said. She brought to mind the smelly rush of words that had been so rudely pushed into her consciousness by the stranger. "There was only one word I understood and he said it over and over again, many times during the assault."

She looked up at Caleb as she realized what she had heard. Its implication had to be important, since the stinky man had made a point to hammer the word into her head.

"What was it, babe? What did that creep say to you?" asked Caleb.

"Nut. He said it over and over—one word mixed in with all the other stuff. Nut."

"Nut?" asked Caleb.

"Nut."

That's what he said.

* * * * *

"Are you sure you want to go to the church this afternoon? We can do it tomorrow. Maybe you'd like to take it easy today instead? I'm sure we could find something to keep us occupied – that is, if you feel up to it," said Caleb.

His intention was clear, made even more suggestive by the comedic-yet-still-seductive waggling of his eyebrows. He winked twice and gave her his best baby-I-want-you-now look.

Then he chuckled.

And she giggled.

The freedom to enjoy each other, laughing and having fun and passing comfortable hours together, was something that they both were loving. Every single moment of it seemed like a gift from the pharaohs – to both of them.

They were finishing up their lunch at an outdoor café called The Nile Runner.

The menu had some standard western items on it, but they had chosen not to order food that they were used to eating. Instead, they had questioned the waiter and ultimately, had left their luncheon selections up to the patient Egyptian's discretion. He had suggested and served, a dish of hummus rolled in the flat, thin baked bread that is everywhere in the desert. Served with salad, it had made a light, yet satisfying, meal.

Caleb planned to leave a big tip for the waiter when they left the shaded terrace. He had never eaten hummus before and had been dubious when it was suggested, but he had seen the enthusiasm in the young man's face paired with the excitement in Layla's eyes. He was glad he had decided to put logical thought aside and follow his heart about lunch.

That hummus stuff will probably make me burp for days, but it'll be worth it. Look at Layla just loving this whole experience! She's practically licked the plate clean...I thought I'd have a tough time getting her to eat after her bad experience but she seems to be fine. I think I'm more shaken than she is.

As if she could read his mind, she looked across the table at him and shook her head. Her straight hair brushed across her rosy cheeks, one strand catching on her lip gloss but before he could reach across the table to brush it away from her mouth, she did it herself.

Caleb found the act mildly erotic.

My libido has returned in the desert air, that's for certain.

"What?" he asked. The headshake had to mean something.

"It's just that I think that you're more shaken up about this whole bazaar thing than I am, that's all. I'm fine, really. And yes, I definitely do want to go to the church today, if it's okay with you. I really want to see it and I don't want to miss it because some fool called me a nut. Besides, we're going to the pyramids tomorrow, aren't we?"

She had been surprised this morning when he'd suggested camel rides, of all things, to the pyramids tomorrow. Of course she'd agreed, almost instantly. Now she couldn't help but wonder if he'd changed his mind.

You're not wimping out on me, are you, Caleb?

"You might be right – maybe I am a little more unnerved by this morning's incident than you are. But it's not every day, thank God, that you see some lowlife manhandling your wife," he said. He was still disgusted by his inability to protect her better. "And of course I still want to see the church. I just didn't want you to feel obligated to go if you didn't feel up to it."

"I feel fine," she insisted. "And the other...you know. Well, we'll still have time for that after we get back to the hotel from the church, won't we? Your offer doesn't have an expiration time on it or anything, does it?" Layla waggled her own eyebrows at Caleb.

"Of course it doesn't. My, um, suggestion is good for anytime. Just let me know when you're ready for...anything. I'm more than thrilled to go forward with that plan. Anytime, babe."

"Well, then. We'll see the church," said Layla. She reached for her glass and swallowed the last drops of the cold tea. She placed the empty glass beside her plate with a gentle thump. She twirled it for a moment, watching the melting chunks of ice slide against the bubble-pocked glass. She looked up to find Caleb's eyes on her. "Then, if you're up to it, we'll take care of the...other activities. But church first, all right?"

He grinned. "Good. Then we're off to the church."

He pulled his wallet out of his pants and felt a bulge in his pocket.

What the he – oh, I'd forgotten about this!

Caleb placed a small black box on the table beside her plate. Layla looked at it, then at him, then back at the box. She picked it up and questioned him silently, the way long-married people are apt to do.

"I nearly forgot about it," he explained. "I was buying that for you when the whole thing at the tapestry stall started. I shoved it in my pocket and jumped over the donkey...I forgot it was there until just now. It's for you, babe. To celebrate out time in Cairo...and other things, too," he finished. He stared into her not-to-be-forgotten teal eyes and watched as they began to shine. He saw a wetness begin in them, so he leaned over and kissed her quickly. "Open it. You might not even like it."

He knew that wasn't likely. It was something she was going to love.

"Oh! How beautiful," she breathed as she stared into the black box.

The platinum and lapis lazuli ring sparkled from the bed of black velvet that held it in place. The stone was nearly the color of her eyes. It also matched the amulet she was wearing, the one that, even now, warmed the spot between her breasts.

Caleb reached over and slipped it on her finger. It fit perfectly.

"I love you, Layla. More than I can ever tell you," he said quietly.

In that instant she knew that he meant what he said. But she also knew that meaning something and acting on it were two different things.

Chapter Seven

"Who even knew there was a Saint Sergius?" Layla asked. "I, for one, had no idea."

They were nearly alone in the cavernous Church of St. Sergius. There were never more than a few visitors to the ancient site during the hottest afternoon hours.

Their steps on the stone floor echoed, the stillness of the space broken by the cool, damp breeze that washed over their bodies like an icy blast from an open freezer. The source of the breeze wasn't apparent but the coolness was welcome.

"Apparently the guys who built the place knew about him. They went all out to pay him tribute. This place is incredible. It's hard to believe it's been standing since the fourth or fifth century—just amazing, don't you think?" asked Caleb. He looked up toward the ceiling. It seemed to be so far away that he felt a brief surge of vertigo. He lowered his eyes, searching for something to focus on.

He stared at the ivory and wood iconostasis. He was immediately drawn to it and marveled at the craftsmanship of the piece. The ebony panels, each inlaid with an ivory cross, must have taken skill beyond measure to make. And that was before power tools, which made the whole undertaking take on even greater dimensions in his mind.

"I read in the guide that Bacchus and Sergius were two Roman soldiers who were put to death in the third century. They wouldn't participate in sacrifices to Jupiter, so they were killed for their beliefs. That's why Sergius became a saint, I suppose. And that's clearly the reason for the church, in commemoration of his selfless acts," Layla said.

"You have to respect that kind of fortitude."

"No kidding," she said. "Listen, I want to go downstairs and see the stone font in the crypt chapel. It marks the exact spot where the Holy Family rested during the flight into Egypt. I'd like to say a prayer, maybe even touch it if I can," said Layla.

She knew that her strong religious upbringing had made such requests reasonable to her. Caleb had always been more laid-back in his regard for, and tolerance of, her faith. His slapdash religious education, thanks in large measure to his alcoholic father, made him a hesitant participant in organized religion. She fully expected him to send her down by herself and to tap his foot impatiently until she returned.

"I'll go with you," said Caleb.

"You're sure?" she asked. It was impossible to hide her shock and amazement.

Wow, I've really got some fence-mending to do. You don't expect me to do anything with you, do you? What an ass I've been.

His eyes flashed to either side of where they stood. There wasn't anyone in sight who was paying any attention at all to them.

Caleb pulled her body against his. He planted a stolen kiss on her lips. He resisted the urge to let his mouth linger on hers, resisted the almost primal instinct her body against his brought to the surface of his mind.

He kissed her and released her. Reluctantly.

"I'm sure," he answered. "Lead the way."

A wide doorway led to a stone landing. The narrow stone steps had been laboriously hand-carved and had been softened by centuries of feet. Layla began descending into the belly of the massive church.

"They have services here every June first to mark the arrival of the Holy Fam—ahh!"

It happened in a flash. One moment she was on her feet and he was being hypnotized by the swaying of her hips and the whisper of her words. Then he was harshly jerked from a sweet-as-summer-wine interlude to a colder-than-a-blizzard reality.

Caleb saw her slip, saw her begin to fall down the steep staircase but was powerless to stop it. His breath caught as he watched her bounce off each step like a rubber ball in a children's cartoon and his heart seized as he saw her tumble to a stop at the bottom of the steps.

He scrambled down the stairs, yelling as he jumped over her still body. Her too-still body.

"Someone! Help. We need help down here!" hollered Caleb. His voice filled the cavern's interior and vibrated off the walls. "*Now* We need help—*Now*"

Caleb stopped yelling and reached for her. He pushed her tousled hair off her forehead and was relieved not to find blood on her pale, hauntingly beautiful face.

For a moment he was afraid to touch her. Yet he was also afraid that if he didn't touch her he would die.

Layla's head rested against one of the thick stone walls and her legs were folded beneath her. He was hesitant to move her, worried that he'd hurt her even more than he feared she'd already been hurt.

A black-robed priest came scurrying on silent feet from some distant part of the crypt and skidded to a stop when he saw them.

He halted briefly, then rushed to kneel beside Layla. He placed a bony hand on Caleb's wide shoulder and squeezed his flesh. The priest made no move to touch the still woman.

"I heard yelling, so I came," he said in a thickly-accented voice. "What happened?"

Caleb gestured to the steps above them as her eyelids began to flicker.

"We were on our way down to see a stone thing—some resting spot," he answered. His words came out in a rush as he watched her return to consciousness.

"The stone font," said the priest quietly.

"Yeah, that's it. She wanted to say a prayer. But she fell, all the way down the steps—it was horrible—she bounced off every one of those damn stone steps on her way down!"

Caleb rubbed her fingers between his own and checked the pulse in her wrist. It felt strong and steady and he felt a flash of hope. Then he realized he'd just sworn to a priest and looked across his wife's body at the aged man.

"Sorry, Father. For the swearing."

The priest managed a shaky smile. "Stressful situation, my son. Don't give it another thought. You say she slipped?" He glanced over his shoulder at the steps.

"Slid is more like it. One minute she was up and the next minute she was a human yo-yo."

"Yo-yo," the priest echoed. "All the way down?"

"All the way."

They turned to look at the stairs. The steps looked even more menacing from their position on the stone floor, beside the still figure of Caleb's wife.

"Look, I think she's waking up," said Caleb. He felt his heart leap in his chest.

Layla struggled to sit up. When the two men saw that she could move they helped her to sit on the bottom step.

A shaky hand passed across her head was enough to tell Layla that she had a small lump. It seemed a reasonable price to pay for what could have been a catastrophe.

"I fell," she said.

Caleb couldn't contain his nervous laughter, pulling her into his arms gently and nodding. He buried his face in her soft, sweet-smelling hair, breathing in the essence of her, the trueness of her, the strength that was hers alone. In that moment, in the cavern beneath the ancient church, he felt his spirit fill with the knowledge that he had nearly lost the most important thing in his life.

The resolution to hold on even more tightly to what he now knew was a gift was strengthened and he took one last deep, calming breath before he pulled his face out of Layla's hair.

"You could say that," he said. He looked into her teal blue eyes and smiled. "You did a good job of it, too. Didn't miss a step, either. Bounced off every one, babe. Are you all right? Do we need to see a doctor, maybe have some x-rays?"

The priest had disappeared up the stairs briefly when Caleb pulled Layla close. He returned now with a chilled bottle of water and a paper cup. He poured water into the cup and handed it to her.

They were all pleased to notice that her hands were steady when she reached for it.

"Are you all right, my dear? Would you like me to phone for a physician—or an ambulance? You are not in a delicate condition or anything like that, are you?" The white-haired priest looked concerned. And, they noticed, he looked like something was

angering him. The lined face had a thunderous look to it that he was trying unsuccessfully to conceal.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you, Father. And I apologize for creating such a commotion in this holy place. I'm so sorry," Layla said quickly. She thought that she must be the reason for the elderly man's anger.

The holy man put a warm hand on her shoulder and patted her reassuringly as he shook his head.

"Don't apologize, my dear. It is I who needs to apologize to you, I'm afraid. When I went to get the bottle of water I saw that there is a puddle of something wet at the top of the stairs. It is undoubtedly what made you fall down the steps. I am heartily sorry for this sad incident. It could have so easily been a tragedy of greater magnitude. As it is, this is bad enough. I fear that you will be badly bruised within a few hours," the priest said.

"Liquid? You mean the stairs were wet?" asked Caleb.

In the confined space his voice sounded twice as loud as it was, by no means low to begin with. Caleb's temper, fueled by his concern for Layla's safety, made his feelings on the state of the stairs something that was beyond question.

"I am afraid so. There is no way of knowing for certain how it got there, but we are constantly asking tourists with beverages to dispose of them. We have signs posted at every entrance to the church, but some people have their own sets of rules, do they not?" The man shrugged and his black robes rose and fell theatrically. "I am sorry. I cannot apologize sincerely enough for this awful incident."

"It's no one's fault," said Layla. "I should have watched where I was going. I was excited and didn't bother to look if front of my own feet, so it's my own fault, really. No harm done."

"Your head has a knot on it—I'd call that harm. And you could have been killed—" said Caleb.

"But I wasn't," she finished.

You're scared. I can see it in your eyes and feel it in your words. You're afraid of what almost happened. I had no idea that I was so important to you.

"If you feel up to it, I can give you a special tour of the font and the crypt. A close-up look, if you will," offered the priest.

The holy man reached out his time-worn hand across the centuries-old room. Layla placed hers in it eagerly.

Chapter Eight

"How about room service tonight?" asked Caleb as he crossed the room in three large strides. "Should I phone in for food? Does that sound good to you?"

He handed her a sweating glass of iced tea he retrieved from the hotel room mini-fridge and sat on the edge of the sunken tub.

Layla took the glass with a bubble-covered hand, drank and placed the glass on the ledge behind her head. She sank further into the soothing bubble bath that he had insisted upon drawing for her the instant they were back in their suite.

"Mmm... Are you sure you don't want to go out? Or to the dining room at least? I'm fine, you know."

He surveyed what he could see of his wife. She did look fine...very fine.

God, what the hell is going on here? My cock feels like it's attached to a string – it's jumping up and down like a schoolboy's. It's as if I'm under a spell – all she has to do is look at me and I get a hard-on. It's not a bad spell, actually...as far as spells go. I guess it could be worse...I could get warts instead of an erection. Or boils or –

"Caleb? Did you hear me, honey? I said that I'm fine, if you want to go out for dinner," said Layla. She gathered a handful of scented bubbles and stroked them across the skin above her breasts. "We don't need to stay in, not if you don't want to."

"I know you're fine, babe. It's just that we've had a busy enough day already. Wouldn't it be nice to just lie around in our robes, eat and relax a bit? We could watch a movie on that wide-screen television in the cabinet – the one we haven't even turned on yet –"

"Missing television, are you?" she asked with a grin.

He trailed his fingers through the bubbles that were slowly popping on the surface of the water. He looked at her and smiled.

"Not one bit," he said.

"Aha. I wondered."

She recognized a warmth within her that had nothing to do with the temperature of the water. Her nipples tingled and stiffened beneath the water's surface.

"Don't waste your time wondering – I'm absolutely not missing the big black box. In fact, I'm thinking that maybe we don't need the ones at home, either. There are so many other ways we can spend our time," Caleb said.

"Such as?"

He ran his whole hand through the water. The tub was large, big enough to accommodate two people without any undue squashing. He wondered if she was up to the activity.

Give her a break...she's been accosted in a crowded market and gone sliding down a set of nearly two-thousand-year-old stairs. Control yourself, man! What the hell is happening to me?

Layla sat up higher in the tub and reached for the glass of iced tea, knowing she was giving him an eyeful—he got a good view of her soapy body right down to her waist. The mysterious blue stone glistened from its place on her chest.

“This and that,” he said. His breath hitched in his suddenly-tight throat. He couldn’t take his eyes off her soap-slicked breasts. He couldn’t resist the sight of the glittering blue stone settled between her taut rosy nipples.

She smiled as she reached for him. Her soapy arm went around his neck and pulled his face to her own. When her lips touched his it was as if an electric current passed between them and they pushed their mouths together more tightly, sharing the energy that consumed them.

Caleb pulled his mouth from hers, touching one finger to a nipple before palming one wet breast in his large hand. He massaged her gently, conscious of her episode on the stairs.

“Are you coming in, or shall I get out?” Layla asked. She nipped playfully at his thick neck, at the tender spot just below his earlobe. She felt his throat move as he swallowed.

“Are you sure, babe? I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

You mean that, don't you? You care, you really do care... Why did we have to come here for you to let me know that you care for me? God, how could we have been so stupid?

“In or out?”

“Your choice,” he answered. “I’d make love to you in or out or in and out or —”

She smiled up at him as she pulled him into the water. They laughed as his clothing became soaked and water sloshed over the sides of the huge tub.

“In!” she said.

Somehow they got Caleb’s wet shirt off his well-muscled shoulders. The jeans were a bigger challenge, especially since his erection left less wiggle room inside the fabric.

Biting and kissing and sliding and giggling, they finally managed to divest Caleb of his clothes.

Layla positioned herself beside him in the deep tub. She pressed her body against his as they kissed, loving the way her soft contours seemed to naturally fit the hard lines of his male physique.

His hands reached beneath the water. His fingers were gentle on her breasts. He teased her with soft caresses on her warm skin, teased her by tugging at her hardened nipples, teased her until she felt as if she could come without any other attention. Layla

moaned when his fingers left her breasts. She moaned, but as she felt his hand slide downward she parted her legs.

Caleb's fingers parted her desire-swollen lips. He felt her press against his hand, felt her need fuel his own longing. He touched her silky soft spots, slid his fingers across her slick opening. He fingered her gently at first. When she pushed her moist folds against his palm he became bolder in his exploration.

His thumb stroked her clit and he felt her tremble. He recognized the signal from her body, the signal that he had learned so long ago. Layla was close to the brink of orgasm and he knew that it would only take a few well-placed touches to send her tumbling to her pleasure.

He wanted to send her tumbling. Again and again.

As Caleb started to stroke her sex in the way he knew she liked the best he was brought up short. Mid-stroke.

Layla's hand circled his penis. His hardness throbbed in her fingers as she tightened her hand around him and she slid her fingers along his length. She gave his cock a fast tug and his lips left her neck, his head falling back against the edge of the tub and resting against the cool porcelain.

"Oh, babe," Caleb breathed. "It feels so good. Oh! Do you know what you do to me when you do that? Oh..."

Layla squeezed his cock with her fingers, closing her legs around his hand and squeezing them together in a matching rhythm.

"I know. Do you know?" she asked. She kissed his neck as his fingers began to move against her skin. "Do you know...that you're...oh! Caleb..."

His thumb pressed against her clit in a motion that couldn't be denied. He slid his finger inside her warm, wet opening.

"I know, babe," he whispered as he kissed her face, covering her eyes, her temples, her nose, her chin with soft, fast kisses. She felt like she was being caressed inside, outside, above water and below the water and felt the first twinges of her orgasm flutter within her. "I know, my love...let it happen. Come, babe. Please let me love you."

Layla didn't need any coaxing. She held him close and set herself free to enjoy the sensations that filled her body, shuddering against him as water sloshed over the sides of the tub.

When her breathing slowed, Layla turned to her husband. He looked as if he had just won the lottery.

"Thanks," he said. "That was awesome."

She squeezed his cock in her hand.

"That was only the beginning," she said. She straddled him and wiggled against his penis, pressing herself along the long, hard length of him.

Her breasts were above the waterline when she pushed herself down onto his throbbing erection and began to ride him—hard. She wanted him to feel the same kind

of satisfaction he'd given her. With her eyes tightly closed and her head thrown back, she gripped the sides of the tub and pumped her pussy on his hard cock.

As the first pulses of his orgasm filled her, Caleb's eyes were on the amulet.

* * * * *

The sultry air surrounded them, the silence nearly complete and the stars glittered like diamonds strewn across the black velvet sky.

The great pyramids were illuminated by the light show.

Layla reached across the distance between them and pulled his hand into hers. She felt as if she had gone so long without feeling connected to him that she had to, in some small way, make up for the time they had so foolishly missed.

"I know it's tacky but it really is pretty, don't you think?" she asked.

He drained his wineglass and placed it on a marble-topped table.

"No doubt. I'm starting to believe that any way to see the pyramids is a good way. I find myself looking up at them almost all day long. It's as if I've got to figure out where I am in relation to them or something," he admitted. It was true—in the past two days he'd gotten the habit of orienting himself by the super-structures.

"I know. I look all the time, too. But you know I've always wanted to see them. Ever since I can remember."

Layla had begged her parents for summer vacations to Egypt and had been disappointed with Florida, Alaska and Cape Cod.

"I didn't know that," he said quietly.

What else is there that I don't know about you?

"Oh yeah. I've been intrigued by everything Egyptian since I was a child. I've had dreams of being here my whole life—oh, it's silly," she said.

She finished her wine and twirled the empty glass in her free hand.

Don't bore him with stupid stories. Not when you're finally finding common ground.

"Hey," he said, turning toward her in the darkness. "It's been a long time since we talked about hopes and dreams...and plans for the future. This seems like a good time, doesn't it? Tell me, Layla—please. Tell me everything..."

Chapter Nine

The ascent was awkward but effective. The great smelly camel lumbered to her feet and Layla felt herself swaying high in the morning air. It was as if she was perched on a large moving mountain.

"You okay over there?" called Caleb. Astride the other camel that had been waiting for them outside the hotel's entrance, he looked like a modern-day sheik. His dark sunglasses and khaki pants would have been comical in the unlikely setting had he not been so handsome.

"Fine," she called back. And she really was fine, too. The seat on the camel's back was comfortable and once the initial shock of being pushed so far off the ground wore off, it was a great adventure.

For Layla, riding a camel across the Egyptian desert was one of her childhood fantasies come to life.

I can never tell him how much this means to me. He'll never be able to understand. Although he surprised me last night...maybe I can get him to understand more than I've ever given him credit for. Who knows, maybe it's possible to fix this broken marriage after all.

The trek across the hot sand was comfortable astride camels. The air, although not sweet-smelling, thanks to the mode of transport, was breezy and cooler than it would have been had they been walking. And the camels covered the distance to their destination quickly, with their huge strides and loping steps. Much too quickly for Layla's taste the ride was over.

"The camels and I, we will wait here," said their guide Mohamed. He was a small man, as wiry as a bantam rooster but with thick wrists and forearms, presumably from a lifetime spent tugging at the halters of stubborn camels. "We will be over there, ready whenever you want to leave. Take your time. We are not in a rush. And perhaps you will want some photographs on the camels, posed in front of the pyramid and the Sphinx. Most tourists, they want those," he said.

With a final smile that gave a glimpse at his gold tooth, Mohamed led his camels toward the spot where other camel drivers and their animals were already waiting.

"I like him," said Layla. She adjusted her shorts and tugged at her top, making certain that all the buttons were closed. Climbing off a camel wasn't the easiest thing she had ever done, although achieving it was one of the most satisfying. "I'm glad you chose to hire him. He seems like a man who knows his job and isn't in a hurry to rush us through this day. I like that."

Caleb watched her pull and push at her already perfectly-ordered outfit. Her attention to detail was one of the things he most admired about her.

"Oh, he should be laid-back. He's getting paid by the hour. But you're right, the camels seemed well-behaved and he looked like he had total control over them at all times. Not bad, since those beasts must weigh close to a ton each."

"You think? That much?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Who knows? All I know is that they're really pretty damn big. I was glad that they listened so well. And Mohamed—I think you just like him for his camels," he teased.

She laughed and her laughter tinkled like a bell, clear and bright across the never-ending sand. Her voice attracted attention—a group of dark men in traditional dress looked up from their conversation when she laughed.

She sounds great in any language doesn't she? So natural, so easy to love. Yeah, boys—you can look but she's with me. Ha!

"Maybe. Sort of like the New York equivalent of dating a guy because he's got a sports car?"

"That's right, babe. These camels are the sports cars of the desert. Now, where should we go first?"

They looked at the imposing pyramid of Khafre that stretched into the cloudless sky. The remnants of its limestone casing were high above them, near the top of the pyramid. There were few tourists in sight, due to the early hour. They had hoped to have the run of the place, without having to sidestep running children or feel like they were on an amusement park tour.

Their timing had been perfect. As they started to walk toward the structure, they could imagine they were the only ones at the site, left to explore with the ghosts of long-departed pharaohs as guides.

"Let's see the valley temple first. Then we'll go inside, okay?" suggested Layla.

"Sounds good."

He reached for her hand as if it was something that he did all the time. They had held hands so often in the past few days that it almost felt natural for both of them.

Their footsteps echoed on the polished alabaster floor.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Caleb asked.

He ran a hand along one of the thick Aswan granite columns. It was strong and solid, despite the thousands of years since its construction.

"Barely describes the magic of the place, does it? Do you see these platforms?" she pointed at the squarish spots placed strategically around the floor. "They're the bases for statues of Khafre. There were twenty-three of them, I think. Anyway, only one has survived and it's in the Museum. We'll see it later. Made out of diorite. I've seen pictures of it and it's beautiful. He must have been a handsome man—Khafre."

"Should I be jealous?"

"Hardly," she said. "Dead guys don't hold any attraction for me."

The time passed quickly. They explored the Sphinx and spent a long time examining the Dream Stela between its massive paws.

"What does it say?" asked Caleb. "Have you any idea?"

She nodded.

It took a second for her throat to loosen enough for her to answer his question. She had waited so long to see this ancient message—it was hard to believe that she was finally standing in front of it.

"It's a promise. An understanding, sort of," she said. "The sun god promised Prince Tuthmosis that he would become king of Egypt if he kind of maintained the Sphinx...repairs and cleaning away drifting sand, that sort of thing."

Caleb touched the stone tablet with one finger. Reverently, almost. Layla watched him withdraw his finger and stick his hand into his trouser pocket.

Unusual for you to be so obviously moved by a slice of stone. What's happening to you here? I'm liking this change, Caleb. Really liking it.

"A pre-Christ contract?"

"Something like that," she answered.

* * * * *

The pyramid of Khafre, although grand in its magnificence, was less exciting to them than the temples, Sphinx or stela had been. They entered the pyramid on the north side through one of the openings in the enormous structure.

The passage first led downward, then sloped upward again. Finally it leveled off and they followed the narrow corridor toward the heart of the pyramid. The silence was absolute, as was the odor. They had come to recognize the odor that permeates pyramids—it was a unique mixture of decay and bat guano mixed with stagnant air. It wasn't something that was pleasant but it wasn't intolerable, either.

The burial chamber was much less impressive than the pyramid itself. Just below ground level, the room wasn't nearly as exquisite as one would expect it to be. An empty red granite sarcophagus waited for visitors. There were no inscriptions to examine and no reason for lingering in the chamber.

The hot air hit their faces like a cool drink after a ten-mile run in the desert. They gasped great gulping swallows of fresh air, thankful to be out of the confined pyramid.

"I don't want to be a spoilsport but I don't want to go back in there, either," said Caleb.

He rubbed a hand across his cheek. He was certain he had brushed up against something moldering in the passageway but his hand came away clean.

Get a grip. Nothing in there but some old bat shit. Look at your wife, man. She's completely unfazed by being in an ancient burial chamber. Brass balls, that's what she's got.

Layla looked at him, assessed his willingness to continue exploring. He'd seemed to be unsettled inside the king's chamber. Maybe he'd want to go somewhere else. He looked like he'd like nothing better than a cold drink and a hot shower.

She decided to press her luck. After all, what did she have to lose?

"You feel like taking a quick look at the Khentkaues' pyramid, over there? She's sometimes called the first female king, although there's been a bit of discussion over the theories surrounding her. But we're here...and I'd like to see the chapel if you don't mind terribly," she finished.

He shook his head and smiled at her. "I don't mind at all. Lead the way," he said. His good-natured demeanor worked like magic on Layla and once again she felt her heart warming toward her husband.

* * * * *

The crumbling structure was set off from the main tourist attractions by a short expanse of hot sand. The area around what is sometimes called the "fourth pyramid" was free of tourists and camel drivers with their charges.

The rock terrain formed the basis for the cut lower segment and Khentkaues' pyramid looked as if it rose up out of the desert like a mighty oak tree pushing through the soil. The chapel and burial chamber rose above the bottom level and a laid stone upper level completed the pyramid.

They stood in the entrance to the chapel, letting their eyes adjust to the interior gloominess. Layla ran her fingers lightly over the hieroglyphic inscription on the thick granite doorway.

"Do you know what it says?" Caleb asked quietly. For some reason he didn't understand, this smaller pyramid gave him a greater sense of awe.

"I must be reading it incorrectly," she answered. "My skill at deciphering these symbols is really only rudimentary at best. Yes, I must be reading it wrong. It doesn't make sense."

"What do you think it says?"

"I think... 'Mother of Two Kings' is what I'm getting...but like I said, I think I'm off base."

"Shall we?"

He bowed gallantly and gestured to the opening. But as she took a step inside, Caleb put a restraining hand on her bare arm.

"Maybe I should go first. Who knows what's in there. Would you mind?"

"Not a bit. Thanks."

As she followed his broad back into the recesses of the pyramid, she marveled at his thoughtfulness. Once again, he had surprised her.

They spent a long time looking at the inscriptions on the walls and following the slightly less-stinky passages inside the cool stone building. They explored the nooks and crannies and took their time poring over the crudely-carved writing that was everywhere. One small room, in particular, held their attention for the better part of an hour.

"Can't you just imagine how it was in the time of the Fourth Dynasty, when this place was built? Can't you just feel the echoes of footsteps, hear the ringing of ancient laughter and smell the sweet odors of the women who walked these floors? Can't you feel them?" Layla asked.

"Me, I feel the tired muscles of the men who built the place. I smell the hot stink of sweaty, unwashed bodies. I hear the grunting of guys laboring day after day, hour after hour, to build what is essentially a large crypt. Not as romantic as your vision—I'm sorry but that's what comes to my mind," he admitted.

She kissed him quickly.

"Such a handyman kind of answer! You ready to head back? I'm getting hungry, aren't you? We've spent a lot more time here than I had planned. Thanks for being so good about coming here," she said.

"You don't need to thank me." He grinned and put his arms around her, pulled her close and kissed her lips. "It isn't every day that a man gets the chance to kiss a beautiful woman in an ancient pyramid." He kissed her again. "Probably in the exact same spot that some important pharaoh kissed his woman, too."

His lips on hers made something inside her stomach flip—in a good way. A very good way. It made the already-slightly-sore area between her legs tingle and grow moist. The seductive kiss that he was giving her made Layla wonder what sex in a pyramid would feel like.

She pressed her body against his and felt the telltale sign of his desire as clearly as if it had been inscribed on a temple wall. His erection pushed against the fabric of his trousers and she felt every inch of his hardness against her thigh.

Layla reached between them and cupped his length against her palm.

"Like this place, do you?" she murmured against his cheek. He inhaled quickly as she fondled him. "Like it a lot, eh?"

"You drive me wild, Layla. Do you realize that?" His voice was husky as she pulled away from him and looked deeply into his eyes. They were filled with desire, but with something else, too. Honesty.

"I'm beginning to realize it, Caleb. I think I'm just beginning to learn how you feel about me."

"I think that I may have kept my feelings hidden for a long time, babe. Hidden from both of us," he admitted.

"And maybe I didn't look closely enough to see what was hidden. I think we've both been dancing out of step with each other."

"Think we can learn some new moves? Maybe partner each other better?" he asked. He grinned but the serious look hadn't left his eyes.

"I think so." Layla gave his cock a squeeze as she leaned in and kissed him. She slid his zipper down and reached her hand inside his pants. His erection filled the space and she tugged it gently toward the unzipped opening.

"Hey, babe, what if someone comes in," Caleb lowered his voice and pressed his forehead against hers. She had the pink tip of his cock out of his pants and was rubbing it between her fingertips, a wicked grin on her face. "But hell, it feels so damn good I don't want you to stop. Oh, you drive me crazy, just out of my mind. I want to fuck you all the time, do you know that?"

With a groan, she kissed him and pushed his cock back into his pants. "I know, I feel it too. I want you everywhere we go, all the time. And it feels so damn natural to reach out and fondle you. Hey. Maybe we can dance a little bit when we get back to the hotel? A little mambo, maybe?"

His laughter filled the small space.

"Don't you ever get tired, woman?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Are you complaining?"

"Oh no—not a bit. Mark me down for every dance on your dance card, babe. So, have you seen enough of this place? It's getting hot in here," he said, grinning. He adjusted his trousers so that he could stand properly and bowed gallantly. "Lead the way, Layla. I'll follow you."

She turned and walked out into one of the long passages.

Caleb followed closely behind her. He wasn't certain that this place didn't conceal snakes among the stones.

At the first turn, she stopped.

"Caleb, I must have gone the wrong way. We can't get out this way."

Layla was puzzled—she didn't recall seeing any heavy stone slabs covering doorways when they went inside the chapel. How had she missed this?

He looked behind them but there were no openings, no doorways between where they stood and the chamber at the end of the passage.

"We came in this way, Layla. We had to—there's no other way in or out," he said.

She turned to look at him in the dim light.

They were trapped.

* * * * *

"It is fortunate for you that I saw the two of you going into the fourth pyramid," said Mohamed.

"Fortunate for us, too. You saved our lives," said Layla.

Mohamed had arrived on the other side of the stone slab just as she was beginning to get frantic. She and Caleb had already tried pushing the heavy stone out of their way but they couldn't get the necessary leverage from their side of the door.

The camel driver had rolled it away from the opening with one well-placed push and liberated them in a matter of minutes. No one wanted to contemplate what would have happened to them if Mohamed hadn't come to their rescue.

Standing in front of the King's Palace Hotel, in the bright sunlight, it was as if the events of the morning had not happened. Or if they had, that they had happened to someone else and not to them. The feeling of being trapped in an ancient pyramid wasn't one that either of them wanted to linger over.

Caleb paid Mohamed and tipped him generously before shaking his hand.

"I can't thank you enough for what you did today. You saved us from what could have been a very serious situation. Thank you, Mohamed. I will remember you always," Caleb said.

Mohamed looked embarrassed. He gathered the reins to both camels and, with one final salaam, walked away and blended into the crowded street traffic within seconds.

"I can't believe that just happened," said Layla. She pressed herself against Caleb's broad back as they watched the man and his camels leave. "It was so creepy. How could an accident like that have happened? I just don't understand it."

He turned to her and gathered her in his arms, pulling her close. The crowd walked around them and it was as if they were alone.

Finally Caleb pulled back, looked down at her and spoke, his words chilling her warming heart.

"It wasn't an accident. It couldn't have been—the slab was too heavy to have just slid into a position that blocked us in the tomb. No, that was no accident. Someone closed us in that pyramid on purpose. Someone's trying to kill us, Layla."

Chapter Ten

It was too early in the day for the small outdoor café to be crowded.

Caleb had wanted to order room service, but Layla didn't want to feel like she was a prisoner in the hotel, so they had compromised. They decided to go out to eat, but to go before it got dark.

They chose a café within walking distance from the hotel. A family-run business, it felt like an oasis in the center of the city. There were Aladdin-style tents erected in a courtyard and compact, tapestry-draped tables were closely grouped together inside the shaded tents.

The house specialty was a bean stew so they both ordered it, along with flatbread and hot tea which was served instantly.

In Cairo the tiny china cups filled with the black, sweet tea that was grown locally was served everywhere and to everyone. They had seen small children drinking from little white cups. And the elderly never seemed to be without a steaming cup between their gnarled fingers.

Caleb drank two cups of the liquid before he spoke.

"The 'coincidences' can't all be coincidences, babe. There's something else going on here. Something strange. Don't you feel it?"

She fingered the amulet at her neck. She had hoped to buy a shorter chain for it somewhere along their travels but so far she hadn't found one that she liked enough to wear with the blue stone. She didn't know why she was being so picky about what the stone hung on, but she was. She knew it had to be perfect. She knew she'd know the right chain when she saw it. Until then, Caleb's chain would do.

"Honestly, I don't know. I do feel as if I've got a target taped to my back, but I don't know if it's coincidence or intention working here. It's hard to tell, Caleb. I mean, any of the things that have happened can be explained away without really struggling to explain them. Oh, thank you."

The waiter put steaming bowls of stew on the table, along with a basket of flatbread, bowed and left. They began to eat right away, both realizing they were hungry despite their ordeal.

"Hey, this is good," said Layla.

The stew was rich and thick, filled with chunks of potatoes, corn, fava beans and chickpeas in a tomato-based broth. They dunked the flatbread in their bowls, eating in silence for a while.

Caleb motioned the waiter away when he asked if they wanted more stew.

"No, thanks," said Caleb. He gestured to the teapot and the waiter removed it from the table. It wasn't long before the young man returned with a full pot and poured the tea into their diminutive cups.

They drank and watched, through the screened sides of the tent, the passersby who filled the sidewalk. Cairo seemed like a city whose sidewalks were never empty. Day and night, there were camels, donkeys and people who had places to go.

"I'm glad we ate early," said Layla. "I could use an early night, after what we've been through today."

"The past couple of days," Caleb added. He reached for the bill and pulled out his wallet, leaving what he hoped was the appropriate amount of money on the table. "I've got to go to the men's room. Wait here, okay? Don't go outside—please. I'll be right back."

Layla nodded. She drank her tea and watched the sidewalk traffic while she waited for him to return. Truthfully, she was in no hurry to go exploring on her own. Not after all that had happened recently.

She felt the quiet fall over the interior of the tent before she was aware of what was going on. She put her cup on the tiny table and looked around and found all eyes were on her. The waiter stood about four feet from the table, staring at her with his mouth hanging open. She turned and saw the other waiter, a round older man, standing with a forgotten plate of hummus in his hand. The diners at nearby tables were watching her, as if waiting for something to happen.

It was an unsettling feeling. All eyes were on her, yet Layla had no idea why.

"Babe," said Caleb. He was talking in little more than a whisper, but in the silent tent his voice sounded loud. "Don't move. Just stay put."

Her first instinct was to turn, but his measured words made her squelch the desire to move. She didn't know what was happening, but she knew it wasn't good. It was a feeling she was becoming increasingly familiar with.

"Caleb?"

"Don't move. I've got everything under control. Just stay put. Trust me, Layla."

She heard, rather than saw, some movement behind her. Slow, scraping noises. Muffled thuds, as if things were being shifted into different places. A chorus of hisses as breath was sucked into tight lungs.

"Layla, I'm going to grab you from behind and drag you back. I'm going to try not to hurt you. Help me do this by just trusting me. Don't fight or do anything at all when I grab you. Understand?"

No! Of course I don't understand. What the hell is going on here?

"I understand," she said.

It happened in the beat of a heart. She felt his fingers grab her shoulders a split second before she was lifted from her seat. She flew backward as people screamed, chairs and tables fell over and dishes crashed to the floor.

"Get it!"

"Over there!"

"Eeewwww..."

Screeching was the same in any language and screeching filled the small space for what felt like an eternity.

It wasn't until things began to calm down that Layla learned what had happened. When she saw what had caused the commotion, she did the only thing that she could do.

She fainted.

* * * * *

Layla woke up in a strange place.

The walls were white and the ceiling was white with white metal fluorescent fixtures that dangled high above her. The smell was slightly antiseptic but she didn't think she was in a doctor's office...it just didn't feel like a medical office. It felt different, somehow. More like a —

"Hey, you're awake," said Caleb. He bent over her, blocking the glare from the hideous lights. "How are you? The doctor says you'll be fine in a few minutes."

"Where am I?"

Then she remembered. The bean stew. The tea. The people on the street. The screaming. The screeching that went on forever and ever and then the cause for the screaming.

The snake. Fat and striped, beneath the dinner table.

And then, nothing. Darkness, complete and total darkness. Until now.

Layla tried to sit up but the room swam around her. Caleb put his arm across her body and held her still while the worst of the spinning subsided. Then he helped her to a sitting position.

The smell was the spices that were piled in bags on the corner of the nearby desk. She was in some sort of office, a very white office. Hovering near the white settee on which she had been placed were three men. Caleb introduced them as the doctor, the police inspector and the café owner, whose office they presently occupied.

The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker.

The owner, a squat man with chin that wobbled, stood beside them, wringing his pudgy hands and mopping his shiny brow. It was obvious that he was even more distressed than Layla was by what happened.

"Are you feeling better, madam?" the doctor asked, stepping forward, reaching for her wrist and staring at his watch. He patted her hand kindly before letting go of her wrist. "Your pulse is good, nice and steady. I do not think there will be any lasting

physical effects from this incident. You are probably feeling bruised—I would venture to guess. Am I correct?”

She nodded. Yes, now that she was upright she was feeling somewhat bruised and battered, especially around her shoulders where Caleb had grabbed her. And her legs must have hit something, too, because they had definite sore spots.

“Yes, I thought as much. I have given your husband my card and if you need further assistance, please do not hesitate to call. But I believe that some rest and a good night’s sleep will have you greatly restored. And I have also prescribed a mild sedative for you to take tonight. I suggest that you take it—it will ease the pain caused by the bruises and will also allow you to rest. A messenger will deliver it to your hotel shortly.”

She smiled her thanks, not trusting her voice. Suddenly her emotions were all over the place and she wasn’t sure if she was going to laugh or cry or maybe even do both.

The doctor shook hands with Caleb before he left.

That left her with only two strange men staring at her.

“Madam, I assure you that this never happens here...I cannot apologize enough for this unfortunate happening. I am appalled that something like this could happen here, in my café. We are so vigilant about checking those tents for anything...undesirable. Look, even here,” the owner waved one beefy hand at the room. “Everything is painted white.”

Layla looked at him dumbly. White?

Is there a point to this?

“White?” she asked.

He shook his head and his chins wobbled. He grinned as if they had reached an understanding and all was resolved. He spread his arms expansively and repeated her words. “White. Yes, white. To see the scorpions,” he finished.

She turned to Caleb with barely-contained horror.

“Take me back to the hotel. Now!”

The smile disappeared from the owner’s face as she struggled to her feet. She swayed once but Caleb caught her and held her upright. He looked to be considering whether or not she could walk but she was determined to get out of the scorpion-filled office. When Layla took a step her knees buckled, much to her annoyance.

Scooping her into his arms, Caleb turned to the police investigator and spoke in short sentences across her body as he headed for the door. They arranged to speak later by phone, the police investigator indicating that he would be at the café for the next two or three hours before returning to police headquarters.

“You know where we’re staying,” said Caleb. He carried Layla into a hallway as the owner ran ahead of them and opened a door. “Although I’m not sure we’ll be in Cairo much longer. I told you what happened today and what happened yesterday. And

everyone witnessed what happened here this afternoon. Cairo really isn't some place I'm sure we'll want to linger."

Layla found herself being placed on the soft leather seat in a black luxury car. Caleb got in beside her and the driver, the café owner's son, pulled away from the restaurant. When she last saw the owner, he was gnawing a full lip and wringing his hands while looking toward the sky.

She thought that maybe he'd better stop with the hand-wringing and begin to oust the snakes from his restaurant.

* * * * *

"I don't want to do it, Caleb. I know how you feel about it, but I don't want to do it. Please, can't you understand?"

She realized that her position in the large tub wasn't the best position for negotiation. At a slight disadvantage with only soap bubbles covering her breasts, she still attempted to sway him from the opinions he had been giving voice to since they'd returned to the hotel.

"I do understand. But really, what else can we do? We can't just wait around until something actually kills you, can we?"

Caleb ran his fingers through his hair as he tried to avoid her eyes. He knew, even if she didn't want to admit it, that something—or someone—was trying to hurt her. He wasn't going to let that happen.

"Nothing is trying to kill me, Caleb. Don't be silly," she said.

She sank down further in the water, letting the soothing jets massage her bruised spots. Caleb had undressed her and put her in the tub as soon as they'd gotten to the hotel and she'd been so worn out that she hadn't even protested when he'd done it. Now she was glad that he had been so determined, the warm water in the tub felt great against her battered body. Again.

"I'm not trying to be silly. I'm trying to be reasonable, but really, it's getting harder and harder to be reasonable with all the freaky things that are happening."

She felt a niggling feeling, as if they were overlooking something about what had been going on. It was something she couldn't put her finger on, but it was there.

But the temptation to tease her husband was distracting her from any logical thought. The gnawing would have to wait, there were other, more interesting things to deal with now.

"It's getting harder, is it?" she asked.

He raised his eyebrows at her, acting shocked but she knew his mobile brows were part of the game—he wasn't surprised at all by her lascivious insinuation. After all, they'd grown so much closer in Cairo, hadn't they?

Why, you tease.

"Layla!"

"Come on, Caleb...why don't you come in here and we'll talk logically about what we're going to do? Let's figure this whole thing out together, what do you say?"

"No way. Not now, Layla...you must be bruised all over. Why," he sputtered, waving one muscled arm in the air as if swatting at flies, "you can't possibly mean...I mean, you're...you're injured. I couldn't—"

She reached for him and pulled his head close to hers, covering his lips with her own and kissing him thoroughly, a lingering, sweet kiss. When Layla pulled her mouth from his her cheeks were flushed and Caleb thought that she had never looked more beautiful.

"You can, Caleb. You can. And we will."

Layla pulled his body closer to hers, shifted in the tub and made room for his bulk as he splashed in beside her. The tub was big enough that it was a simple maneuver for her to slide over to the side, raise herself up on her knees and straddle his body.

"I can't believe you pulled me into this tub again!" Caleb said, sputtering and laughing as he pushed his thick hair out of his eyes. Wiping a large hand across his face he brushed bubbles off his chin as she giggled at him. "So now that you've got me here, what do you plan on doing with me, darling? Hmm?" Wiggling his eyebrows up and down and twirling a nonexistent mustache like a silent film-era villain, he dropped his eyes to her slick breasts, their perky points rising out of a sea of white foam and felt his body respond.

"Oh Caleb, I've got plans for you, lots and lots of plans. But first we've got to get these wet clothes off you—we don't want you catching a chill, do we?" Layla smiled as her fingers reached for the buttons on his shirt and began to open them. It was a bit of a struggle but, with much splashing, sloshing and giggling, they managed to separate Caleb from his clothes. Tossing the soggy garments onto the plush white rug beside the tub, they smiled triumphantly as the last wet item—his boxers—hit the heap with a squishy thud.

"Hell, we're getting pretty good at that, aren't we?" he asked.

"Mmm-hmm," she murmured, sliding her cunt along his thigh. Shivers of delight, red-hot in the heated tub, danced along her spine and she shuddered. "We're getting pretty good at...a lot of things lately. Practice, I suppose. That's the trick, Caleb. Practice."

When she spoke her breath was spicy, wafting over his skin in waves of exotic seduction. She leaned closer to his neck and began to nibble the tender spot just below his earlobe, stopping to lick his skin and kiss the wettest points before making her way up his cheek and to his mouth. The rasping sound of Layla's tongue against his afternoon stubble was hypnotizing, like the sinuous music of an exotic instrument.

"I don't know, babe. This practice is making me hornier than a bull in heat. God, I want you all the time, it never ends. What the hell is going on? My cock is hard all the time, Layla—all the time." Taking her hand in his he pressed it below the surface of the

water and wrapped it around his turgid organ. He was hard, all right, hard enough to dent the tub with a sudden shift and it excited her. "Feel that, babe? Feel how big and hard I am—I want you so much it hurts."

With slow, steady pressure she stroked his cock as she gyrated against his thigh, grinding her slippery cleft against his muscular body. But the temptation to feel his hardness within her was too great. Layla rose above him, angled his cock toward her body and slid down onto it, squeezing him tightly with her well-exercised internal muscles.

"You're so hard. So thick and hard and—oh!"

"How does it feel? Tell me how it feels...with words, babe. Please. I want to hear you say it," Caleb said, holding her teal eyes with his own and searching them for the answers to the hidden questions that had always intrigued him.

"You want to hear it?" she asked, gripping his cock and swirling her hips like a belly dancer. "You mean you want me to talk dirty to you, Caleb? My, oh my, what would they say in your office, darling?"

"Fuck my office. Yeah, I want to hear it—tell me, talk dirty and tell me how it feels when my cock is in your—just tell me, please," he said, leaning forward to nibble her nipples.

Pushing him back against the tub, she grinned and pulled herself up in the tub. His cock slid out of her cunt until only the tip remained inside and she clenched her muscles against the round pink cap—hard.

"You want to know how it feels to have your prick in my cunt?" She'd never used those words before and there was a thrill that came with saying the silent, doing the undone. It was naughty and nasty and nice all in a flash and after the first sentence was out she found the rest came much more easily. "You want to know how it feels when my dripping wet honey pot sucks you inside and holds you captive, squeezing you until you lose control—lose control and give me what I want?"

Caleb squirmed, his erection throbbing as the warm water swept over his skin. His helmet was being stroked by her pussy, something she'd never done before. It felt like his tip was being kissed by her body and it was amazingly sexy—he knew he could let loose and fill her with his juice if he lost his concentration for even a second, so he focused on her words rather than the hammering pulse beneath his stiff skin.

"Tell me about it."

"My cunt is like a secret cave, one that I don't share with anyone but the most important person in my life. You, Caleb, are the caveman and I am the cave. When you need shelter, I give it to you. When you...neglect my cave, I deny you entrance. When you knock, sweetly and gently or sometimes with strong, masculine power, I let you visit my cave. And our visits, they are very nice. Aren't they?"

Her underwater belly dancing gyrations were fluid and graceful, pulling his cock through the water as she held it by the head and moved her body. Warm water washed over her clit, making her wetter inside with each movement.

Caleb licked his lip, stared into her eyes and nodded. "Very nice. Tell me more about your cave."

"When your cock visits my cave it must be on its best behavior. Strong, fat and hard, I want your cock to fill me. I get wet when you visit, so wet that I feel the wetness dripping from my opening and sliding down my thighs. I feel my warm juice coat your cock, feel you pressing against my cave walls and touching, with your fat round tip, the sensitive spot hidden deep inside my cave. When you touch that spot I go wild. It is here," she said, impaling herself on his shaft and pressing his penis to the spot she knew so well. Layla threw her head back, her hair floating on the surface of the water as she rode him, feeling the first surges of her orgasm begin deep within her.

"I'm touching it, your spot. I can tell when my cock hits it, you shiver inside. Oh babe, I feel you shaking against me. Come, Layla. Let me watch you come."

"Yes. Yes, it's right there—oh! Yes, yes—*Oh!*"

Strong and swift, her climax gripped her body and she slammed herself against him, pressing her clit down on the base of his hard cock. The waves seemed endless and her spasms were strong enough that she splashed water over the edges of the tub. The sound of it hitting the tiled floor didn't register to either of them, they were so wrapped up in the experience of her pleasure.

As Layla's breathing slowed and her shudders became shivers, Caleb lifted her from the soapy water and set her on the wide edge of the tub. Positioning himself between her thighs, he grinned up at her before he spread her legs wider and separated her lips with his thumbs. Her clit, swollen, red and glistening, rose out of her slick pussy, having the same effect a hooked worm has to a fish. His mouth closed over her nub, sucking it softly at first, then more forcefully. The pressure against her sensitive spot brought her to the brink of climax swiftly but that had been his plan—to arouse her and make her wait, the same way she'd taunted his cap and made him wait while she took her pleasure.

Chuckling at the vigorous wiggling she was doing against the tub and his mouth, Caleb lifted his mouth from her sex and pressed a finger inside her dripping cunt. It disappeared inside her body and he watched her skin close around it before he slipped a second finger beside the first.

"Feel good, babe? Tell me, does it feel good?"

His free hand disappeared beneath the water. As his arm moved Layla realized that it was more illicit to imagine his hand on his cock than to actually see him stroking himself. Not being able to watch him tug at his hard-on drove her insane and she moaned as she pulled his hand from beneath the water.

"Show me. I want to see you touch yourself, please," she whispered.

Rising from the water like Poseidon from the sea, Caleb circled his cock with one hand while he rested the other hand on his hip. They watched as his hand slid along his straining penis, moving slowly and surely over the slick skin. When he reached the reddened tip he squeezed and a white drop appeared at the tiny round hole. With his

fingertips Caleb gripped his cap, stretching so the hole widened. He stood, the water running down his body in streams and held his cock in front of her face.

"Taste me. I want you to lick my juice from my cock—I want to feel myself in your mouth. Do it," he said, shaking his penis near her mouth. "Do it now."

With infinite slowness she stretched out her tongue and touched it to the pearl, lapping it onto her tongue and holding her mouth open to his eyes before she swallowed his essence. Then she pulled his cock into her mouth and clamped her lips around his width, swirling her tongue across his sensitive tip before opening her throat and sliding her lips to the base of his long, hard shaft.

Caleb moaned as his hips began to buck, sending his penis into her mouth in short, swift strokes. She could feel him fighting to control himself and it excited her. With sure, fast fingers she teased her clit until it throbbed. Her climax was close and with her legs spread and her hand on her sex she knew his was, too.

Pulling his cock from her mouth, Caleb grabbed his testicles and squeezed as he sunk back to his knees. With his eyes on her fingers he rammed his cock into her wetness, his fingers joining hers in a tangled cluster against her clit.

"Come, please," he gasped. "I want to see you come, feel you come, hold you—oh! Yes, that's beautiful, babe!"

Her blue eyes locked on his as a strangled moan escaped her lips and her cunt seized him with the strong spasms that invaded her body. Caleb watched her for a moment before he pulled his cock from her. Their eyes dropped to his engorged member as he leaned back, pointed it at her pussy and held it steady. It seemed like time stopped as they watched his cock twitch once—twice—three times before it erupted, shooting streams of hot white liquid onto her quivering clit. He bathed her with his pleasure, the spurts strong and thick enough to arouse her one final time. With the last spasm of his cock he leaned forward, massaging his wetness over her clit with his fat, red tip.

Layla's climax was a mere echo of the others but it was almost sweeter than any she'd experienced. Tiny shivers pulled her closer to Caleb as he pressed himself against her center, his eyes on hers and the amulet between them.

Chapter Eleven

Layla awoke to the light of the sun over Egypt filling the room, warming her face, shoulders and breasts. She looked over at the clock on the bedside table.

5:42.

The sun rose early in Cairo.

She turned her head in the other direction, toward the slow, steady snoring that vibrated the pillow beneath her head. Caleb was lying beside her on his back, the crisp cotton sheet that covered them had slid down to just below his waist, too.

Examining him while he slept was something she had done often when they were first married. And she knew he had done it, too. She remembered waking up to find his eyes on her, drinking her relaxed state like a man lost in the desert gulps cold water. Neither of them had watched the other one sleep in a long, long time.

Too long.

He's beautiful when he's awake, but even more so when he's sleeping. So peaceful. So unguarded. Why can't he be like this when he's awake? Why do we both have to be so tense, so totally prepared to defend ourselves? It's unbelievable that we've allowed this to happen. But at least it seems like we're figuring it all out, that we're getting past the crappy times that we've had for so long. Maybe, like the old song says, the best is yet to come.

Layla's eyes lingered on the stubbled cheeks beside her before they drifted downward to Caleb's hard, muscled chest. A smattering of downy-soft hair fluttered with the rise and fall of his body. His nipples, with their deep rosy tautness, invited tasting but she resisted the temptation to suck them between her lips. It would wake him and she wasn't ready to wake him. Not yet.

His abdomen was flat when he was standing, even flatter when he was lying on his back, his stomach muscles clearly defined, the result of hours spent at the gym. A line of dark hair led downward from his navel, snaking toward the edge of the crumpled sheet and disappearing from sight.

Her eyes rested on the bulge beneath the sheet. She knew his body was bare, the same way hers was. Sleeping nude wasn't something they usually did at home. No, it was something that had happened to them since they had arrived in Cairo.

Layla liked the freedom of sleeping without nightclothes. She thought that she might never again wear a nightgown. And never, no matter how cold the winter nights could be, would she ever again wear flannel! Cairo had broken her of that habit.

She liked the feeling of the soft sheets rubbing sensuously across every inch of her bare body.

And she liked the idea that Caleb, in all his masculine glory, was completely unhidden from her touch. She liked that idea very much.

Her hand seemed to have a mind of its own. And its mind, it seemed, lived between Layla's tingling legs, somewhere in the warm, moist area that was even now growing more insistent.

She watched her hand travel beneath the sheet, watched the slow, steady movement of her own limb as if it were the actions of another person and she was just an innocent bystander. The sheet shifted as she watched her fingers slip across Caleb's upper thigh, toward his—

There. His cock rested in its downy nest of pubic hair, lying solidly on top of the soft black curls. The tip pointed toward Layla, as if it knew the way home and it was the first part of his penis that she touched. Her fingers felt the smooth roundness of him, felt the silky skin of his sensitive cap. Fondling him, she held his penis in her hand for the duration of several snores. It was exciting to hold him while he slept, his lack of awareness—his un-involvement—drew her nipples into stiff peaks. And his deep slumber kept his penis from becoming instantly erect at her touch. Layla couldn't recall the last time she had felt Caleb's flaccid penis.

Hard to believe that holding a soft cock could be so exciting. Hard to believe that I can feel so close to him without his even knowing I'm here.

Tightening her fingers around his cock she pulled it toward her, stroking him more purposefully, knowing that the growing need within her had to be satisfied. Her passage became slippery and she shifted, pushing herself closer to his body.

I want it. I want it inside me. And look, it's growing hard. He wants it too, even if he doesn't know it.

The amulet fell across her breast as she shifted. The chain circled her nipple and the hardness of the ancient rock stroked her sensitive peak with every breath she took. The effect was intoxicating. Her breathing quickened and her hand increased its tempo.

Caleb turned onto his side and for a moment she thought he would awaken. But he continued to sleep, with his now-erect cock pointing at her wet, swollen sex.

She lifted her leg so that she could wrap it around his hips. It took no effort to position herself over him and less effort to slide down onto his throbbing organ. In his sleep his hips began to move against hers and they found the rhythm in a heartbeat.

Sliding along Caleb's fully erect cock without his knowledge gave her a feeling of intense power and she paused, savoring every second of possessing him without his conscious consent. The needs of her cunt kept any further contemplation at bay and she began to move purposefully toward fulfillment.

Every stroke against his cock brought her closer to her orgasm. Each time she slid down his length she shifted, grinding her clit against his hardness. There wasn't a wasted movement and her pussy convulsed almost instantly as she pressed her fist to her mouth and rode the waves of pleasure that swept over her body.

It wasn't until Layla had reached the crest of her orgasm that Caleb's eyes opened. He watched in amazement as her climax wrapped itself around his body.

Caleb was powerless to stop the surges of his own orgasm. It was upon him as his eyes opened, his cock shaking as it emptied in wet bursts into her body. Waking like that made him wonder if he was having a wet dream of sorts, his cock uncontrollable and all his deepest desires fulfilled. But as he put his hands on her ass and pulled her closer, squeezed the last drops of cum into her pussy and felt her trembling breath against his cheek, he knew he wasn't dreaming. Dreams this complete never really happened—they were only dreams themselves.

And he knew, as the last spasm subsided, that he had lost more than his heart and his cock to Layla. He had lost his soul to the blue-eyed woman who wore the blue amulet.

* * * * *

The suds ran off her back in streams. They pooled around her feet before swirling down the drain. Caleb was hypnotized by the sight of the soap streams as they showered together, still somewhat shell-shocked by the way he had been awakened just a short time earlier. Like so many other things in Cairo, it had taken him completely by surprise.

His cock, back to its normal flaccid state, seemed unaffected by the episode. He, however, wasn't nearly as nonchalant.

I still can't believe that I was inside her when I woke up. Not only inside her, but being shaken by her sweet, wet pussy while she came all over me. Good God, what the hell is happening here? I don't think I know this woman who's my wife. But hell, I'm mad for her, just completely crazed for her. To think she had my cock shooting the works two seconds after my eyes opened! It was like being a passenger on the greatest carnival ride in the world.

Layla turned to face him and ran her soapy hands over his broad chest and tweaked his nipples, smiling as she caught his attention with her fingers.

"Daydreaming, darling?"

Wondering what the heck just happened, most likely. Wondering how your cock got so hard, how I climbed aboard and rode you like a speeding train toward the final stop. Are you wondering, my dear man, just how I could have pushed you and your little friend there over the edge without your knowing I was going to do it?

The look on his face was enough to tell her all she needed to know. She looked up at him and laughed out loud. His laughter joined hers. It reverberated in the small space, filling the room and filling their hearts.

Layla dropped to her knees on the tile floor and sucked his soft manhood into her mouth. She suckled him gently, conscious of her early morning assault on his sensitive flesh. The flesh in question didn't respond instantly and she took it from her mouth and

held it beneath the warm water for a second, running her fingertip up the underside, along his hidden vein.

"I don't know, babe... You gave it a workout just this morning, you know. I'm not as much of a stud as you think I am, I'm afraid," Caleb said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Just relax. Can't I just taste the clean, fresh taste of your skin without you worrying about workouts and studs and...anything else. Really, darling, don't think—just enjoy yourself."

Turning her attention back to his penis, she pulled it between her lips a second time and began to stroke it with her tongue. Slowly, steadily, it stiffened as she sucked it. Shifting beneath the shower spray, Caleb angled his hips and shoulders so that she was sheltered from the worst of the falling water and watched his cock slide in and out of Layla's mouth with rapt attention.

God, she's beautiful. So damn sexy like that, on her knees before me, with my cock between her lips. I never would have believed I could get it up so soon after...well, hell, after coming the way I did I'm surprised it can even move! Damn, she's good. Why haven't I realized it before? Watching her like this, I could just shoot my load right now, watch her swallow it down or maybe...maybe a piece of jewelry. A necklace of sorts, perhaps? I've heard of such things but never—oh, that feels good. Yes, little bites on the head, just the touch of your teeth against my cap...yeah, that's it. A necklace.

"Babe?"

"Hmm?"

"Babe, I want to come—"

Layla chuckled, sending thrills from his cock, through his balls and along his spine. "So come, darling," she said, pulling her lips from his cock. Her tongue reached out and licked him as she grinned up at him, her blue eyes flashing. "What's stopping you?"

"But I want to come on you. I want to give you a...necklace. Do you know what that means?"

Low, throaty laughter filled the shower as she pushed wet strands of hair off her neck and shook her head. "Your wish is my command, darling. Feel free to drape me with your pearls anytime. Can I taste you first? Just one more time?"

Nodding, he watched her pull his cock back into her mouth and continue to torture him with her tongue. The urge to come was great but he resisted, loving every moment of her attention with her tongue. His hips shifted rhythmically, moving his staff against her lips with increasing fervor.

Finally he knew he couldn't take much more. His cock felt like a volcano on the verge of eruption.

"Layla. I. Can't. Oh, I can't wait. It's coming babe, it's coming soon," he moaned, pulling his penis from her mouth.

Gripping the base of his cock with one hand while he held the wall with the other, he looked into her face before he gave himself up to the surges of his body. Her eyes

were steady as she nodded, a smile on her face, before she tilted her head slightly, dropped her eyes to his throbbing organ and bared her neck to him.

The sight of her waiting to be christened by his cum pushed him over the edge and his cock let loose, sending splashes of wetness across her soft skin. With an aim that was as controlled as his orgasm would allow, he ringed her neck and watched as each burst of his cock added to the white spots that glistened beneath her chin. His final spray dribbled across her breasts, coating the amulet with a cloud that couldn't conceal the brilliance of the stone.

"Hell, that was incredible," Caleb groaned, shaking his cock as it began to soften. "I wondered how it would feel but I never thought you'd let me do that."

Rubbing a fingertip in the ring around her neck, Layla grinned. "You shouldn't keep your desires to yourself, darling. I imagine I'd let you try much more than you think I would. You should try me—you might be surprised."

"I already am. Believe me, I already am."

The water ran cold as they played like children beneath it. There was a newfound freedom, an openness between them now like nothing they'd experienced before.

Chapter Twelve

"Ugh," said Layla, clutching her stomach and taking a step backward. Her head felt like it was spinning and her pita and fig omelet was threatening to make its presence known again – on her feet.

"Babe, are you all right? Here, let me help you," said Caleb. He pulled a chair from beneath one of the neighboring tables and led her to it. He watched as her legs folded and she practically fell into the seat. "What is it? What can I do?"

It took a moment but the room finally stopped spinning wildly. Layla looked at him from between the fingers that covered her face, feeling sheepish.

Imagine, a woman who had stood in the flame of the Statue of Liberty behaving like she had never been higher than the third floor of a department store.

"Nothing, you don't have to do anything. I'm fine," she said. She pulled her hand from her face and blinked. She really was fine. "It was just a touch of vertigo, I suppose. Nothing more. Just a wave of dizziness when I looked out over the city."

Caleb let the breath he had been holding out of his lungs in one long rush of air. It sounded like a punctured tire as his breathing returned to normal. He hadn't known that a green-faced wife could scare him senseless. But now he knew. The sight of Layla's green-tinged skin had been enough to make him feel like fainting.

"Vertigo? Oh, babe, how miserable. I'm sorry. I should have thought of that when I suggested we come here. It never crossed my mind." He gestured helplessly at the window with its breathtaking view.

He had thought when he suggested an early morning trip to the Cairo Tower that they could enjoy a leisurely breakfast in the rooftop restaurant. He thought that the slowly-revolving floor of the building would be something that would be unusual enough to entertain them for years to come. He thought that they could experience a romantic, 360-degree view over the city and its ancient monuments from the observation deck.

He hadn't thought that breakfast, the floor and the view would so violently clash.

"It's fine, Caleb, really. I just leaned too close to the edge, probably. Just one of those things. Let's go take another look, shall we? I promise not to swoon this time," she said.

She stood and was pleased to feel the solidness of her legs beneath her. They seemed to have gotten past their brush with wobbliness. She walked to the railing beside the window and tilted her head toward the enormous glass panes. The thick panes of glass were the only thing that was separating them from the clear blue sky.

The sensation, as they moved slowly through the unencumbered space, was exhilarating.

Caleb had chosen well. Layla loved the Cairo Tower.

Joining her at the brass railing, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. They stood in silence until the tower had made a complete revolution.

Directly below were the spires and cornices of so many ancient buildings. In the distance, the pyramids and their sentinel, the Sphinx. Camels, donkeys and people scurrying like tiny insects below them gave movement to the scene. And toward the horizon was the endless, shimmering sultriness of the scorching sand.

"It's so pretty, isn't it?" Layla asked.

She turned to face him and found that his eyes were on her rather than on the scenes of Cairo.

"Very," he said softly as he leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

* * * * *

"Can you believe that it's 1,600 years old? I can't get over it, that we're standing beside something so incredibly ancient. Yet really, in Egypt something that's only sixteen centuries old is pretty new, isn't it?" Layla spoke softly, as if she was fearful that her breath would disturb the fragile book.

No matter that it was encased in a square glass box, it still inspired awe. The Coptic book of the Psalms of David was one of the highlights on display in the Coptic Museum. They had stood on a quiet, nearly reverent line for their chance to view the world-famous book. Its unassuming size only served to enhance its status as one of the world's greatest pieces of literature. The fact that within the humble pages was a text that had endured for so many generations was proof of its importance.

"You've got a point. Small, isn't it?"

Layla nodded. "Tiny, almost."

Caleb chuckled beside her and she knew exactly what he was thinking. She had to hand it to him, though. He kept his mouth shut until they were safely away from the Psalms, in an empty chamber two rooms from the book. Only then did he give free rein to his American sense of humor.

"Proves it, don't you think?" he asked.

She knew she had to play along. It was only fair, especially since it had been his idea to visit the Coptic Museum. She knew the attraction had been expressly for her benefit. She knew, too, that Caleb was probably bored to distraction.

Yes, she'd play along.

"Proves what, darling?"

"The old saying."

"Old saying?"

He grinned and she couldn't help but smile back at him. His cheesy sense of humor had been one of the things that had initially attracted her to him when they met. Its disappearance shortly after they married had been one of the things that she had mourned over. How could she not smile at its return?

"Sure," he nodded. "You know — about good things coming in small packages?"

Layla's grin grew. *Two can play games.*

"Small packages?"

"Yeah," he said. "Like the old saying...you know the one. Come on, you've got to remember the old saying about good things coming in small packages. Don't tell me you've forgotten it, Layla. Please don't tell me you've forgotten the saying!"

She struggled to contain the laughter that was bubbling just beneath the surface of her mind.

"No, I haven't forgotten the saying. I'm perfectly aware of the little old saying you're thinking of," she said. "It's just that I'm surprised that you know about it."

"Surprised? Why surprised?"

Layla stopped walking and turned to face him. She glanced around the room and when she was sure that they were alone, she answered.

"Because, darling. You have no firsthand — or first-hands — knowledge of small packages."

She looked pointedly at his crotch before she turned and walked toward the next room.

He chuckled as he followed her.

* * * * *

"Oh, excuse me," said Layla. "I didn't mean to —"

The black-robed figure didn't pause as it pushed past her toward the ladies' room exit. The unknown woman had emerged from the stall adjacent to the one Layla had been using and slammed against Layla as she opened the door, pushing her with great force against the old-fashioned steel stall frame.

After she pushed Layla aside the woman didn't turn to inquire about Layla's well-being. She didn't look back or stop at the cracked white basin to wash her hands.

She just flew out of the bathroom like steam from a geyser.

Layla shook her head in disgust, the woman's rudeness annoying her more than she was willing to let on. She knew she wouldn't tell Caleb about this incident, knew it would only add to his overall disdain for the ability of the host country to guarantee the safety of traveling foreigners. But honestly, how could any government be held accountable for isolated incidents of rudeness? For all she knew, the woman was from New Jersey.

Layla washed her hands at the sink, then she pushed up her sleeve to see the spot that had taken the worst of her collision. There was already a swelling bruise on her forearm.

Oh well. It goes with the other ones I've managed to gather on this trip.

* * * * *

"The museum was perfect. Thanks for thinking that it would be a good way to spend the morning. You were right, it was the perfect thing to do today."

Caleb looked over at her. They were walking back to the King's Palace and he was doing his best not to appear to be too safety-conscious. He was being careful to hold her hand loosely in his, even though his instinct was to crush her fingers within his own.

He had a bad feeling about all of the "little accidents" that had befallen her during their stay in the city. A very bad feeling about them.

"Well, you're the one who started the day off with a...bang," he replied. "After that, I knew that I had to do something special."

Layla blushed. They both knew that what she had done had been very much out of character for her. But they both thought that it was one of the most amazing mornings of their lives.

Oh yeah? I'm going to be banging you awake more often, my friend. You can count on that. No more sleeping undisturbed for you, darling husband. I've got plans for you. Big plans.

"You succeeded. The Coptic Museum was one of the places I'd hope we'd have a chance to see. All of the wonderful displays...the stone carvings from the time of the Mamluks...the extraordinary collection of ancient ankhs...the falcon carvings. Everything was just too incredible. What did you like the best, Caleb? Was there one thing in particular that stood out in your mind?"

He considered the question carefully before he answered. When he did finally answer, he spoke the truth.

"I know that you probably thought that I did this whole museum trip for your benefit," he said. "And I admit that it was my intention—I wanted to do something nice for you. But you know, I really enjoyed the experience. The book, the Psalms of David? That was interesting and well worth the wait to see it. A lot of the other exhibits were interesting, too. All of them, actually. But I guess that if I had to choose one thing that stood out in my mind, one thing only, it would have to be the pulpit. It really blew my mind to see that sixth-century stone pulpit. I stood there looking at it and imagined all those who had stood before it in the past and wondered who would stand where I was standing in the future. It was almost like I was feeling the tie that binds, you know? The one that holds the line of history together."

They had reached the sidewalk in front of the hotel. They stood in the sunshine, feeling the warmth spread between and within them.

“That would have to be my favorite thing from the museum,” Caleb said. “The feeling that you and I were a part of the past and the future – together.”

He leaned down and kissed her at exactly the same moment that Aman opened the door behind them.

The doorman waited discreetly, holding the heavy glass door open wide as if it weighed little more than a bird’s feather and as if he had all the time in the world.

Chapter Thirteen

"Sah teyn." Enjoy your meal. The waiter, dressed in his colorful mid-nineteenth-century costume bowed after placing an array of large ceramic plates and bowls on the already-crowded table. "Is there anything else that I can bring to you? Anything else that you desire right this minute?"

The waiter's English was good, if a bit stilted.

"La, shukran," said Layla. *No, thank you.* She was pleased that the serious young man knew how to smile. It was evident by the broad smile and fast flash of his gold tooth that her knowledge of his language pleased him. He bowed a second time, this time dipping his body lower than he had the first time, before he left them to their meal.

"When you try to impress someone, you really go all out, don't you?" teased Layla. She tore a piece of the piping-hot whole wheat pita bread into a small chunk and scraped the pita through the communal serving bowl in the center of the table. She placed the savory morsel in her mouth and chewed, closing her eyes and tilting her head back in a pose of rapturous abandon.

Caleb looked dubiously at his wife's expression before he cast a doubtful gaze on the bowl between them. Then he looked back up at Layla. She had swallowed the food and had her hand covering her mouth.

"Sick?" he asked.

I won't be surprised if you are. How on earth did you eat that...that...that slime? Good God in heaven, you won't catch me eating any of that stuff. Not even if I'm threatened with death by sandstorms or biting by sand fleas or stoning by —

Layla's laughter brought him back to reality. The sound was like a cool breeze on a hot day.

"No, I'm not sick," she said, reaching for another hunk of bread and holding it between her fingers as she spoke. "I'm absolutely over-the-moon amused by your expression, though. It's so funny that I nearly choked."

She scooped more of the mixture onto the bread and popped it into her mouth. Caleb shook his head as he watched her chew and swallow.

"Gagged, more than likely. What the hell is that stuff, anyway? Do you know what it is or are you just being daring? Playing with your life, so to speak?"

"Of course I know what it is. I ordered it, didn't I?"

He stared at the bowl.

"I don't know. I don't remember hearing you say 'I'd like an order of pulpy-looking brownish gooky stuff. With a side of hot bread, please.' No, I don't remember hearing

anything like that," he said. He shook his head in the direction of the bowl. "I'd remember if I heard you ask for that – whatever it is. What is it, anyway?"

"I'm trying to tell you, Caleb. It's *babaganoush*."

"Babaga – what?"

"*Babaganoush*."

"Say that three times fast."

"Listen, wise guy, don't knock it until you've tried it." Layla scooped another helping from the bowl and ate it contentedly. He watched in horror.

"Not in this lifetime."

"Never say never, darling," she countered.

A week ago I would never have believed that you and I could be sitting at a memorable little establishment like this one, eating a traditional Egyptian meal. No, I never would have believed it was possible. So never say never, Caleb. The nevers might just come back and bite you on the butt someday.

"You still haven't told me what it is," he said smugly. "Is it some kind of state secret or something? Some long-dead chef's top-secret recipe? What exactly is that stuff you're eating?"

"I told you, it's *babaganoush*. Which, for tourists like yourself, is nothing more than a fancy way to say eggplant."

He leaned closer to the bowl and gave a quick sniff.

"I never saw an eggplant look like that before. No sir, never did. And I've seen my share of eggplants, too."

"Mashed. It's mashed. Potatoes look different when they're mashed, don't they? Well, eggplant is no different. It looks different when it's mashed, but it tastes just as heavenly. Have some, you might really be surprised," Layla said. She pushed the bowl closer to where he was sitting.

"No, thanks. I'll take a pass on that. I'll stick to the grilled chicken kebabs, thanks."

"Chicken," she teased. "At least try the *tahini* sauce on your chicken. That way you won't be missing out entirely on an authentic meal."

"That's agreeable. So, do you like the restaurant?"

"I love it. But honestly, I didn't think you knew about the Café Riche. It's one of the places that I've always wanted to see but never thought that I'd get the chance to visit. This is fabulous, Caleb. Thank you for surprising me with this, but really...how did you know?"

Café Riche was one of Cairo's infamous spots. Known in literary circles for being the "in place" for many of Egypt's intellectual set for decades the restaurant was one of those off-the-beaten-path places that she didn't expect Caleb would have known about.

Maybe you're deeper than I give you credit for, darling. I'm so surprised that you suggested eating here. I don't care that you won't try the babaganoush—I love it that you were willing to try such an artsy watering hole.

"I asked Aman," Caleb admitted, grinning.

* * * * *

"I have the day planned out, babe. I still have one more surprise in store for you. You're not too tired to see it, are you?"

They were walking back to the hotel after their hearty meal at the Café Riche. The foot traffic on the street, as well as the camel and donkey traffic, had slowed somewhat and it didn't seem as confusing and noisy. Caleb was content for them to walk side by side, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans.

Layla enjoyed the feeling of freedom that came with not being tethered to her husband's body and was thankful that he felt secure enough to let her walk on her own, without the confining grasp of his fingers around hers. Romantic handholding was one thing—possessive handcuff-gripping was another. She wasn't at all fond of the latter. But how to discourage it without hurting Caleb's feelings? That was the question.

"No, I'm not too tired. It's just that you didn't have to plan out the day like this. I mean, the breakfast at the Cairo Tower, followed by the visit to the Coptic Museum, followed by that delicious lunch at Café Riche. You didn't have to go to so much trouble, Caleb. Really, I would have been satisfied with something less planned," Layla said. She wondered what he had planned for the rest of the day. If it was anything like the first half of their day it promised to be something that would delight her.

Layla loved it that he cared enough to try and please her but she didn't like the idea that he was pushing down any and all of his own desires to do so. She knew that the day's activities weren't things that were pleasing to him—she knew it in her heart as surely as she knew her own name.

Caleb stopped walking. Abruptly. She looked at him.

Uh-oh. I've ticked him off.

"Are you not enjoying the day I've planned for us?" His tone told a story that needed no words.

Damn. It's worse than I thought. I've hurt his feelings.

Layla's arm wound itself around his elbow instinctively. She pressed herself to his side.

"Of course I'm enjoying the day you've planned for us," she said, smiling. "It's just that I don't want you to do a whole bunch of things that you don't enjoy, too. I don't want you to sacrifice your happiness to ensure mine. Does that make sense to you, darling?"

He pulled his hand from the depths of his pocket and pulled her into the circle of his arm. He squeezed her shoulder in silent communication before he spoke.

"It does. But I'm having a good time just being with you. I love watching you get so excited over the most unlikely things. I love sharing it all with you, babe," he said. He leaned close to her and pressed his lips against her forehead. They lingered on her skin just long enough for Layla to feel the familiar tightening in her chest. As her nipples tingled he pulled back and looked down into her face. "So, what do you say we spend the afternoon the way I've planned? I promise you'll be surprised. And I think you'll be happy, too."

How could she say no?

"I'd love that, darling."

* * * * *

The sun beat down on the ribbon of asphalt that wound its way through the endless stretch of dun-colored sand. Had it not been for the auto's air-conditioning blasting on high through the molded plastic vents it would have been deadly inside the car. As it was, the air-conditioned air was only mildly cool.

Caleb drove with the confidence of a man who's secure in the reliability of his directions. That and the fact that any turns off the main road led into the desert was enough to ensure their route be confined to the main road. Thus, they were in no danger of getting lost.

"And as soon as Aman told me about this place I knew we should come and take a look for ourselves," Caleb said. He jammed his elbow up on the lip of the door, beneath the glass pane beside him. He felt less than comfortable without his arm hanging out of the car in the sunshine. He knew that to hang it out the window was suicidal for his skin but still he felt a strong desire to hang it out jauntily, as if they were on an ordinary yet divine summer afternoon date. He settled for perching his elbow – painfully – on the lip of the doorframe. "I knew you would love it."

"You're right, of course. I will love it. It's somewhere I've only read about but didn't think I'd see. I've dreamed about it, actually. I didn't expect that we'd get the chance to see it, at least not on this trip," said Layla. She stared at the horizon and marveled at the overwhelming vastness of the uninterrupted sand. She couldn't imagine how it must have been to be living in the unforgiving desert anytime during the past thousands of years. She knew that it had been done, successfully, but she still marveled at the enduring nature of the human spirit. The will to survive was humbling.

"It's not that far from Cairo. So really, with only a ten-mile ride it doesn't make any sense to skip the place. Besides, it's not every day that you get the chance to go to a place where a king once lived," he said. He pulled his eyes from the road long enough to look her way. He tossed his head, curled his lip and said, "Thank you very much," in his best Elvis Presley voice.

Layla giggled at the impersonation. It was turning out to be one of the best days they'd had so far. And it was only half over.

* * * * *

They stopped in Saqqara on the way to Memphis. The crowds by the side of the road alerted Caleb to the possibility of something worth seeing in the small village.

A sign proclaiming Saqqara to be one of the most extensive archaeological sites in the world sealed the deal for him. He found a spot for the rental car on the soft shoulder of the main road and parked it. They left the car there and headed for the center of activity.

"So what all is in this place anyway?" asked Caleb. He naturally assumed that Layla would have the answers. It never occurred to him that she might be unfamiliar with the place in the center of the desert.

He wasn't wrong. She debated which of the highlights of the ancient site she should tell him about first. She knew that if she included the Mastaba of Ti and the deep underground Persian Tombs on the list of attractions she would burn him out before he saw anything at all.

Layla settled on telling him about the Step Pyramid of Djoser, the Pyramid of Unas and the Pyramid of Sekhemket. They were all names that he had heard or seen in their travels to some of the sights in Cairo.

As they walked over the loose sand she pointed toward the pyramid in the foreground. It was surrounded by a series of smaller stone buildings and bits of rubble.

"Many scholars believe that that is the first pyramid ever built. It was built, I think, around 2640 BC. It's called the Step Pyramid of King Djoser. In front of it, those smallish buildings are stone chapels. They look intact but are pretty much filled with rubble."

Caleb ran his fingers across the sand-smoothed stones that comprised the sides of the king's pyramid. It was impossible not to feel the impact of the huge monument in the middle of the bleak desert.

Layla continued. "It was designed by Imhotep, who was King Djoser's physician. Imhotep was raised to the status of a god after his death."

"Why?"

"Because the ancients believed him to be the son of Ptah, an Egyptian god. Ptah was the embodiment of the creative force. Ptah is generally shown as a mummy holding an ankh."

Caleb walked to the shady side of the pyramid and tilted his head back. He looked up at the uppermost level of the pyramid. It towered high against the blue sky.

"Got to be about two hundred feet to the top, wouldn't you think?" he asked. He squinted to get a clearer look. "Yeah, about that I'd think. It just really makes you wonder how they managed to get those huge stones up there, doesn't it?"

"Amazing, that's for sure," said Layla. She looked at the top of the monument and knew that some things could never be explained, no matter how hard anyone tried to explain them. Some things were better left as mysteries.

"Well, I guess that's it, then. Nothing much else to see around here," said Caleb. He fanned his face with the back of one hand. He reached out his free hand and secured one of hers in his tight grip. He gave her a tug and her feet followed him toward the rental car. "Let's see if there's anything worth seeing in Memphis. Only a few more miles to go."

Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was the fact that she had awoken so unnaturally early. Maybe it was nothing more than the sand burning through the soles of her sandals.

Whatever it was, something was making her typically long fuse considerably shorter than it usually was. Her shortened fuse was letting her feel emotions that she had been squelching for months. Emotions that weren't good. Emotions that didn't bode well for someone.

And that someone was pulling her across the desert with the determination of a steamroller.

* * * * *

Caleb's gallant demeanor melted in the heat like an ice-cream cone melts on a sidewalk. He became less talkative and considerably less engaging.

As he became quieter Layla became more annoyed.

Back to being Mr. Personality, are you? "Nothing much to see" —I can't believe that anyone could possibly have the narrow-mindedness or the unmitigated gall to proclaim the site of the oldest stone building in the world to be so blatantly dull. Oh! I could scream, I could just scream! To think that I thought that he was really starting to like the things that I like. To think that I actually believed all of that crap about being connected to the past, present and future and taking a thrill from sharing it with me. How could I have been so damn stupid—again?

Memphis turned out to be a ruined city in comparison with Saqqara. Layla could only infer, from the look in his eyes, the way Caleb perceived the city that was nothing like Graceland.

Once the earliest capital of Egypt and remaining, sporadically, the capital of the country for thousands of years, Memphis had fallen on hard times in the last few thousand years. It looked shabby and run-down. Even the sand looked down on its luck, drifting along the hard-packed lower layers of brown like so much dust.

Even the evidence that the city had been the center of worship for the mummy god Ptah was diminished by the effect of the scouring sand.

"This is it? Hell, the King would be so put out, don't you think?" asked Caleb. He looked around him with open disdain.

In a land of dead towns, this one has got to be the deadest so far. Hell, even the mummies are so bored that they left. And to think that I drove twelve miles on that road through Hades. I should've stayed at the hotel. At least then I might have gotten laid. Or the pool. I could've been swimming—instead I'm stuck here, looking at blowing dirt.

"Memphis," said Layla, her voice calm and measured. "Was at one time a place of strategic importance, militarily speaking. It was not only the capital of the nation, it afforded protection of both the northern and southern parts of Egypt. Sort of in the center of things, you know?"

Layla tried to engage Caleb in the historical aspects of the place. They had history, lots of it, beneath their feet. If only she could grab his attention she thought they might be able to salvage what was left of their side trip.

That was not to be. Try as she might, he refused to be captivated by anything in Memphis. By the time she had pointed out all of the high points, to no avail, she was as blistering as the sand and she no longer felt the burning sensation below the soles of her feet, she was so hot and bothered herself.

The final straw sent her over the edge.

And when she went flying over the edge it was while she was standing beside the supine figure of long-dead Rameses II.

"It's enormous," Layla said in an awe-filled voice. "The sculpture was completely hand-carved. It must have taken many men a long, long time to get the statue to be so elaborate. Look at the expression in the face. The torso is incredible...so many planes and such precision. I never knew it was this beautiful. Or so big—really, really huge."

Layla stared at the enormous statue. It rested on its back in a specially-constructed building designed to protect the ancient colossus. There was no denying it—Rameses II was the prize of Memphis.

"Too bad the poor old guy is left staring up at the ceiling for eternity. Kind of makes him look like one of those big climbing toys in a kiddie park," said Caleb. "And really, babe, if you want to see something big—well, hell, I can show you something big." He reached for his fly, expecting to hear a scandalized titter coming from her at any second. It never came.

When he saw the thunderous look in Layla's eyes he regretted his words but it was too late to take them back. The damage had been done.

And by the looks of things, it wouldn't be damage that was easily undone, either.

* * * * *

It was the longest twelve miles of his life. If Caleb had thought that the climate inside the car was stifling on the ride to Saqqara and Memphis, he learned just how hot the climate could be during the ride back to the hotel.

Layla was as silent as the statue that he had mistakenly insulted. Once or twice he tried to speak with her but she wasn't having any of it. He feared that his Elvis impersonation and comments about the weather were only making her angrier.

Not something he could afford to do. By the time he had driven three miles from Memphis he had decided to keep his mouth shut.

Maybe forever.

Chapter Fourteen

"Ahlan wa sahlán," said Aman, holding the door open as wide as he could and stepping as far back as was possible. A smart man, he had never actually seen a hurricane but he had read enough about them to know when one was headed in his direction.

"Ahlan biki," responded Layla. She turned to him and smiled with her face but her azure eyes held no mirth in them. They were as cold and hard as arctic ice.

Aman's gaze met Caleb's. He saw hopelessness in the man's ashen face and wondered what in the world could have put such despair and anger into their day. When they had left the hotel they had been laughing, kissing and holding hands. Now they returned as strangers.

"In the blink of a camel's eye," thought Aman as he let the door waft closed. *"That's how fast life can change—in the blink of a camel's eye."*

* * * * *

Layla and Caleb rode the glass elevator to their floor in silence. The elevator operator, a short young man in a severely-starched uniform looked like he would rather be battling an army of deranged mummies than be stuck in the elevator with the couple.

Their anger filled the air like so much electricity. It was impossible not to feel its sting.

When the elevator door slid open Layla was out of the enclosed space like a pistol shot.

And just as deadly. Hell, I've really pissed her off this time. Maybe I should try and make it up to her—somehow. We had a great day, doing all kinds of crap that I knew that she'd love, but I make one rude remark next to a hunk of moldy, sand-washed, flea-bitten goddamn stone man and she goes berserk. No damn good deed goes unpunished, that's for certain. Maybe—I don't know. Maybe I'll just let her cool off. Then, who knows? Maybe we can salvage what's left of this night. Back off, that's what I'll do. I'll just back off.

Inside the suite Layla kicked off her sandals with such force that they bounced off one of the creamy beige walls in the bedroom. She tore into the dresser and pulled some clothes from the drawers. Then she stormed into the bathroom without a backward glance. The door slammed behind her.

Yeah, I'll just let her cool off.

* * * * *

Layla tugged off her clothes. She threw them in a heap on the marble floor before she began pacing the floor, making several circles around the room before she sat down on the edge of the sunken tub.

Her fingers slid through her soft-as-silk hair as she held her head in her hands, her elbows on her knees and stared at the floor between her feet. The cold tub on her bare butt felt refreshing—it soothed the heat that had filled her like a raging furnace and she took a couple of long, deep breaths, attempting to bring her galloping heartbeat under control.

Of all the asinine things to do. What kind of a self-absorbed, culturally-challenged, irreverent asshole am I married to? I cannot believe that that dickhead actually made a joke about Rameses II! For thousands of years civilizations—and civilized people—have respected him, adored him even. But no, my idiot husband has to compare the statue to the size of his cock! Damn—what a jerk. And then, as if he hasn't made a big enough ass of himself, he reaches for his goddamn zipper. Of all the ill-bred, ill-mannered stunts to pull.

Oh God, what the hell did I ever see in that man? And how on earth did I think that we could salvage our marriage?

She stood. When she passed the mirror she caught a glimpse of her naked body in the mirrored wall. She stopped and looked at herself.

Her breasts were high and full, with small pink nipples and her shoulders and neck were attractive, leading down to a flat stomach. She felt for excess fat and was pleased to not find anything meaty enough to grab. Her gaze traveled downward, to her professionally-waxed bush. A slim line of hair remained, flanked by smooth strips and it was trimmed close to her body. Beneath the shadow of her fawn-colored hair she could see her slit.

She ran her fingers across her breasts, down her stomach and through her wispy tufts of hair, using the fingers of one hand to separate the seductive cleft, opening her lips wide enough so that she could see the deep pink skin hidden between them. She looked soft and inviting, warm and moist. An involuntary shiver traveled up her spine as she let her eyes linger on her hidden spot.

With a sigh, she pulled her fingers away from her pussy and turned toward the shower. She reached in and twisted the knobs until the water was cool but not cold.

I'm not bad-looking...I'm pretty damn good-looking in fact. It's not as if I'll be alone for the rest of my life if things with Caleb don't work out. I'm decent and smart. And I know how to laugh—just not at disgusting, inappropriate rude remarks made at international places of historical note! What a jerk—no, I know I can find someone else if things don't go well with Caleb. And right now, I don't see how things can go well.

The water felt so cool that she wondered if there was steam coming off her overly-hot body. She took her time bathing, using the lavender-and-jasmine-scented body wash provided by the hotel. It had an exotic, spicy scent that filled the air in the room.

She didn't ever want the shower to end. Not ending it delayed the moment when she would have to tell her husband about her decision. She knew that when she told

him it would cause some ugliness between them. Probably some hurt feelings followed by strong, angry words followed by...who could tell? But whatever the consequences were, she knew without a doubt that she needed to follow through on her decision.

Whether or not—and she knew it would be not—Caleb liked her decision.

But the moment of actually telling him about it wasn't something that she wanted to do quicker than she had to, so she stayed in the shower. She stayed beyond the point at which every body part she owned had been washed at least three times. She stayed well after she had washed and conditioned her hair twice. She stayed long after her fingers got wrinkly.

Finally her wrinkly fingers found their way between her legs. As her body cooled down, Layla's center had heated. The demands of her body, the tingling sensations and the warmth that had begun deep within her, couldn't be denied.

She was wet, slippery and relaxed and her finger slipped inside herself effortlessly as her thumb danced across her clit, teasing it to attention. The accommodating little nub obliged instantly and pressed against Layla's thumb in response.

Her nipples were hard pebbles beneath the shower spray. Every pulse of cool water against their sensitive skin sent ripples of pleasure through Layla's body.

The tempo and pressure of the strokes between her legs increased. She angled herself so that the shower spray hit her between the legs. The splashing of the water coupled with the well-placed touches of her fingertips sent her crashing toward satisfaction. The spasms of her orgasm gripped her and she leaned against the shower wall for support. When the delicious torture was over Layla was shaking. But finally she was smiling.

As long as I've got these two fingers I don't know that I really need a man.

* * * * *

He stood when she walked out of the bathroom. It was comforting for him to see that the set of her mouth wasn't a rigid line any longer. Her whole expression had softened and it gave him hope.

She had donned an oversized t-shirt that he was surprised to see still existed. It was an old concert shirt and the name of a now-disbanded rock group was blazoned across the chest in faded letters. He remembered the concert fondly, one that they had attended shortly after their marriage. If he remembered correctly, they had had hot, frenzied sex in the backseat of their car after the concert had ended—in the crowded arena parking lot.

Caleb felt his cock grow hard at the memory.

Ah, so she probably wore the shirt to remind me of happier times, of sexy times we've spent together. That means that I'm forgiven, right? It means that she wants me, doesn't it? Well, I'm only happy to give her what she wants.

He crossed the room to where she was standing. Her fingers, working their way through her hair with a wide-toothed comb, didn't pause at his approach. If anything, they became even more industrious.

Her arms, above her head, showed her breasts to their best advantage. Her breasts pressed, high and full, against the time-softened fabric of the shirt. He could see her nipples, tiny and hard, moving beneath an H and an N. The H and the N were making his cock so hard that it was nearly uncomfortable.

He had to get it out of his pants. Fast.

When his arms went around her body from behind she was flabbergasted and when he pressed himself against her and she felt his enormous bulge her eyes flew open wide.

You've got to be kidding! I can't believe he thinks that now is the perfect time for romance. He really is an oaf—more uncultured than I ever realized.

Caleb had her pinned against the heavy wooden dresser with his body and he pressed himself against her as he snaked a hand beneath her shirt and cupped her breast. He palmed it, giving the already-erect nipple a tug as he massaged her skin.

"Caleb. I—"

His lips found her neck, found the soft, hidden spot beneath the hair at the base of her skull. His lips caressed her, his tongue licked her and despite herself she felt her crotch tingle.

"Caleb. I—"

"I know, babe. I know..."

He reached between them for his fly. He slid the zipper down and the sound of the grating metal made Layla push backward against him.

"Caleb! I—"

"I know, Layla. I know. I'm sorry too—it was stupid and we can just forget the whole thing. Now, though, we both know what we want, don't we?"

His cock pressed itself against her butt cheeks outside the long t-shirt before Caleb lifted the edge of her shirt and pressed himself against the lacy lavender panties she wore. She felt his erection mold itself to the space between them, felt him shudder as his cock rasped along the silky fabric that covered her.

"I don't think you know what I want, Caleb. I don't think that you have any—"

He whispered against her ear. His breath was hot against her skin and despite the screaming protests that were filling her mind her body reacted to his nearness, to his touch, to the hardness that made her softness quiver.

"I'll figure it out, what it is that you want. Give me a chance, babe. Just give me a chance...for now, this is something we both want."

Caleb's fingers pulled her panties aside, exposing her butt and pussy to his probing cock. When she felt his hot skin push against her she tried to move but he had her pinned.

“Caleb! I don’t think that this is a good idea. I think we need to talk, not—hey, do you hear me?”

Her squirming was making it nearly impossible for Caleb to position himself. But the wiggling was having a serious effect on his desire to position himself. He was getting more and more aroused with every twitch of her ripe ass. His cock felt like it could burst at any moment, spraying her with the wetness that he was battling to hold back.

Oh babe...I didn’t know that this “oh-I-can’t” game could be so damn sexy. We’ve never done this before and it’s driving me insane. I love the little protests, the wiggling to get away—I know you don’t want to get away from me. I can feel it in your body—you want me as much as I want you. And I’m going to make us both happy—if you’ll just hold still.

Wait—do you want me to stick it up your— We’ve never done that before either, but if it’s what you want I’ll give it a go. Yeah, I think I can do that. You’ve just got to hold still for a minute, so I can get it—there! Ooh babe...

His cock slid into her ass like a large sedan parks in a space engineered for a compact car. It was a tight, tight fit but he angled it and didn’t let up on the pressure until it was all the way in.

Layla had never felt such a full sensation. It was...arousing.

Caleb’s hips began the slow, steady rhythm they both knew. She looked up and saw that he was watching her in the mirror’s reflection and their eyes met and held. There was a look of intense concentration mixed with amazement topped by excitement on his handsome face.

His arm dropped from her breast and he pushed his fingers beneath the fabric of her panties, sliding them through her soft down and pressing them between her lips. He shifted, so that his fingers could drop further and found her wetness, dipping his thick, hot fingers into her folds. His finger filled her as his thumb teased her clit and he grinned at her when she pressed herself against her hand.

“Feels good, babe...feels good, doesn’t it...my cock—oh, my cock. You’re so hot and tight back there...I had no idea it could...oh babe, do you feel it? Do you feel how huge I am inside you?”

With every thrust of his penis between her butt cheeks he pushed her pussy onto his fingers. The sensations were sending her closer and closer to fulfillment. He did feel huge inside her ass—bigger than he had ever felt in her pussy. She could feel his balls slapping her as he pushed against her. She could feel them begin to contract and knew that his orgasm was near. Very near.

When she felt the first waves of pleasure pulse through her body she pushed herself against his fingers. She tensed her thighs around his hand and held on tightly to the dresser. Her eyes held his as her head angled back and her lips parted. The convulsions of her pleasure weren’t something she tried to hide from him.

As Layla’s orgasm began to end Caleb thrust forcefully into her. Once—twice—three times was all it took before his cock began to shake, spurting its flood deep into

her. She watched his face as he released his cum into her, watched his open, unguarded waves of pleasure.

She watched it all, wondering if she would ever see Caleb like this again.

Chapter Fifteen

Layla was awake long before the sun rose.

There were no sounds of camels, donkeys or kebab carts coming from the street beneath the balcony. There were no vendors calling out for customers, no voices of haggling as goods and services were exchanged.

The only sounds in the slowly-lightening room were the sounds of Caleb's snoring. He slept in the center of the huge bed, with his arms flung wide above his head and his legs parted beneath the sheet. On his back. She could see the bulge that lay peacefully below the edge of the sheet. She had no desire to tease it to attention. She had no desire to ever see it again.

It took only a few minutes for her to dress in the bathroom. Then she gathered her things and stuffed them into a small bag which she carried out to the living area. Then she slipped, barefoot, out the door of their suite. She didn't put her sandals on her feet until she was standing before the elevator.

* * * * *

Caleb was dressed in a white terrycloth hotel robe when she opened the door. He was sitting in one of the large, comfortable chairs that faced the balcony and the view. He was sitting beside the butter-soft sofa where, just a few nights earlier, they had made passionate love.

Now there wasn't a hint of that love remaining in the room.

He stood when she walked in. He pulled the sash of the robe closed and looked at her. He waited for her to speak. When she didn't he couldn't keep silent. His voice was husky, still tinged with sleep.

"I woke up and you were gone. You're —"

"Leaving."

Like a strip of bikini wax. Fast. Painful. Just get it over with. Don't give him time to talk you out of it. Just do it.

"Leaving?"

"Leaving."

He pushed his fingers through his mussed hair. They left wide tracks in the thick waves.

"Leaving? But Layla, you can't be serious," he said quietly. He was using his let's-be-rational voice, a voice that had always annoyed her with its implication that he was the rational one while she was obviously the irrational one.

His tone made her decision an easier one to stick to.

"I am. I'm very serious," she answered.

She looked past him, through the wide expanse of glass toward the pyramids that were just being touched by the rays of the rising sun. Despite the inner uneasiness she could feel taking hold within her, they were a sight that filled her with warmth. She felt the serenity she gathered from their timeless forms building inside her body, beginning at the already-warm spot between her breasts, beneath the blue amulet.

"But why? Is it because of the Memphis Rameses thing? I thought we got past that, I thought we were over that whole thing. Aren't we? Because if that's what it is, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you upset. I was only teasing, making a joke —"

"It wasn't funny."

"So that's what it is, isn't it? The 'big cock joke' by the statue?" He spread his arms and held his hands up in a position of surrender. His robe parted slightly and she could see his hard, bare body but not even the sight of his flaccid but still large penis could arouse any positive emotions within her. "I said I was sorry. I take back the big cock joke, Layla. I take it back."

She shook her head sadly.

You really don't get it, do you? You just don't have a clue.

"It's not the joke. Not all of it, anyway. It's the joke, yes—but it's other things, too. It's not just one thing."

He put his arms down. They hung limply at his sides. He stared at her for a long moment before he spoke again.

"It was the ass thing, wasn't it? It's because I stuck it up your ass, isn't it?"

"No, Caleb, it's not the ass thing."

He ran a hand across his chin. The sound of his skin raking across the stubble sounded enormous in the quiet room.

"But, babe. You wanted it, too. I could feel that you wanted it as much as I did. I mean, if you didn't want me to do it I wouldn't have done it but you were wiggling and every time I got close to putting it in...well, you know, the usual spot—well, you just wiggled even more and I thought— Hell, anyone would think what I thought. So I did it," he said. His hand rested on the back of his neck. When he looked up he had a shy grin on his face. "And it felt good, too. I know it felt good to you. You liked it, didn't you? Hell, I know you liked it. I know you wanted it. I know —"

"Enough. Enough with the 'I knows'—all right? I'm not sure you know much of anything about me. I'm not sure you *ever* knew anything about me. One thing I can assure you of, though, is that I definitely did not wiggle around against you, as you so eloquently put it, so that you would stick your cock up my ass—or anywhere else, for that matter. I was trying to get away from you and your big, fat cock. That's why I was wiggling."

Realization dawned on his face like the sun dawned over the desert. He opened his eyes wide and stared at her.

"You didn't..."

"No. I didn't."

"But...but you—but you came! I saw it—you came just before I did. I felt it. I felt your orgasm, Layla. You can't tell me that you didn't get pleasure from that, I won't believe it."

"I'm not trying to say that I didn't come. I'm not even trying to say that I didn't enjoy what we did yesterday. I did—I enjoyed it a lot. But it's not what I wanted from you, not what I needed from you. It's what you were willing—ready—to give to me. I took what you insisted on giving me, Caleb, not what I needed from you. Do you understand?"

"Give me a chance. Give me a chance to figure out what you need. I can give it to you, I know I can. You've just got to give me a chance," he said. His face fell as she reached for the small bag that she had packed.

Then he got angry.

"So that's it? No chance, you're just leaving me? And you weren't even going to tell me about it? I was just going to wake up and find you gone, is that it?" His words were coming fast and furious and she knew that it was only a matter of time before he—before he what? She had never seen him like this before. She had no idea what he was going to do.

"No, that's not it. I had planned on waking you up before I left," Layla said. She paused at the door. Her hand was on the lever but she couldn't walk out without trying to make him understand why she was going. "I need some time, Caleb. That's all. Just some time to think some things out."

"I thought we were supposed to be working these marital issues out together. Isn't that why we came to Cairo in the first place? To work things out—together?"

She looked into his eyes.

They had lost their anger and were now filled with sadness. She thought she preferred the anger. It was easier for her to bear.

"That doesn't seem to be working very well."

"Are you coming back?"

Layla waited for her voice to be steady before she spoke.

"I am. I wouldn't just leave you without coming back. That wouldn't be fair, not to either of us. So yes, I'll be back," she said.

"Where are you going?"

She had been afraid that he would ask that question. She didn't want to lie to him but she didn't want him following her, either.

"I don't want you following me, Caleb. I need to be alone, do you understand?"

"Hell—you can't just go off on your own without telling me where exactly it is that you're going. It's not right—we're in a foreign country here. How can you do that to me—you wouldn't want me to do that to you, would you?" his voice held a rising note of panic. "Please, don't just go off like that. You have to tell me where you're going. I won't...I won't try to bother you. I'll respect whatever it is that you need, whatever it is that you think you're going to find on this little off-in-the-desert quest of yours. Just don't leave without telling me where you're going. It's not fair to do that."

His tone as he finished up his long-winded statement made her want to leave without answering him. But she knew he was right. To leave and not tell him where she was headed wasn't fair.

Layla opened the door. As she stepped out into the hallway she turned and spoke to him. It was only one word but it spoke volumes about how she was feeling.

"Luxor."

* * * * *

Aman's loaned car was a bright, shiny expensive black sedan. She had been shocked when the doorman stowed her bag in the immaculate trunk and handed her the keys.

"Thank you, Aman. *Shukran*. I appreciate your willingness to help me, a stranger," Layla said.

She felt a tightness in her throat and for the first time she thought that she might cry. She managed to push the tears down, but just barely. She didn't dare consider how long they could be held off and could only hope she wouldn't break down before she reached the security of a quiet, safe place. She was afraid that once the crying began it would be a long time before it stopped.

"*Af wan*. You're very welcome, *Sayyida*. And we are not strangers...we are all on this plane at this time in history to live peacefully, are we not? Therefore, we are as camels crossing the desert...each with a specific journey, separate from the others, but each with an obligation to help the other camels cross the desert. Sometimes the trip is a difficult one, but we will all, eventually, make it to the other side," Aman said. His smile was broad and his shimmery gold tooth was like a blessing from above as he closed the driver's side door.

"I'll see you soon, Aman. I promise to take good care of your car."

The engine purred like a fat cat and she shifted it into drive.

"Not to worry about the automobile. Be more concerned with taking good care of yourself, *Sayyida*."

"I'll do both. See you soon!" With a wave she was off and within seconds the car was lost from sight.

Aman turned and walked back to the front of the King's Palace Hotel, a thoughtful look on his expressive face. The words he spoke were low and slow, hidden from all who would listen in the chaos of the street.

"In shaa allaa...in shaa allaa..."

If God wills...if God wills...

Aman wasn't the only one who was watching his black automobile drive into the crowd.

High above the street Caleb, still wearing the white hotel robe, watched his wife leave. He wondered if he would ever see her again as he turned and headed back inside the too-quiet suite.

And there was another pair of eyes that saw Layla leave the hotel. A deep, dark set of eyes that followed her movements until she was hidden from view. But these eyes knew where the expensive automobile was headed.

And they would be waiting to watch it when it arrived at its destination.

Chapter Sixteen

Luxor, on the east bank of the Nile River, was a city that was in constant motion.

Surrounded by the ruins and reminders of a deep-seated past civilization it pushed steadily toward the future without looking back. Mixed in with the ever-present donkeys, camels and carts were sleek European vehicles that added to the confusion on the streets.

Foreigners from all parts of the world filled the air with sounds that rose like a well-practiced yet always-changing orchestral piece. The German staccato chimed in with the lilting Spanish notes which fluttered and danced between the deep, no-nonsense baritone of the Polish interludes. And the underlying beat of the city, always hovering just beyond all perceptions, was the melodic sounds of the Egyptian Arabic tongue. This, the language that had survived the sands of time, kept the tempo of Luxor.

Layla felt as if she had stepped right into the center of the United Nations—and she loved the feeling.

Floating on the wide waterway there were vessels of all shapes and sizes. The dazzling modern cruise ships that carried passengers up and down the Nile were lined up like white and silver soldiers at the dock. Beside them the traditional wooden sailing boats known as feluccas were moored. Smaller, made of wood rather than chrome, the feluccas looked like they had fallen directly out of an old-time movie set.

The room she rented on a mid-size felucca named *The Nile Princess* was comfortable. There were no fancy amenities, just clean, plain accommodations. Layla unpacked her things, stowing them in the small old-fashioned free-standing wardrobe in the corner of the room. She washed up in the pink and white Thirties-style tiled bathroom before she went up onto the deck of the boat.

Crew members scurried past her as they made ready for the short voyage up the Nile. The boat wasn't going all the way to Aswan and the magnificent dam. Rather, it was going to take the passengers on a short, overnight tour of the river.

It was just the sort of getaway that Layla had hoped to find.

"Are you waiting for someone?" The voice came from above her.

She looked up into the face of a matronly woman who was dressed entirely in flower-print clothing, her shirt and knee-skimming skirt covered with daisies and her earrings were some sort of abstract flower made from gold and pearls. Even her feet were stuffed into soft-soled canvas flower-print loafers.

Layla wanted to laugh out loud but restrained herself. She hoped that she never got so old that the idea of flowers covering every inch of her body made an appealing fashion statement in her mind.

"No, I'm not," she answered. She waved her hand above the vacant wooden deck chair beside her. "Please, help yourself."

The elderly woman sat down with exaggerated care. Arthritis, Layla surmised, looking at the woman's gnarled hands. It took her a few moments to get herself settled on the hard seat. She lifted her legs and stretched them out in front of her. It wasn't until she was positioned just so that the flower-covered woman spoke again.

"Well, hello. Quite a fine day for touring, dear. Don't you think?" There was no mistaking the proper British accent. Her precise white updo and muted cosmetic application solidified the thought in Layla's mind.

"It is. Just beautiful," Layla murmured. "Excuse me, but are you British? Your accent is lovely."

Her companion colored. "Oh, how sweet of you to say that, dear. Yes, yes, I am a citizen of the Crown, if you will. Born and bred right on Cornwall-on-Flemington. Are you familiar with that area, dear? In the Flemington East district? Near the Bramley-on-Kent end?"

Layla shook her head so quickly that her hair tickled her cheeks as it touched them. "No, I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with England. Always meant to go, mind you. It's just that we...well, I haven't gotten around to it. Not yet."

The woman glanced down at the ring on Layla's finger.

"Widowed, are you, dear?"

"No, what gave you that impression?" she asked.

Do I look like a widow? And what exactly does a widow look like, anyway? I can't really be that sad-looking, can I?

"Oh! Pardon me, dear. It's just that..."

"Yes? What gave you that idea?"

The woman fluttered her fingers in front of her face. She was blushing and a sheen of perspiration crossed her brow.

"It's all right—I'm not offended," said Layla. "I'm just not widowed, either. I don't know what I've done to give you that impression, especially so early on in our acquaintance. But no, I'm definitely not a widow."

"Oh, well...that's good then, isn't it? I didn't mean to put my trainer in my mouth, but I suppose that I have done just that. I must say, though, that you looked kind of forlorn sitting her all by your lonesome. A pretty woman like yourself, all alone on a romantic boat like this one is...well, a fast look at your hand let me see your wedding set and I thought...well, I just thought that there couldn't possibly be a husband who would leave you to yourself to go on such a romantic trip. No, I thought that the poor bloke must be dead to have missed the chance to sit beside you on this deck!"

Layla couldn't help herself. The first tear rolled silently down her cheek, much to her horror and complete embarrassment.

Her companion, however, didn't lose a step. She reached into her flowered handbag and pulled out a packet of soft white tissues. She tore one out of the bundle and pressed it into Layla's palm. Her mothering attitude, calm and efficient and so totally in control, helped to quench the well of tears that had filled to overflowing in the younger woman.

Layla wiped her eyes. She blew her nose. She wadded up the soggy tissue in her fist and scowled.

I am not going to do the typical female thing and fall to pieces. No, I won't do it. I'm going to figure out what I'm going to do with my life, figure out where I'm going and whether or not I'm going alone or with Caleb. But I'm not going to fall apart. Not now. Not ever.

And certainly not in a place as gorgeous as Luxor.

* * * * *

The woman's name was Matilda. And her husband, Arthur, a portly man, apparently loved stripes as much as Matilda loved flowers. They made a likely couple, even if they did look a bit like one of those optical-illusion puzzles.

They coaxed and prodded Layla until she agreed to dine with them. A six o'clock meeting was arranged for the formal dining room and the trio parted ways.

Layla lingered on the deck of the slowly-moving felucca, training her eyes toward the shoreline. It was hard to imagine but she knew it to be true—the Nile was famous for flooding the fertile green lands that bordered it. The rich soil, which she could see was covered with assorted types of crops, was enriched by the flooding and the receding waters.

She looked down at the water that lapped gently at the floating hotel's sides. It was dark and deep and looked like it was capable of swallowing anything into its depths.

It was impossible not to wonder what was hidden beneath the flowing water.

* * * * *

"Arthur, don't be such a bore now, our guest will think that we're stuffy," said Matilda. She poked her husband's pinstriped elbow with a finger that protruded from the cuff of a rose-patterned dress. "We don't want Layla to think that all we can think of to talk about is old buildings, ancient cemeteries and moldy old mummies. She's going to get the wrong idea."

Layla sipped her after-dinner tea from one of the ever-present white china teacups and smiled at the couple who were seated across from her at the cozy wooden table. The dining room was slowly emptying out yet none of them felt like calling an end to their dinner.

It had, Layla realized, been one of the most enchanting evenings she had spent in Egypt.

"Oh, no, please don't ever think that," said Layla. She smiled at the smooth-faced, round man whose striped attire made him look like Humpty-Dumpty just waiting to fall off the wall. "I can't begin to tell you how much I'm enjoying hearing about your travels. You two have been to a lot of the wonderful places that I've only dreamed of going to. I hope to someday see these same spots...and now I'll have an insight into the things to pay attention to and the bits to look for, all thanks to you."

Arthur's face took on a rosy glow. Layla thought that her compliments had an effect on the old man, coupled with the two generous snifters of brandy he'd consumed.

"Oh, posh!" he said jovially. "Glad to be of service, what. And tomorrow, by Jove, we'll all go exploring the Karnak Temple. That is if you can stand to be around a pair of doddering old fogies like the two of us, that is."

Layla watched as he reached over and put his arm around Matilda's flowered shoulders. He carefully pulled her body closer to his and leaned forward to plant a chaste kiss on the white-powdered wrinkled cheek of his wife.

"Oh, Arthur. Let's not embarrass our guest, shall we? We'll save the smooching for later," Matilda tittered. She got red-cheeked and as giggly as a schoolgirl at a Sadie Hawkins' Day dance.

And she hadn't drunk anything stronger than Earl Grey tea, so there was no chance that she was at all intoxicated.

Oh, what I wouldn't give to be able to get old with someone who loves me like that. I thought that it would be Caleb that I was going to get old with, but now I'm not so sure. Sometimes I'm afraid that I'll never find contentment like they've got. And other times...other times I think it's so close, just out of my reach. Damn, why can't things ever be easy?

* * * * *

The night air was cool on the deck of the boat. Layla strolled the deck, tactfully ignoring the slurping noises that came from the lovers scattered around the dimly-lit spots on the deck. She focused instead on the thoughts that refused to be ignored. Thoughts that were, after all, the reason she had left Cairo on her own.

Layla wondered, not for the first time, if she and Caleb would ever find a way to make their marriage work. It felt as if they were sometimes near enough to finding a point where they were both satisfied with the way things were working out, but those times were like the proverbial applecart. They were too easily and too often, knocked askew.

The question, then, was how to stop bashing the applecart around?

Maybe I need to not let his crudeness annoy me so easily. Maybe I've got to loosen up. After all, I've been groaning about how he never wants to have any fun, how he never has time for fun. And when he does lighten up and say or do something a little bit off-color, I throw a fit.

Not good. All right, I've got to get a grip on that.

She continued to walk in the moonlight. The breeze that caressed her face, her hair, her body was like a whisper that filled her heart and soul with...something. She knew she was being filled with something, but what was it exactly? It couldn't be fulfillment, because there were still so many things left unsettled with Caleb and the direction their lives were going to take. It couldn't be happiness, because she knew she wouldn't be truly happy until she figured things out in her mind and they had acted upon those thoughts.

I know he loves me. I know it as surely as I know that I love peanut butter and hate jelly. I know it like I know my own name, the feel of my own skin—and the feel of his skin on mine. I know it as surely as I know I love this little blue amulet that has become a part of me.

Layla's fingers slid beneath her sweater to touch the amulet hanging between her breasts. It felt hot to her touch, reassuring in its heaviness and solid against her skin. Yes, the tiny talisman had become a part of her.

Love. Maybe that was what the gentle night breeze was reminding her of, filling her heart and soul with memories and feelings—feelings that had always been within her. Feelings that she and Caleb both had but had learned to overlook, push down and ignore.

And I love him. I don't always agree with how he treats me, his overprotective crap. But I think that we can work on that, that he can get all of that under control. The important thing, maybe the only thing worth considering, is that I love him and he loves me.

What else could there be?

Oh God, how quickly can I get back to Cairo? I've got to get off this felucca!

She didn't hear the footsteps on the deck behind her. She didn't hear them above the noise of the Nile as it moved the little boat. She didn't hear the nearly-silent feet come up behind her as she filled her mind with the pros and cons of staying married to Caleb.

She didn't hear any of it.

The first thing she heard was the cracking sound the old wooden railing made as her body was shoved against it.

Then, she felt the emptiness all around her as she headed for the depths of the Nile.

* * * * *

"Hell's bells, Arthur! Hold on to her! Don't let her go, do you hear me?" Matilda's shrill voice filled the air, its proper British accent being corrupted by the swearing that came from her mouth as naturally as if she were a deckhand. "I say! Where the hell is everyone? We need help here! Help. H-E-L-P!"

Arthur snorted above her as her toes felt the icy coldness of the black water beneath them.

"Hold on, Layla," he huffed. His face was sweating in the night air, sweating and swollen as an enormous cherry. And red—there didn't seem to a word for the hue of

red that covered his skin in huge, blotchy patches. All Layla knew as she stared into his face that his redness was her safety line. She prayed that he wouldn't burst something before help arrived for them both.

Her prayers were answered. Above the shouting she heard the slapping of feet and felt strong hands pull her from her position between the boat and the water. They pulled her back onto the deck of *The Nile Princess* and set her down on her cool, damp feet.

She looked down. Her shoes were gone, lost to the Nile's clutches.

"Are you all right? Are you all right, madam?" asked a uniformed seaman. He looked anxiously into her face as if afraid of what her reaction would be. "Is there anything I can get for you? Anything I can do for you, madam?" His voice sounded shakier than her legs felt but she had no thoughts for him, or for how he felt.

Layla's reaction shocked her.

There was only one thought that filled her mind at that moment. She had an uncontrollable desire to see Caleb.

In that instant knew that she loved him completely and that she wanted to spend every remaining moment of her life with him.

Before she could speak, a flowered form pushed its way toward her.

"Of course she's not all right. Blimey, the poor woman's nearly been drowned in the blasted Nile River! One of you sea fellows should go get the captain of this vessel. And another—you—go get Mrs. Greer some tea. And some brandy—a lot of brandy—for my husband, Arthur. The man is a hero! Now go—shoo! Let this woman catch her breath, won't you?" Matilda issued orders like Hannibal preparing for battle. She pointed and gestured. She poked the startled seaman in his starched chest with her manicured fingernail. She pushed gawkers aside as if they were pigeons instead of people.

Then she turned to Layla and pulled her close to her flowered bosom. Layla folded herself into it gratefully. The chest against her cheek wasn't Caleb's but it would have to do. For now, anyway.

* * * * *

"I cannot apologize enough for the unfortunate incident. I am appalled that this has happened on my felucca," said Captain Makmud Kahlil. His dark complexion was faded by the enormity of the situation, even in the light of the following day. He had been awake all night long, questioning passengers and crewmen. He had no concrete answers to the questions that surrounded the near-fatal incident.

The fact that it was not an accident was the most disturbing part of the entire affair. A number of passengers and crew had confirmed the presence of a *galabiyah*-clad figure who had been spotted on the deck of the boat shortly before Mrs. Greer went overboard. And there was a couple—who had been amorously engaged by the

lifeboats—who said that they had heard the sound of running footsteps about the same time the commotion had begun. The couple hadn't seen the running figure, unfortunately. They had been too busy re-clothing themselves to see anyone.

And then there was the boat's railing itself. It was splintered in such a way that there was no room for speculation. The woman had been shoved, forcefully, against the wooden railing. There was no other explanation for what had happened.

Captain Kahlil would be eternally grateful to the fat little man in the striped suit who had the sense and courage to fling his body toward the opening in the railing and grab for the woman's flailing arms. He was not at all certain that many people would have willingly jumped into the face of death in order to save another, he was not sure that he, himself, would have been brave enough to do such a thing.

"I understand," said Layla. "It was an accident. Accidents happen."

"But no, madam, it was not an accident," said the captain. He shook his head and stared down at the polished wooden floor beneath them. "It was deliberate, I assure you. There are too many witnesses who say that they saw someone—I hate to say these words but they must be said—the witnesses say that they saw someone push you toward the railing, toward the river. They saw a person—one person—running away from you after you crashed through the railing."

Layla looked at the man. His tiredness and sadness were mingled with regret and shame and she could see that it was nearly unbearable for him to have this conversation. She took pity on him.

You didn't push me, Captain. You can't assume responsibility for the whole thing. I don't know that there is a way to assign blame for this whole huge mess—some things just happen, that's all. There have been enough freaky things happening since I've been here for me to believe that they just happen. No explanation. No taking blame. Let's just move on. Personally, I've had enough of Luxor and The Nile Princess.

I just want to find Caleb.

"I'm not sure that you should beat yourself up over this whole thing, Captain. Accidents, even nasty accidents like this one, happen. There's little or nothing that can be done about it now. It's over and I'd like to move on, if we could," she said. Her tone left no room for discussion but the captain was insistent. He leaned forward and put his arms on his desk. He looked into her eyes and frowned.

He had insisted she sit in the comfortable leather chair that he usually occupied. The boat's doctor was seated on the edge of his desk and he had taken the hard wooden visitor's chair for himself. He saw her grimace as she shifted on the chair. She seemed to be searching for a more comfortable position.

"Madam, can I get you anything? Something to make you more comfortable, perhaps?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks. *La, shukran,*" Layla said. Her smile lit up her pale face like a beacon in the darkness. The two men were impressed with her bravery and her unwillingness to dwell on the pain that she must have been feeling.

The doctor had feared that she had dislocated her shoulder when she swung from the side of the boat but it was only very severely strained. She had a bruise on her hip and another on her back. One was from the hand that had pushed her toward her “accident” and the other was from the railing as it broke when she crashed into it.

The captain looked at the doctor and tapped his head quickly, asking him silently if the woman had suffered a head injury of any kind. The doctor responded by shaking his own head. No, the woman was not impaired in that manner.

It was then that the captain saw his second glimpse at courage and bravery on his vessel. It was hidden within the wholesome-looking blonde woman who occupied his chair.

Chapter Seventeen

"Now when I introduce you to Caleb, please remember what I've asked of you," said Layla. "No mention of what happened as not being an accident. Please, I don't want him to know that I—well, that I had anything other than a clumsy accident. That's it, all right? Do I have your word on it?"

Matilda and Arthur looked at each other, then at Layla. Neither of them looked happy at her request.

"But dearie, you were the victim—" began the well-intentioned matron for the tenth time.

"Exactly. You know it and I know it but my husband doesn't need to know it. I don't need for him to feel overly-protective where I'm concerned. Quite honestly, that's already a problem in our marriage that will need to be sorted out. This will only intensify it. So please, please...I need your word that you'll keep my secret," she said.

She stared at the retired couple with such a fierce determination that they gave in and shook their heads in unison. Yes, they would keep her secret.

* * * * *

Caleb was waiting when the boat docked. Introductions to the lifesaving couple and promises to keep in touch were brief. Layla couldn't wait to get him to herself and the feeling was mutual.

With a ride from Aman's son and the use of the spare key he had been loaned, Caleb had retrieved Aman's car from the Luxor parking area by the docks and had driven to meet the boat at Karnak. He put her small bag in the trunk and once they were both inside the vehicle Caleb turned to her, searching her teal eyes for forgiveness with his tortured ones.

"Layla," he began. He knew that he had to tell her all the things that he had realized in the past long, lonely twenty-four hours. He was afraid that if he didn't tell her now she wouldn't be willing to listen to him later. "I am so sorry for being such a self-centered, controlling fool. I know now that I've continually pushed you away by trying to hold on to you too tightly. And you know, I didn't even see it. At home I was so completely self-absorbed that I didn't bother to notice and here, well, here I've just been a complete idiot about so many things. How can you ever—"

Layla leaned forward and covered his lips with her own, enjoying the feel of his heat against her body, the sudden silence in the car. She felt her heart beating rapidly beneath the blue amulet; the feeling was one of absolute contentment.

"Oh God, I love you so much," Caleb said, covering her face with fast, frantic kisses. "I was so afraid that I'd blown it, so afraid that you wouldn't come back to me. Babe, we can work this out, can't we? I need you."

Pulling away from him she looked into his eyes and nodded at him, smiling as his face broke out in a wide grin.

"We can work it out, darling. And we will...we just need to listen to each other, I think. I'm at fault too, it's not all you. I think I'm too touchy sometimes, that I take things too seriously when you're only trying to joke with me. I'll try to loosen up."

"But oh—the ass thing—I'm sorry, babe. I didn't hear what you were trying to tell me. I'm sorry about that, I really am."

A smile played around the corners of her lips.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Caleb," she said.

"What do you mean?"

Layla leaned forward and kissed him with a passion that had been lurking below the surface ever since she had first set eyes on him on the dock by *The Nile Princess*. She kissed him until they were both breathless.

She dropped her hand to his lap, allowing it to settle on his hard-on. When she gave him a friendly squeeze with her fingertips he gasped, his sharp indrawn breath making her moist pussy squirm against the leather seat.

Layla pressed her lips against his temple and spoke softly.

"Because, darling, I enjoyed the experience. I was hoping that maybe we could—" she gave his cock another rapid squeeze. He gasped and his penis grew stiffer between her fingers. "Do it again sometime. What do you think about that? Do you think you could park your big, hard cock up my ass again...soon?"

* * * * *

Their plan had been to head back to Cairo as soon as the boat docked but, as everyone knows, even the best-laid plans can go astray.

The Sultan's Luxor Hotel was posh, elegant and refined. It had exquisite decor and was filled with priceless antiquities.

It was all wasted on Caleb and Layla.

They barely made it to the hotel room before their clothes were ripped from their bodies by hands that sought to uncover and stroke what lay beneath. The abandoned pieces of fabric were piled randomly around the doorway of the expensive room.

Layla noticed the carpet. It was soft and lush and didn't burn her knees as she dropped to them and pulled Caleb down beside her.

Their hands and mouths couldn't find each other quickly enough. Layla pushed him onto his back and straddled his body so that her pussy faced his mouth. She lowered her mouth to his throbbing cock and pulled it deeply into her throat. She

sucked him long and hard before she released his length and began to nibble her way up from the base of his cock to the fat, round tip. When she got to the tiny hole she poked her tongue into it and groaned. He tasted spicy and warm and she knew that she could keep her lips around him for hours.

Caleb's tongue was working its magic on her hot, wet folds. He lapped at her eagerly, pausing to push the tip of his tongue inside her pussy before sucking her clit between his lips. He sucked her greedily, licking her wetness as if it were her gift to him.

His tongue teased her dark, secret hole openly for the first time ever. She shivered against his mouth as he licked her. It was a forbidden pleasure that was no longer forbidden.

The agony was delicious but she couldn't take the anticipation any longer. Tearing herself away from his mouth she gave his penis one last kiss.

"Babe, you taste so good...everywhere, babe. So good..." Caleb moaned.

She turned to face him, straddling him on her knees. His cock was standing straight out from his body, thick and red with the large throbbing vein on the underside beating just beneath the surface of his skin. As she watched a drop of moisture appeared in its tiny eye.

"I need you – now," she moaned.

She pushed herself onto his staff and rode him like he was a desert sheik and she was his queen. She rode him until they reached a shattering climax.

It wasn't until much, much later that they looked about the room. It was even later still when they ordered dinner to be brought to the room so that they could quench their hunger. Naked.

Chapter Eighteen

The Cairo Museum was crowded.

Tourists, unable to hide their fascination with all things Egyptian, clattered and chatted as they walked past display cases. Cameras, expensive ones as well as disposables, clashed together where they hung from leather and plastic straps around the necks of brightly-dressed foreigners.

Mixed in with the throngs of tourists were local people, silent as the tombs they guarded. Many wore uniforms that showed their affiliation with the museum, but even more wore ordinary dress. Blending with the crowd, these were the true guardians of the treasures of their land.

In many instances, visitors assumed the local people did not understand their language, so felt free to make rude or unrestrained comments. They would have been shocked to know that every employee at the museum could speak fluently in at least five languages. It was a fact that wasn't highly publicized.

Layla and Caleb stood out from the others in that they were a strikingly handsome couple, strolling hand in hand rather than scurrying about helter-skelter. They took their time walking through the museum, stopping frequently to have a closer look at a display or to read the small placards placed discreetly near the artifacts. They seemed to be enjoying each other and the things they were seeing. They seemed satisfied.

Coming to Cairo has been a dream come true. Caleb has been so thoughtful and loving...especially since he bought me that little cupboard at the bazaar. That was the moment when things changed between us, I know it was. That was the moment when we connected again. Of course, we've had our ups and downs but at least we've managed to work everything out. And that moment was the moment when we began to come together, regardless of what happened afterward. It all cleared the air, anyway. I guess that has to happen once in every ten years, doesn't it?

Caleb kept one eye on the crowd as they walked from room to room. He felt as if someone was watching them, or maybe even several someones. Maybe it was the sightless eyes of the mummies that he felt but he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

I'll be happy when we get back home...I don't think we need Cairo anymore, we've found each other again so it's served its purpose. I'd like to get Layla back home in one piece—something that's beginning to feel like it's a nearly-impossible feat. I don't know what the hell is going on here, but I don't like it. Not one bit.

"Look at this," Layla said. Her breath caught as she stared through the glass case at the alabaster carving. It was a small statue of Nut, the goddess of the sky. Delicately-carved and chipped along the edges, the likeness rested on a bed of black velvet. Layla's

eyes were drawn to the dark eyes painted in black on the diminutive goddess. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Caleb read the small rectangular card that was propped beside the display.

"It says here that the sky goddess, Nut, swallowed the sun every evening. During the night it traveled through her body and was reborn at sunrise," Caleb said. He looked at Layla and smiled. "She must have had a wicked case of heartburn, don't you think? And they don't say how the sun got back out every morning—let's not even speculate on that one."

She looked at him and shook her head at his irreverence. Sometimes he was just like a naughty little boy! It was something she wouldn't admit but it was one of the things that had first attracted her to him.

"Caleb, you're terrible," she said. It was hard to keep the laughter from creeping into her voice. "Poking fun at an Egyptian goddess like that...you should be ashamed."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm not making fun," he insisted. "I'm merely having fun with her, that's all."

Her eyes rested on a lengthy transcription that was elegantly lettered on a scroll of some sort and was hung beside the display case. It was excerpts from the text from one of the passageways leading to Unas's burial chamber. Her teal eyes lingered over certain portions. She read aloud—

Make your seat in heaven, among the stars in heaven.

"That's Nut, the sky goddess, welcoming Unas into the Afterlife," she breathed.

Her face relaxed and she stared at the ancient words as if they had a hold over her. In truth, she felt a gentle tug toward something...something distant...something unknown.

Caleb's voice brought her back to her own reality.

"Earth to Layla—come in, Layla!" he half joked. He didn't like the glazed look in her eyes.

Is the stress of the past few days getting to her? What's this, she looks like she's in a trance or something...

He shook her and she winced.

"Ow! Stop squashing my shoulders—they still hurt," she said.

She looked up at him and saw the concern on his face. He dropped his hands from where they had gripped her shoulders and reclaimed one of her hands in his.

Layla saw a couple staring at them from the other side of the Nut display. She realized that her words had probably been understood by the frowning people. Understood and misinterpreted, she knew.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. You had—I don't know—a look on your face. It scared me, I guess," Caleb said. He searched her eyes but found no traces of the faraway look. She looked like herself as she rubbed her bruised arm with her free hand. "And look, I'm sorry I hurt you the other day. My only thought was to get you away

from the snake before it bit you on the foot. I didn't stop to think about how lifting you like that would hurt you. I'm sorry, really sorry."

Layla hated the remorse in his voice. For so long she had wanted to hear him take some responsibility for their failed marriage, wanted to hear some kind of feeling or regret from him. But she found that she didn't want to hear those emotions, though, now. Not after he'd saved her life.

"Stop apologizing—please. You saved my life in the restaurant, Caleb. Who cares how you grabbed me? If you hadn't grabbed me and lifted me like that, I could be in the hospital right now. Or worse, Caleb. I could be dead if it wasn't for you," she said.

The full impact of the trauma at the restaurant hadn't even begun to hit her. Too much had happened since then. She knew that when it did it would be hitting her like a runaway truck. She had been trying her best not to think about any of it. And since then there had been her near drowning. She did want to think about that either.

Caleb, however, could think of nothing else.

He pulled her toward him and wrapped his arms around her shaking body. She seemed to have become smaller, more delicate, in the time they had been in Egypt and he wondered if the "vacation" was taking too much out of her. Not for the first time, he wondered if they shouldn't catch the first plane home.

"Want to go back to the hotel? Are you feeling tired?" he asked.

She pushed against his chest. She shook her head and looked into his face. She saw concern there like she hadn't seen in years. It warmed her heart.

"No, I'm fine," she said. Her small woven purse slid from her shoulder and fell to the marble-tiled floor. "Just clumsy."

They smiled and bent together to retrieve the purse and the assortment of belongings that had tumbled onto the floor. Caleb grabbed the purse and she scooped everything up. The blue stone slipped out of her shirt and dangled an inch above the floor.

Caleb handed her the beige bag and she stuffed her essentials back inside it. She snapped it closed and let the strap fall on her shoulder.

"Ready?"

"Ready," she answered.

When they looked up there was no doubt that they were being watched. The watcher made no effort to conceal his stare. In fact, his mouth hung open, as if to catch flies, as he kept his eyes riveted on the pair.

The man was dressed in traditional garb. He wore a blue-and-white-striped *galabiyah* over a loose-fitting shirt and trousers. His feet were clad in worn leather sandals. His head was bare, his curly hair white at the temples.

His dark eyes lingered on Layla's chest and at first she thought he was some kind of pervert, staring at her chest so insolently. Then she realized that it wasn't her chest he was looking at, but what was on her chest.

The voice that came from his mouth was heavily-accented.

"*Ahlan wa sahlán*," he said. He inclined his head politely after speaking.

Layla answered, hesitating only briefly. "*Ahlan biki*."

"I thought you might speak some of our language," the man said in well-spoken, if stilted, English. "I could tell that you were one who understands."

She smiled and rubbed her thumb along the back of Caleb's hand. When they saw the stranger staring, he had grabbed her hand instantly. His grip on hers was tight and she doubted anything could separate them. She was hoping that he would, at least, loosen up on his hold – her fingers felt as if they might be turning blue.

"Only a little. I've tried to learn more of your language, but you must admit, it is not an easy one to master. So many sounds," she said. She smiled.

The stranger returned her smile with one of his own, displaying the two gold teeth in his mouth.

"You have a point," he conceded. "But you must also admit that your English is a difficult language to learn, as well. Many sounds," he said with a smile.

His friendliness disarmed her. Caleb was still wary. He glanced around and saw that there were armed guards at the doors of the hall. He knew that one scream would bring their pistols to the ready. He relaxed his grip on Layla's hand slightly.

"Are you enjoying the museum?" the man asked pleasantly.

Caleb didn't move to answer, so Layla spoke.

"We are. So many amazing things to see...I don't think anyone can truly appreciate it all in one day."

The man nodded, as if she had just spoken the wisdom of the ages.

"Well said. I have always thought that one could come here every day for the rest of one's life and still not see all there is to see within these walls. Not even," he paused. "No even with the help of a third eye."

The last statement hung in the suddenly-still air. It felt heavy between them, as if it was something that could never be ignored but must be dealt with. Immediately.

Great. Another fruitcake. Why does Layla attract so many of them? What is it about my wife that pulls weirdos to her like bees to honey? Is she an asshole magnet or what? And how do I get rid of this lunatic?

"A third eye?" asked Layla. She found she couldn't help but ask.

He inclined his head toward her breasts. He looked pointedly at the amulet nestled on the fabric of her shirt.

"You wear the blue eye, madam. Surely you know this?" he said softly. His voice had taken on a softness that had not been there before. He spoke with rounded vowels in slow, even syllables. He spoke as if he was walking through a mine field.

Layla instinctively put a hand over her heart, fingering the blue stone, the warmth from her body keeping it warm on Caleb's chain. She lifted it quickly and dropped it back down the neck of her shirt, shielding it from view.

"My husband," she looked at Caleb. "My husband gave the stone to me a few days ago. We attach no meaning to it. Just an ordinary bauble," she said. She hoped that her smile didn't appear as wobbly as she felt.

"Yes. You are wearing it well, madam. Over your life force, very good indeed. Let me ask you though...are you feeling well, madam? Are there any things in Egypt that may not be agreeing with you?" he asked. He leaned forward slightly and stared intently at her face. Layla angled her body away from him.

Just annoying fools like you. Enough! My wife and I have spent enough time suffering superstitious old fools.

"If you'll excuse us," Caleb said. His voice left no room for discussion. "It was very nice to meet you, but we've got to be going. Have a nice day."

He herded Layla before him, shielding her body with his own. He walked them briskly toward the doorway, thankful again for the guard standing silently against the wall.

As they left, they heard the final words of the stranger.

"The blue eye needs no meaning but its own."

* * * * *

"Honestly, Caleb, I didn't think it was such a big deal."

She watched him from her seat beside the balcony. He had insisted that she sit down when they returned to the hotel.

Their room had been cleaned in their absence. It was a pleasure to relax in the uncluttered space while he waited on her. The warm breeze from the open French doors blew across her body. She lifted her cheeks to the sun's rays and closed her eyes.

His voice snapped her eyes open.

"No big deal? Some nut comes up to us and starts talking about eyes and meanings and all sorts of crap and you think it's no big deal? I don't know...this place seems filled with lunatics and they all have some ulterior motive, some hidden agenda. I just haven't figured out what they're all up to yet. But I will, I promise you that," he said.

"You haven't forgotten the things we discussed, have you? You've promised not to be so—how did you put it? 'Overbearing, controlling, ridiculously overprotective'—need I go on?" asked Layla. She hoped this wouldn't be a step backward in their blossoming relationship.

Caleb shook his head.

"No, you don't need to go on. I remember what we said and I'm really, really trying, you know."

"I know that. I think we both are. And we're doing a damn good job of it, aren't we?"

"We are. I guess the nut just put me on edge, that's all. Sorry, babe. I've got it under control, I promise."

"No problem. I can understand how you feel. Let's forget about it, all right?" she said, smiling.

He handed her a glass filled with diet soda and ice cubes. He had an identical one in his own hand.

"No cocktail? I thought you would at least have a cold beer," she said.

He looked at the glass in his hand and shook his head. He had his own reasons for not drinking. He wanted nothing to dull his senses while they finished their stay in Cairo. He didn't think they could afford to have his capacities diminished in any way.

He knew what he had said to her, knew what he had promised her. And he had every intention of keeping his word. And his promises. But he wasn't going to let his guard down. He couldn't do that – the stakes were much too high for that.

"No, this is fine. I'm in the mood for something bubbly, something cold. How about you? Can I get you anything else?"

She took a long pull at the glass before she placed it on the glass table beside her chair, crossing her legs and leaning forward. The neckline of her blouse fell forward, putting more than the amulet on display and she was aware of what she was doing – what she hoped she was doing – to her husband.

"What are you offering, Caleb?"

* * * * *

A short while later they broached a subject that hadn't been discussed yet. Lounging in the rumped bed, it felt like the appropriate time and place to discuss it.

Layla cleared her throat, pushed her hand through her mussed hair, trying to smooth it into some semblance of order. The expertly-cut hairstyle fell into place and although she was undressed and ruddy-cheeked, she felt some measure of control.

"Caleb?"

"Hmm?"

He stroked the soft skin of her back gently. He was a man who had figured out how to really connect with his wife. They had taken their relationship to a higher level during this trip, one that he hoped they would maintain after they returned home.

It doesn't get any better than this...she's an amazing woman. How the hell had I forgotten that? I know one thing – I won't be forgetting it again anytime soon. No way. I've found her and there's no turning back.

"Don't you wonder what's happened to us?" she asked. His fingers stopped moving on her back.

"What do you mean?"

"You know. I wonder what's happened to us to make us feel so...amorous. It's nice and I love it, don't get me wrong. But I just wonder what the sudden change is. Don't you?"

His fingers began tracing the delicate skin along her spine again. She felt soft and vulnerable and he knew in that instant that he wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with Layla.

"Not really, no," he said. It was only partially a lie.

It's the best thing that's happened to us since we've gotten here, babe. Why question a good thing? Seems to be just tempting fate, don't you think?

"Well, I do," she insisted. "I like it and all, but it just seems strange. It's like we're taking some kind of weird aphrodisiac or something...just a weird thing to happen all of a sudden."

His fingers stopped again. He didn't answer immediately.

"But babe, so many things are weird since we've been here. This is the best weirdness so far," he said.

Chapter Nineteen

"Solar boats? That's what you want to do today? Look at some old boats?" Caleb shook his head but he was smiling. "You know, it's getting pretty easy to keep you happy."

Layla took a sip of the sweet black tea before she put the little white cup on the table. They were sitting on the balcony outside their hotel suite. It had become one of their favorite spots in all of Cairo. The noise and activity below could be watched from the comfort and safety of their front-row seats.

"I've always been this easy to keep happy, darling. I haven't changed, not in that way. It's funny but I've been thinking about you that way too... I mean, why didn't I see you in this light before? Is it the Egyptian sun that shines on us differently? Something's changed."

He stared into the distance. The pyramids had crowds around them that could be seen. They looked like scurrying ants on the sand, the camels and horses larger insects.

"I think we're finally seeing each other, is all it is. We've slowed down enough, or at least I have, to see who it is that we're really married to. This was a good idea, babe...I'm glad we came to Egypt. Even with all the scary stuff that's happened."

"Me, too."

Caleb reached over and they held hands for a few minutes as they watched the city before them, marveling at the crowds of moving animals and people. In the midst of it all, they felt the first contentment they'd felt in years.

"So just where are these old boats, anyway?"

* * * * *

The museum that housed the recently-excavated solar boats of Khufu was filled but not crowded. Most people were busy viewing the pyramids and they were able to walk through the museum in relative peace.

"The boats, placed in large carved depressions in the stone, at the base of the pyramids, were put there for a very specific reason," the tour guide said. His English was impeccable and Layla wondered how many times each day the handsome young man repeated these words. "They were to be at the disposal of the dead king during his time in the Afterlife. Of course the pyramids were thought to be the Houses of Eternity and the dead would require such implements to remain, should we say, active during the Afterlife."

The small crowd chuckled appreciatively at the guide's joke. They followed him to the far end of the exhibit and stared in awe at the boat, made of cedar, that was in amazing condition for having been buried for thousands of years.

"The king would need to use this boat when he went on his foray with the sun god, Ra, to journey through day and night. So far, excavations have unearthed three boats, all of which are on display in this museum, at this site. Are there more? Only the king knows for certain. But I assure you, modern Egypt will solve the mystery of the solar boats. If there are more, we will find them."

Caleb and Layla lingered by an especially beautiful headdress. It was gilded and had carved scarabs on it, with long, trailing marks near the edges. It looked as if it had taken many hours of hard, tedious work to create.

"It is lovely, isn't it?"

The voice near Layla was soft and melodious. It was as if someone had sung the words rather than spoken them. She turned to find the source of the pleasing sounds.

A short, stout woman stood beside her, looking at the headdress with a wide smile on her dark face. She had loosely curling gray hair and alert brown eyes. When she turned and smiled at them it felt as if they were standing in a beam of sunshine, warm and cozy and enveloping.

"You are Layla," the woman said simply.

"Hey—" began Caleb.

He stopped when he saw the look of supreme trust on his wife's face. She had made an instant connection with the elderly stranger.

Either she's made a connection or she's in some kind of weird trance thing again. I hope it's a connection. I don't think I can take seeing her space out again. Too creepy.

"I am. And you are?"

"Suma. In your language, it means to ask. Is there anything that you would like to ask me, Layla? I know you have many questions," Suma said.

Layla didn't feel strange to be speaking so casually with a perfect stranger. Not after all the unusual things that had already happened. Actually, Layla had begun to expect the unexpected.

"What's going on? I feel...something. But I don't know what it is," Layla finally said. It was the truth as she knew it. It was the first time she had spoken it aloud.

"The blue eye."

Caleb had been standing passively, watching the exchange between the two women. He looked at his wife's chest, where he knew the stone was hanging. It was completely hidden by her black shirt. How had the old lady known that Layla wore the stone?

Layla's hand went instinctively to the spot over her heart. She placed it on the amulet, felt her heart beating in her chest.

"How did you know?"

Suma smiled, shrugged. "I have been waiting to see you. I knew you would come, someone always does. No matter how well-hidden the blue eye is, someone always finds it. This time it was you. The last time it was the daughter of a pharaoh. No matter how the guardians conceal and watch it, the eye is discovered. Sooner or later. So, I knew."

Layla listened to the woman's words and finally the last few days began to make sense to her. Caleb, too.

"Are you telling us that there are people who watch the blue stone?" Caleb asked. His hands clenched at his sides.

"There are."

"Are they responsible for what's been happening to us? All of the accidents that we've had? Did they do those things somehow?"

Suma looked into his eyes, saw the barely-controlled rage. He was furious that someone had tried to kill his wife. Who could blame him? she thought.

"They did."

"Do you know where they are—who they are? I'm going to have them arrested, prosecuted. I'll see them pay for what they nearly did to us!" His voice was loud in the small space and Layla put a hand on his tense arm.

She was touched that he was so outraged that she'd nearly been killed but she didn't want him to scare Suma away. There were still questions that needed answers.

"They were merely fulfilling their destinies, the way we are all required to do. And no one knows who they are or where they are. It is one of the age-old secrets of the blue eye. They travel cloaked in darkness and no one knows their true identities."

"The ones in black, in the bazaar. That was them—the ones who went on about Nut!" said Caleb.

The old woman nodded. "Yes, they were the guardians."

"So what do I do? How do I keep them from bothering me any more?" asked Layla.

As far as she was concerned, that was the real issue at hand. She knew that there had to be something that she had to do and knew that the answer was with the woman who stood before her.

Oh Suma, you're an unlikely-looking oracle. But after being tackled in a bazaar, entombed in a pyramid, pushed off a boat, nearly bitten by a poisonous snake and let's not forget the poor dead, murdered woman who had the misfortune to look like me and have a name similar to mine—well, after all of that I think I just could put my faith in an oracle as unlikely as you are. Unlikelier, even.

Layla grinned as she glanced at the white sneakers that poked out from beneath the edge of Suma's blue-patterned *galabiyah*.

"You must leave the blue eye behind. The guardians will never allow it to leave Egypt."

Caleb scowled. It was legally theirs. He had paid for the chest and its contents and they weren't leaving it anywhere.

"Why don't they just take it from me? They had their chance when I was wrapped up in the tapestries," said Layla.

Suma took her time answering, hoping that her answer wasn't going to create a stir in the museum. With the man's temper flaring, she wasn't certain that he could be counted on to remain calm but there was no getting around it. The truth had to be told.

"No one can ever remove the blue eye except the wearer...as long as the wearer is alive. If you are no longer alive, well, that is another matter. Then the guardians can remove it. That has usually been the case, since the wearer eventually..."

"Eventually what?" asked Caleb.

"Goes mad," said Suma.

Layla felt the words swimming in her head. So that was what was going to happen to her! Ever since the moment Caleb put the amulet around her neck, she knew that something was going to happen to her, but she hadn't had any idea what it was. Suma's words explained a lot of what she had been feeling.

"So if I leave it in Egypt?"

"It will wait for the next wearer to find it and the cycle will go on and on, for eternity. You are part of a chain that has been growing for thousands of years. You, however, are a particularly strong link in the chain, in light of all of the unusual circumstances that have surrounded your time with the blue eye."

Caleb's blood had run cold at the mention of insanity. Suma had gained his full attention at that point and she still had it.

"Circumstances?" he asked.

Suma nodded and her gray curls bounced. If they hadn't been discussing Layla's impending journey into madness, the woman's dancing curls might have been endearing. But at that moment, they were something that the trio barely recognized.

"Of course you know that Layla means Born at Night. Those born in the dark hours are much more capable of receiving the gift of sight," said Suma. "I, also, was born in the night. See? We are sisters."

"I thought Layla was just an old Eric Clapton song," said Caleb.

"No, of course not," admonished Suma. She looked at him as if he had attempted to deface the Sphinx. "That is just an unfortunate coincidence," she added.

"And you have it over your heart, which intensifies the effects of the eye," Suma said. "Most have worn it higher, so the world could view it. You have hidden it, but by hiding it over your own life force, you have given the eye added power."

Caleb and Layla clasped hands.

Madness, powers, pharaohs—only in Egypt could something like this happen to them!

The question was, what were they going to do to get out of this mess?

Chapter Twenty

"We have reached a cruising altitude of 33,000 feet. We anticipate a smooth flight and advise you all to settle back and enjoy the trip. The seat belt sign has just been turned off. Feel free to move about the cabin if you so desire. The flight attendants are available to serve you. That's all for now," said the captain.

The loudspeaker clicked off and the buzz in first class began.

They unfastened their safety belts and looked out the window. Gone was the bustling city of Cairo. The pyramids, the Sphinx and the unforgettable monuments were behind them. They could see miles of brown sand stretching below them, but nothing that would remind them of the magic and delight of the ancient city.

"Feeling sad about leaving?" asked Caleb. He knew the answer, but wanted to give her a chance to talk about what she was feeling. He had learned that talking was something that was important to his wife. He hoped he wouldn't soon forget that small fact.

"A little," she admitted. She fingered the amulet that hung around her neck. It was on a dainty gold chain and Caleb's chain was back around his own neck. "Despite the scary stuff, Cairo was a good place for us, don't you think? We changed a lot there, didn't we? We found each other again, just like the travel agent said. Cairo is the land of love."

He nodded, reached for her soft hand, took it in his bigger one and gave her a gentle squeeze. He stroked her delicate skin with his thick finger, thinking of the other spots on her body that had such soft, delicate skin.

Caleb felt a familiar stirring in his pants and knew his cock was growing—again. He wondered if the erotic influence of Cairo was something that was going to be with them always and hoped that it would be. He hoped that with all his soul.

"It is. I wouldn't mind going back sometime...maybe next year. We could make this an annual trip for us, if you'd like to. I wouldn't mind that at all," he said, shifting in his seat.

Layla smiled, touched by the newfound consideration of her husband for her wants and desires. And she had a sneaking suspicion that he had a hard-on—again. She had secretly hoped that his eternally-stiff penis was something that would accompany them home. Apparently it was going to do just that and she couldn't be happier about it.

"Really?" she asked.

"Really, darling. I think we could use a relaxing vacation at least once a year. Besides, I want to go back to the museum and see the little brass plaque with your name

on it...the one beside the blue eye. Donated by Layla Greer—has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" Caleb grinned.

He knew it had been difficult for her to leave the treasure behind, but she had done it with her usual grace and elegance. Now that the amulet was locked securely in a glass case and millions could enjoy its simple beauty, he found it much more interesting. When he had realized that the only thing standing between Layla's attendance in his life or her journey to the afterworld had been the blue eye, it had been his sole focus to talk her into leaving it behind. He was thankful that she had agreed to donate it to the museum. Now that he had found her, he couldn't stand the thought of losing her again.

"It does. I love this new amulet, Caleb, but I miss the blue eye. I'd love it if we went back to see it from time to time," she said.

"Then that's exactly what we'll do," he promised. "And we can go anywhere else that strikes your fancy, too. I promise that I'm going to be more attentive to your needs in the future, Layla. Trust me."

"That's what I'm hoping. That we're both more attentive to each other," she said quietly. Then she smiled. "And I love it that you've discovered your sense of adventure. There are a couple of other places on my want-to-see travel list, you know."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. This was news that wasn't completely unexpected. He knew she was an adventurer while he was a stay-at-home kind of guy. He knew that there would have to be a change in his attitude about traveling.

"Oh? Where else, babe? What other kinds of things do you want to see?"

"Oh, lots of places. There are some caves I've always wanted to see," said Layla. She stretched to sit more comfortably in her seat. She crossed her legs.

"Caves? That sounds interesting," Caleb said. He leaned toward Layla, resting his elbow on the armrest between them. "Tell me more."

"Oh, there are caves near the city of Aurangabad in India that I've always wanted to see. Thirty-four of them, to be exact," she said. "Want to go with me?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he leaned over and kissed her, taking care to let her know just how much he loved her. His lips lingered on hers, savoring the warmth and sweetness that they had learned to share so fully.

Caleb shifted on the seat, his trousers growing tighter by the second.

"The signs are off," he said huskily. "You know what that means, don't you?"

She grinned wickedly. "It means that the signs aren't on any longer? That we can remove our seat belts and relax?"

"That we can walk around the cabin, that's what it means. It means that we can use the restroom if we so desire," he said, nipping her earlobe and cupping her breast, sheltering her from view by turning his muscular body so that she was nearly hidden against the wall of the plane. Caleb felt a hard peak beneath his hand and gave it a squeeze before covering her mouth with his. "And babe, I have desire," Caleb whispered, pressing her hand to the bulge in his lap.

"I'll follow you," she whispered.

"Um, I was thinking that maybe you should go first. I've got to wait a second before I get up and walk around with my cock stretching the limits of my pants."

Layla's eyes fell to his crotch. She felt moistness grow between her legs, felt desire build rapidly within her and smiled.

You've got a point, Caleb. A very large, hard point. Yes, you'd better wait a minute. But don't be too long. I'm not sure I can wait.

"Hurry, darling."

She rose and headed for the tiny restroom. First class had accommodations that were larger than those in the rest of the plane but still, the room was small. Layla was thankful that she had worn a skirt for traveling. She hiked it up and put one foot on the toilet seat, using the seat as a step. She perched on the edge of the narrow ledge that ran around the room.

When Caleb locked the door behind him the space inside the restroom was filled to capacity. Had either of them been claustrophobic it would have been an awkward situation. Neither of them was thinking of confined spaces or anything else as Caleb unzipped and tugged his cock out of his pants.

"You're so damn sexy up there," he groaned, pushing aside the edge of her panties. His fingers slid across her wet pussy, pressing against her engorged nub as he smiled. "You're as excited as I am, babe. You want me, don't you?"

Layla looked into his eyes and felt more love for Caleb than she had in years.

I want you in so many ways, Caleb. We have lots of lost time to make up for.

"I want you very much," Layla whispered. She put her arms around his shoulders and pulled him toward her. With a swift movement she arched her hips so that he could part her lips with his fat tip. Caleb entered her and she knew in that instant that their joining was, like so many things in the land of the pharaohs, preordained.

He pumped his cock frantically inside her, short, swift movements that wasted no time. With his cock rubbing her clit and his hands on her ass, Layla climaxed. Bright lights flashed behind her eyes as she pushed her mouth against his shoulder and enjoyed the familiar twitches of her pussy around his hard flesh.

"Oh!" gasped Caleb. He arched his back and she felt his cock spasm as he filled her with his liquid heat.

He looks amazing, standing here with his cock buried within me. So open. So unguarded. So ready to share fun and adventure, passion and love. He looks like the man I feel in love with all those years ago.

They returned to their seats separately. Layla went first, feeling the slippery reminder of their recent activities as she sat down. When Caleb slid into place beside her she felt a distinct thrill dance along her spine. He reached for her hand and they held tight to each other as the plane crossed the globe.

Neither of them noticed the brown-eyed man studying them from a seat two rows behind them. They didn't see the tattoo beneath his hairline or hear the ancient words he was whispering to himself.

But the man in the suit saw them. In fact, his eyes were on them for the entire journey.

About the Author

Nina Nash loves romance. She loves steamy kisses, hand holding, walking on the beach at moonlight and mostly, she loves love. The feeling that your feet have left the ground and your heart has begun to sing—that's what Nina is all about. Writing romance? It comes easily to a woman who believes in it as passionately as she does.

Nina divides her time between Key West and Manhattan. An accomplished pianist, she'll often be found tickling the ivories while contemplating her next novel. When she's not writing romance or making music, she likes to snorkel, scuba dive and rock climb.

Life in the Nash household is never dull. And Nina doesn't think it should be, either. As far as she's concerned, life is too short for dull. What do you think? Nina loves to hear from fans!

Nina welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.



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