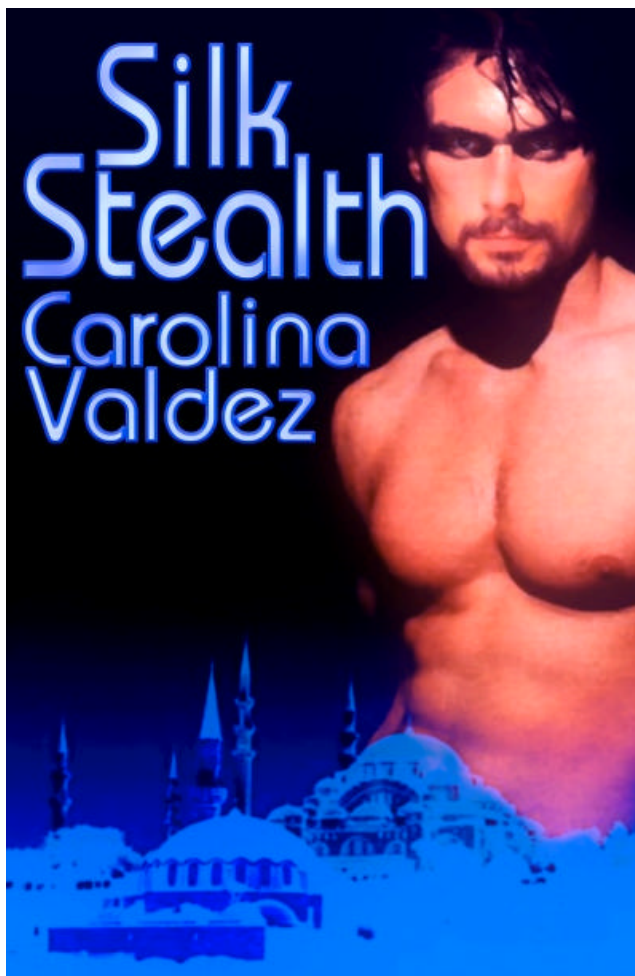


Silk Stealth

Carolina
Valdez



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...As she stepped out of her slacks and black panties, revealing full hips and thighs, he felt his penis swell against his will and begin to throb. The dark patch over her mons stood out under the light. It was in the shape of the vertical rectangle popular with American women. They waxed off the hairs along the edges to prevent them from showing outside a bikini swimsuit. The thought of those hips in a bikini made his balls tighten.

With a groan, he moved back from the window as she stepped into thermals that gave off the soft sheen of black silk. The ache in his swollen groin now matched the pain in his stitched thigh. The instant urge to tongue the fine skin of her belly, to lose himself in those inviting thighs and plunge his dick into her swept over him.

He hit his fist on the window sill. He'd been too long without a woman, and now he'd be with one he could not have.

Damn my superiors at the CIA. Why didn't they send a man?

ALSO BY CAROLINA VALDEZ

Dark Stranger
In Passion's Thrall
Knight of the Captive Heart
Sweet Chocolate Ecstasy
Where Vesuvius Sleeps

SILK STEALTH

BY

CAROLINA VALDEZ

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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*To the Middle East, with all its mysteries;
and to those agents who, when the stakes are highest and
the dangers greatest, are there and there first.*

*Special thanks to E. J. Gilmer,
my editor, not only for her editing skills but
for her cheerful encouragement.*

CIA VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

~Vision~

We will provide knowledge and take action to ensure the national security of the United States and the preservation of American life and ideals.

~Mission~

We are the eyes and ears of the nation and, at times, its hidden hand. We accomplish this mission by:

- Collecting intelligence that matters.
- Providing relevant, timely, and objective all-source analysis.
- Conducting covert action at the direction of the President to preempt threats or achieve United States' policy objectives.

~Values~

In pursuit of our country's interests, we put Nation before Agency, Agency before unit, and all before self. What we do matters.

- Our success depends on our ability to act with total discretion and an ability to protect sources and methods.
- We provide objective, unbiased information and analysis.
- Our mission requires complete personal integrity and personal courage, physical and intellectual.
- We accomplish things others cannot, often at great risk. When the stakes are highest and the dangers greatest, we are there and there first.
- We stand by one another and behind one another. Service, sacrifice, flexibility, teamwork, and quiet patriotism are our hallmarks.

CHAPTER 1

AT THE DIRECTION OF THE PRESIDENT

Peering, with care, around the corner of the building, and apparently satisfied it was clear, the woman in the black *chador* stepped beyond it and into the courtyard of a modest house. Elizabeth followed her with the same care, having no idea which part of town they were in because, when she'd been brought here, she'd been loaded into a jeep and blindfolded.

Now the woman, whose name she'd learned was Sefrah, released her face veil and let it drop. Removing her street shoes and putting on a pair of colorful embroidered slippers from those lined up just inside the entrance, she signaled Elizabeth to do the same. Then she moved across the tiled floor past pots of red and gold flowers and a splashing fountain in the center of the courtyard. Beckoning, she entered a room off on one side.

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* * *

It had been just after the midday call to prayer that Elizabeth Michaels, M.D., had been summoned to examine a child with a serious illness.

She'd just finished evaluating a little boy in the temporary clinic, where she was working with the Across Borders Physicians team, when Sefrah, veiled, had entered the room. Crossing to Elizabeth, she'd pulled hard on her sleeve before Elizabeth could begin checking another patient.

"Please to hurry. My daughter very sick. Sick to die." Above the veil her eyes were wet with tears and wide with alarm. She pulled again.

Through the tug, Elizabeth could feel the woman's tremors, and her heart ached for her. "Dr. Windham, can you take over while I go with this woman? Her child's too ill to be brought here."

Jerod Windham was a Brit, and the only other pediatrician on the team. Tall, with dark hair and eyes, and an olive complexion, he was an excellent diagnostician, but Elizabeth felt he was cold with his patients and their parents. Frowning, he'd watched her grab her medical bag and stand to follow the woman. "You're going to her house? Is it safe?"

"The child needs me."

"Humph." After a moment, he nodded. "Go. I'll handle things here."

Elizabeth had followed Sefrah on foot for two blocks, then a jeep had pulled up and she'd been hustled inside. When Sefrah had turned to blindfold her, panic had swept through Elizabeth. She thought she was being taken hostage.

"Okay, okay," Sefrah had repeated over and over in her accented English as she'd tied the black silk over Elizabeth's eyes.

Elizabeth had decided the patient must have a dangerous communicable disease or a condition the family wanted kept secret.

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Maybe the parent was a rich official who already had the four wives allowed under Muslim law and kept a secret, disallowed mistress. Maybe it was the child of someone pledged to celibacy. Calming herself under the blindfold, she'd mentally reviewed illnesses of the Middle East and their treatments as the jeep bumped along to their destination.

She'd left Windham in charge and followed Sefrah. A child needed her, and that was, after all, why she'd joined the team and why they had come.

* * *

Now, anticipating a child too ill to be taken to the clinic, Elizabeth halted in the doorway, shocked to see, instead, a man about her age on a sleeping pallet on the floor. He was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen.

Sefrah gestured toward him, her face lined with concern.

The room gave off the faint, acrid scent of blood. In a flash, Elizabeth understood, and irritation swept through her. *Damn the CIA. Are they idiots—sending a pediatrician when this man may need someone trained in trauma care?*

The eyes in the man's face were closed, their dark lashes casting faint shadows against flushed skin. A fine sheen of sweat covered his forehead and neck; the lower half of his face was obscured by a black mustache and the stubble of a beginning beard. Crusted dirt mottled his clothes. A bullet had grazed his left forehead, leaving a half-inch wide abrasion that had turned blue and was covered with small amounts of fresh and coagulating blood. The pant leg over his left thigh was stained with red as well as dark, clotted blood. She frowned at the dirty water stains and dried mud on the pants.

He groaned, tightening his lips against pain, and shifted his hips, making his groin prominent under the loose cloth of his trousers.

Something about his wounded vulnerability, coupled with the

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handsome features, his low groans, and the fluidity with which he'd moved created an unexpected and instant trill of attraction in Elizabeth's breast and an ache that shot through her to settle in her loins. Her breath stopped in her throat. Even though she knew chemistry between a man and a woman couldn't be explained, guilt paralyzed her. The ethics of her profession made it clear that attraction to a patient you were treating was forbidden desire and unacceptable to act on. She had to control the rush of feeling she experienced for this man. Forcing sensuality from her thoughts, she brought them back into a medical mode and crossed the room to assess his injuries.

"Sir, can you hear me? I'm a physician." Kneeling and opening her medical bag, she listened for a response that didn't come. Reaching in for her scissors with one hand, while she shook him with the other, she repeated the question in a firm, raised voice, hoping to break through the barrier of sleep or confusion. Nothing.

"His name?" she asked her guide.

From the folds of the *chador*, the woman produced a passport for a David Foster Fontana. Knowing patients often responded to their first name when they wouldn't to their last, she said in a raised voice, "David, can you hear me? I'm Dr. Michaels."

Again, he didn't respond.

Well, dense again, Michaels. If you're involved in espionage you probably don't carry a passport with your real name on it, do you? So in the condition he's in, he's not going to answer to David, is he?

Slipping latex gloves over her hands, she cut away his trouser leg, grateful for the stint she'd spent working in an emergency room just before her pediatric residency. Next, she tried hard pressure on his chest bone. He reacted by wincing and pulling away, which told her he wasn't in a deep coma. She diagnosed a mild concussion from the bullet that had skimmed his forehead, and was relieved to find his pupils equal and reacting when she shone her penlight in them.

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She took his blood pressure, pushing up his sleeve to reveal an arm on which fine, dark hair grew. His pressure was low, but within normal limits.

Good, he's not in shock. Should be, so he must be healthy and strong.

The chest she bared to her stethoscope's contact was covered with dark hair up to his neck. It felt springy under her touch, and she felt a sudden urge to lay her cheek against it. Pulling herself away from that dangerous thought, she laid the bell below his left nipple and listened.

"Your heart sounds are normal, but your heart rate's too fast. I'll figure out why once I've examined your thigh wound." Pinching the skin over his sternum, she felt the skin slide back into place. Satisfied he wasn't dehydrated yet, she decided to give him a little fluid anyway since she didn't know how long he'd be unconscious and unable to swallow.

Sefrah had disappeared, and now she returned with a tea kettle filled with warm water, a stack of clean cloths, and a basin.

"Thank you," Elizabeth acknowledged in Pershi, grateful for the woman's anticipation of her needs.

Sefrah had shed the outer garment but, like Elizabeth, retained her *rusfari*, the Islamic head covering. Her dark eyes were wide in her face, her expression still serious. Her long dress was purple voile over a satin under slip. Its elegance after the dead-black *chador* surprised Elizabeth. The other surprise was Sefrah's pregnancy. She was approaching term, and yet she'd risked coming for a doctor.

Why, Elizabeth wondered? She hadn't known the man's name, thus wouldn't be a wife or a lover carrying his child. Maybe she and her husband were friends, alarmed at his condition. Maybe if she'd called a local doctor for someone with a bullet wound it would have been reported to the police and made them suspect. Perhaps this was just an injured stranger their kindness drove them to help.

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No time to figure this out now. She had work to do.

Relief flooded her when the thigh she exposed was revealed to have been stabbed rather than having a bullet lodged in it or bones shattered by one passing through. The wound oozed fresh blood and was inflamed. Knifings were such nasty things, and judging from the evidence on his clothing, it appeared he'd crawled through muddy water. Infection had set in. That explained his restlessness, the fine sheen of sweat, and the too-rapid pulse.

She assumed he was an American and spoke English, although she wasn't sure. If this was the man she was to rescue, he must speak English, since they'd sent for her with her pathetic grasp of Pershi. Because it was possible he heard her, even though he couldn't respond, she spoke to him in a calm, even tone as she worked.

"I'm cleaning the abrasion on your forehead where a bullet grazed you. You were lucky there. It's only caused a mild concussion. I think you're going to be glad about that when I clean and stitch up the knife wound in your thigh. Stitching should stop the bleeding, but I may not be able to do more than dull the pain.

"I'm going to give you a shot of antibiotic in the butt because the knife wound's infected. I suspect you won't like it much either. Then I'm going to get you out of these filthy clothes and bathe you. That I think you *will* like."

Feeling herself blush at how salacious that last sentence sounded, she wondered what she was going to do about bathing his groin area.

She repeated her words to him in Pershi, grateful when Sefrah helped. Chances were, even if this man was American, he spoke Pershi. Sefrah didn't seem to read the comment about liking the bath as sensual.

Elizabeth worked without stopping, speaking seldom now. When his face and the bullet abrasion were clean, she covered it with a non-stick dressing.

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Turning her attention to his thigh, she decided to cut the pants loose through the waistband in order to cleanse a large area around where she'd be working. Surprised to see he wore no underwear, she left his personal areas covered to protect his modesty, mostly for the sake of her host. Sefrah brought more clean cloths, and Elizabeth washed the upper leg wound with liquid soap from her bag.

Next she drew up an anesthetic with adrenaline, which would produce numbness and help control any bleeding. "Just a little stick now." It was what they always told patients, she thought. And it wasn't always true.

"Arrgh," he cried when she inserted the needle right into the wound. He didn't open his eyes.

When she'd used all the medication, she tore open a package of sterile forceps to probe it. "You'll feel some pressure in your leg as I check things out."

And then, "No wonder it's infected and still oozing blood. The knife drove pieces of fabric into the cut. They're out now. I hope you aren't allergic to penicillin because I'm going to sprinkle some powder inside before I stitch it up."

She was perspiring under her unwanted *rusfari*, grateful she'd stitched knife wounds on adults when in the emergency room. Most of the time it was on gangbangers younger than this man, but the technique and the anatomy were the same. Still, she was a pediatrician, not a surgeon. In general, she stitched kids under eighteen. As she drew sutures through the needle, she wondered if a surgeon would have to undo her work and put this man's leg back together a better way.

Can't worry about it. The important thing is to get this done so he can heal and get out of here. Steady now, she worked until the wound was sutured and dressed.

His temperature was one-hundred-and-two degrees. She'd use tepid water to bathe him to help bring it down.

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Elizabeth knew, under Islamic law, Sefrah couldn't be alone with the man unless they were related, and no doubt she wouldn't consider it appropriate for Elizabeth to be either. She remained to help, tossing out the basin water when it was dirty and refilling it.

As Elizabeth bathed her patient, she continued to assess him. He wasn't what she'd call buff, but his muscles stood out because they were so well developed and defined. His body was pure masculinity and in perfect proportion. A faded scar in his lower right quadrant told her he'd had his appendix removed many years back.

He looked innocent and lay so still. *If you're the one I'm here for, what is it about you that makes it imperative you get out of this country? What puts you in such danger?*

She judged he kept fit by hiking, practicing martial arts, or working at something that required walking. Trailing his hands in the basin, she scrubbed the dirt from them and let the water soak away what was under his nails. He'd crawled through dirty water, digging his fingers into the ground as he pulled himself along. Whether before or after his injuries, she couldn't tell. Everything else on the front of him was fine.

His fingers were long, like those of a pianist; the nails were clipped short. The small callous on the trigger finger of his right hand gave Elizabeth pause.

When she cleaned his legs, she bent one of his knees and submerged his foot in the warm water and poured water down his lower leg, knowing how good that would feel if he were aware of it. Examining the bottoms of his feet, shock threaded through her as she recognized cigarette burns on one foot. He'd been tortured.

Unease threaded through her mind as she patted them dry and applied Band-Aids.

She paused again when she'd finished all but the personal areas of the front of him. By now she'd cut away the remaining trouser leg, and only a loose portion of cloth covered his penis and scrotum.

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Embarrassment flooded her as she fought a powerful urge to see him uncovered, knowing this wasn't the place or the time for it. Still, her medical conscience bothered her as she wondered if he'd been tortured there too and how dirty he might be. Maybe that was the reason for the absence of briefs or boxers.

She'd observed RNs bathing patients, and this was when you handed the man the washcloth, left the basin of water on the over-bed table, pulled the curtain and walked away for a few minutes so they could "finish" their bath in privacy.

Oh, Lordy, Lordy, what am I going to do?

And then Sefrah was motioning to her, eyes wide with shock, saying in Pershi, Elizabeth surmised, that they must not expose the man. Her husband would clean him there later.

Relief...and just a little regret...swept over her. But sensual feelings aside, she knew she had to examine him because torturers crushed testes and heaven only knew what they might do to a penis. Explaining to Sefrah she *must* check him, she lifted the cloth in a way that she could see but the other woman could not.

Sefrah turned her face away.

Elizabeth felt the orbs for knots or crushing and lifted the flaccid penis. No bruising, tearing, burns or bleeding that would indicate a sheared urethra. Her shoulders relaxed from unconscious tension.

They rolled him over, protecting his stitched and bandaged leg, covering the lower half of his body with a towel. Washing his shoulders and back, she was struck by how strong they were, even in this relaxed state. Sefrah left the room for more water. Elizabeth slid the towel up to expose his butt and legs. His butt wasn't flat or too round. It was just right—the muscles firm and strong. As she ran the soapy cloth over it, she realized she'd begun to caress him as she washed. Horrified, she drew back just as Sefrah returned. She rinsed and dried that enticing part of his anatomy, then slid the towel up to cover him from his

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shoulders to below his bottom. Then she washed thighs that were as hard as stone.

Whatever the reason for his being here, he seemed to have kept fit enough to move fast. This time he'd gotten away before those cigarette burns could progress to something else, but not without injury. Next time he might not be as lucky.

She'd developed a rhythm to her bathing. It freed her to remember her encounter with the two men who'd entered her office in San Francisco three days ago at closing time.

* * *

She was alone, and had just reached to lock the front door when they pushed their way inside. Two men in dark suits, white shirts, and red, striped ties.

"Dr. Michaels?" The taller man with silver at his temples spoke first.

"There are no narcotics or street drugs here." Despite their conservative dress, prickles of fear had lifted the hairs on her arms as she prepared to press the 911 button on the cell phone in her lab coat pocket.

When they flashed ID badges, she studied them with care before using the desk phone to dial the Central Intelligence Agency and confirm who they were.

She could tell her thoroughness irritated them. Arrogant because they were CIA, she thought. Higher and more respected even than the FBI. Once she was sure of them, she locked the front door and led them to her office. She motioned to the burgundy leather chairs used by patients and pharmacy reps.

One of the agents perched on one corner of her desk, a posture she'd thought was intended to intimidate as well as to control the meeting. She check-mated his move by standing behind her desk, leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

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“Your country needs you, Dr. Michaels.”

The statement was so ridiculous she'd started to laugh. His face flushed, and she realized she'd angered him. This was not good, she told herself, and fought to straighten her face.

“That's pretty melodramatic. What do you mean ‘my country needs me’? Why are you here?” She thought anyone could have pegged them for who they were; they fit the stereotype well.

Now the cohort spoke, his brown hair worn in the neat cut actors who portrayed FBI or Secret Service agents in movies sported. His tone was intelligent and logical. “We have someone we have to get out of the country where you're going tomorrow with the Across Borders Physicians' team. We have reason to believe the services of a doctor may be needed.”

“Is this person under eighteen?”

They stared at her, expressions guarded. She wasn't sure they understood what she was getting at. “You do realize I'm a pediatrician, a children's doctor, don't you? My patients are all under eighteen.”

No response.

It was obvious they weren't going to tell her anything more. After further unsuccessful attempts at soliciting information, it came to her she didn't have a choice. Someone higher up had decided she would do this. They were just messengers following instructions. No doubt she was to accompany the child of someone very important to the United States. Sighing, she gave in. “How will I know this person?”

“You'll know. You'll be summoned, and you'll take it from there.”

“How will we get out? You've given me no time to study the country beyond what I've done as a doctor going to one small area. I didn't think it necessary to study the entire country or those surrounding it.”

“You will be summoned. You will receive help. The escape route will be known to those who'll assist you.”

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“Is it a boy or a girl?”

They answered with, “When you’re summoned, you will take your doctor’s bag with sufficient medical supplies packed in it.”

“Sufficient for what level of injury or illness?”

She could get nothing else out of them. They provided her with identifying phrases, money in the country’s currency, and a map they assured her was current. She was given a satellite phone with global positioning features, and three numbers she memorized. The person she was assisting would carry the phone and call the first when they left on their journey, the second was for emergencies, the third number would be used when they crossed the border. Whichever border it was. They didn’t tell her that either.

Once she made contact, she was not to carry the phone or use it. If she was detained by authorities, she was to say she’d been sent to tend to someone seriously ill and had been taken hostage. She should demand the American Embassy be contacted.

That night while she was packing, Laela, a female agent, who was Muslim, arrived to quiz her about her knowledge of the beliefs and customs of the region. Elizabeth was shown how to wear *hejab*, including the *rusfari*, the *chador*, and the *manteau*, a long sleeve coat covering a woman from neck to mid-calf or ankle. Her *manteau* for the clinic was a powder blue lab coat, her *rusfari* dark blue silk. When the agent pulled out an emerald silk *manteau* and a rust colored head scarf, Elizabeth blurted out, “Isn’t that a little sexy?”

“For parties or official receptions,” Laela explained. “You’ll not be alone dressing in one like this. You’ll see gold silk and silver lamé coats too.”

By the time she boarded the plane before dawn the next morning, Elizabeth was exhausted and slept on the long flights over. But not before noticing the men’s section was separate from the one for women.

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* * *

And now she was here. Tending a wounded, unconscious man. Was he really the one she was supposed to help escape? Or had she been brought here just because he'd been shot and knifed? And how was she to know if this was her charge, unless he could respond to her password phrase?

Deciding at this point it didn't matter because, in any case, he needed a doctor, she continued the bath until she'd finished and he was covered with blankets.

She started an IV infusion of two-hundred-fifty cc's normal saline in his left arm and put the polyurethane bag underneath his shoulder. Since there weren't any poles on which to hang it, the weight of his body would provide enough pressure to send the fluid into his vein.

Sefrah provided a cushion for her, and she sat on the floor with her back against it, watching the steady drip of the solution. Ready at any moment to grab his arm if he moved in such a way as to dislodge the needle in his vein, she took time to study him in depth.

His light skin told her he was not Arab but Aryan, as were the majority of the people in this country according to her CIA briefing. His mustache, but not the beard, were typical for the men here. From the beard stubble she guessed he hadn't shaved, or been able to shave, for a few days. Hiding out perhaps? His clothing, what she'd seen of it, was also common dress for males in this country. Before the IV finished, she concluded that, depending on his English fluency, he was either a native to this country or had been born in the United States, a first generation to immigrant parents.

Sefrah said her husband had discovered the unconscious man in their garden the previous night. They had no idea how long he'd been there. Elizabeth instructed her in taking the man's blood pressure and temperature for signs he was slipping into a deep coma from a brain hemorrhage or that the infection was worsening. She was to come for

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Elizabeth right away if those signs appeared.

When the saline bag was empty, she removed the needle and line, taped a cotton ball over the needle hole and instructed Sefrah to remove it in a couple of hours.

She took his temperature again, breathing easier because it had dropped two degrees.

* * *

They returned Elizabeth to the clinic blindfolded and in a jeep until they were let out two blocks from the clinic. She and Sefrah kept their heads lowered as they walked, with purpose, past cement buildings plastered with photos of the ruling cleric and the president, as well as pictures of the shrine at Mecca with an arrow pointing east.

With a suddenness that caught her off guard, Sefrah grabbed her arm and pulled her into a doorway.

When Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak, Sefrah put a finger over her lips and shook her head. "*Basij*," she whispered.

Already Elizabeth had learned people here feared the *basij*, a voluntary force of teenage males in jeans and loose T-shirts who carried automatic rifles, more than they did the *komitch*, the moral police. Under her *manteau*, she wore an ankle-length, buttoned skirt. The last button was undone and on occasion bare leg showed beneath her coat when she walked. Sefrah had saved them from being noticed, and from a stern, "Cover yourself!", and a possible report about them to the police. Laela had warned Elizabeth the *komitch* would take her passport and jail her until they could sort out why she was there.

The need for secrecy and the cost to her patient if they were discovered hit home like a hammer to Elizabeth's brain. It made her nervous to see "moral police" carrying automatic weapons. Just to tell women to cover themselves? She didn't think so.

However, she stepped inside the clinic as if nothing untoward had occurred. She resumed examining patients, amazed she could do it with

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such ease and with steady hands. Soon she was submerged in the needs of the dark-haired, dark-eyed children before her, their bright faces lighting up her heart.

Still, in the back of her mind was the image of the injured stranger on the pallet, and the incredible magnetism she'd felt from him. The remembered smell of danger surrounding him still singed her nostrils.

At the day's end, she entered the supply tent just outside the clinic and refilled her bag, replacing what she'd used and adding extra IV bags and line in case the man needed more fluids when she returned the next day. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dr. Windham approaching.

Although his name and accent didn't bear it out, she was sure Windham was an Arab. As they'd set up the clinic, she'd overheard him speak what she knew to be fluent Arabic to one of the technicians. His olive skin, black eyes and hair confirmed his Arab roots. Either born in Great Britain or schooled there from early childhood, she'd guessed.

"You were gone a long time."

"Hmm. Sorry about that. Thanks for taking over for me. Tonsillitis plus a nasty infection from a thorn embedded in her foot. Holding down a four-year-old while I removed it wasn't easy for the mother. The child's throat was too sore to swallow liquids, and I gave her a penicillin injection and some fluids. She was dehydrated from refusing to eat." She'd had time to concoct the story, but now, as he eyed her medical bag with what she thought was suspicion, her heart pounded. Would he see through her fabrication? Maybe her attempt to be casual as she closed the bag to prevent him from seeing the adult items she'd included were obvious to him.

All this need for secrecy was proving to be exhausting. If the man she'd tended was CIA, how did he manage it? "I promised the mother I'd check on her tomorrow morning. She'll come for me just after the

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first call to prayer.”

“At dawn? You are certainly dedicated, Dr. Michaels.” He tipped his head in a sort of bow, which she thought displayed cynicism.

She shrugged. “Seeing the girl then, I can be back by the time clinic opens.”

He nodded, but she still sensed he was suspicious. “Very dedicated, as I said, Dr. Michaels. I will see you at dinner?”

“Yes, of course. I’m looking forward to meeting the rest of the staff.”

In fact, she longed to go to her hotel room and hit the sack. Flight time alone had been over fifteen hours, plus early check-in in San Francisco due to Homeland Security protocols, then plane change waits. But it would look bad if she didn’t meet the others who’d volunteered for this stint.

* * *

Dinner was served in a white tent, the same kinds of food she glimpsed in the hotel restaurant as she’d hurried past the door. Rice and yogurt appeared to be the country’s staples. In addition there were cucumbers, dates, melon, tangerines, apples, cookies, sunflower seeds, nuts, and kebabs of all types. In deference to the Americans, they even had pizza and hamburgers. Orange soda seemed to be the drink of choice, but Coke held its own too.

Dr. Clarence Burgess, the physician in charge, gave a brief address prior to introducing the staff. The volunteers ranged from clerical and technical to professional persons. The largest number of doctors were surgeons and anesthesiologists. They’d all arrived to help a small, established clinic with limited staff and heavy medical needs. The specialists would perform surgeries not available in the area.

Pride swept through Elizabeth as she looked at the people around her. Coming here had seemed to be a logical extension of her work, but now she felt humbled to see men and women who’d brought donated

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equipment, medicines, and supplies, in addition to giving their time to people who needed them and to a clinic whose resources were sparse. A wave of gratitude followed pride. Happiness that she was part of this mission surged through her. It would be frustrating and sad to leave it for her CIA assignment.

As the dinner ended, Dr. Burgess bid them *Salaam alaikum*—Peace be with you.

CHAPTER 2

THE EYES AND EARS OF THE NATION

Her sleep was broken by tormented visions of rifle-shooting teenagers screaming, “Spy! Kill her!” and of running a gauntlet, naked except for her *rusfari*, through streets lined with men wagging disapproving fingers. She dreamed of a handsome face with a black mustache and the shadow of a beard bending over her, full lips pressing hers as his tongue explored the satin interior of her mouth; of long-fingered hands caressing her unclothed body and then penetrating her as she wrapped her legs around the man as his thumb massaged her clit until her emotions reached a fevered, moaning pitch.

Without warning, she wakened gasping, as her body convulsed in an orgasm that sent circles of intense pleasure out from her center, like a rock dropped in a pond.

As the spasms slowed and quieted, and her racing pulse returned to

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normal, she convinced herself the orgasm had been triggered by fatigue and stress. She snuggled deeper into bed, relishing the release she'd experienced, thinking it would be easier now to care for the stranger without having her emotions overwhelm her.

Stimulated by the sexual response, sleep evaded her. She lay in the silken darkness until deciding to rise before her alarm went off. By the time the call to prayer sounded from the minaret's loudspeakers, she'd eaten and was waiting outside the hotel.

In the chill morning air, the extra layer of warmth provided by the *chador* over her *rusfari* and *manteau* were welcome. Today she'd dressed in slacks and a long sleeve, turtleneck top to avoid any challenges to her modesty.

Sefrah appeared out of the shadows, and they scurried past a man rising from his prayer rug in a shadowed corner. Heart skipping a beat or two, Elizabeth watched out of the corner of her eye to see if he would follow them, but he rolled the thin rug and carried it away in the opposite direction. She thought he was a street sweeper for he also held a twig broom.

First you think Dr. Windham's suspicious of you, and now you think this poor man's watching you. Paranoia's overwhelming you, she scolded herself.

No one was in sight as they climbed into the waiting jeep. She submitted to the blindfold without protest.

As the jeep bumped over roads in need of repair, eagerness at seeing her patient again lifted her spirits after the difficult night. Would his fever have broken? Would he be awake now?

Sliding out of her loafers and into the waiting slippers in the courtyard, she stepped into her patient's room to see a man kneeling beside the pallet holding a cup of water to the mouth of the injured man.

"No! He's unconscious! He'll choke and die!" She hurried across

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the room to stop him.

The man with the cup turned and stared at her, his black eyes wide with shock, as the patient took the cup and gulped the water down.

Elizabeth knelt beside the pallet in relief. "Thank heavens, you're awake. I'm Dr. Michaels, and I stitched you up yesterday."

The man who'd offered the cup rose and stepped back.

"This is my husband, Rayan Firouz," Sefrah said.

He was stockier than her patient and dressed in Western clothing—brown slacks and a white shirt. Elizabeth nodded to him and apologized.

His concern for the injured man mirrored Sefrah's. The two of them withdrew to the far side of the room and sat on pillows.

The slate-gray eyes in the haggard face of the man on the pallet looked into Elizabeth's eyes, and an electric mini-charge zapped her heart. Climaxing in her sleep hadn't seemed to diminish her response to him. He still drew her to him like a compass needle pointing north.

He nodded. "Head hurts," he said, before sinking back and closing his eyes.

She talked to him during her assessment. "That's from the bullet grazing your skull. Your temperature's almost normal, but we'll see if it spikes this afternoon. I gave you a timed-release penicillin shot that should help you throw off the infection from the knife wound." She redressed his injuries. "Your head and thigh look better, and your vital signs are good."

After she'd repacked her bag, she started to stand to leave. Without warning, a hand grabbed her wrist in a steel grip.

She looked into alert, intense eyes that took her measure without mercy.

"Who are you?" He demanded in American in a voice hoarse from recent lack of use.

Now was her chance to confirm what she suspected. She said,

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“Well, Harry Potter, I see you speak Parseltongue.”

His forehead contracted in a frown and his response to the code was slow. When it came, she could feel the disbelief radiating like tiny daggers aimed at her.

“You’re from Hogwarts?”

“That’s right. Dumbledore sent me.”

He stared at her, then covered his face with his hands. “A woman. My God, are they crazy?”

“My sentiments exactly, Mr....”

“Mansouri. Shir Mansouri.”

“Mr. Mansouri.” So the David passport was a fake. Or else this name was. Her mind whirled in confusion.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, weaving like a blade of grass in a light breeze. “It’s not safe. We have to get out of here.” He attempted to stand.

She pushed him down, feeling the tensile strength of his shoulders as they resisted her touch. She spoke in her firmest, no-nonsense, physician’s voice. “Not today. Tomorrow, *if* your fever’s down this afternoon and tonight. We’re not going to start out for Muggle Town if you’ve got a raging infection. Antibiotics aren’t used much in this country, so what I gave you should be effective against whatever bacteria it’s fighting. But we don’t know how long it’s been since you had food. Would you agree you need strength for our journey?”

Releasing him, she was relieved to see he continued to sit and made no move to rise.

“I have something for you.” Pulling the leather case containing the phone and GPS unit out of her medical bag, she handed it to him.

“You really are from Hogwarts.”

“You bet.” And it felt like she was. It was so melodramatic, so unreal. So inexplicably magical to be with this man. “Sefrah will take your afternoon temperature. If it’s normal and doesn’t rise this evening,

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and if you've been able to eat, we'll leave tomorrow if you can make the arrangements."

"Tomorrow then."

"We'll see." She stood. "Oh, I forgot. I've memorized three phone numbers we're to call. The first one is for when we leave."

* * *

But it was not the next day that their journey began.

Sefrah had gotten word to her that his afternoon temperature was normal. Relieved, but still recovering from jet lag and exhausted from a busy but satisfying day in the clinic, Elizabeth opted to eat in the hotel restaurant instead of the tent with her co-workers. Relaxing, she showered and shampooed, using a converter in order to use her blow dryer. Plaiting her hair into a single braid, she dressed in slinky, black slacks and top before adding the rust-colored *rusfari* and sensual, emerald silk *manteau* she knew drew out the green in her hazel eyes. It might be the last time in a long while she could dress up.

She went downstairs to the dining room.

He stood in the flickering candlelight of an alcove near the entrance, leaning on his cane like an injured stallion in a field of saffron. He wore Western dress—slacks, a collared shirt underneath a bulky knit sweater in charcoal that heightened the gray of his eyes and the darkness of his hair. Her heart turned over.

She hesitated for a second, then, eyes straight ahead, passed him as if he were a mirage.

"One hour. Pack, leave your bags in your room. Wear a *chador* over warm clothing and sturdy shoes. Wait in the garden."

His throaty voice made her tongue tingle just as goose bumps cropped up on her arms.

Giving a slight nod, she entered the restaurant and was seated on the women's side. Excitement and dread made it difficult to choke food down, but she forced herself to eat well for their journey.

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Returning to her room, she removed her clothes in order to dress warmly as he'd advised. Removing the beautiful coat, she pulled the black top over her head and stepped out of the slacks.

Well, so much for glamour night, kiddo.

Without a clue about where or how they'd be traveling, she wore her Adidas. Packing as fast as possible, she donned the *chador* and headed downstairs for the door to the garden.

Her food was a lump in her stomach.

* * *

From a room across the small courtyard from hers, Shir watched her undress. His intention had been to know when she left her room, and he'd been shocked to see her unbutton the sexy *manteau*, which, in those moments in the alcove, he'd wanted to rip off of her himself, and begin to strip. It was obvious she didn't know she could be seen through the openings in the carved screen covering the window.

Of course he should've stopped watching right then and gone to the car. But he was a man with a man's curiosity and couldn't tear himself away. He'd already seen the amazing color of her eyes—a peculiar blend of green, gold, and umber. Without the headscarf, he now knew her hair was the color of burnt cinnamon and long enough to braid.

Islamic law dictated severe punishment if he was caught ogling a woman like this, yet he couldn't turn away, cursing because he was a man and men always had sex on their minds. He continued to watch as, with sure movements, she pulled her top garment over her head and off. While her hands were extended above her head, her lush breasts rose in their sheer brassiere to jut up and out. He had a glimpse of large, dark areolae and soft nipples before she dropped her arms and pulled on a turtleneck sweater.

He remembered firm hands redressing his wounds, the feel of the probe in his ear when she took his temperature, the touch of her fingers as she pressed the stethoscope bell over his heart, the serious eyes,

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thoughts turned inward, as she examined him.

She was all business when she'd given him the passwords and handed him the GPS satellite phone. He shook his head. Self confidence surrounded this woman like an aura. Now it seemed she was a sensual goddess in disguise. He found her not only utterly intriguing but alluring as well.

As she stepped out of her slacks and black panties, revealing full hips and thighs, he felt his penis swell against his will and begin to throb. The dark patch over her mons stood out under the light. It was in the shape of the vertical rectangle popular with American women. They waxed off the hairs along the edges to prevent them from showing outside a bikini swimsuit. The thought of those hips in a bikini made his balls tighten.

With a groan, he moved back from the window as she stepped into thermals that gave off the soft sheen of black silk. The ache in his swollen groin now matched the pain in his stitched thigh. The instant urge to tongue the fine skin of her belly, to lose himself in those inviting thighs and plunge his dick into her swept over him.

He hit his fist on the window sill. He'd been too long without a woman, and now he'd be with one he could not have.

Damn my superiors at the CIA. Why didn't they send a man?

And then, *Oh hell, every man falls in love with his doctor if the doctor's female. Psychologists call it transference. Forget it, pal. It isn't real. It'll pass.*

* * *

It was after sunset and darkness had settled in. The moon was a slim, silver crescent coupled with a brilliant star in a black sky the texture of velvet. The scent of jasmine was strong, and a nightingale called as Elizabeth entered the garden. A *chador*-clad Sefrah joined her, nodding and leading the way to a gate hidden behind overgrown shrubs. Sefrah had a key, but they both had to push the rusted iron gate

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to free it. Its scrape broke the silence with what sounded to them like a clashing cymbal. They froze, listening for signs of detection. A rush of adrenaline caused Elizabeth's heart to knock against her chest. When no one appeared, Sefrah led the way through to the street and locked the gate behind them with a trembling hand.

A blue sedan with its motor running waited for them. Rayan sat behind the wheel. Despite his cane, Shir opened the back door for the women, and Elizabeth was struck with the air of command about him now that he was on his feet. Sefrah climbed in, but Elizabeth turned to Shir.

"You're supposed to notify them we're leaving."

He handed her the phone, and she dialed the number, then returned the phone to him. He moved away and spoke in a voice low enough that no one could overhear.

Then she climbed in behind Sefrah, and after she'd settled in, pulled the cloaking *chador* off her head, relieved to be free of it.

Rayan seemed to know their destination, and, after greetings were extended, no one spoke for the next hour. Little traffic appeared as the car hummed over the wide road.

Elizabeth felt her adrenaline rush wearing off as fatigue set in. She started to doze, but wakened when she realized Sefrah was shifting positions often. The weight of her unborn child must be irritating Sefrah's bladder. Either Sefrah didn't want to interrupt their drive for a bathroom break or this was something you didn't speak of in front of guests.

"Mr. Mansouri."

He turned. "Shir. In private you may call me Shir."

"Is it possible to find a restroom somewhere soon?"

She could almost see him smile in the darkness. He nodded, and spoke to Rayan in Pershi.

She felt Sefrah squeeze her hand in gratitude.

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They stopped at a small, roadside teahouse, whose exterior and the palm tree beside it were illuminated by tiny Christmas tree lights, just as the final call to prayer sounded. Elizabeth was reminded that her day had begun with just such a recorded call over a loudspeaker, and although the day's end was now official, it wasn't over for this small party. Weariness made her mouth dry and her shoulders ache.

Rayan pulled out a small rug and knelt beside the automobile. Sefrah, due to her advanced pregnancy, no doubt wasn't expected to kneel. She stood behind him, fingering wooden prayer beads and mouthing the responses. When it ended, she rushed to the outdoor restroom.

Elizabeth trailed behind her. She hated the Eastern toilets because you squatted over them. She wondered how Sefrah managed with her late pregnancy and the enveloping *hejab*. How did these women stand the *hejab*? Maybe one could get used to it with practice, but *she* was thankful she'd only have to wear it for a short time. The scarves and the cloak mashed her hair down, rendering it unmanageable.

As she walked past the teahouse with its twinkling lights, a man in rough clothing carrying a thin rolled rug disappeared around the back corner. It was a *déjà vu* experience—like the man she and Sefrah had seen that morning, he'd chosen a corner outside in which to say his prayers. Somehow Elizabeth had had the impression before arriving in this country that everyone said prayers in a mosque. *Interesting how perceptions change when you know different.*

If Shir had relieved himself or said prayers, she wasn't aware of it. When she returned to the car he was leaning against it, arms folded.

* * *

"How's your headache?"

"There, but better."

"How does your leg feel?"

"Hurts like hell. What did you expect?" he blurted out.

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His curtness was genuine because his leg was killing him, but he knew it was also an unconscious attempt to keep her at arms' length. Her form was just a shadow in the darkness, but the herbal scent of her shampoo enveloped him and did strange things to his belly. Her warmth radiated to him like an enveloping miasma, prompting an urge to take his time undressing her, to run his hands over her skin to see what she felt like, to explore every curve of back, buttocks, and hips to discover the promise her body held.

An image opened in his mind of a woman with her legs spread for him, while he looked straight on at soft folds peeking from a nest of cinnamon curls, the small rosebud seat of her pleasure, and the opening through which she'd bring him release. The thought of the heat his fingers would find inside her as he prepared her for his entry singed his fingers now.

Damn, his body was betraying him again. Thank Allah darkness hid the growing bulge in his trousers. Running a hand across his face, he sighed. He didn't even know if she was single.

They were in danger. She could have no idea of just how much danger they were all in, or of the cruelties they would suffer if caught. Despite his injuries, he was responsible for these people, and yet he was letting his mind dwell on sex, when he was the one who must be vigilant. Their lives depended on it. Disgust swept through him.

I should never have watched her undress. No wonder Islam forbids it.

She pulled him back to reality. "From the tone of your reply, I'd guess it does hurt. I need to check it. When can we manage that?"

He stepped away from the car and reached for his cane, moving away from her scent, her heat. "Sorry. I tend to be curt when I'm in pain. When it's light you can look at it. For now we need to be on our way again. Sleep if you can."

"Sefrah needs to stop every half-hour. Can Rayan arrange that?"

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Her concern for this woman she'd just met touched him. "I'll see that we do, but try to sleep through as many stops as possible. It's not too much farther to a safe house we'll use."

She retrieved the thermometer from her bag inside the car. "Let's take your temperature."

He stiffened. If she touched him, he'd have to fight off waves of rolling desire. He hated himself for this weakness, and for the carelessness, which had resulted in injuries that made his superiors send a physician. It would have been easier to get out of the country whole and on his own. "That'll have to wait."

"No. We'll do it now. It takes less than a minute." The firmness in her voice was unmistakable.

Her fingers, soft and warm in the cool night air, tugged at his ear to straighten the canal as she insert the cool probe.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on their escape route, instead of his cock.

"Just as I thought. Your temperature's risen. But it's not as high as in the past. I think you're on the road to throwing off that infection completely. One thing we need to do is see that you drink enough fluids. Here, take this Vicodin for the pain." She reached for a bottle of water and insisted he drink it all right then, in front of her.

When she thrust the bottle into his hand, her warm fingers touched him. His body warred with desire under that touch.

Remember, pal, she's your doctor, not your lover.

* * *

It was still dark when they arrived at the house. Elizabeth was wakened by Shir calling her name. The door next to her was open and cold air hit her neck. She shook Sefrah's shoulder and waited until she stirred.

"Don't wake up too much. We're going right back to sleep." Shir leaned on the open door.

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“Good. I’m tired. Jet lag.”

Shir unlocked the heavy wooden courtyard door, and the three of them stumbled inside. Rayan had driven away. Elizabeth assumed he was hiding the car. Inside, she watched Shir slide the door’s bolt into place and stand for a few moments staring out its peephole. Homes here seemed to be built around courtyards, with few windows in the individual rooms. He seemed satisfied they weren’t followed because he signaled they should come with him past the courtyard’s fountain and into the first room on their left.

Thick, oriental carpets covered the floor. Fat cushions had been tossed here and there around two sleeping pallets. “Sefrah and Rayan will sleep here,” he said.

The décor in the next room was the same. “This one is for you, Dr. Michaels.”

Elizabeth was in no mood to question anything. Pulling off just the *chador* and her shoes, she curled up under the covers on the nearest pallet and fell asleep, but not before noticing that Shir waited in the doorway until she did.

* * *

She slept through the first call to prayer, waking when Sefrah spoke her name.

Today Sefrah wore a loose scarf over her dark hair. She was dressed in a sapphire blue pant suit that, even in her pregnancy, made her look feminine and appealing. Elizabeth was amazed at what a bell-shaped *chador* could hide. It was as if the feathers of a raven disguised a tropical bird. Was it this way with all the women here or just the younger ones? Did they declare their individuality by dressing in bright colors and elegant materials beneath the black cloaks? She found the idea fascinating.

“Hurry, we must buy food,” Sefrah said.

Elizabeth threw water on her face and hair, changing into clean

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clothes because she'd slept in what she'd worn the night before. Donning the awkward *chador*, she joined Sefrah for the walk to the bazaar.

"Shouldn't the men be with us?" She spoke from behind her veil.

"No. The cloaks hide that we are strangers. They might be recognized. Ah, fine melons here."

Elizabeth watched Sefrah barter for yogurt, cantaloupe, dates, onions, tomatoes, and lamb. They returned to the house with their purchases, and, as they approached the courtyard door, Elizabeth sensed Shir's presence behind them. Turning her head a fraction, she confirmed he was there and realized that, despite his cane, he'd shadowed them to the bazaar and back to be sure they were safe.

Today an embroidered headband held back dark hair that almost reached his shoulders. His eyebrows were thick above his eyes, and he was letting the beard grow. He looked so delicious she wondered how any woman could resist him.

Knowing he was there created an unfamiliar feeling that invaded her independent soul. Her mother had died when she was nine, and her father had raised her alone. Although she knew her mother hadn't wanted to leave them, her death had left Elizabeth with a terrible fear of being abandoned. Frantic to be helpful to prevent her dad from leaving, too, she cooked, kept the house neat, and helped with the laundry while her dad supported them. She'd always known she was loved, but she'd also learned she had to take care of herself. What if her father died too? If he did, and she couldn't take care of herself, what would happen to her?

Her father had remarried and was still alive, but the fear of abandonment had haunted and shaped her life, even through medical school. This feeling of someone watching her back was new to her. Warmth spread through her.

Under Sefrah's supervision they sat down to a breakfast of yogurt,

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melon, and dates. There was an old *samovar* in the kitchen, and from a paper sack containing leaves she'd brought with her, Sefrah brewed tea, which they drank out of glasses and sipped through a sugar cube held in their teeth. As was the custom, they sat on the floor to eat.

Elizabeth stood and helped Sefrah clear up. All this sleeping and sitting on the ground had made her back ache. She must have rubbed it because, suddenly, strong hands cradled her waist while thumbs massaged her lower back.

"Hmm, that feels wonderful. It'll take some time to get used to all this floor business." She leaned into the massaging fingers.

"I haven't thanked you for fixing me up. I haven't been too nice about it, but I assure you I'm grateful."

His breath brushed her ear. He smelled of toothpaste and soap.

Sefrah moved across the doorway as she worked, and, as if he realized he'd done a forbidden thing in touching a woman, Shir withdrew his hands.

"Thanks." Elizabeth spoke without turning. The withdrawal of his touch almost undid her. Turning now, she faced him, but didn't look into his eyes because she wanted to so much and knew it would arouse all kinds of feelings she thought it best to hide. "I need to check your bandage. No protests, please. Let's get it over with." Dragging two cushions together in the room where Sefrah worked, she motioned to him to sit.

Retrieving her medical bag from the sleeping room, she knelt and took his temperature. His ear felt hot as she straightened the canal and inserted the probe, but it was natural warmth and not fever causing it. "Normal. Good. I doubt it'll rise again this evening."

She listened to his heart, placing the stethoscope over his shirt this time to avoid the temptation of feeling the hair on his chest. "Heart's great too."

Continuing to brace herself in order not to betray her feelings, she

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looked into his eyes, using her penlight to check his pupils' responses. The deep gray eye color told her that centuries ago Asian blood, with its genetics for dark brown eyes, had mingled with blue Aryan eyes. His eyes also caused her to breathe faster, and she counseled her heart to slow down.

Sighing, she thought it was almost criminal for a man to be this good looking, and for her attraction to him to be this strong. For all she knew, he wasn't even a nice person.

She tugged with unexpected suddenness at the bandage on his forehead, watching his jaw tighten as the tape pulled away.

"This looks fine. We'll leave it open to the air now." Next she removed his thigh dressing, sorry she hadn't shaved his leg when she'd put on the tape because this time he jumped as hairs tore away. Elizabeth inspected the wound and sniffed the stained gauze to detect any hint of the foul odor of infection. There was none. "How's the pain?"

"Still sore as hell, I'm sorry to say. Ripping that tape off didn't help any."

"Sorry about that. I wish I could kiss it and make it better..."

"Yeah, I wish you could kiss it too." He spoke in a low, throaty voice.

Surprise made her look into his eyes, and, for a moment, the world spun. Had he meant the sensuality in his voice, in his words? He held her gaze with his own, and he might as well have telegraphed that he had.

Careful, Michaels. Patients as virile as this man appears to be fall in love with their doctors because injury makes them vulnerable. You're just a mother figure. It's that old thing called transference. Keep your mind on what you're here for. Remember the mission.

CHAPTER 3

ITS HIDDEN HAND

“I’m afraid you’ll just have to be patient,” Elizabeth said. “It’s healing on schedule.”

“How long was I out?”

“Three or four days, I’d guess. The bruise on your head was yellow yesterday, and that happens in four days. Do you recall anything that happened to you?”

“Not much. What I do remember is classified.”

“You were tortured.” She felt him stiffen. “Cigarette burns on the sole of your foot.”

He nodded.

“After I finished bathing you, I checked your personal areas for bruising or crushing. They were clear. You aren’t having any difficulty urinating, are you?”

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He choked on a swallow of tea, and she saw a red glow spread across his face. Behind her she heard Sefrah go dead still in the kitchen.

“You...you *what*?”

“I examined you, Mr. Mansouri. I’m a physician, and you were injured. Of course I checked you. Everywhere. Now answer me. Are you having any difficulty urinating? If you are, that could indicate kidney damage or a fractured urethra, neither of which I’m qualified to treat.”

The silence in the kitchen was profound. Then, with unexpected suddenness, Sefrah began to put dishes away with much rattling and noise.

“I’m fine.” Shir spoke in a low voice, and she had to lean in to hear him.

“Sorry if I embarrassed you,” she said.

There was a long silence. Then he smiled a slow, lazy smile that created an ache in her belly. “You bathed me?”

“Yes.”

“All over?”

“Well, not there. Rayan did that after I examined you.”

“Too bad I wasn’t aware of your ablutions.” Again, the throaty voice seduced.

She felt the blood hit her face. It was her turn to blush.

He suppressed his mirth with a quiet chuckle.

* * *

The rest of the morning the two men sat cross-legged on the carpet in the room where she thought Shir must have slept, huddled over maps. They spoke in Pershi, and Elizabeth caught very little of the conversation. Once, when he must have heard her in the doorway, Shir looked up and shook his head. She moved away, understanding from what the CIA agents had told her that it was safer if she didn’t know their plans.

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Used to being busy, and restless when she wasn't, she straightened the other sleeping pallets, checked her medical supplies, and helped with lunch after midday prayers, threading onto wooden skewers the squares of lamb Sefrah had cut, alternating the meat with onion and tomato wedges.

Rayan came into the courtyard long enough to set a fire in the small fire pit, and, when the wood had burned to coals, Sefrah placed the skewers onto the spit. Elizabeth tended them while the pregnant woman set out the rest of the meal.

When the courtyard was filled with the scent of burning wood and roasting meat, Shir appeared and stood beside her.

"Hungry?" she asked, feeling that irresistible pull because he was near.

He rubbed his stomach. "Oh yes, and that smells wonderful. I think my appetite's returned."

She thought he reached to touch her shoulder, but pulled back, just as he had with the massage, a sure indication to her he'd spent considerable time somewhere where men and women were allowed to touch.

"Having an appetite's a positive sign you're recovering," she said as she slid the cooked kebabs onto a silver tray. Then she asked in a quiet voice, "I understand why Rayan's with us, but why Sefrah?"

Surprise crossed his face. "I forget you're new here. Families do everything together in this country. If they had children, they'd be with us too. We're less noticeable that way, and, since we aren't married or relatives, we could never travel with just the two of us. As it is, everyone assumes we're related in some way—cousins and wives, sisters and husbands, brothers and wives, or siblings. Something like that. But you aren't wearing a wedding ring, and we don't look alike enough to be brother and sister."

"I see." *Except I don't fit any of those categories and neither do*

SILK STEALTH

you. She lifted the tray and carried it into the room where they sat down to eat.

“The food’s delicious, Sefrah. Thank you.”

She was rewarded with a shy smile of appreciation. When they drank their tea, Elizabeth declined to do it this time through the sugar, thinking it was no wonder she’d seen the kind of dental problems she had in the children and parents who’d come to the clinic. The man who’d sold them food in the bazaar had two rotten front teeth, no doubt the result of a lifetime of tea drawn through sugar cubes.

Shir sat with his back against a cushion, his stretched leg stretched out, his other leg with its knee bent and his foot tucked under the injured thigh. He was dressed in baggy trousers like those she’d cut away. The temptation to look at his crotch was compelling. She studiously avoided doing so. For the first time she noticed he was attempting to dissolve his sugar in his tea. A difficult task considering spoons weren’t used and the “cube” was a hard piece of brown beet sugar chopped off a larger chunk.

He glanced up and caught her watching him. She smiled, and he gave a half smile that made a dimple show just to the left of his mouth. Her heartbeat increased, and she schooled it to quiet down. If he was trying to seduce her, he was succeeding. She’d have to be very careful around him.

“We must leave as soon as we’ve cleaned up,” Shir announced after lunch.

The men helped, and when the house was tidy and they’d repacked their bags, she watched Rayan and Shir pull up the hand-knotted, silk carpet she’d slept on and slide open a secret panel.

The gleam of chrome flashed in Shir’s hand as he pulled an automatic handgun from the cache and slid it into the back waist of his pants. Rayan did the same. Next the men drew rifles and slid them into soft cases.

SILK STEALTH

Elizabeth couldn't believe what she was seeing until Shir moved past her, his face grim.

When she climbed into the car, she knew one rifle was on the floor at Shir's feet. The other lay between Rayan's seat and the door. Both men had shifted their handguns to the front waistband.

They were out of the medium size towns now and into the countryside on the edge of the desert. Early afternoon sunlight bathed red, gold, and dun-colored rocks and foothills. Palm fronds waved in gentle winds, and the smell of blue ball flowers permeated the air.

Beside her, Sefrah seemed restless; there were fewer tea shops where they could stop to use the restroom. She rubbed her back several times and shifted as if to get comfortable. The car hummed along a road in poor repair, and cracks in its asphalt made the car jolt.

"Are you all right?" Elizabeth asked Sefrah when they hit a jarring pothole.

Sefrah's fists clenched. She nodded, but didn't relax her hands.

They drove on. Then, with unexpected suddenness, the car engine coughed, sputtered, and limped along as Rayan pumped the accelerator. The motor died. Shir swore as the automobile rolled to a stop.

Rayan turned the key over. The battery fired, but the motor didn't catch. The men got out to look under the hood, then underneath the car. They walked to the back and opened the trunk.

Shir swore again. It seemed they'd run out of gas, and the extra gas can was empty.

"I'll walk," Rayan offered.

Elizabeth could read embarrassment and frustration on Shir's face because he was helpless.

Rayan pulled the case off his rifle and laid it on the floor at Sefah's feet. He picked up the empty can and started back to the last gas station they'd passed. Shir shifted his gun to his back waistband. He started to

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crouch down with the women behind him, then grimaced and stood instead.

Elizabeth guessed he'd felt his sutures pulling.

"Sefrah, let's get out and move around," she suggested, noticing it was more difficult for Sefrah than it had been earlier. She was quite slow and grunted a little as she moved.

Rayan had gone about half a mile when they saw a car coming toward him pull up beside him and four men pile out. They weren't the best dressed men in the world, but they gestured as if they were friends and laughed as they pulled their gas can out and filled Rayan's.

"Cover yourselves and get back in the car," Shir ordered, his face serious. "Dr. Michaels, sit in front and pull my rifle out of its case and onto your lap. Leave the door ajar. You may need to hand it to me."

Elizabeth saw tears in Sefrah's eyes. The part of her face showing in the opening of the *chador* was white with fear. Inside the car, she cradled her pregnant belly with her hands. Elizabeth wanted to comfort her, to tell her not to worry because Shir and Rayan were well armed, but she didn't know what to say. She was afraid too. She sat in the passenger seat and pulled the rifle onto her lap. Not having any idea how to aim it, and not sure she could bring herself to kill anyone, she thought just holding it might be impressive. If she had it in her hands, she could pass it with ease to Shir if need be.

She watched as the passel of men followed Rayan back to where Shir stood. They waited until the gas had been emptied into Rayan's car and he'd started it. Shir paid them for the gasoline and added a tip.

Amidst smiles, bows, and Pershi talk, they piled back into their car and drove away waving.

Elizabeth put the rifle down and climbed out of the car, tension draining away. "What nice people. Good Samaritans."

"Nice people? They're black-hearted scum." Shir spat on the ground. "Trust me, if this had happened at night, they'd have robbed

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and killed us.”

Elizabeth shivered. Now she understood Sefrah’s fear.

They reached the next gas station without incident, and Shir bought a second gas can and filled them both. While Rayan and Sefrah were using the restroom, Elizabeth handed him another bottle of water as he stood in the shade of a tree.

“Drink all of it, please. Where are we going?” she asked.

“To the village where Rayan’s family lives. We’ll spend the night there.” With an easy twist, he removed the sealed top and began to drink.

Elizabeth watched as his lips closed around the opening and wondered what it would be liked to be kissed by a man with a mustache. She’d never had that experience, but suspected that, with this man, she’d like it very much. Too much for her own good.

Shaking away those thoughts, she pointed out the disintegrating earthen bricks of a structure not far away. “What’s that? I saw one like it a while back.”

“Camel caravans used to come this way. Those are the remains of the places where they stayed the night. They call it a *caravansary*. I suppose you’d call it a motel. You’ll see them every twenty miles as that’s the distance a pack camel can cover in a day.”

“I haven’t seen any camels.”

He laughed. “Oh, camels are still used, but I doubt we’ll see many here. Cars are a much better mode of transportation.”

They were approaching the next *caravansary* ruins when Sefrah cried out and stiffened beside her.

In the gap where her *chador* had fallen open, Elizabeth saw the woman’s belly tighten into a hard ball.

Of course. I should’ve guessed. The restlessness, her aching back, and this a first baby. She wouldn’t have recognized the signs.

“Shir, Sefrah’s in labor. How far are we from the village? Have

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Rayan ask her how long her back's been hurting and she's had these cramps. Also, has her water broken?"

Rayan almost drove off the road. Shir had to grab the steering wheel to straighten the car.

"Rayan says her back's been hurting since last night, and she's had the cramps all day."

There was a quick exchange between Sefrah and Rayan. Then Shir said, "She tells him they're coming fast now, and this was the strongest. And, yes, her water broke just after we started out this afternoon. It's another hour to the village."

Dismay clouded Elizabeth's mind. She didn't deliver babies! Pediatricians stood by in high risk deliveries when a baby was delivered by caesarian section or if one was in distress in the womb, but they didn't *deliver* them. "We need to stop so I can examine her to be sure she can make it to the village."

Pershi flew between the two men once more. Sefrah moaned again with a contraction.

"Really, I need to check her now!"

The car left the road, bumping over ruts and rocks until it stopped near the *caravansary* ruins. With Rayan and Elizabeth supporting her, they got Sefrah into the shelter of old walls after Shir had checked for lizards and snakes. Sefrah's *chador* served as a blanket, and Elizabeth used hers to cover her. Shir had brought the medical bag, and Elizabeth gloved.

"Gentlemen," she said.

The men stood there as if in shock, then Shir took his friend's arm and pulled him around the corner and out of sight.

She removed Sefrah's slacks and panties. Bringing Sefrah's knees up, she explained what she was going to do. As the next contraction subsided, she slid two gloved fingers into the laboring woman's birth canal and felt the open cervix, the little roundness pushing against it.

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Removing her fingers, she said, “Well, people, we aren’t going to make it to the village. Sefrah’s going to make Rayan a father right here and now.”

She could hear Shir translating as she took a precipitous delivery pack from her bag. It had been there, unused, since her obstetrics rotation as a resident, but she’d kept it as a disaster preparedness measure. In this setting it seemed appropriate to thank Allah she had it, and to ask that this be the uncomplicated delivery of a normal baby.

Her hands were shaking. She closed her eyes and took three slow, deep breaths from her abdomen. Then she went to work.

Slipping a sterile paper drape under Sefrah’s hips, she washed her folds and vaginal opening. The split sterile drape she placed over her abdomen and personal area covered everything, except the place through which that little body would enter the world.

Elizabeth thought of nothing now except what she needed to do to guide the baby out. Coaching Sefrah to breathe, pant, and, at last, to push and push again, she saw the baby’s head emerge, turning slowly with each new push. She cradled it in one hand. Then the first shoulder slipped out.

Realizing she’d been holding her breath, Elizabeth forced herself to breathe. They were home free.

It wasn’t long before she held the newborn in one arm, while she used the small bulb syringe with her other hand to clear its airway.

A sharp cry brought joy to her heart. “You have a daughter, Mrs. Firouz.”

Sefrah burst into tears of happiness.

Elizabeth laid the baby on Sefrah’s abdomen while she clamped the cord and tore open a package containing sterile scissors. “Shir, have Rayan come now.”

“It isn’t done, Dr. Michaels. Muslims believe...”

“Tell him to get here right now.”

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The firmness in her voice must have convinced them because a shaky Rayan came around and knelt next to Elizabeth. She handed him the scissors and pointed. “Cut the cord right here. Between these two ties.”

His hand shook, but he cut the cord. Then his face lit up as he saw his daughter, and Elizabeth knew he would always remember this moment and the part he’d played in his firstborn’s debut. He reached for his wife’s hand.

Elizabeth listened to the rapid little heartbeat, counted respirations, toes, and fingers. “She’s perfect.”

Wrapping the baby in a sterile blanket, she put her to Sefrah’s breast. The baby’s normal sucking reflex took over, and Elizabeth relaxed her aching shoulders as the baby’s actions stimulated the release of the afterbirth. She put it in a basin and covered it so Rayan wouldn’t see it. After tapping Sefrah on her knees, she slid down her *chador* to cover her patient as Sefrah lowered and closed her legs. Turning, she examined the afterbirth to be sure no bits had been left inside the womb. Satisfied it was whole, she massaged Sefrah’s lower abdomen until the womb tightened and she knew there was no danger of hemorrhage.

Relief cut her tension just as the scissors had cut the baby’s cord. Tears flowed, and happiness hummed within her.

Using solutions from the pack, she washed the baby’s face and eyes. That would have to do until they were in a warmer, cleaner environment.

Rayan sat beside his wife, and the glow on their faces reflected shared love and reverence for this amazing little being who had entered their lives. These were sacred moments, the highlight of a couple’s life, and Elizabeth stepped around the wall to give them privacy.

Shir stood guard, his assault rifle in his arms.

The sight of him watching their backs opened the floodgate of her

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tears again.

“Hey, doctor lady, it’s okay. You did good.” His voice was gruff, his thumb rough but comforting as he wiped her tears away.

“I don’t do obstetrics. I’m a pediatrician.”

Shock spread across his face as he took in her words, probably because he’d have expected his boss to send an internist or someone trained in trauma medicine to help him. Then he smiled. One arm went around her shoulders and he snuggled her to him. “In that case, you did more than good.”

She melted into his side, letting her head drop against him, taking in the scent of his skin, the dust on his clothes. His body was hard and firm, the body of a warrior. She could have stood in his embrace forever.

“Sorry for the weeps. It was the relief that everything turned out okay. It’s a woman thing.”

He brushed his lips against her hair. “Yeah, I know. We need to move out. Is Sefrah able?”

She nodded, feeling empty when he let her go.

The sun was setting as they settled Sefrah and baby down on the back seat. Elizabeth had to sit in front between Rayan and Shir. It was an old car and didn’t have bucket seats. Still, she was wedged between the gear shift and Shir. The full length of his unhurt leg touched her, and the heat from his body seared her.

Euphoria over the success of the delivery made her feel open and flowing, strangely sensual, and all woman. Given the mood she was in, she’d be happy to make a baby with the man seated next to her any old time.

CHAPTER 4

WITH TOTAL DISCRETION

They were expected, and when Rayan drove into the village, his family was there to greet them.

Shir watched their faces light up when his friend helped his wife out of the car, their newborn in her arms. With surprising suddenness, the street filled with women, and the high-pitched trilling sound they made with their tongues filled the air.

“Are we being attacked?” Elizabeth froze in the midst of climbing out of the car.

Shir just smiled at her. She was rumped in the worst possible way, and her voice was muffled behind her veil. “No, it’s the Middle Eastern woman’s cry of delight. They do this all over the country. You can drop your veil, by the way. This village isn’t as rigid as in some parts. Women cover just their hair here unless they enter a mosque.”

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“A mosque. You know, I haven’t been in one. I’d like to do that.”
“We’ll see that you do.”

She’d dropped her veil, and, for the first time, he studied her face and mouth, almost drooling over her full lips. Their natural color was as ruby as the pomegranate juice some women here used in secret for lipstick. Once she was free of the *chador* he’d be able to see the curve of her breasts and watch the sway of her hips as she moved. He wondered if she knew that women here, even the married ones, rouged their nipples. Or that they often wore nothing under their *manteaus*.

Rayan raised his hands and told the crowd that Elizabeth had delivered the baby and where, and the trilling began again. The women pulled Elizabeth into the center of a circle as they danced around her with their cries.

Shir saw her flush, and knew it embarrassed her to be the center of attention. When Rayan called out they had named their daughter Jasmina Elizabeth Firouz, he watched as her face broke into a smile and tears rolled down her cheeks. Laughing, she wiped her tears away, then crossed her arms over her chest, bowed to the couple and mouthed thank you in Pershi.

She always got it right, he thought. Pride in her rose in his chest. He wanted to pick her up and swing her around, to kiss those full lips and run his hands through her hair, while the women’s trills encircled them like a magical shield against the world.

He sighed. He was forgetting the mission again. Forgetting the dangers that lay ahead, and how strong they would need to be to reach the border. He needed to let her rest here, but then it was urgent for them to move on. They still had to cross the mountains before they reached the border and complete safety. Once again he cursed his slashed thigh.

They ate in the home of Rayan’s parents, and he studied Elizabeth as she sat on the floor across from him. She’d already examined little

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Jasmina, and again declared her perfect. She'd changed into a dress. It was soft and simple, its folds falling gracefully across her hips and thighs, the sleeves long and the neck high. Her scarf was tied in back, framing her face and showing the part in her hair in front. In the back he could see the tip of her braid.

She was a gracious, thoughtful guest, he thought, and seemed a soft woman, but he knew the steel encased in all that softness and the disarming smiles. It was one of the traits that drew him to her.

Leaning, he spoke to Rayan. "She hasn't had enough sleep since arriving in this country. I want her to rest as long as she needs to tonight. I must leave as soon as possible, but, of course, you and Sefrah can't continue with us. I wish you well with your new baby, but this complicates things for me."

Rayan nodded, his black hair gleaming under the lights. "Right. You can't travel alone with her. If you were older, and she was a foreign guest, yes, but you're too close in age."

"Can you get her back to the clinic?"

"They believe she was called back to the States for a family emergency, so we couldn't return her there without compromising the mission. And you're not well enough to travel alone. Do you have a passport for her?"

Shir nodded.

"We're all weary, my friend. Let me think on this. We'll talk again tomorrow."

Looking across the room, he saw her yawn, another sign she was tired and would welcome retiring for the night. He smiled at her.

Elizabeth was to sleep there. Shir was leaving with Rayan and Sefrah for the small house they used whenever they visited. He saw her eyes widen in panic as Nasrin, Rayan's mother, rose to lead her to her room.

He caught her gaze with his own, and smiled. "Tomorrow," he said.

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The panic disappeared, and she gave a little wave and turned away.

He fell asleep on his pallet thinking of her, of the feel of her hair against his lips and the round softness of her breast against his ribs, her hip against his when he'd hugged her. Those breasts would be more than a handful, he thought, as something stirred in his chest. And those thighs...how he'd love to part them and slide into her.

He wasn't just tired, he was exhausted. He needed rest as much as she did. He drifted into the comfort of sleep before he could dwell any more on her tempting body.

* * *

"We've told no one you're a doctor. That would lead my enemies right to us. They think of you more like a midwife. There'll be a celebration of Jasmina's birth tonight. Nasrin will take you to the bazaar to buy a gift for her, plus clothing for our journey. She'll insist on paying for them. You will turn her down. The shopkeeper will refuse to let you pay, but if you don't pay, you may be arrested as a shoplifter as soon as you leave the store."

They were having breakfast in Nasrin's home, and Shir had wangled a way to be near her so he could speak in private, even if only for a brief time. They were in different rooms, but seated side to side in the doorway and could see each other's faces.

Elizabeth couldn't control the shocked look she knew he saw on hers.

Shir was smiling, the light in his eyes dancing. "That's the way it is in this country, you see. Politeness and generosity are everything—even if it's a lie."

"I've never heard of such a thing! What if you hadn't warned me? I could've ended up in jail." Shivering at that thought, she tamped down the words to a whisper when they almost exploded from her.

"Well, I'm telling you now. You'll be fine. Nasrin will help you buy a gift. I assume my superiors gave you money?"

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She nodded.

“I must talk to you again. Just before midday, I want you to make your way to the stables behind the house. Be there before the call to prayer begins. Wear slacks and sturdy shoes. Don’t forget your headscarf.”

Again she nodded, a surge of pleasure trickling through her at the thought of being alone with him.

* * *

The trip to the crowded bazaar fascinated Elizabeth. The narrow streets were lined with men selling hot tea from *samovars* and jars of walnuts in water. The rugs for sale were made of wool rather than finely knotted silk. Everywhere there were signs covered with flowing, Arabic calligraphy. And the usual arrow pointing to Mecca.

The kaleidoscope of colors, the unfamiliar scents, the feel of old stone beneath her feet captivated her, and, for a while, she forgot why she was here, lost sight of the warnings the CIA recruiters had given of the danger she and Shir would be in.

Nasrin led her to a clothing shop housed in an old stone building, where the shopkeeper’s wife took Elizabeth’s measurements behind a heavy curtain that hung from a wire stretched across the back corner of the room. She and Nasrin chattered to each other, their tones rising and falling in obvious collaboration about Elizabeth’s clothes.

Watching the older woman bartering with the shopkeeper, Elizabeth was struck by how much Rayan resembled Nasrin. The dark eyes and clear skin, the unlined facial planes similar in male and female features. The thought of baby Jasmina crossed her mind, and she smiled. Would Rayan’s genes make a difference, or would Jasmina resemble her mother and her mother’s mother?

Nasrin followed her to the cashier. There the little drama played out just as Elizabeth had been told it would. Shir had advised her well. Using her most professional manner, and waving aside every protest,

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she paid.

She emerged with one outfit composed of layer after layer of white gauzy material in a long skirt, a top with flowing sleeves, a vest and headscarf of the same material. A second outfit was composed of loose trousers of coarse, woven linen, a blouse, an over-tunic, and, again, a vest. This latest outfit was in bright reds and blues.

Next Nasrin took her to a cobbler, scurrying ahead down a back alley. Elizabeth almost had to run to keep up.

Throughout the entire shopping expedition, the thing uppermost in her thoughts was that she would see Shir. Alone. Goosebumps crept along her arms. How did single women in this country tolerate never being alone with a man who wasn't a relative?

From the cobbler's shop she carried away a pair of leather riding boots and sturdy hiking shoes. Looking at her feet encased in the hiking shoes gave her pause. She wasn't in shape to do much walking. Thinking of Shir's lithe but strong body, she felt flabby.

Their final stop was to buy a gift for the baby. Nasrin purchased one, too, and Elizabeth, over the grandmother's protests, purchased an expensive blanket woven of sheer wool. Its soft folds wouldn't scratch and would protect Jasmina against chilly nights. She bought a rattle, and a pink dress that would fit her when she was older.

Nasrin pushed her, as if knowing of her midday meeting, and they were back in the house in time for Elizabeth to put on her new boots and riding clothes.

* * *

Stepping from sunlight into the shadowed light of the stable, she stopped just inside to let her eyes adjust. She heard the occasional step of a horse in its stall and the crunch of huge jaws munching hay. The smell of the hay was sweet, and the warmth of large bodies behind latched gates enveloped her. For a moment she remembered novels she'd read when she was younger—before she'd begun the grueling

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pre-med courses in college and then medical school and a residency that left no time for reading or play—and images of getting it on with Shir in the hayloft flooded her mind. His mouth hot and wet as they laved her breasts, his cock large and hard in full erection and like hot satin in her hand. The groans of his pleasure as she stroked it would issue from the deepest part of his throat. And when he parted her thighs and pushed inside her...

Lost in her reverie, it was a shock when her eyesight cleared and he emerged from another part of the stable leading two horses.

“What are you doing?” she cried. She could feel the heat of his body when he arrived to stand beside her. She stiffened so he wouldn’t sense the surge of emotion rolling through her at his nearness.

“Shhh, we have to talk. We’ll ride, and you need to keep your horse behind mine just until we’re out of sight of the village.”

The thought of further injury to him unnerved her. “Your leg isn’t ready for riding. You could tear the skin around the sutures, maybe even snap them.”

“We’re just going to walk the horses, and I’m going to throw my left leg over to mount. I’ll leave the right out of the stirrup so it can hang straight.”

“That’s crazy! You use your thighs in riding and to stay in the saddle!”

She felt the steel as he ordered in a low voice, “Get... up... on... that... horse.”

Letting him provide a hand-up, she mounted, knowing it wouldn’t take long for him to see he couldn’t ride. Not today, anyway.

He grimaced as he swung into the saddle, then he swore and dismounted.

Dismounting, too, Elizabeth didn’t speak, knowing better than to remind any strong man that she’d warned of a weakness he didn’t want to have.

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His one comment was, “Damn!”

Turning from her horse, she almost stepped into Shir. She heard his sharp intake of breath, and stood paralyzed because of his nearness. She could feel his breath warm against her forehead, imagined she sensed his heartbeat exploding through his chest to wrap around her and cause her heart to beat in sync with his. Elizabeth didn’t know whether his intake of breath had been because he’d been in this country long enough that being this near a woman shocked him, or because he felt the same intoxicating magic she did when their faces almost touched.

Her gaze rose to his lips beneath the mustache, wondering how they would feel if he kissed her, knowing how her own tingled at the thought of it. She should move away from him, she knew, but she couldn’t make herself do it.

She thought in those moments, when they stood alone as the only two people in the world, that he felt the wonder too, but then he broke the spell by stepping away.

Relief and disappointment mingled as he moved from her.

Without speaking, they led the horses back to their stalls.

As they fastened the last gate in place, he stared at her mouth. “Tonight at the party, go into the back garden when I signal. We’ll talk there.”

Desire trickled through her, leaving her giddy. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and she couldn’t speak. She managed to nod before leaving the stable without looking back.

She thought he watched her the entire length of her walk to the door. She believed he’d wait a long time before leaving himself, from a different door to protect them both from discovery.

Watching our backs.

She folded her arms and hugged herself.

* * *

The party was a complete surprise. Held in the home of Rayan’s

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parents, men and women mingled, and the women wore dresses, jeans, or slacks.

She'd worn a sheer, white headscarf. It was loose, and she'd no sooner stepped inside the door than she felt someone pull it from her head. Turning, she saw the gauzy material fluttering in Shir's hand.

"Not tonight," he said in a voice quiet enough that only she heard.

Then Sefrah called, beckoning her to see what the village women had done earlier in the day. She was seated on a velvet ottoman, extending her sandaled feet to show Elizabeth red-brown henna paste drawings of a sun adorning each foot.

"We call it joyous body art," a woman said in Elizabeth's ear. "Hello. I'm Ariana, one of Rayan's sisters. I live near the university in our capitol."

"You speak beautiful English. I'm pleased to meet you," Elizabeth replied, extending her hand.

"Thanks for the compliment. The henna paintings are believed to beautify and protect from evil. The plan is to do them prenatally. When done afterwards, they purge a woman from the pollution of childbirth. The sun's a symbol of blessing and fertility.

"When we do the feet, the woman can't do much walking or she'll ruin the paste. It's a way of keeping her quiet until she's recovered from the delivery. It's interesting that studies indicate a much lower rate of post-partum depression in countries who use henna in this manner. Would you like a Coke?"

"Fascinating. Yes, thanks." Elizabeth took the proffered glass and watched as Ariana filled it.

"Vodka?" Ariana offered.

"Vodka?" Elizabeth repeated this in surprise. The Koran, she knew, forbid the drinking of strong spirits.

"Oh, yes. There are Muslims, and then there are Muslims, you know," Ariana said with a smile as she tipped the colorless liquor into

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the Coke.

From across the room Elizabeth noticed Shir lift his glass ever so slightly to her and smile.

There was a DJ who played Western CDs, while people danced and laughed and chattered. At one point, Rayan's father warned them to quiet down before the neighbors reported them to the moral police, and the noise softened, but the merriment didn't end.

She was feeling quite warm, and just a little tipsy from the vodka, when she noticed the signal from Shir.

She welcomed the cool night air on her skin as she stepped outside. A couple seated on a bench hidden by a silk tree were kissing, and the sight shocked her. Inwardly, she laughed. Four days in an Islamic country and already she was attuned to the moral code.

Then she saw Shir's white shirt in the moonlight at the end of the garden, his figure tall and straight in navy blue slacks, and she walked toward him, as if to her destiny.

"Hi," she said, stopping before him and looking up into his shadowed face.

"Hello," he answered, his voice low and soft.

It almost undid her. If she'd expected him to take her hand or pull her into his arms like the couple on the bench, however, she was to be disappointed. She stood, her skin aching for the touch that didn't come, and a sudden awkwardness settled over her.

She blurted out the first thing that came into her mind. "Sefrah's been showing me her henna art."

"Yes," he said. "They'll henna your fingernails and toenails when we marry."

"When we *what*?"

"Marry. When we marry."

Stunned, she stepped back. "Who said anything about marriage? We barely know each other. Who came up with such an insane idea?"

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“Shh. Listen.” His tone was filled with calm logic. “Because of the baby, we can’t travel with Rayan and Sefrah any longer, and we can’t travel together as single people. I’m sure you can understand that. The solution is for us to marry.”

Her words came spilling out. “I don’t know who you are, I don’t know what you do, I don’t even know why they sent me to get you out of this country. What the hell is it you know or have done that you’re so important?”

“Shush, Dr. Michaels, please.” He laid a finger across her lips.

His finger was warm against them. Once she’d quieted she sensed his reluctance to remove it.

“Islam allows for temporary marriages. That’s all it will be. Rayan and I’ve discussed this...”

“You discussed it, but didn’t include me in the discussion? How insulting!” Seething again, she managed to keep her voice low, but couldn’t keep the bite out of it.

“Well, we’re discussing it now. I’d planned to talk to you on our ride, but you know how well that turned out.” Bitterness colored his words. “You can blame me because I’m injured and because my superiors sent you to get me out, but you can’t blame me for this country’s mores.”

Remembering his pain when he’d tried to mount the horse vented the steam right out of her. Counting to ten, she breathed in and out to calm herself. Silence surrounded them as he waited for her response. After a time she asked, “A temporary marriage?”

“Yes. Rayan and Sefrah have laid the basis for it. They’ve told family and friends that’s why we came here.”

Deflated now, her physician’s mind recognized the logic in the situation. There was no other way in a nation where the sexes couldn’t travel together.

He lifted her chin with his fingers. His gray eyes were dark in the

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shadows, but she knew they gazed into her own.

“Agreed?”

“Agreed, Mr. Mansouri.”

“Shir,” he said in the husky voice that always made something turn over deep in her belly.

“Shir,” she whispered, but she felt deflated.

* * *

The day before her marriage, the women assembled in Sefrah’s house, and every woman who even somewhat approached Elizabeth’s size brought her wedding dress. To Elizabeth’s surprise, the gowns were Western styles. Amidst giggles, oohs, aahs, rapid Pershi, and after many try-ons, the women settled on a white strapless gown with a beaded lace bodice and a flowing, silk shantung skirt. They pulled her hair off her neck and pinned it high on her head, then fastened a brilliant tiara on top. Its veil hung over her face and down her back almost to her waist. Nasrin, as the substitute mother for Shir, would lift it off her face in the appropriate part of the ceremony.

In a country where women are veiled, I’ll appear before men and women on the most important day of my life with my face exposed. What a strange contradiction.

When they’d dressed her, Elizabeth couldn’t believe the woman staring back at her from the mirror was Elizabeth Michaels, M.D. Touched by their communal generosity and kindness, she brushed away tears. “It’s beautiful,” she said, and felt guilty because her marriage would be a sham, just another CIA plot.

“A good man. Shir a good man,” Sefrah said as she patted her on the shoulder.

“Good woman,” Nasrin said in broken English, as she twisted some strands of Elizabeth’s hair into a finger curl in front of one ear.

Again, something stirred deep within her at the sound of Shir’s name. *Is he a good man? I think so, but I don’t know, do I? Maybe it’s*

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just lust and my clitoris talking.

She felt the blood hit her cheeks at such sexual thoughts in the presence of these dear women.

After removing her wedding finery, the women escorted her to the public baths, where she was thoroughly scrubbed with loofahs dipped in fragrant defoliants. She was shocked when approached by a woman with a straight razor who was to shave her legs, arms, and even her belly. The women erupted in titters at the sight of her bikini-waxed pubis. The razor never touched it.

They shampooed her hair until it gleamed. The scent of jasmine mingled with the steam in the spa until it filled the room.

In all her life she'd never been pampered. Instead, she was the one who'd spend the night at a critical patient's bedside, who'd manage her father's medical care, who'd brew strong coffee and buy sardines, known as brain food, for her fellow residents as they crammed for comprehensive exams. This marriage was so unreal that, for once, she gave herself over to the hands of others, letting their kindness wash over her like the warm waters of the bath.

They rubbed her dry with fluffy towels, and pronounced her ready for henna. They painted the nails of her fingers and toes with curlicues and tiny suns in the red-brown henna that mirrored the color of her hair. And as they painted, Ariana interpreted with nonchalance while they instructed her in wedding protocol and spoke with blunt explicitness about what she must expect when a man and a woman made love.

Technique was not beyond their descriptive skills.

In her bed that night, Elizabeth covered her head and laughed into her pillow at how she'd been embarrassed thinking of lust and her clit when the women had not shown the slightest embarrassment at preparing her for sex of all kinds and in many different positions. Their combined expertise in pleasing a man sexually sent her into another round of laughter.

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* * *

The next morning, before the hair stylist arrived, Nasrin brought a gift to her bedroom. Elizabeth opened the nested, pale blue tissue to find a strapless, white satin bra with matching boy-cut panties and a full length half-slip.

“Why, Nasrin, they’re beautiful. What a wonderful surprise. Thank you.” She ran her hand over the cool, slippery material.

“You birth Rayan’s Jasmina,” Nasrin replied, her eyes a little damp. Elizabeth’s throat tightened, and she could only nod.

She was wearing Nasrin’s gift when the other women arrived to dress her, then the stylist began on her hair. They were in the Firouz home, and she heard the guests arriving. Their laughter and chatter filtered through the courtyard, garden, and house, heightening her nervousness.

At last she was dressed. The women fussed one last time, clucking like mother hens as they straightened the folds of her gown and patted the wispy curls the stylist had created along the sides of her face and neck. Her hair was pinned in smooth swirls on top of her head, and her tiara and veil were anchored.

Sefrah brought the sheer veil forward over her face.

She was ready.

As she entered the courtyard, her heart jumped in her chest at the sight of Shir dressed in a snowy white shirt and snug fitting black slacks and formal jacket. She thought his eyes glinted when he first saw her, and the smile he gave her seemed for her alone.

His handsomeness took her breath away. A sudden shyness crept through her, and she looked down.

Mr. Firouz, Sr., led Shir and Rayan into one of the side rooms. Nasrin took Elizabeth’s hand and led her past the guests into a separate room in which a *mullah* waited, sitting behind a table. Sefrah and Ariana joined them, and the *mullah* asked her questions to determine

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her willingness to enter into the marriage. Ariana interpreted.

When she was asked if she agreed to this marriage, Elizabeth did as the women had instructed her—she didn't answer.

Nasrin, standing in as Shir's mother, slid a gold coin toward her, symbolizing the groom's willingness for the marriage. Twice more the *mullah* asked, Elizabeth refused, and again gold coins were produced. On the fourth request, she agreed and signed the contract along with the witnesses. The *mullah* picked the contract up and left the room.

Ariana explained that he was joining her father, Rayan, and Shir to obtain Shir's consent and the signatures.

When the *mullah* appeared at her door and motioned for her to come out, panic surged through Elizabeth. She had just married a man who didn't love her. Couldn't love her because he didn't know her any more than she knew him. Nasrin, sensing her panic, although not the reason for it, gave her a gentle nudge, and Elizabeth moved zombie-like to stand before the cleric. Shir joined her.

The women held a fuchsia-colored, silk kerchief above the heads of the bridal couple as the *mullah* repeated the question of their wish to marry. As they gave their consent, grains of crystallized sugar, formed when the sugars were rubbed together, fell on the scarf as a symbol of the sweetness of life.

Next she and Shir dipped their little fingers in a cup of honey and fed it to each other, again to doubly insure a sweet life together.

With hands as cold as ice, Shir slipped a heavy ring on her marriage finger, and the *mullah* introduced them as Mr. and Mrs. Shir Mansouri. The women broke into the strange tongue-trilling sound they had made when they'd heard of Jasmina's birth.

Joy surprised Elizabeth by sliding through her at the sound. Their happiness for her cradled her in love.

Nasrin stepped forward, lifted her veil and smoothed it back.

Shir leaned to kiss Elizabeth, his lips cool and without passion

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against hers, and she remembered his assurance that this was a temporary marriage. Dismay settled in her heart, dampening her happiness.

They sat down in chairs next to a mirror flanked by two candelabras, so light would always be reflected in their lives. In front of them, on a gold, embroidered cashmere scarf, were many traditional, symbolic foods in mounds—sugar cones, cardamom seeds, henna, herbs and spices, wild rice, salt, black tea, and even frankincense, believed to burn evil spirits. In the center was the Koran, open to the middle.

The air was scented with rosewater. Everyone was eating now, and Elizabeth opened small gifts the guests had brought. When she'd finished opening them, she fingered her wedding ring. For the first time she studied it. It was old, a large ruby encircled by diamonds set in a wide band of antique gold.

"It's beautiful," she gasped. "Was it in your family?"

"No," he admitted. "I selected it especially for you. I'm pleased you like it, Mrs. Mansouri. As for beautiful, you look ravishing today. I'm sure I'm the envy of all the men here today."

"Well, you couldn't guess how many women yesterday wanted to play with your cock tonight. And today you look good enough to fuel that fantasy."

Aghast at what she'd said, she covered her mouth with the back of one hand.

Shir stared at her, then he threw his head back and laughed.

She relaxed. At least he didn't hate her. She would return the ring, of course, once they had crossed the border and the marriage was over.

Despite the call to prayer and the brief respite some worshippers took to pray, the sneaking of vodka into Cokes and orange juice was prevalent that afternoon. There were also flutes of champagne that tickled her nose when Elizabeth drank it. By the time the celebration

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had ended and it was time to take her to the house she and Shir would share that night, she'd had more than enough to drink.

Shir had removed his jacket and carried it slung over one shoulder. He'd loosened the top buttons of his shirt. They walked to the house with the guests following. She stayed the appropriate few steps behind her husband, who'd refused to use his cane.

At the courtyard door, she kicked over the pot of water for purification as the women had instructed her, but when she tried to step on Shir's foot to indicate she'd rule the household, he moved away with surprising nimbleness.

Then he swooped her up in his arms and carried her into the courtyard to the tongue-trilling calls of the women and the approving shouts of the men.

CHAPTER 5

PERSONAL COURAGE, PHYSICAL AND INTELLECTUAL

Kicking the door shut behind them, he set her down. Leaning against the wall, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her with a hunger she hadn't expected after the coldness of his kiss in the ceremony.

She met him hot kiss for hot kiss.

His mouth was mellow with the taste of champagne, his lips soft and beseeching. Half drunk not just with liquor, but with desire as well, Elizabeth opened her mouth in invitation to his searching tongue.

His body was tight against hers, and she felt the growing swell of his penis. Oh, she'd been there once before, when it was soft and he was very much in need of her as a physician. Now she felt need of a different kind in him, the need of her as a woman, and passion flared inside her, making her dizzy with wanting.

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She rubbed her body against him and felt his arms tighten around her. Frantic for his touch, for the feel of him, she pulled his shirt up and lifted her shantung skirt and satin slip to let his zipper rub against her bare belly.

With a groan he slid one hand under the banded leg of her panties, caressing the smooth skin of her inner thigh, and then her outer groin. His tongue drove into her mouth, almost to her throat, and she sucked on it to signal she wanted him to explore other parts of her wanton body.

She could barely breathe through the sensations he created as he ran his hands over her skin. He tantalized her by avoiding the very place she wanted those hands and that calloused trigger finger. She was wet, her clit swollen, her walls quivering in preparation for his entrance. He brushed the back of his hand lightly across the cinnamon curls over her mons, and she felt it all through her folds. He was driving her crazy.

"You're dallying," she whispered against his lips.

"Yes," he whispered back as he pulled the tiara and veil from her head and the pins from her hair.

As her hair fell and spread around them, she reached for his belt. Slipping the buckle free, she unhooked the waistband of his trousers. His hands stopped exploring her thigh. He waited. Still and silent.

Pulling the zipper down slowly, ever so slowly, she smiled at the power she had over him. Just who was in control in this household now? She slipped the trousers down over his perfect bum, and then slid one hand into the slit in the opening of his boxers.

He moaned. "Don't start what we can't finish, Elizabeth." His breathing was rapid and shallow.

She delighted in it.

Pulling his cock out through the opening, she thumbed the tip and smeared the drops she found there over the head.

"What are you doing, Elizabeth?"

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“Making you slippery, Shir. Lubricating this huge cock I want inside me.”

Trembling, he tried to push her away, but it was too late. Through the haze of alcohol that had loosened the tight control she'd had over her feelings for him, she was determined to become Mrs. Mansouri in truth. At least for tonight. Temporary marriage or not.

“Elizabeth, my thigh, I can't...”

Not listening, she pulled her panty leg aside and lifted her leg. Grasping him, she guided him until he was at the entrance to her vagina.

“Elizabeth, love, I told you I can't...”

She pushed, and he penetrated her.

He groaned.

“Does that feel good, Shir?” she murmured as she let pleasure roll through her folds and tease her clit. She rocked and pushed again and again, feeling him full inside her, the head of his penis kissing the entrance to her womb. She pulled in and out, in and out to let the sensitive underside of his glans rub against the ridge of the opening to her passage. And in doing this the snap on his boxers massaged her hungry clitoris as well. “God, but you excite me, Shir.”

He grabbed her tight. “I can't hold back, Elizabeth, I've wanted you too long...”

Her own excitement was so high it was hard to speak. “Then why wait?”

With that she slid a hand up under her leg to his shorts and caressed his taut balls as she shoved herself hard against him again and again, reveling as their excitement rose together to a crescendo and he erupted inside her just as she peaked.

She heard herself cry out as waves of sexual sensation unlike any she'd ever experienced with any other man began in her clitoris and folds. Her vagina clenched and unclenched in spasms around his hard,

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welcome cock, drawing him closer and closer to her womb. The waves of her release spread over her and subsided by increments until she was weak and sated by love.

They stood in silence, locked together...

"Elizabeth."

"Hmm?"

"My thigh."

Pulling back, she let him slip out, feeling a dreadful sense of abandonment at the loss of him inside her. Adjusting her clothes, she said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened to me. Are you all right?"

He was zipping up his pants. "More than all right. I need to rest my leg, that's all. I should've used the cane today, but I thought that would spoil the effect. Here, let me lean on you."

With his arm around her shoulder, he limped to the main room and sank down on a couch covered in beige velvet.

"Come here," he said.

Kicking off her shoes, she knelt to remove his, massaging his feet as she did.

"Usually they henna the palms of a bride's hands. I'm glad they didn't do yours."

She looked up and felt her face grow warm. It was obvious that a bride with henna paste on her palms wouldn't have been able to handle Shir as she'd just done. The expectation would have been that the man would initiate the love-making and the woman do all the receiving.

Seeing her expression, he laughed. "Don't worry. I liked it. Very much. Here, lie beside me." He patted the couch,

She stretched out with her back to him, smoothing the borrowed gown to keep it from wrinkling. She fell asleep with his arm about her shoulder, her bottom against his groin.

At dusk she felt him shift and get up. He disappeared into the sleeping room and returned with his cane. Then he opened the

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courtyard door and Rayan slipped in carrying his rifle. They spoke in low tones, then Rayan went out again. Shir relocked the door.

She sat up, her hair a tangled mass about her shoulders. "Is anything wrong?"

Shir leaned in the doorway, arms akimbo. "No, Rayan's watching our backs. We've taken turns."

"You mean..."

He nodded. "I kept watch when you were at his parents' home. Tonight he takes my place."

"I didn't know." Her heart sang a little.

"Well, after all, you're my ticket out of here." His face was expressionless.

Just his ticket out of this country? She hid the hurt she felt, and to soothe that feeling she reminded herself that, for a time at least, she was Mrs. Shir Mansouri. That could never be taken away from her.

He said, "I'm hungry. There should be cold food for us somewhere."

"Would you help me out of this dress first?"

He was clumsy with the myriad of tiny buttons down the back. She giggled—he was all man. When the last button was free, she pulled the bodice down to her waist and started for the sleeping room.

He caught her arm and turned her toward him.

She brought her arms up to cover her bra and breasts.

"No." He took her hands in his and pulled them to her sides, then leaned to press his lips against her neck.

She stood, eyes closed, as her skin started to tingle all over her body.

Releasing her hands, he cradled her face with his and kissed her, his tongue finding entrance to her willing mouth. His fingers threaded through her hair and then slid down her shoulders and behind her to release the satin bra. It fell to the floor between them, and she gasped as

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his hands cupped her breasts.

Gathering them together, he leaned to kiss the plush mounds.

"They rouged you," he whispered. "I thought they would."

All her senses were alive now, tongue and skin a tingle, the womanly places in her body aching and damp. It took her breath away.

"Did they tell you your breasts would taste like strawberries and cream?" His tongue brushed her skin.

"No." Her reply was but a wisp of a breath.

He released her breasts, and his mouth found one rouged areola. Even untouched, desire had caused her nipples to form hard nubbins of pleasure, but now, as his tongue played with one of them, she thought it would explode.

She felt her dress slide over her hips and settle in a rustle to the floor. Next the satin half slip disappeared and she stood in just her panties.

She stiffened and tried to draw away.

"What's wrong?"

"My hips and thighs..."

"You have nothing to hide from me, Elizabeth. You saw me naked. I've seen you bare-assed too. You have no idea how much I've wanted to bury myself in those thighs and hips." And he told of watching her undress.

Before she could protest, he removed her panties and caressed her buttocks, running his hands down the thighs she thought a bit too large and then up to the soft skin of her belly.

Elizabeth thought she would faint from wanting him again as his caresses progressed down to her pubic hair. She spread her legs, inviting him to explore the rest of her, and felt his fingers slip through the curls to her clitoris and her labia. She sighed with pleasure. Then he penetrated her vagina, his fingers stretching and rubbing against the tight walls, his massaging thumb bringing her clit to engorgement.

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She was clinging to him now, kissing him, moaning against his lips as she felt the sweet sensations begin between her legs and slide down her inner thighs. Then they swelled to her belly and flooded her entire body as she arched her back and cried out his name.

As her climax subsided, he pulled her even tighter against him, and kissed one ear as he said with a satisfied chuckle, “And now just who’s in charge in this house?”

So content was she that she just smiled, marveling at how he’d known her thoughts that first time.

For several minutes they rocked together in his arms, and when she complained of the chill, he released her to put on a robe.

When she joined him in the kitchen, he was exploring the refrigerator in true, hungry-man fashion. “Here’s yogurt and cold lamb slices.”

She lifted the lid of a dish near them. “And I’ve found slices of watermelon, cantaloupe, and kiwis.” She also located fresh-churned butter and thick slices of bread.

“A feast,” he said, a proprietary hand resting on her hip as he looked over her shoulder.

His nearness still brought a swirl of happiness, and when he brushed her cheek with his lips, she sighed and leaned into him.

Carrying their food to the tablecloth on the floor, they sat cross-legged and ate in silence, sometimes pausing to just gaze into each other’s eyes and enjoy each other’s company.

They drank goat milk, and laughed together when Shir wiped a white mustache of it from Elizabeth’s upper lip. The moment brought the American TV ad “Got milk?” to mind and, without warning, homesickness niggled at her.

Shir looked at her, then asked where she’d been born and why she’d chosen medicine, why she practiced in San Francisco. She talked between bites, happy to tell him about herself.

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Then she said, "Were you born here? Your English is excellent, and I'd guess your Pershi is too."

He froze, and his face closed as if a shutter had been pulled down.

"I...I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have asked."

He leaned to kiss her. "When we're safe I'll tell you anything you want to know about Shir Mansouri. But for now you mustn't ask. Agreed?"

She nodded, but something had changed in that moment, and she wasn't sure what it was.

* * *

He joined her in the dressing room. She was seated on a chair in front of a mirror banked by burning candles. She'd removed her wedding makeup, and her cleansed skin glowed in the candlelight. Her nightgown was yellow silk, and at the sight of her rouged breasts through the delicate fabric his penis began to swell.

She'd checked his wound after dinner and said he could leave it open to the air. It was less painful today. She'd assured him it was healing well, but the sutures had begun to itch. It was unbearable, but she'd refused to take them out.

"If you don't remove them, I may," he'd told her in frustration.

"If they come out too soon I might have to stitch you again. You don't want that, do you? I have some Benadryl cream I can rub on them, but it won't help a lot."

"Why don't you kiss it and make it well?" he'd asked, struggling to let go of his irritation.

Her laughter had been bright as she'd applied the cream.

Now, she'd just begun to brush her hair. Taking the brush from her, he worked on the tangles, enjoying the feel of the gleaming strands over his hand as he used the other to wield the brush. "I love your hair. Please don't ever cut it," he said.

Her gaze caught his in the mirror, then she looked down.

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There again was the unexpected shyness in this confident and capable woman that aroused him even more.

When the tangles were gone and her hair hung in gleaming strands, he lifted it to his face. "Hmm, you smell like jasmine."

"The shampoo," she said.

"I know." He spread her hair across her back and around to cover her shoulders. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

Silence. Then she turned a clever little smile on him. "Oh, it's just your cock talking, Mr. Mansouri. I think maybe you'd like to stick it in me one more time tonight."

He laughed. "Oh, you've got that just about right." He lifted her hair away from one shoulder and leaned to kiss it, letting the kiss grow into a hard suck to mark her lovely skin as his, and then nipped. His mouth was wet against her skin as he said, "I'd lift you up and carry you away again if it weren't for this damn leg of mine. It was tough to make it over the threshold with you today."

"Then let me accommodate you." She rose and took his hand to lead him to their pallet.

They lay on their sides, locked in each other's arms for a long time, content just to be together, until the hunger in his belly to be immersed in her again flared up. He kissed her forehead, her eyes, her upturned nose, then her mouth as he dipped his forefingers into her ears. He smiled at the sudden intake of her breath that brought. As his mouth progressed to her neck and shoulders, he slid the thin straps of her gown down and nuzzled her full breasts. He was lost in the silken feel of her hair, the scent of jasmine, the taste of strawberries and cream, the heat her body radiated.

More than anything, he wanted to be a lover such as she'd never had before, to satisfy her so she would never want to be with another man.

She gasped as he suckled her breasts, and she ran her hands down

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his shoulders to the small of his back. Her touch aroused every nerve ending in his skin, and his penis rose sharply, large, damp and ready.

He pulled her gown up as he suckled, and slid his hand down over the curve of her waist and the satin skin of her hip and thigh, delighting in the sigh she gave as he moved to her navel. Encircling her there, pushing his finger into its dip, he slipped down to her mons and massaged with the heel of his hand.

He could feel the excitement build in her. It fanned his own. "Open to me, Elizabeth."

She brought her knee up, exposing lush folds and the slit waiting just for him.

He slid his fingers inside her as she reached for his hard cock, and he thought he would die as she stroked up and down his shaft, then twisted and pulled with extreme and sexy gentleness.

"You'd better let me inside or it'll be too late," he told her.

She laughed deep in her throat.

"Elizabeth, I can't do much with this sore thigh."

"I know, love. You didn't think I'd let you get me this far without knowing what I needed to do, did you? Lie flat."

She straddled him on her knees, guiding him inside the hot box of her womanhood, and his pleasure was so intense he reached for her breasts and pulled at her nipples. Up and down, up and down she moved on his hard shaft, moaning. And then she lay on him, avoiding his sore thigh with care, moving from side to side as her mons rubbed against him and her springy hairs created ecstasy against his skin. And then circling, circling until he couldn't hold off any more.

Wounded thigh or not, he anchored her buttocks against him and pushed harder and harder into her, matching her rhythm, wanting more than anything to bring her to a shattering climax. When he sensed her excitement had reached a feverish peak and her orgasm would hit at any minute, he let himself go, exploding into her at the very moment he

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felt her shudder and her tremors begin.

The spasms inside her pulled again and again at his penis, drawing him ever deeper and ever deeper, until he seemed at one with her.

As their climaxes subsided, he wrapped his arms around her as if to never let her go.

She drifted to sleep, and he lay in wonder at everything he felt for this woman.

Transference? That's a bunch of crap.

One worry furrowed his brow. When she learned what he'd done, how he'd deceived her, how would she feel about him then? Fear that he might lose her made him hold her even tighter.

* * *

She woke before dawn. Shir had covered her with a blanket in the night. He was not in bed this morning. Elizabeth rose and reached for her robe. Moving into the room with the couch, she saw him seated there, dressed and cleaning his guns.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not exactly, but we need to leave while it's still dark. Rayan thinks my enemies may know I'm here. I've packed our belongings into backpacks. Since your medical supplies are already in a small one, I didn't have to disturb them."

He paused, then looked up and smiled. "Good morning, beautiful. How are you?"

A glow filled her. "Hi. I'm wonderful. And you?" She returned his smile. *Maybe this relationship isn't just about the sex.*

"Sorry for the abrupt end to our honeymoon. Rayan's arranged a car for us. We'll be going into more traditional villages, so keep your *chador* out just in case. I'd say wear a headscarf and something Nasrin helped you buy. Veil if you see that's what the village women do."

They ate a hurried breakfast and were in the bedroom while she dressed, when he asked, "Do you have something to prick your finger

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with?”

“I carry diabetic testing supplies. Why?”

“Prick your finger and smear blood on the bed sheet.”

“What?”

His face was grim as he turned to her. “In this country they kill women who aren’t virgins when they marry. In fact, it’s their brothers and uncles who kill them. When the women arrive to clean, they’ll spread the word you were a virgin.”

Shocked, she said, “I can’t imagine anything so barbaric! These are wonderful people!”

His voice softened, but his face was still serious. He cradled her cheek with one hand. “Trust me in this. There are fanatics in every country. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you.”

Now his face was filled with pain, so she pricked her finger, not once but twice, and spread it where their bodies would have met in intercourse. That was crazy in itself, she thought with a smile; they hadn’t been anywhere near a bed that first time. Nor the second. But, as she stained the linen, she wondered if it had mattered to Shir that she hadn’t come to him as a virgin. Then, reminding herself this marriage was temporary—and a sham—she tossed the thought aside.

She dressed in the red and blue outfit from the bazaar, then put on the hiking shoes to break them in.

They slipped out of the courtyard in the cold darkness and, hugging walls and moving without making a sound, made their way to the car they were to use.

Rayan and Sefrah waited there for them. Sefrah handed them packages of food and bottles of juice and water. She’d also brought Jasmina, and Elizabeth leaned to kiss the top of the sleeping infant’s downy head. “Be well, precious Jasmina Elizabeth. Grow big.”

Shir once more wore native clothes, this time with a low, round hat resembling a turban. His beard was filling in, and to her he was as

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handsome as when he'd worn the headband.

As they drove away, a wave of unease disturbed Elizabeth's happiness. "How could anyone know you're here? Were we followed?"

He groaned. "I paid for your ring with a credit card using an alias I didn't think they'd know about. Possibly that tipped them off."

"David Fontana?"

"How did you know?"

"You had that passport when Rayan found you."

He drove fast, although she saw him wince in pain. As they sped through the dawn call to prayer, she decided he must not be Muslim for he didn't stop to pray. As the sun colored the foothills of the mountains toward which they were headed pink and gold, she looked at the fields around them. Everywhere there were stacks of branches about four feet high covered with dark green leaves. Beyond these fields were trees covered with the same leaves. Is that where the branches had been cut, she wondered?

As if he'd anticipated her question, Shir said, "Those are henna trees in the distance. The top branches have been harvested, and they're stacked awaiting pick up. They'll be sold to processors. This country's one of the largest producers of henna in the world."

Several times he pulled off to hide the car and watch to see if anyone followed. Elizabeth watched out the back as they drove to see if she saw anything suspicious. Soon her neck ached from craning. He reached to rub it for her, and the feel of his hand massaging her tight muscles almost undid her.

The stops made it slow going. He wouldn't let them go into a village to eat their lunch. Instead, he drove past it, and killed the motor. Getting out, he attached brushes that hung down from the back bumper behind each rear wheel. Then took a trail off-road and braked the car near a stream. As they got out, she noticed he'd parked behind a mound of large, tumbled stones, leaving the car invisible from the trail. The

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brush had erased any marks left by the wheels.

They shouldered their packs and removed their shoes, then he rolled up his pant legs, she hiked up her skirts, and they waded about half a mile upstream to a nearby cave.

“If they use dogs, we’ll lose their scent this way.” It was spoken as if they were out for a small town stroll.

She’d once tended a teen mauled by a pit bull. The thought of dogs terrified her.

CHAPTER 6

INTELLIGENCE THAT MATTERS

When they'd stowed everything in the cave, he said, "I'm going to drive the car away from here. Rayan's friend knows where to retrieve it. I want you to wait in the cave for me. With my leg, it'll take me three-quarters of an hour."

To kill time, she spread the cloth provided by Sefrah and unpacked enough food for lunch. Shir returned with his rifle, dropping it on the cloth while he tried to sit without hurting his thigh. As he leaned, his shirt slipped up in back, and Elizabeth caught the gleam of his handgun.

She sighed. "I have to know something about the danger we're in. What do I look for? What do I do if they capture us? In San Francisco they told me to say I was a hostage and demand to speak to the American Embassy, but I've married you. I can't claim to be a hostage

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now, can I?"

"They told you to contact the American Embassy?"

She nodded.

"Elizabeth, I don't why they told you that. There is no American Embassy in this country. And, yes, you could still claim to be a hostage. Can you fire a weapon?"

"An old boyfriend took me out to shoot bottles with a twenty-two once, but otherwise, no. All I know is which end to point at the target." She drank from her water bottle.

"I'll show you how to use a knife."

Choking, she cried, "I can't kill anyone! I'm a doctor!"

"If it's your life...or mine?"

Dismay must have registered on her face because he took her hand. "Elizabeth, we're talking survival here. I stole vital information from this country, and there are powers who don't want me to share it with the United States' government. There are other things in my head that matter. They'd torture me to get it, and they'd torture you in front of me to make me tell. They'd kill me once they had it. If that happened, you'd be better off dead."

"I could always mimic Stockholm Syndrome." Reading the puzzlement on his face, she explained. "That's where a hostage falls in love with the captor. It begins out of fear for their lives, then it becomes an irrational need to protect the captor. They never rat on the captor." She put up a good front, but deep inside she wasn't sure the men hunting him would let her go.

He scoffed. "And if they tortured me in front of you? Could you still cling to that?"

She covered her face with her hands as an unbearable pain slammed into her chest. "No." The admission came out as a whisper.

"Then I'll teach you how to kill with a knife. There's little time to teach you to shoot, and it would use up ammunition. Now, let's finish

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eating.” And just like that the conversation about killing ended. “I’m starved! And when do I get these damn stitches out? I need more of that itching cream too.”

“Day after tomorrow I’ll remove them. You’ll still itch until you heal, I’m afraid, but you’re moving better now and I think the risk of opening the wounds will be minimal once they’ve been in a week.”

“Thank heavens.”

After they’d eaten, she packed everything, then looked with longing at the flowing water. “Could we wash there?”

“It’s pretty cold coming down off the mountain, so I don’t think you’d like it very much. I know it’s too chilly for me.”

She settled for washing her hands and face.

Afterwards, Shir pulled a dagger from his pack and demonstrated how to cripple someone so they couldn’t run after you, and how to kill with a drive right up under the sternum, through the diaphragm, and into the heart. He left to reconnoiter, and while he was gone, she practiced the moves he’d taught her, feeling like Mohammed Ali “dancing like a butterfly” with her footwork.

She worked with diligence, but her face was wet with tears as she contemplated hurting anyone that severely.

“Enough, Elizabeth. Don’t exhaust yourself. Come, we have to walk through the cave.”

He strapped a sheath on her leg, and she slipped the dagger in it. He helped her into her pack, put his own on and picked up his cane.

* * *

It was mid-afternoon before they reached the other end of the cave. They’d moved to another elevation while inside, and the air was cool when they stepped out into the sunlight. Standing until their eyes adjusted to the light, Shir then removed their packs.

“Stay here while I check things out.”

She watched as he moved, cane in hand, rifle slung across his back,

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to the trees. Even with the limp, he moved with the studied grace of a stalking lion. He knew this territory, perhaps had crossed the border this way before.

He disappeared, and now the only sounds were the occasional squawk of a bird and a rustle of leaves as some tiny creature moved through them.

“All clear,” Shir said from behind her.

Turning, she cried, “You scared me! I didn’t hear you.”

“That’s the point, love.” He leaned toward her, taking her face in his hands, covering her mouth with his, running his tongue along the edge of her lips until she opened to him.

She drank in the sweetness of the kiss.

When they drew apart, he looked into her eyes and said, “Good morning, Mrs. Mansouri.”

“Hi.” She pressed a finger to his moist lips.

“Sorry we didn’t have more time on this first day of our honeymoon.”

She nodded and slipped once again into her backpack as he held it for her. “Where to now?”

“We have to get over the mountains to the border. I’d planned to rent a car in this next village, but if someone’s trailing us that would be too obvious. We’ll stay in the trees to walk there and see what we think.” He paused. “Damn, but I wish we didn’t have to play this by ear.”

They ambled through the woods for an hour, over fallen branches and around tree stumps, avoiding any wildlife that might be there. When Elizabeth begged a rest, Shir was quick to agree.

They sat down near the stream, listening to it ripple and flow. On occasion a small, spotted fish flipped up to the surface and dappled sunlight reflected off its scales before it swam on.

She sat with her back against a small tree, and Shir lay with his

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head in her lap, his sore thigh stretched out.

“What made you choose this line of work?” she asked.

“Boredom, I think. I was unattached and restless, wanting a challenge, wanting the prestige of being with the agency.”

“Did you expect it to be dangerous?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so, but there’s a war in the next country, and that ups the stakes. I was trapped in an unusual situation.”

When she opened her mouth to ask him something else, he reached up and touched her lips. “That’s enough for now, okay?”

She nodded. They sat in silence for a long time, comfortable with each other, finding words unnecessary.

She was gazing up at the blue sky through the lace of trees overhead when she felt a hand slip under her skirt. “Shir, not here.”

“Why not?” he asked, his mouth warm against her bared knee.

“Someone might see.”

“So, let them, new bride.”

Her tongue was beginning to buzz as his hand moved up the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. She didn’t want him to stop. After all, this was the first day of their honeymoon and it had been an entrancing first night.

He slipped her dress up to her waist and slid his head down to her belly. She closed her eyes as his mouth assaulted her, not protesting when she felt him slide her panties down and off one leg. When his hands touched her ankles and pushed gently, she bent her knees.

“Spread yourself for me.”

When she obliged, she heard him say through a haze of desire, “If only you knew how much I’ve wanted to look at you there ever since I saw you undress that night in the hotel, look full on at all the secrets your folds hide from me. Hold onto the tree, Elizabeth, just like you would to a headboard.”

Sliding her hands around the small trunk, she inhaled when his

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mouth touched her.

“Does that feel good?”

“You know it does.” Her heart was racing now.

He blew across her mons, his breath as warm as his mouth. Her nerve endings sprang to life as she remembered the excitement of bedding with him.

“And this?” His tongue flicked over and over her aching clitoris, slid to her slit and probed.

She lifted her hips, wanting to get closer to the pleasuring mouth, wanting him to press hard. When he pulled away an inch instead, she moaned, “Don’t tease me, Shir.”

“Tease you? I think I’m going to *please* you very much. Still care if someone sees us?”

“No.” She was gasping now. “Do it. Please me. Just do it.” She let go of the tree, pulled his cap off and ran her fingers through his hair, digging in with her heels to lift herself to him, pressing her body to him, until his mouth and chin were hard against her. She gyrated in rhythm with his lapping mouth until she felt her climax begin to build. Her breath came in gasps as she worked to gain the heights, worked to reach the pinnacle and shatter into a million pieces because she loved this man and it made him happy to be the object of her sexual release.

“Don’t stop, Shir, don’t stop,” she cried. “It’s going to happen...now!”

And it did. That exquisite, tumultuous sensation rocketed through her body and made her forever his.

She floated down from ecstasy. “Come here,” she said through a voice still hoarse from desire.

She felt him tremble with his need of her as she loosened his trousers and freed his hot, swollen cock. He knelt over her as she guided him inside while the muscles of her vaginal walls still quivered, still pulled and caressed him until he pushed hard in long strokes until

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his penis began to gush and he found his release.

It was his aching thigh that separated his body fully from hers.

They lay together for a time while the stream gurgled and the birds squawked, then they adjusted their clothing and sat up.

“Wow,” Shir said.

“Double wow,” she said.

“Got strength enough to walk again?”

She laughed. “Oh, I think I do.”

* * *

It wasn't uncommon for travelers to stay the night in a farmhouse. Shir arranged for lodging for them in the hayloft in one outside the village. Remembering her thoughts about getting it on with him in a hayloft, Elizabeth giggled when he told her, but she knew their bodies had indulged in enough sex for a while. And relationships, after all, were about more than the physical she reminded herself firmly.

She heard Shir ask the direction of Mecca, and they showed him the arrow painted on the outside of the barn. He bought hot food for them from the farmer's wife, which they ate outside seated on the cloth Sefrah had provided.

He pulled two small rugs from his backpack. “For prayer,” he whispered. “You kneel behind me, and I'll say the words. You can just mouth something. They're too far away to know the difference.”

When they'd climbed to the loft after the final prayer, Elizabeth realized Shir was as exhausted as she was. Knowing he'd stand guard, she insisted on sharing the watch, making it clear she'd wake him at the first hint of trouble. She slept first, and the fact he wakened her at two in the morning and then fell asleep as soon as he hit the hay confirmed his fatigue.

He slept through the dawn call to prayer.

Since Elizabeth had noticed the farmer's wife was dressed in white, she chose the many-layered, gauzy white outfit from the bazaar.

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They had a cold breakfast of rice, dates, and the standard yogurt. Then she watched in fascination as Shir grayed his beard. Next he created age lines around his eyes, until she barely recognized him.

“Have you ever worn contact lenses?” Shir asked.

“No, why?”

“Those beautiful eyes of yours are a dead giveaway. I asked Rayan for some brown lenses. There’s no correction in them, just color. Let’s see if you can get them in. I wish this was a town where the women veiled, but it isn’t. They wear loose *rusfaris* unless they go into the mosque.”

At last Elizabeth got the lenses in, and Shir expressed relief. “It won’t be so easy to see you’re a stranger, but I wish I’d thought to bring something to darken your hair. Remove your wedding ring and wear this plain band. You might be accused of stealing something as expensive as that ring.”

Elizabeth pinned the ring to her bra, feeling a strange reluctance to remove it from her finger. But that was foolish, she told herself. When this temporary marriage ended, she would return it to him. They were already into the lower level of the mountain range they’d cross, and she didn’t think she’d be wearing it much longer anyway. No reason not to get used to being without it now.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

They entered the town and headed to the small bazaar, where Shir bought warm coats for both of them. They were in an alley off the main street when the mid-morning prayer call sounded. They knelt on their rugs, and after, as Elizabeth rose again, she saw a man furtively fold his rug and slip around the corner.

The hair on her arms stood on end and goose bumps popped up. “Shir, I’ve seen that man before.” Amazement she could sound so calm spilled through her.

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“What man?” he asked in a quiet voice as he folded his rug.

“The one who knelt about thirty feet from us, just beyond the seller with the tea *samovar*.”

“Where have you seen him before?”

“Not far from the clinic when Sefrah first brought me back from seeing you. Then again that first morning we stopped at the teahouse. He’s following us. I’m sure of it. The first time I saw him I thought he was spying on me, but I decided I was being paranoid.”

“This is serious, Elizabeth. Let’s get out of here while I think. Keep your eyes down.”

They kept moving.

“If he’s following us, why hasn’t he attacked us?”

“He probably lost us when we went off the road for Jasmina’s birthing,” Shir said. He nodded toward a group of women chanting and moving along together. “See those women? This is a dervish town.”

“Whirling dervishes?”

“You’re thinking of the assassins. No, these are Muslims who go into a trance and speak in strange languages. Remember the Tower of Babel? They feel the experience brings them closer to Allah. Much like charismatic Christians feel about God. That’s where those women are going. I want you to hide out in them.”

“I don’t know anything about trances and speaking in tongues!”

“Just watch and mimic what they’re doing. You’ll be safer in the middle of the group. Believe me, they’ll never know you’re a stranger. I’ll go with the men. I’ll arrange transportation for us and, when it’s safe, I’ll come for you.” He gave a low whistle. “When you hear that, just ease back out of the group and I’ll find you. Hurry.”

Frightened, Elizabeth scurried after the women, whose behavior was already bizarre. Shir had gotten it right when he said they’d never know she was a stranger. Her white clothing fit right in, and they were in such a religious fervor no one noticed when she joined them.

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The women were headed for what she later learned was the closed and locked tomb of some famous, ancient clergyman. It was a domed building about twenty feet high, and since it was built on a hillside, a cement patio had been constructed in front. The women climbed the steps to the patio, then danced, chanted, and babbled. Bending forward and back, forward and back, they moved in a semi-circle. One young woman of about fourteen had lost her headscarf, and her long, dark hair flew forward over her head when she bent down and back again when she rocked up. Her eyes were glazed, and the language coming out of her mouth was unlike anything Elizabeth had ever heard. She reminded Elizabeth of someone mentally ill, and it was very disturbing.

There appeared to be a leader, and when an older woman went to the locked door and began to bang her head on it over and over, the leader moved to her and cradled her in her arms. She stroked and soothed her until the head banging stopped.

When the teenager's rocking grew out of control, she did the same with her, yet the leader appeared to be in a trance as well.

For warmth, a fire had been laid in a raised brazier, and Elizabeth watched in horror as a woman put her hand in the fire. Concerned for her, Elizabeth inched closer, only to discover the woman had no burns. When the woman stuck her hand in the fire again, she saw that not even the hair on the woman's arm had singed. If she hadn't been there, Elizabeth wouldn't have believed it.

She continued to move with the group, bending and babbling, taking little dance steps, watching with analytic eyes the behaviors exhibited by the women. She would have bet the single pretender there was Dr. Elizabeth Michaels, M.D. Every other woman there was in a trance. It was strange, but she felt safe hidden among them.

At times she searched the street below and the hillside behind the tomb for the man with the prayer rug, but he didn't appear. However, she was sure he existed.

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Tired because she didn't have the unbridled energy the trances created, she was grateful to hear the low whistle. The women were calming down. Some knelt and wept as they came out of their hypnotic state. Others were leaving, and Elizabeth went down the steps with them then slipped out of the group to follow Shir.

"Did you see him?"

"No," she said. "Did you?"

He shook his head. "We have to leave. I should've rented horses from the farmer."

Here we go again. He knows he can't ride horseback.

He led her out of town to a stable, and she hid in the shadows while he made arrangements.

"Come. You'll need to change clothes. Since he's seen you in white, he may miss us if we change. We can use one of the empty horse stalls."

Of course they didn't change together, although it would've comforted her to see his body again the way it had been when they'd made love. She stepped out dressed in the red and blue riding clothes and her new boots. She'd tied a blue *rusfari* in back, sleek against her head.

Exiting the stables, she stopped dead still. Shir had changed clothes, and he'd colored his beard solid white. He was loading his backpack onto a camel, moving with the slow pace of an older man.

"Shir," she protested at the sight of the camel.

"It's not the same as riding a horse."

Yes, it'll be worse.

"They're gentle, but they do spit, so stand well back," he warned.

For his sake, she was relieved to discover it was easier to mount than a horse. The animal knelt, and a short stool brought her high enough to sort of slide into the saddle. Hanging on when the camel stood was another matter.

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They were to ride with a group of men, and there was a sudden onset of moaning and bawling, much like the grunting of a weightlifter, as the camels stood with their loads.

“You’ve been on one of these before?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“Thank goodness. I may need your help.”

Shir laughed, then frowned. “You have your dagger?”

“Yes. I see you haven’t bothered to hide the rifle.”

He directed her attention to the other men, who all wore rifles and bandoliers slung across their chests. Shir was just one of the group.

Unlike being in the midst of the dervishes, riding behind the men made her feel vulnerable, even with Shir just yards ahead. She discovered that, while most horses step one foot at a time, camels move both legs on one side of their bodies at the same time, so she was thrown into a rocking motion that might have caused seasickness had she been prone to it.

Just before they moved out of sight of the road, she looked back and saw a lone car speeding off into the distance.

“Shir!” She pointed to the car.

He shook his head. “The only way you can reach the village where we’re going is on foot, camel, or horseback.”

She wasn’t reassured. She couldn’t shake the feeling they weren’t safe. People who’d hunted him this long and this far weren’t going to give up.

CHAPTER 7

WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGHEST AND THE DANGERS GREATEST, WE ARE THERE

After they'd traveled half an hour, everyone dismounted for midday prayers. She and Shir knelt in their little charade.

Afterwards, as they sat sharing dates and nuts for lunch, she lowered her voice. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

He stopped eating. He looked in her eyes and said nothing. She sensed his anger, but didn't know if it was because he was disappointed she thought he might have or because she shouldn't have asked. Or because he'd killed someone. She didn't think CIA agents were supposed to kill.

She didn't repeat the question. He hadn't understood she'd asked because she was afraid she might have to use her dagger. She needed to know what sort of agony people dedicated to life went through if they had to destroy another's life.

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It took the camels another hour at trotting pace to reach the village. Elizabeth's body felt like a martini—shaken, not stirred—by the time they arrived. Once on the ground, she had to wait for her sea legs to subside.

Shir said, "It's Friday, and they pray in the mosque today. Put on your white *chador* and veil yourself if you'd like to observe. I have a contact here who'll arrange new transportation for us. If you're in the mosque it'll be as safe as being among the dervishes."

A little frisson of fear trickled through her as her instincts rattled a warning. "We shouldn't separate. We should stay together." They moved down an alley devoid of people or windows on the buildings. She could tell she hadn't convinced him. She turned to face him. "If they take me, promise you won't come for me."

The pain in his face touched her heart.

"Please, Shir, promise? I know nothing, except what they already know. You're the one who's important. You have to get across that border even if I don't. I'll pretend Stockholm Syndrome. I know all the symptoms. I'd play it to the hilt."

He kissed her. A forbidden kiss, warm against her lips, but also one that said she was being foolish, that she needed to trust his judgment. He looked deep into her eyes for a long moment. Then he left.

Heart in her throat, she watched him disappear around the corner, then she moved with other white *chador* clad women to the mosque for prayer.

* * *

This mosque was smaller, but much like others she'd seen. She knew the Koran forbade the use of images, thus the facades of minarets and mosques were covered in tiles set in geometric designs. These particular blue and white tiles were old. Some were missing. The courtyard in front of the building was divided into female and male sections by white sheets hung from wires. A low hum emanated from

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both sides as people visited with one another.

There were children splashing the fountain water with their hands, and women she assumed to be their mothers or grandmothers were seated nearby, visiting with each other. Friday prayers seemed to be a very social event. Maybe the highlight of the village people's week.

Elizabeth couldn't imagine such a simple life.

She walked, with a group of women, into the mosque itself and was disappointed to find its walls plain, the floors barren. There was a beautiful stained glass window up high at the front, and a chandelier hung from the lofty ceiling, but those were the only ornamentations. She'd left her shoes at the door, and now the sound of bare or slipped feet brushing ancient stones was added to the chatter as people talked to one another. To her left was an arched corridor, and, as women spread prayer rugs in anticipation of the call, she found herself inched back until she was out of the domed room and at the corridor's distant end.

The call to prayer brought a sudden, visible change as speech stopped, and Elizabeth could hear the swish of *chadors* as the women knelt, faces to the floor.

She took her time going down, taking in the sea of kneeling, white worshippers rug-to-rug on the cool floor, listening to the chant of hundreds of voices rising.

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest. I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship but Allah.

It created a mystical quality she couldn't have described and would never forget.

The prayers ended, and now chatter rose and garments rustled once more. She had just finished folding her rug and slipping on her shoes when an arm reached from one of the arches and grabbed her around the waist, while a hand stuffed a dirty rag in her mouth. She fought until he seized her hands, then her struggles were futile because her feet no longer touched the ground.

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Her *chador* and *rusfari* came off her head, and she felt her hair exposed, a dead give-away to her identity.

Stockholm Syndrome, her mind clamored as she fought to override her fear. *Remember Stockholm Syndrome.*

He was a large man with a paunch, and he smelled like greasy lamb and mint jelly.

She had no idea where he was taking her, except now they were on a deserted street behind the mosque. No random woman was abducted off a street here, much less from a mosque after prayers. He took her because he knew who she was, knew she was with Shir.

Go limp, she remembered from a self defense class. He grunted as she became dead weight. Bending her right knee, she kicked backwards hard.

He cried out in pain and loosened his grip on her as he bent over his injured knee.

She kicked it again. Swearing, he releasing his grip. Breaking free, she yanked the rag out of her mouth. Shouting, "I hope I broke your damn kneecap," she ran.

Looking back to see if the man was following, she saw Shir slam him over the back of the head with his handgun. The man fell like a rock. He'd never know who or what had hit him.

"This way," Shir signaled.

She joined him, still running. Soon they'd left that street behind and reached rocky terrain. There they mounted horses he'd bought, and kicked the animals into a run on a narrow trail leading into the mountains.

Shir rode as if he were part of the horse. Elizabeth jolted along until she thought her bones would separate. The horses were covered with sweat, barrels heaving when Shir pulled up. Dismounting, they led them off the track and into a stand of trees beside a stream.

Shir pulled her into his arms as her body betrayed her with

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uncontrollable shivering. She burst into tears. He rocked her, crooning in Pershi against her hair, words she didn't understand. She just knew Shir was there.

"He..." Her teeth began to chatter and she couldn't finish.

"Shhh, shhh."

By degrees the shivering slowed, then stopped. Her tears ceased.

Shir took her headscarf and wiped her face.

"My eyes hurt...the lenses."

He helped her remove them.

* * *

As he dried her tears, anger at his stupidity at leaving her welled up inside him. Woman's intuition had told her they should stay together. He'd turned a deaf ear to her. After all, he was CIA Special Agent Mansouri—Top Gun in his class, ex-Navy SEAL. Shir Mansouri didn't make mistakes.

But his I-don't-make-mistakes attitude had almost lost her to him. His mouth went dry at the thought. First using that credit card because he wanted an expensive ring for her. Now this.

What he wouldn't tell her was that he'd found his contact dead. Tortured and left strung upside down from a tree. A man who knew nothing except he should assist Shir if needed. A man who'd provided a horse for him a couple of times and with whom he'd shared an occasional vodka and Coke. He hadn't even known Shir was coming.

These were fanatics who sought him—evil men.

When he couldn't find Elizabeth at the mosque, he'd been beside himself. If she hadn't screamed, he might never have found her. He should have killed the man who abducted her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it in front of her. That may have been another mistake. But then, finding the abductor dead would have told his pursuers he was here anyway.

She began to talk, and he turned his attention back to her.

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“He grabbed me from the mosque. They don’t do things like that here. He knew who I was.”

He felt her stiffen with rising panic.

“We have to get out of here. They’ll know we came this way. They’ll guess we’re on horseback. We have to go!”

Taking her face between his hands, he calmed her. “It’s okay. The horses need to rest. We’ll stay away from the trail and use the GPS. Didn’t you tell me you had an emergency number we could call? I’d say this is an emergency.”

Determining their position, he dialed the emergency number and reported in.

She moved away to give him privacy.

Returning to her, he said, “If you’re feeling better, we need to walk the horses and rub them down.”

He watched her remove the *chador* and stow it, with her headscarf, in the backpack. The easy grace with which she moved made him ache to make love to her right then and there. To erase all memory of the frightening encounter. But this wasn’t the time or the place.

And when it was the right time and the right place, when she knew what he’d done, learned of his deceit, he might never see her again.

He sighed as he gave her a towel to wipe down her horse.

His leg was hurting again. He went through his pack and swallowed two Vicodin pills with a swig from his water bottle. He had to ride, even if it damaged his leg. They could always fix him up once he was back in the States.

Since their food supply was running out, he rigged a line and caught a couple of trout. He located berries and found a cave where it was safe to start a fire. She cleaned and filleted the fish with a physician’s expertise, and cooked them. They ate with their fingers.

“You’ve done this sort of thing before,” she commented.

He nodded. Bracing himself for more questions, he relaxed when

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she said nothing else.

“We’ll leave soon. I want to go as far as we can before dark. Can’t risk injury to the animals. Horses can see well at night, but these trails are not easy.”

When he started to reconnoiter without her, she refused to be left behind. With a smile, he extended his hand. For the first time, he was conscious of how small hers was in his. It had seemed larger than life when it had done such magical things to his aching cock.

He discovered an old trail he hadn’t seen before. He wondered why it had been abandoned, but decided to start out on it. The GPS told him it was parallel to the one they’d been on.

Despite moonlight, he pulled them up at midnight. They’d need to start out again before daybreak, and their mounts needed a break as much as they did.

She insisted they take turns with the watch, and, after her experience, he had no doubt she’d stay awake, tired or not. He let her sleep first, listening to her soft breathing, imagining the feel of her skin under his hands, her cries when she climaxed. He missed her soft, warm body next to his.

If he told her how much his leg hurt, there was no telling what her doctor’s mind would order him to do. He didn’t intend to tell her.

She slept without moving, but wakened as soon as he said her name. A short kiss, then he slept.

* * *

First light was just breaking through the trees when Shir returned from washing his face in the stream. “Brrr, it’s cold this morning.”

Elizabeth handed him his jacket. Her hands were buried in her pockets. She didn’t have gloves, but refused to take his when he offered them.

“What do we have that we can eat cold? Can’t risk a fire,” he said.

“If you can find some berries again, I’ll dig out the last of the nuts

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and dates.”

The meal, with little fat and protein, didn’t satisfy their hunger.

It was warmer riding in the sun, but the trail was often steep and they’d have to get off the horses.

“Now I know why they made a new trail. It’s faster.”

“The men who’re after us will reach the next village before we do,” Elizabeth said, unable to hide her alarm.

“We’ll deal with that if we have to. Right now let’s just think about getting there. I’d bypass it, but we need more food, and you need gloves and a woolen scarf. It’s going to get colder the higher we go.”

It seemed forever before they saw the village stretched out beyond them in the clear, thin air.

Leaving the horses hidden in the trees, they made their way into town and the crowded bazaar. Elizabeth bought a string bag which they stuffed with food. Shir bought gloves and a woolen scarf for her. He purchased horse blankets and, while the seller was rolling them tightly and tying them with rope, Shir inquired about visitors to the town. They were the first to arrive that week, the merchant told them.

Elizabeth thought her nerves would crack as she watched for the two men she knew had followed them. Even news that no other strangers had come into town didn’t relieve her anxiety.

Their purchases made, they passed the public baths on their way back to the horses. Elizabeth looked at them with longing.

Shir said, “How many days has it been since we bathed?”

“Our wedding day?”

“That seems like a long time ago, doesn’t it, Mrs. Mansouri?”

“It was over too soon,” she said, her gaze settling on his face. “Happy honeymoon, Mr. Mansouri.”

His smile was boyish. “Some honeymoon. All it lacks is for us to get shot at.”

“Knock on wood. Do you think we could risk a bath?”

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Shir shook his head.

It was when they reached the horses that she noticed fresh blood on his pant leg.

“Your leg!” Dismay colored her voice. “I knew you weren’t ready for horseback. I was going to remove the stitches soon, and now I can’t.”

He shrugged. “It’s not that bad. It’ll wait until we cross the border.”

She got the message that the subject was closed. As he tied the blankets on the backs of the saddles and she fixed breakfast, she asked if they dared take the main trail.

“I don’t know. If those men came along, we’d be pretty vulnerable.”

“You said it was much faster. I think we need to get over that border as soon as we can. You need to be safe, and a surgeon needs to check your leg.”

He came to stand behind her, lifting her hair to kiss her neck. She shivered with pleasure. “That does feel good, Shir, but I don’t think...”

He slid his arms around her waist and hugged her to him, her bottom pressed against his groin. “I agree, my love. It’s unfortunate. But I can think about it, can’t I?”

She turned so he could kiss and hug her properly, but when she stepped back, he let her go. “Once we’ve crossed the border...” she said.

He broke into an impish smile. “Then watch out, Mrs. Mansouri.”

“And you watch out too, Mr. Mansouri.” Her heart raced. If he’d touched her then she’d have pulled him down with her, but he didn’t. Instead, they sat for breakfast.

Afterwards she redressed his leg, noticing how the sutures had popped at the top and the skin had separated. It was still oozing blood. She pulled it together with butterfly bandages, then wrapped his thigh with a stretchy wrap.

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"I think I may have done that fucking you in the woods." At the dismay coloring her face again over the thought she might have caused the sutures to give way, he leaned to kiss her cheek. "I'm teasing. It happened the first day on the horse. After the camel ride."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wouldn't have made any difference. We had to get away."

She sighed. "True, but I'd have dressed it like this anyway. Better done sooner than later. By the way, when was your last tetanus shot?"

"All my shots are up to date, Dr. Michaels, but thanks for asking."

They stuck to the old trail, but it became more and more difficult to traverse. She took a nap when they rested the horses mid-afternoon, knowing otherwise she'd never have the stamina to do her part of the night watch. Shir went to bed while it was still light.

After sunset, Elizabeth sat alone under a moonlit sky dotted with stars. Night fragrances filled the air, and she pulled her jacket close about her and folded her arms with their gloved hands around herself. At length she sat down beside Shir, leaning against her saddle and stretching her legs and letting them touch his. His warmth came through the blanket to mingle with her own.

When her watch chimed midnight, she wakened him, and slipped down under the covers in the warmth he'd created. The blankets still carried his scent. She should have been happy, but all she could think of was how every step to the border carried her closer to the dissolution of her sham marriage and the loss of Shir.

Abandonment. She was going to have to deal with it again.

* * *

It was midday when they rounded a bend and found the trail blocked by a huge rockslide. To their left was mountain wall, to the right the gentle stream they'd followed became a waterfall over a steep drop into a canyon.

They dismounted. Shir was in the lead since he was an experienced

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horseman. “Damn, there’s no way around this. We’ll have to get back to the main trail.”

Using the GPS, they made their way carefully across hills and rocks until they reached the main trail. It was deserted, but Elizabeth still felt a vague sense of unease. “I know I thought I wanted to do this, but now I feel like a sitting duck. I don’t like it.”

“We don’t have much choice. Even if we got around that slide, there might be more. I’m sure it’s why they stopped using that trail. We lost a lot of time crossing from there to here.”

At least on this trail they could ride faster. The horses didn’t have to pick their way over rough spots.

“Isn’t there a road somewhere?”

“Not up to these villages. In a car on the road it wouldn’t be hard to spot us, and that’s why I chose this way. In a car I could also be caught at the border crossing. Now, though, the trees are getting sparse. The nice little stream that fed them is gone, so this trail’s our only choice.”

At the next village, Shir decided to board the horses for the night and rent a place to sleep.

“A pallet instead of the ground,” she said. “A place to wash our face and hands. Food without ants.”

“Yes, and we’ll no doubt be the only visitors.”

The house he rented was tiny, and the courtyard fountain was broken, but the sheets were clean and so was the house.

“Those nights under the stars had a certain appeal, but it’s wonderful to be in a real house again.” Elizabeth clapped her hands in happiness.

“We still have to split the watch,” he said, his face filled with regret.

They wouldn’t be sleeping together. A little ache began in her heart.

She took the early watch again, seated by the locked courtyard door and peering out the peephole every half hour, patrolling the rooms and

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listening for unusual sounds. When it was Shir's turn to take over, he moved outside with his guns.

She didn't sleep well at all. Restless, she tossed and turned. Being in this house made her feel exposed in a way she hadn't in the woods by the stream.

Just before dawn, while she fixed their breakfast, Shir went for the horses. She left the courtyard door open since he'd be bringing them inside to be packed. When she heard footsteps, she hurried to help him.

And faced Dr. Jerod Windham as he stepped across the threshold.

CHAPTER 8

NATION BEFORE AGNECY, AGENCY BEFORE UNIT, AND ALL BEFORE SELF

She froze.

He was dressed in native clothing, but she recognized him instantly, especially the smooth voice and cold manner.

Smiling, he closed the door behind him. “Well, well, well...Dr. Michaels. We thought you’d been called back to America. When we learned you hadn’t, we began to worry about you. But you’re safe now. We’ve found you.”

For a moment she couldn’t breathe. *Shir! Where’s Shir? Do they have him?* Fear almost robbed her of her senses. She stared at Windham, knowing if Shir returned he’d be trapped and they’d torture him. Torture *her* in front of him until they got what they wanted. Then they’d kill them both.

She put her right hand over her mouth and backed away, hiding her

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wedding band behind her back because if they knew she'd married him they'd want to torture her in front of him for sure. "Go away! I don't want you here!" The fear on her face was real, the words right out of Stockholm Syndrome.

"I told you, my dear, you're safe. I've come to take you back."

For a moment she hesitated. Maybe he *had* worried about her, maybe he wasn't Shir's enemy at all. Then she looked into eyes as hard as obsidian and recognized evil.

"I don't want you here, don't you understand? You must go before he comes back! Please, go. Go, go, go, go..." A little dervish activity now, and gestures of pushing him away, voice raised, praying Shir would hear her and escape. He wasn't far from the border now. He could make it.

"Where is he, my dear? We need to speak to him."

Rolling her eyes, she dropped her voice to a whisper. "No, no, no. I don't want you to speak to him. I can't go with you. I must stay with him. He needs me. He'll be displeased if he finds another man here." Then she looked as glassy-eyed as possible.

"You aren't my relative. I need to cover myself. I can't be with a strange man alone. You aren't my relative." She fled to the bedroom and dragged her *chador* out of her backpack and pulled it on. She removed the wedding band and hid it under the sleeping pallet. She felt for her knife, relief rushing through her at the feel of it in its sheath around her leg.

With a suddenness that surprised her, she knew she could use it to save her life. To save Shir's life if need be.

Holding the corner of the *chador* over her nose and exposing just her eyes, she paused in the bedroom doorway. "You must go! He will be so angry if he finds you here. I wasn't veiled when you came! He'll call the moral police!"

He stepped toward her. She stared into his eyes as she moaned and

SILK STEALTH

shivered. "Don't tell him I wasn't veiled! Don't tell him I wasn't veiled! Oh, I just know he'll call the moral police."

"Come, my dear. I'm here to rescue you."

"Rescue?" She made her eyes wide. "No! I don't need to be rescued! Go away! I want you to go away!"

When she'd exhausted herself, and Shir had not returned, she sank to the floor and wept as she banged her head on the floor much as she'd seen the dervish woman do at the tomb. He must reach safety. That was all that mattered.

Her voice was hoarse. Her lips were cracked. "Please go away. I don't want you here. I must stay with him. He needs me..." She curled into a fetal ball.

The man who'd attempted to abduct her arrived. "Their rental horses are still here. No one's seen him. He'll come back. He'll come back for her."

The prayer rug man came in. They searched the rooms, but found nothing important. Shir's weapons, the GPS unit and phone were gone.

Windham laughed. "For his hostage? I don't think so. She's pretty much useless to him and to us now. She won't know anything, and even under pressure she wouldn't tell us. Hostages become attached to their captors just as you see here. She'd rather die than betray him. And, without him, we can't torture her to get him to tell us what we want to know."

Elizabeth heard it through the pretended haze of exhaustion. She'd played her role to the hilt. Now it was up to Shir.

* * *

Shir had hidden his anxieties about being in town from her. Last night his training had told him something was wrong. Thinking only that they must leave, he'd started for the stables that morning before realizing he'd left her alone. He was returning for her when he saw a man step through the open door and close it behind him.

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Slipping into deep shadow, Shir heard her tell the man to leave, that she didn't want him there. Then he heard her rantings as she played the Stockholm role and knew she was warning him.

Something tore inside his chest. He had to leave without her. They weren't going to hurt the idiot she pretended she'd become, but if he tried to rescue her, they'd catch him and torture her in front of him until he told them what he knew about their plans to develop nuclear warheads, and the names of all the other special agents and every mole in the country.

We stand by one another and behind one another. What we do matters.

That was the pledge the agents took. SEALs were trained to watch each other's backs. When six went in on a mission, the second man watched the back of the first, then leapfrogged to the first position. The third man, who'd watched the back of the second, then leapfrogged to that of the second, and on down the line. Special agents watched each other's backs too. They were a unit, a band of brothers. His role in standing behind them was to die before disclosing their names to a malignant, foreign power bent on destroying the American way of life.

She was a smart woman. She'd understood the risks and had told him to go if they caught her. He thought she could handle herself. He had no choice but to leave her.

Now.

He left money for the horse he was taking, then stampeded every other horse in the stable to stop them from following him. He rode hard, without stopping, talking into his phone to get help for her.

He was met by another agent after he crossed the border, flown to Germany where a doctor examined his leg, and then to the United States where a minor surgery corrected the damage he'd done. He took medical leave, and waited with a full heart for her to return.

* * *

SILK STEALTH

Unable to follow Shir because there weren't any mounts, Windham and the other men remained the rest of the day in case he returned. When he did not, they left.

When she heard the door close behind them, Elizabeth wept with relief. When Shir didn't come to her in the night, she knew he was safe. If they'd caught him, they'd have brought him back to torture her in front of him. They hadn't found him and he hadn't come for her. That meant he'd made it across the border.

Elizabeth washed her face, combed her hair, and packed their things.

She wasn't prepared for the knock on her door and an arrest by three of the moral police for having been alone with men who weren't her relatives. They ordered her to cover herself. A crowd had gathered in front, watching as the police put her on a horse whose reins were held by a female officer. They cantered out of sight. Then turned toward the border.

Elizabeth almost fainted with relief.

After crossing into the next country, she was met by a suave man who identified himself as a representative of the United States Department of State.

"Thank you, Dr. Michaels, for your role in this matter. We can never acknowledge your contribution publicly, but the president has asked me to personally deliver his thanks on behalf of a grateful nation."

CHAPTER 9

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

In San Francisco, she resumed her pediatric practice as if nothing had happened. Each morning she pinned her wedding ring inside her brassiere, and wondered about Shir Mansouri. He seemed like a dream she'd once had. Now she was back in reality. She needed to let it go.

And then one Friday evening he was there on her front stoop when she came home from work. He was dressed in casual slacks and a cream-colored pullover, his hair falling loose in waves about his face, the beard and mustache gone.

Her heart turned over and began to pump about two-hundred strokes a minute.

"Hi," he said, his smile searing her soul.

She was tongue tied. At last she said, "You made it."

"I did. Got my leg fixed up too. Good as new except for a few scars."

SILK STEALTH

You made it too.”

“Uh-huh, after a scare from the moral police you sent.”

He laughed, and his laughter, so familiar to her, seemed to ripple through the whole world, not just into her very being.

He took her key from her hand and opened the door. Inside, he slipped her lab coat off and hung it on a peg, put her purse on the counter. Then he kissed her. His mouth was warm against hers, the kiss slow and deliberate, as if he was savoring the taste of her.

His hands cradled her face and he kissed her forehead, eyes, nose, and lips.

Her whole body was starting to sing. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

When he tongued first one ear and then the other, she felt her knees weakening.

His fingers went to her blouse as he undid the buttons and slid it from her shoulders. Next her slacks went. When he undid her bra and pulled it off, he asked, “What’s this?”

“The ring you gave me. I was planning to return it.”

He stared at it for a long moment before laying bra and ring on the counter.

She gasped as his hands slid under and lifted her breasts. He kissed one, then the other and she thought she would die when he nuzzled and sucked one, while caressing the nipple of the other with his thumb.

“No rouge,” she said.

“No rouge. No strawberries and cream. You taste better to me.”

He slid her panties down, kneeling to kiss her knees when he removed her shoes and drew the panties over her feet and off. On the way back up he kissed her mons and ran his hands over her thighs and hips, before sliding the edge of his hand between her folds.

She was naked now, her eyes closed, slave to the sensations he created in her.

SILK STEALTH

She heard the rustle of clothing as he stripped, then he pulled her to him and she felt her breasts up against his chest and his erection against her belly.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he whispered. “Where the hell is your bed?”

He made love to her in it as if he was worshipping a goddess, touching her in all the right places, whispering endearments to her in Pershi, running his hands up her inner thighs until she quivered with excitement. Laving her breasts, her belly, her clit.

She couldn’t get enough of him. He was hot and trembling with wanting her, and she touched and ran her hands over all those places she knew pleased him.

“Open your legs for me, Elizabeth, and let me come into you. Guide me home.”

He covered her, and she fondled his hardened cock, lifting the drops of pre-come on her fingers and lubricating his glans with it. She tugged on his engorged penis and gently rolled and twisted it in her hands until he groaned, “I need to be in you.”

When he pushed in, she lifted her hips to meet him, relishing the feel of his hardness inside her, making little cries of pleasure as he went in and out over the sensitive entrance to her vagina. When his hand found her clit, she wrapped her legs around him, anchoring him to her. With his injured thigh he hadn’t been able to ride her like this, and she let the need for him to be closer and closer well up inside her.

Tonight he would tell her the marriage had been a sham. Tonight was all she’d ever have with him.

There was no one like Shir, and the feel of him on her, in her, thrusting and hot, their bellies perspiring from the heat of being together excited and filled her in ways she would never understand.

Soon he would leave her, but tonight he was here. Tonight... “Oh, God, Shir, I’m going to come!”

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They came together, his cock thrusting until it found that tight spot between her cervix and her vaginal wall that brought him the most pleasure, while her vagina tightened and pulled him deeper with every pump. She cried out his name as her release began in her womb, then spread to her clitoris. It shot down her legs to her toes, causing them to curl, and spiraled up through her vulvae until it burst in her chest with piercing sweetness, leaving her weak with satisfaction.

They drifted into sleep until he became too heavy for her. He turned on his side and pulled her up to him with her back to him and her bottom tight against his groin.

“Elizabeth,” he said in the darkness.

“Yes.” It felt good to be snugged up against him. It felt right.

“I have something to tell you.”

“Then tell.”

“I told you the marriage was temporary.”

He might as well have thrown ice water over her. Fear made her feel faint. “You did.”

“Well, all of that wasn’t quite true. It’s true we couldn’t travel together without being married. It’s true *mullahs* perform temporary marriages. What wasn’t true is that our marriage was a temporary one. Lord forgive me, I lied to you. I loved you almost from the first moment I saw you, and I was afraid, if we had a temporary marriage, I’d lose you. When we married that was for real.”

Her heart trip-hammered in the silence. “I’m still Mrs. Shir Mansouri?”

“You are.”

She burst into tears.

“Don’t cry, Elizabeth, please, please, please. I’m sorry I deceived you. If you want a divorce we can get one...but...” He stroked her hair.

“But what?”

“It would break my heart.”

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She turned to face him, and he shifted his body toward her.

“Not be Mrs. Mansouri? Not make love to you, not make babies with you? Oh, Shir, that would never do.” She found his lips in the dark and kissed him, whispering against them, “You turned me on the first time I saw you, wounded and unconscious, that unresponsive penis in my hands, your balls gracing my palm.

“I thought you were here to tell me the temporary marriage was over...that special agents couldn’t be tied down. It’s why I didn’t have your ring on my finger, and why I wore it as close to my heart as I could. I knew you’d come someday to tell me it was over.”

“My cover’s blown, Elizabeth. People know who I am. I’ll be kicked up to administration now, maybe training new agents. And”—he slid his hand over her thigh—“I’d love being tied down with you.”

“We can sleep together now? Kiss and hold hands in public?”

“We can.”

As she floated into sleep with the man she loved beside her, she said, “Shir?”

“Yes?” His voice was drowsy.

“Thanks for watching my back.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Mansouri. I’ll be forever grateful you watched mine. Now let’s go to sleep so we can wake up and do this sex thing all over again.”

CAROLINA VALDEZ

In her previous contemporary novella, *Where Vesuvius Sleeps*, Carolina Valdez took us to an excavation in ancient Pompeii at the foot of a slumbering volcano, and into the world of classical erotic art. This followed *Sweet Chocolate Ecstasy*, her first erotic paranormal. Carolina's association with Amber Quill Press began when her short erotic historical, *Dark Stranger*, was a winner in the 2004 Amber Heat Wave Contest. It placed third in the 2005 Lories Best Published Novella Contest. Next came a traditional historical romance, *Knight of the Captive Heart*, a "5 Angels—Recommended Read" from Michelle at FAR.

* * *

***Don't miss Knight Of The Captive Heart, by Carolina Valdez,
available from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

England's widowed Earl of Gladsbury has a problem: Christiana, his only child and heir, binds her breasts and often dresses as a boy in denial of her womanhood. She longs to be a knight.

The earl knows that should he die in battle while Christiana is unwed, she and Gladsbury would be at the mercy of the king. It's not only time that she marry, but that she learn a noblewoman's duties of managing as well as defending the castle. Hoping to awaken her sensuality, the earl assigns her for defense lessons to his most eligible knights—Guy

de Bere and the mysterious new arrival, Rowan du Veau, the Dark Knight. What the earl does not know is that Guy's heart is tainted by lust and greed; he wants Christiana and Gladsbury. Rowan's heart has been captured by a distant noblewoman; he needs land and wealth in order to become betrothed to her.

Under their tutelage, will Christiana discover the true nature of these strong men? Is a man capable of changing his loyalties? Will the earl's hopes that his daughter learn to revel in the power of her womanhood come to fruition, or will she, like many noblewomen of her day, become just a pawn for one man's greed or another man's need?

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