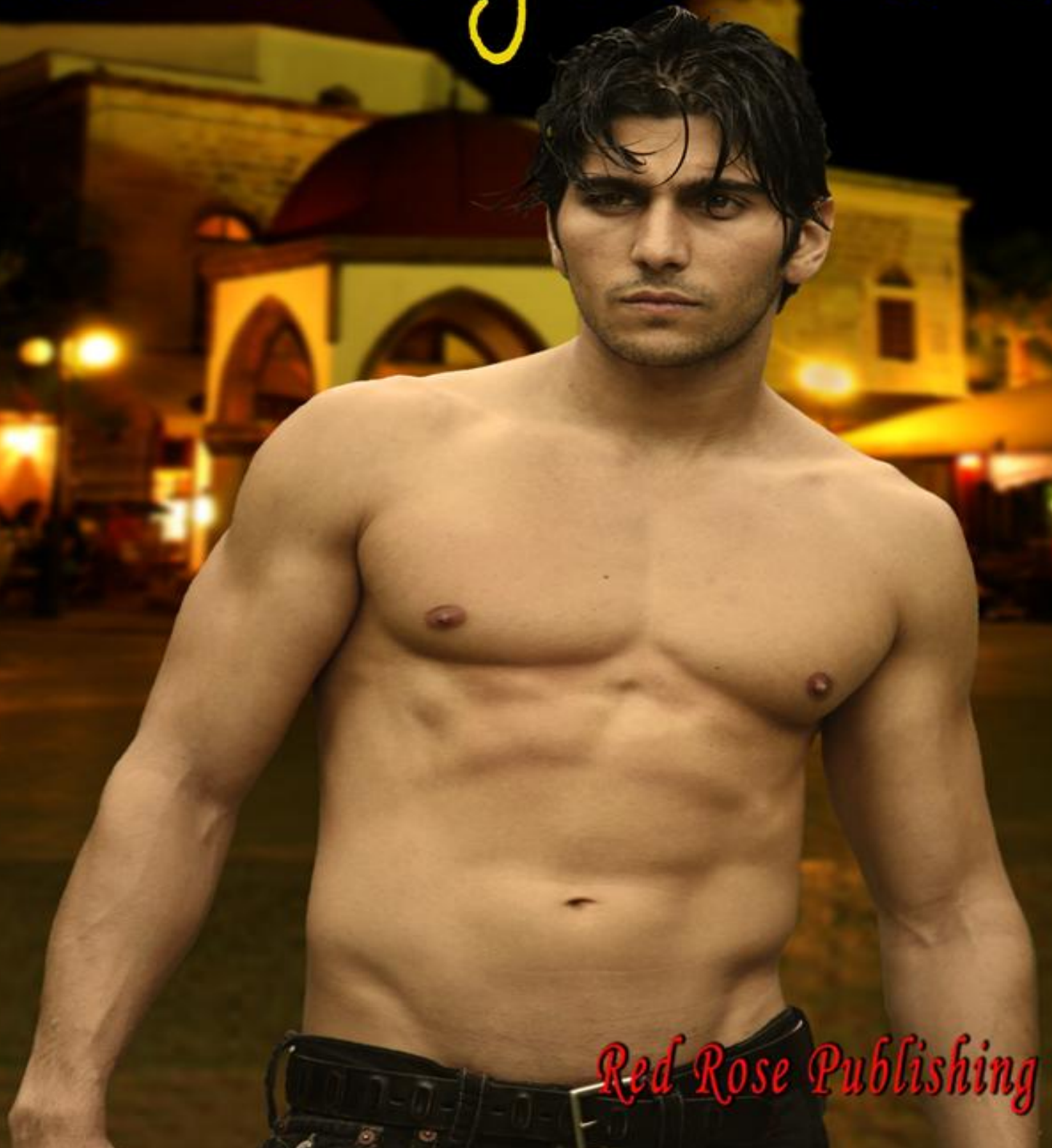


NICOLE L. PIERCE

# Seduced By The Sheik



*Red Rose Publishing*

*Seduced By The Sheik*

*by*

*Nicole L. Pierce*



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## Chapter One

Vanessa Nash saw the short cop with the beady eyes and panicked. Even in a dimly lit and crowded bar, chock-full of loud music and laughter, he scared the shit out of her, his recent stalking of her not forgotten. Had he ended up here by accident or was he going to start terrorizing her again?

“Wow, that jerk just won’t quit.” Her friend Amy, who was seated on the bar stool next to hers, looked horrified. “Vanessa, you have to call the police.”

Vanessa couldn’t hold in a laugh. “Yeah, that worked really well the other times. You don’t get it, Amy. He threatened to harm my parents if I turned him in, and I know he has it in him. When I found him *inside my house* after coming home from work, I called the cops and told them he’d broken in. Nothing happened. I found out that he’d told his buddies at the Chicago PD that we had a lover’s spat, and I’m trying to get back at him. Like we were ever lovers.” She shook her head, starting to tremble. “You know how the Chicago PD sticks together. They won’t believe that he’s stalking me. The only thing I can do is move out of town, which is easier said than done with my mother so sick...”

She grabbed the passing bartender by the arm. “Joe,” she said to the small, mustached man, “a margarita. A hundred margaritas.” She laughed through her tears.

“I’ll get you one, Vanessa.” Joe peered at her closely. “You okay?”

“Just do it, Joe. I’ll give you a good tip. Got paid a big commission for selling an expensive house.”

Joe looked at Amy.

“She’s not in charge of me,” Vanessa said sharply. “I know I don’t usually have more than a few beers, but tonight it’s *my* turn to feel no pain.”

Joe shrugged. “Whatever, Vanessa. I’m just used to getting you Cokes after you have *one* drink.”

“Well, not tonight.” She let out a long breath. *How did Ken find me this time? I know it’s not an accident. He has moles all over telling him where I am. That has to be it.*

“Be back with your drink.” Joe strode away, disappearing from her sight.

Amy placed a hand on her arm. “Vanessa, drinking won’t help.”

“You’re the designated driver.” Vanessa glanced over her shoulder. Damn, damn, damn. He was watching her. A mean smile kicked up his lips when they locked gazes. He was getting off on terrorizing her. Quickly, she turned back around. “Damn it, Amy. What am I going to do?” She dropped her head into her hands. “How the hell can I keep him from ruining my life?”

Amy shook her head. "Hire a bodyguard," she answered grimly.

Vanessa laughed. "Yeah, I can afford that. Real estate is feast or famine. I got a big check today; may not get another check at all for a month. The slow season is coming up. Not that the real estate market is good these days."

They lapsed into silence. Joe brought her margarita and she took a drink of the frosty concoction, feeling the alcohol almost right away.

"I heard you say you need a bodyguard. I'd be glad to be of service and not charge a monetary fee."

Vanessa jumped to her feet, whirled around, and found herself staring up into the face of the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Her breath caught at the intensity of her attraction to him and at first, she was at a loss for words.

"I'm Karim. Karim Zaldana, at your service. I can promise you that nobody will hurt you around me."

She regained her wits and assessed him as she felt he was appraising her. *I'll bet nobody could hurt me around him. Not only is he gorgeous, he's tall and made of muscle.* His long dark curls grazed the tight white material stretching across his massive shoulders. He had penetrating dark eyes with long lashes, smooth olive skin, and luscious, full lips that begged to be kissed.

"I'm Vanessa." She tried not to stammer like a schoolgirl talking to her first crush. After all, she'd lived thirty years and was used to men, even gorgeous men.

*But not this gorgeous.* His low, sensual voice with a slight accent added to his allure.

She worked her way from his face to the bulge in his tight jeans.

If she took him up on his offer— if his offer was even serious— she'd have a hard time fighting her lust for him.

“You don’t know what to make of me.” Karim smiled, flashing strong white teeth and a cleft in his chin.

She could feel her face heating. “Well, I know you can’t be serious...” “Maybe, maybe not. I just overheard your friend and decided it would be a pleasure,” his gaze fell to her breasts, “to guard a body as lovely as yours. Besides, I won’t tolerate men who terrorize women.” He lifted his stare and his eyes seemed to burn as they locked onto hers.

*Was he saying he found her hot? Holy hell, men who looked like him never said that.*

She felt herself breaking into a foolish grin, her knees weakening, her breasts and nipples hardening. A body slid in between the two of them, pushing them apart, and she met the eyes of the intruder, knowing exactly who it would be.

“Hey!” Karim looked down at Ken. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, little man?”

Ken whirled away from Vanessa toward him. “Look, Arab scum, you keep your dirty hands off my girl or I’ll...” he cut it off, looking around as if making sure nobody was listening to him.



“Ken, get away from me,” Vanessa managed, in the strongest voice she had. “I’m not your girlfriend. I never was, and you insulted...” her gaze quickly flew to Karim’s, “you insulted my...”

“Fiancé,” Karim inserted smoothly, but there was a thread of steel in his voice.

Vanessa drew in a shaky breath. Ken wasn’t large, but he was deceptively strong and often wielding a gun, even when not on duty. Although it was illegal in Chicago to carry a concealed weapon, Ken acted above all law and so far had every reason to think nobody would ever touch him. After all, he was a Chicago policeman.

She wasn’t worried about what Ken would do in front of a crowd of people. It was what he did when she was alone that terrified her.

“Where’s the damn ring then? Vanessa would never turn me down for somebody like you,” Ken said harshly. “She wouldn’t mix with your kind.”

Karim’s eyes narrowed as he shoved him out of the way and put his arm around Vanessa. “We became engaged tonight. I’m going to buy her a ring — a very nice one. I’m a Sheik. You know all Arabs are rich.”

Vanessa heard his sarcasm and felt the tension in the air. She was grateful to Karim for shielding her from her nemesis.

“I know all Arabs are scum,” Ken said, lowering his voice as he again looked around. He fixed his gaze back on Karim. “Vanessa wouldn’t let you put your greasy hands on her.”

Karim glared at him a moment, then turned to her and pulled her into a kiss. His mouth slanted against hers shocking her, both because of the action and the way she felt in his arms. His hot lips pressed against hers as his tongue pushed through her teeth and swept through her mouth. She felt herself growing weak as he bent her over his arm. She kissed him back, savoring his masculine flavor mixed with the sweet taste of wine. His hands massaged the back of her hair and her own hands slid up into his springy curls. God, he felt so good, tasted so good, smelled so damn good...

“Fuckin’ tramp!” Ken’s voice was almost a whisper, but right in her ear. “You’re such a little whore.”

Karim abruptly stepped back from her and grabbed Ken by the collar. “Watch your mouth.” He punched Ken in the face, his teeth clenched. Blood spurted from Ken’s nose as he fell backwards. Voices filled the room. If no one noticed them before, they did now. The bar’s chubby bouncer, Big Eddy, ran up to Karim with angry eyes.

“Get out of here,” he said in an outraged voice. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“He deserved it,” Karim replied without apology, his eyes masked as he raked his gaze over Ken. A few patrons were tending to the bloodied man who lay groaning on the floor.

“Eddy, this man was defending me,” Vanessa said.

“Get out,” Eddy shouted at Karim, ignoring her. “We don’t want trouble here! And you’re trouble!”

There was a sudden hush in the room.

Karim’s hot stare brushed hers and held it for a moment. Then he gazed over at a red-faced Eddy and nodded. “Fine, I’ll go.” He turned to walk away.

Vanessa felt a wave of unexplainable panic, yet she couldn’t speak or move. Amy grabbed her shoulder and whispered into her ear as she watched Karim elbowing his way out of the bar. “If you want to go after him, do it. I’ll drive home alone. No biggie.”

Vanessa was trembling. “Thanks,” she whispered back to her friend.

As Karim pulled open the door, a gust of summer-scented air drifted into the room, blowing back hair and skirts.

“Karim!” Vanessa called his name in the now completely silent room. Even the band had stopped playing.

Karim let the door slam behind him, not looking back. Without missing another beat, Vanessa grabbed her purse off the bar stool and ran after him, away

from the crowded, smoky room out into a damp, warm night. Gentle raindrops hit her face, but she stayed focused on Karim, who walked a half a block ahead of her with bold, purposeful strides.

“Karim, wait!” she called out, and this time he halted and turned around, his face void of expression.

She caught up to him and marveled again at his magnetic male splendor. Under a black sky, void of stars, the streetlight rested on his beautiful features, making his black eyes glow like two coals.

Her lips tingled as she remembered his kiss.

“I can’t believe they treated you that way.”

He shrugged, his face unchanging. “I’m used to it.”

“Well, it’s wrong.”

He stared at her, something flickering in her eyes, touching her. Something about him really moved her. “Why are you staring at me like that?” he asked, although his hot eyes told her he knew.

“You asked if I needed a bodyguard. I do. I don’t have a ton of money, but if you’re willing to do it for just a little... Maybe you can stay at my place part-time. I can’t move in with my parents. My mother had a heart attack a while ago and I don’t want Ken to show up and give her another one.”

He kept staring at her. The longer his gaze rested on her face, the more she felt pulled into his magnetism. “You need full-time help if that man is stalking you.” His eyes narrowed. “I’ve seen him around. He’s a cop, isn’t he?”

Tears welled in her eyes, although she tried to blink them away.

He rested a big hand on her arm and she felt her entire body jolt. “Report him, Ness. I’ll go with you.”

“No.” At the surprised look on his face she added, fighting tears, “He’s threatened my family if I turn him in, and I believe he’d do it. My parents are so fragile, I can’t take that chance.”

“And you’re afraid the police won’t believe you over him too, right?” His voice tightened.

“That also crossed my mind. And, if they don’t, well, he’s free to terrorize my parents. Karim, I can’t.” She knew her eyes were pleading.

“Fine for now,” Karim said grimly. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.” He had a strange, thoughtful look on his face that gave her the chills.

“You don’t know me.”

“But I sense there’s goodness in you. You’re different from other people I’ve met. I think you deserve protection, and I’m pretty good at that. I spent a few years in Palestine helping and saw terrorism. This crazy cop who would hurt you is nothing compared to that.”

She felt her loins raging at his touch, his musky, leathery scent, and his sheer presence. The low timbre of his voice washed over her like hot chocolate. “I...I don’t know what to say. I live in a studio apartment...”

“My house isn’t large, but there’s more room than that. We can stay there.”

She couldn’t swallow as she watched his eyes. Finally she said, “I can’t take that much from you, a stranger.”

He broke into his gorgeous grin, a stark contrast to the darkness in his stare. “You’re my fiancé.”

She laughed, feeling her face heating.

“It’s not a joke. If you want my services, you’re going to have to marry me. I won’t charge you money, but everything has its price, doesn’t it, princess?” He raised his eyebrow and she watched him, feeling a sudden wave of confusion.

His gaze didn’t waver.

*My God, he means it!*

“My visa expires soon and I don’t want to go home. They’re not generous with visas to Arabs these days.”

Her head whirled as she tried to digest his words.

“It won’t be so bad. I find you very attractive and sweet, and I think you like me, too, so far.” With that, he reached up and pulled her into his embrace, kissing her under the velvet black sky while raindrops fell on their heads.

The world seemed to come to a stop, as though the two of them were wrapped in a swirl of cotton, protected from the rest of the world. His big, work-roughened hands massaged her hair and back and she pressed into his body, feeling on fire, her sensitive mound bumping up against his hard cock. She knew that the alcohol was hitting her system, but it was more than a suddenly light head making her melt against him. If it felt this good with their clothes on...

He drew back and licked her lips, his hot breath bathing her face. Her knees were so weak that she almost fell, but he caught and held her, his strength arousing her, making her feel protected and warm. Oh, to be able to feel those arms around her whenever she liked. To be able to make love to this magnificent man at her leisure. "Yes," she answered, short of breath. "Yes, I'll marry you, Karim."

Karim straightened up and stared at her. "You mean it? You don't want to change your mind?"

She didn't have a mind right then. Her head was dizzy and her body liquefied. Was she crazy? Did she want to take it back?

"Shit." Karim took her hand. "Let's go, love."

"What?" She glanced over her shoulder at where Karim was looking, and startled as she saw Ken being helped out of the bar by two men. She turned back, her heart pounding.

“Come on,” he said in a calm voice. “I promise to keep my part of the bargain. I’ll protect you from him and anyone else who ever tries to hurt you.” He put his arm around her and she melted against him, glad to have him as her shield.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Karim reminded as she settled into his car, a modest Taurus with a leather interior. He threw his arm over the back of the seat and watched her. “Are you sure you want to marry me?”

She breathed in his masculine scent. “I...I admit I’d feel safe married to you. You’re so big. I don’t even know what you do for a living. I don’t know *anything* about you.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then said, “I buy and renovate old houses. I came to America to stand on my own, apart from my father. I will tell you more about me tonight as we test our sexual compatibility.” His gaze froze on hers.

A shiver went through her spine as her pussy convulsed. “Yes,” she agreed, knowing for sure that she’d lost her sanity. Years of Ken’s stalking had made her so desperate she would marry a stranger. Sure, he was hotter than a bonfire, but she still didn’t know anything about him. He could be crazier than Ken. Still, as she stared at him, she couldn’t wait to make love to him. It would be her first time since college.

She’d never liked sex. Why did she crave it now?

Karim winked at her and she turned to putty.



“Let’s go.” He turned on the car.

## Chapter Two

Karim could barely drive with his hard-on. Damn, what this woman did to him! He didn't really understand this strong attraction. Women liked him and he had his pick — women far more beautiful than this Vanessa. He glanced over at her. She had her head resting against the window, her smoky-lashed eyes shut. He grinned a little. Obviously, she'd had too much to drink. Then he sobered.

*That's probably why she agreed to marry me. Maybe she'll still change her mind, but I can't let that happen.*

His groin tightened and he groaned out loud. He hadn't looked this forward to making love for years. Maybe never. Vanessa's long silky, blonde hair, creamy skin and angular features called out to him, like a siren. He loved her lips, full and pink, and tasting her had just made him want more. His gaze fell to her breasts, rising and falling gently behind her white blouse. She must have come to the bar from work. She wore a short black skirt — not *too* short — and white flats, showcasing her slender ankles. She wasn't thin, however. Rather, she was curvaceous and round.

His cock bucked. What would she think when she discovered the truth about him? Would it ever happen? If she didn't fall in love with him, really in love, he'd never have to tell her because he'd let her go. Until then, he'd enjoy learning about her. He found her fascinating. Just the short time he'd spoke with her, he felt her kindness. He trusted his instincts. If he didn't have good instincts, he couldn't make the fast, split-second choices he had to make both on the Saudi side and the American side.

Letting out a breath, he pulled his car into the driveway of his small ranch, one he'd renovated himself. He would test her to see her true character. If they indeed were meant to be together forever, she had to be the woman he thought she was. He'd been used before, and hadn't minded so much when he was young. But at thirty-two, he no longer enjoyed sex just for the sake of it.

After turning off the car, he glanced over at Vanessa and smiled again. She looked like an angel with the lights from his house illuminating her face. Reaching over, he gently shook her shoulder and she sat up with a start.

"You fell asleep, darling. We're home. This is where we're going to live."

She looked confused for a minute, then her eyes finally grew sharp and alert.

"Karim."

"In the flesh."

She smiled a little warily, then looked out the window. "This is your house?"

He couldn't tell if she was disappointed or not. Her reaction mattered a lot to him, so he held his breath.

"It's cute!" She tossed him a grin. "Who lives in that mansion behind it? They sure don't keep it up. I'd love to renovate that place and sell it. I'm a realtor."

He held in a laugh, certain that his eyes were twinkling. "Are you good at decorating homes?"

"I like to decorate. Think I did a good job with my apartment."

"You need to get out of your lease. I can help you with that."

"How?" Her honey-colored eyes narrowed.

"I have good lawyers."

She bit her lip. "I'd rather keep the apartment, just in case this doesn't work out."

"Of course," he said, his stomach clenching. It had to work out. "Let's go inside. I'm anxious for you to see it."

"The outside looks great. In fact, it's familiar." She gazed at it out the window. "I wonder if I showed it to somebody, even you. How long have you lived here?"

He hesitated. He didn't really live here, at least not normally, but he could tell her how long he'd owned the house. "Three years."

“I don’t remember why this is familiar. I’m probably remembering wrong, especially now. I’m half drunk.”

Karim felt a pang. “I know. Let me come get you.” He got out of his car and walked around to the other side. When he opened the door, he lifted her into his arms, grabbed her purse for her, and shut the door with his hip. Her arms immediately grabbed his neck, and he swayed as her femininity and sexual allure almost knocked him out.

His cock swelled again. Only a short time from now, and she’d be his.

“If I throw up, will you still think I’m sexy?” Her head lolled on his shoulder.

As he unlocked the door with her in his arms, he laughed long and hard.

“Try not to,” he instructed and switched on the light.

He turned on the lights and she looked around his small living room with its hardwood floors, Oriental rug, masculine leather furniture and paneled walls.

“You did a good job.”

“I’m not really done yet.” He looked down at her and at the same time, she looked up at him, as if she knew to do it. As he drank in her amber eyes, he felt them almost swirling at him, mesmerizing him. “I’m going to show you my bedroom now.” No point in beating around the bush.

To his surprise, she kissed his lips briefly. “Yes.”

He almost came in his pants.

His bedroom had a light switch right next to the entrance and he flipped it on carelessly, eager to see her reaction to it. It was one of three, the others being bare of furniture. This one had a king-sized bed with a rumpled dark blue comforter thrown over satin sheets. The paneled walls and blue curtains, embroidered with gold, gave the small room a masculine flair. His dresser and bed stand were blunt oak. He made them himself. He took her little purse from her and laid it on the bed stand.

“Do you like it?” he asked, nonchalant.

“It’s really nice — for a man.”

“Just for a man?” He bit back a chuckle.

“This place needs a woman’s touch,” Vanessa mumbled as he set her on his bed.

He climbed on beside her, his cock so full it almost burst. “So do I.” He started unbuttoning her blouse.

Vanessa felt herself shivering as his fingers grazed against her flesh while he unbuttoned her blouse. There was something magical about Karim, something she’d never experienced before. She wanted him to touch her in every way and wanted to touch him back; just give into her feelings. Did love at first sight exist?

She knew the answer was “no,” but this lust was very powerful.

When he unbuttoned the last one, she sat up and he pulled her blouse slowly down her shoulders and arms then tossed it on the floor. “Lay back down, love.” Karim looked up at her, curls resting just above his eyes.

She couldn’t swallow and reached up to sweep his hair off his forehead. It fell right back down again, making him look ungodly hot.

“Lay down,” he repeated.

She did and he stood up and bent over to pull her skirt and briefs off her legs, tickling her, making her laugh. But her stare was on the bulge in his jeans. Never before had she wanted to see a man’s cock. She’d never found them particularly interesting, especially with the partners she’d had. Now, she was barely paying attention to her own nakedness in her impatience to see him. She stood up to get close to him, the two of them inches apart. He smiled and she swayed closer to him, her breath catching.

“What do you want?” His surly mouth kicked up at the ends, his eyes glowing.

She couldn’t answer, but reached down and unbuttoned his jeans, her fingers shaking. He put large hands on her shoulders, gripping her tightly.

“Look at me, Vanessa.”

She lifted her gaze and felt dizzy, the room spinning as she reached up to touch the strong curve of his jaw.

“Are you a virgin?”

“Do I act like one?” His question had startled and embarrassed her.

“I sense an innocence about you.” His hands lightly ran down her shoulders and arms, giving her goosebumps. “Even though I’ll have blue balls tomorrow if I don’t, I won’t make love to you if you’re not ready. I’ve never had an American virgin.” He sounded amused.

He couldn’t back out now or she’d die. Her body was hot and cold at the same time, and her sex was screaming for him. She could barely stand, so weak were her knees. But she didn’t want to lie to him. “I...had a few boyfriends in college, nothing great, and I didn’t like sex, so I haven’t had it since. But I want you. I can tell it’ll be different. I’m very attracted to you.”

He smiled, his eyes softening. “As you will be my wife, it would be most uncomfortable if you didn’t desire me.”

“Please take off your pants.”

“Your wish is my command.” He bent his head, showing his thick, abundant curls. She swallowed hard as he stepped out of his jeans, slow and deliberate, watching her. She gulped as her stare fell to his groin. The only thing shielding her from his cock was a tight pair of black briefs, so she stepped closer to his body, then pulled down the last of his covering with a decisive yank. He laughed, but she



barely heard him as she stared at his cock. Good heavens, so *this* was why the other women in her office drooled over male anatomy.

His cock was long, thick, straight and elegant, alive and pulsing against his abdomen, hard as a rock. She'd never been so turned on by anything in her life and could barely draw breath.

"Well?"

She swayed into him and he hugged her.

"It's...magnificent. I don't know how else to describe it."

"I'm glad you think so. Your body is perfect."

"No, I'm chubby."

"You have womanly curves." His hands touched her shoulders, then fell to her hips and she found herself gasping for air. He smiled and slid one hand to her ass, pinching it, causing her to shiver.

"I want to possess you. I *will* possess you, and make you never want anyone else."

With those words, he lifted her under her arms and laid her on the bed. Climbing in beside her, he overwhelmed her with his pure animal magnetism. When he devoured her lips, she gripped his taut back tightly and they rolled over on the mattress, fusing together, her on top. She savored the feel of his hard, damp

flesh, loving the way her breasts pressed into his muscled chest, making them sizzle.

He rolled them over again and his cock pressed into her pussy as he lay atop her. While he swirled his tongue around in her mouth, she couldn't drink him up fast enough, thirsty for his manly taste. Desperate to have him, she sizzled with heat and tension. When he rubbed his cock up and down against her sex, she quivered until her teeth chattered. He was to die for, and at that moment, she would have killed for just one night with him.

He pulled away from her lips and she cried out, but his mouth and tongue moved down to her chin, then to her breasts. As he sucked hard on her stiff nipple, milking her, the fires roared within her. Karim massaged her other breast until it blazed. After leaving her boneless, he moved his head down, licking her abdomen and naval. Then he set his head between her legs. He dared to look up at her from there, his eyes and lips smiling teasingly at her.

She could feel her body twitching, her pussy pouring cream as it spasmed out of control.

“Karim! Do something, damn it. I can't take it anymore.”

He spread her knees apart and she felt her entire body shook again. When his tongue flicked her wet slit, she arched and moaned, coming with a jolt that wracked her body. The sensations blazed throughout her and made her writhe

with pleasure. When the waves died down a little, she wondered if that was her first orgasm. Well her vibrator had done a half-assed job of turning her on, but nothing like this...!

“Again,” she pleaded.

He found her clit and wiggled it with his tongue and she lost it — her body, her mind, her very being. The tension exploded inside of her like a thousand fireworks all at one time and she threw back her head as she came, chanting his name over and over again.

When she lay beside him — spent, sated, happy, full of wonder — still after-spasming, she threw an arm over his sweaty skin. “Damn, you’re good,” she complimented, still swallowing air. “I’m shaking from that ride.”

“That’s just foreplay.” Karim mounted her, falling over her body, his ragged breathing warming her face. She caught a glimpse of his gaze from her half-blind eyes. His were on fire. She threw her arms around him. God help her, she wanted more. “Please,” she whispered. “I can’t take it. I...I need you inside of me or I’ll go insane!”

He nibbled her ear and that just renewed her after-spasms.

“I really can’t wait anymore,” she heard herself saying, spreading her legs wide for him, feeling her pussy convulsing with need that only he could fill.

Then he slid the thick, hot head of his cock inside of her, pulling it out right after. She knew he was teasing and was about to yell “no” or hit him, but he eased in again, filling her as he slowly sank into her sex, causing the flesh inside her unused entrance to grasp his hot shaft, then let go, then grab it again. She flushed and gasped, her heart pounding from her chest against his, her breasts, nipples and pussy all on fire.

As he thrust into her, she found herself hugging his neck — maybe too tightly — and thrusting back up to meet him. When he rotated his hips to sink in deeper, she moved with him, the perfect dance, the perfect cock, the perfect ride to paradise. Her head swam. Her muscles turned to mush. Her erogenous zones zinged and zapped, and her entire body blazed with loaded bullets of pure, wicked sensation.

She didn’t know where she was or who she was and it didn’t matter. Karim mattered. The feelings he gave her mattered. Only his hot cock inside her pussy mattered. She couldn’t stop shuddering and arching, and her tension exploded into pincushion prickles of heat that encompassed her, making her feel like she’d lifted to the skies.

With one last thrust, Karim let out a primal growl and came inside of her, his hot seed flooding her with more magic, and she screamed, laughed, and cried as

she held onto him, dizzy with ecstasy. He thrust again and came some more, and she arched to meet him, digging her nails into his sweaty back.

Finally he stopped, falling on top of her like a rag doll, breathing heavily into her ear. She could hear the slamming of his heart along with her own. They were in tandem, had reached the goal of becoming one. Vanessa had never had such an awesome experience before, hadn't known you could feel so close to another human being...and so wonderful. Tired, but sated, she held him as he rolled her to his side. His breathing feathered her hair and ear, and she buried her face in the crook of his neck. The only sound in the room was their panting.

After an eternity, Karim stirred and whispered to her. "You were tight. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She laughed, reaching up to finger the wet curls near his temple. "Um, no."

He pulled her closer to him, a possessive type of grip that reminded her she'd agreed to marry him. For the visa. She'd heard of marriages like that, but maybe she could make this one happy. The way she felt now, she was in the mood to try. Her body was still alive...still after-spasming...still molded into him. Vanessa heard her cell phone ringing inside her purse and her body jolted. "Aw, shit," she groaned. "How did he know when to ruin it?" She pulled to her elbow as the phone's musical bells rang again. Cold fear washed over her.

“I’ll get that.” Karim grabbed her purse off the nightstand and fished inside for her phone. Staring at the Caller ID, he mumbled, “It’s the bastard.” He looked at her from under mussed curls.

Vanessa covered her face. “Let it go to voicemail.”

“How does he have your cell phone number?” Karim asked gently, lifting her chin with one finger.

“I have no idea. He always gets my phone numbers, even when I change them. Creeps me out.”

The phone stopped ringing.

“If he calls back, I’ll talk to him.” Karim’s eyes narrowed and she could tell that his anger was not at her. “I suppose he’ll try to have me arrested.”

“No.” She reached up to cup his chin, loving the feel of his five o’clock shadow, even as she felt her stomach clench with dread. It could be worse though. She could be without her beautiful bodyguard.

“He won’t try to have me arrested?” Karim stared down at her, his thumb running over her cheek. “He’s a cop with an opportunity to try to put an Arab in jail.”

“Ken gets embarrassed if anyone bests him in a fight. He won’t report it. I suppose that’s good because...you could be deported.” Her heart sped up.

Somehow it seemed like a major catastrophe, although she barely knew him, had only had sex with him...

He looked slightly relieved, then smiled at her. His fingers still held her chin, making her insides sizzle as he watched her. "It's good that his ego is so inflated. I really hate to tap into my contacts. I do have some."

Her heart sped up. "Illegal contacts," she deduced.

. "You don't need to know that. By the way, Ness, you have wonderful lips."

She couldn't help grinning at him. He looked so hot in the nude with his hair all disheveled. And he'd called her Ness. The only other person who called her that was her father, whom she loved dearly. Just as the good thoughts washed over her, the phone rang again.

Karim's face grew serious. He kept a hand on her arm as he put the phone to his ear.

## Chapter Three

“Yes?” Karim gritted his teeth and kept a hand on Vanessa. If he kept touching her, nobody could hurt her. Dumb, he knew, but he was well equipped to take care of this man, if necessary. Ken had only seen a small part of what he could do. “This is Vanessa’s phone,” he continued, when no one answered.

“Is this the Arab?”

Karim swallowed the bitterness in his throat. He’d been through a lot since 9/11. “This is Karim, Vanessa’s husband-to-be.” He heard the ice and pride in his own voice. “I don’t want other men calling her, especially you.”

“Is that how they do it in Egypt or wherever you’re from? Men forbid the women from talking to other men?”

He needed to keep cool. “I just know what I do. I won’t let you talk to her, and you’d better not try to see her again.” Anger swelled inside of him.

“I could have you arrested.”

He said nothing, not wanting to encourage this turn of conversation.

“But I like to take care of things myself,” he said.



Karim met Vanessa's worried eyes and winked at her. To Ken he said, "I'll be glad to meet you man-to-man anytime." He patted Vanessa's arm when she gasped. "Vanessa won't be with me though."

"Oh, we'll meet man-to-man," Ken said, his voice rising in anger. "I'll see you — and Vanessa too — when I decide, and you won't get any notice. Tell *The Whore* that I love her."

The line went dead and Karim's belly tightened with fury. He'd seen men mistreat women in his country, and he had no use for it. His father had a harem — it was part of his cover — but he was good to all of his wives. Karim, helping his father's good works from across the ocean, hated violence, especially against females. They were precious jewels to be protected. *Ness is the most precious of all. I can feel her goodness.*

Vanessa was clinging to his arm, staring at him when he turned to her. He forced himself to relax, at least outwardly. "He is no match for me," he said, his accent stronger than usual. "You will never have to deal with him again. I'll do that for you."

"But what if he finds us and breaks into the house?"

"Let him try." Karim thought of the gun in his bed stand drawer. He was a crack shot; nobody would harm her. "I'm committed to keeping you safe from him."

She set her soft lips to his arm and laid her head on his shoulder. “You seem really nice, Karim. I hope this isn’t just first impressions.”

He put his arm around her, his fingers tapping her breast. Damn his cock. Would he want to make love to her all the time for the rest of his life, even after just talking to her stalker? “I don’t put on acts,” he assured, kissing her temple.

She melted into him and his cock got even harder. Again.

“Thanks for talking to Ken for me.”

“You’ll never talk to him again, my love.” The softness of his voice surprised him. He could be gruff, but not with her. She brought out a sweet side of him that he preferred to hide. Often, it was necessary for him to suppress that part of him.

“Karim, when will we marry?”

His blood started rushing, the thought exciting him. “My card is due to run out in a few weeks, so I think as soon as possible is good. You must convince everyone that we married for love.”

She turned her head and kissed his cheek. “I can do that.”

He sucked in her flowery scent and pulled her into his lap. “I think you will make a good wife, even if it’s temporary. I love the feel of you, soft as a blanket. Your skin is so smooth.” He ran his hand down her bare thigh, his hand heating at the contact.

She flushed and smiled up at him from his lap. He took in a shaky breath as her side rubbed against his cock. “Wow,” he mumbled.

She pulled away slightly and looked down, her smile widening. “I love to look at it.” She took his cock in hand and it stirred delightfully. “I’m no expert, but you seem awfully large. Are you?”

“I’m well-endowed, I suppose.”

“You suppose?” She tried to close her hand around his now pulsing staff, but her fingers couldn’t touch. “Karim, you’re huge.”

He felt a surge of pride, pleased that she seemed impressed, but he didn’t say anything. Pulling her close, he stroked her hair as she kept her gaze on his groin area.

“Can I...?” She lifted her red face, then dropped her gaze. “How can a decent lady ask this question?”

“Love, in this bedroom with me, you do not have to be a decent lady. Please speak your thoughts.” His cock swelled more. Her pleasure at watching his staff aroused him. He felt his predatory nature, the male in him, spring to full life.

Vanessa suddenly pulled back and stretched out on her stomach, her head almost buried in his balls. *A man can only take so much...*

She kissed his cock with hot, wet lips, rubbing it in her hands at the same time. “I want to...suck you off.” She lifted her gaze, her cheeks fuchsia.

Karim was breathing heavily as he stared down at her silky brown(3) hair. “You certainly won’t get an argument from me.” His cock hardened and pulsed, brimming with sensations. He could feel drops of pre-cum dripping off his cock’s sensitive head.

“But I’ve never done it before.”

He laughed, wondering if he’d be able to hold out, even though he had good self-control. “It’s easy to please a man.” Pushing her away from him, he stretched out on the mattress, delightfully aroused. She lowered herself between his thighs and he groaned from pleasure and agony. When she fondled his balls he almost came then and there. “Vanessa, I’m so ready for you, dear.”

“You smell...sexy.” She started licking his balls and his entire body tightened as the breath left his lungs.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked anxiously.

He couldn’t help laughing. “No, love. Just...suck me off already or I’ll come on the bed. Are you sure?”

*“Stop asking me that!”*

She took him into her mouth.

At once, the animal part of him took hold. His body grew very tight as she swirled her tongue over the head and sides, doing a good job for an amateur. He gritted his teeth as she continued to take him further inside, near her throat. As

she sucked him like a baby to a mother's breast, he erupted with a loud growl and then shouted, "I'm going to...spit it out if you like, Ness!"

He arched and convulsed with another loud bellow, and then did it again and again. As he lost most of his wits, he did vaguely wonder if he'd ever come so much for one woman. He could hear her mewling, him gasping and moaning, and felt himself unloading with relief. When he finished, he was truly spent, breathing heavily on his back as she returned to him.

When she lay on top of him, she nuzzled her silky head under his neck and made a sound of contentment, also breathing hard. Minutes later, his senses returned and he lifted his head to watch her. She lay on his chest with her eyes shut, a soft smile on her face. Shocked, he wiped a few drops of cum from her lips.

"You swallowed it?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Uh huh," she confirmed, still smiling.

Wow. Even some very experienced women won't do that. It meant a lot to him that she'd found him desirable enough to share such an intimacy. He felt they were more connected than ever now.

*Yet you don't know her, Karim. Will she want to stay with a man who mixed with some dangerous people?*

Karim wrapped her tightly in his arms and patted her back until she fell asleep, her breathing soft and even. He kept her on top of him for a long time, and

then reluctantly and gently rolled her to her side. Standing up, he looked down at her curvy, bare form, one knee high, the other leg stretched out, and he almost got teary-eyed at her beauty. What an angel.

With quick strides he walked to the wall and flipped off the light switch, filling the room with blackness. Only the streetlights shimmering through his shut drapes gave the room any light. Eagerly, he walked back to the bed and stood over his fiancé, his cock still tingling from their sex.

Feeling the chilling air, he covered her with his heavy down quilt then climbed in bed beside her, throwing his arm over her as if protecting her, even though nothing threatened her now. Her crazed stalker couldn't get into his house; he had state-of-the-art security in all the places where he stayed.

"Mrs. Karim Zaldana," he whispered to her, and he kissed her sweaty forehead. Some time in the night, after staring at her for hours, sleep overcame him.



Vanessa smiled before opening her eyes. She had her arms around Karim, who was snuggled into her, snoring softly. She brushed back his curls and kissed his slightly parted lips, her body prickling as she remembered the night

before. If she hadn't awakened in his bed, she would have thought last night a surreal dream with a fantasy man.

Muted voices and laughter drifted from outside the window, grabbing her attention. After kissing Karim on each shut eyelid, she climbed out of bed and quickly threw on her clothes, then walked to the window to see what was going on.

At the mansion behind them, she saw at least a hundred people, from young to silver-haired, of all different sizes, shapes, and ethnicities. They had painting supplies, ladders, and wore work clothes. There was much laughter and camaraderie amongst the odd collection of workers.

Curious, Vanessa shot a look over at Karim, who had stretched out on his back, looking hotter than hell in the nude. His cock was hard. Her pussy spasmed and she grinned, but wanted to let him sleep. After running to the bed and giving him a kiss on his cheek, she went outside to see what was going on.

As she stood right beside Karim's house, she took in the mansion first, now that it was daylight. Her realtor's eyes recognized it as a nineteenth century Romanesque mansion that needed a lot of work. The architecture was beautiful, the potential limitless. The band of people appeared to be renovating it. She wondered why the owner hadn't just hired professionals to do the work.

Vanessa slowly approached the loud, rowdy group and noticed a few people glancing at her. As she neared, a tall, skinny, African-American man in a paint-splattered muscle shirt and baggy torn pants caught her gaze and laughed good-naturedly. "You won't be able to work in those nice clothes," he said.

Flustered, Vanessa looked down and realized he thought she was going to help them. "Obviously I didn't come to work — at least not now. I'd be happy to help once I get out of this skirt." She smiled, hoping the others didn't think her a snob. "I just heard noise and saw all of you, so I came outside."

A young, teenage girl with auburn hair and an oversized shirt set a paintbrush on the ground and assessed her. "I saw you coming from Karim's place. You his girlfriend?" She seemed to mock the last word.

Well, obviously they knew the man who lived in the servant's quarters. She could feel her face heating. "Well, yes." She was going to marry him so she guessed she was his girlfriend. The girl grinned, tossing her sassy red hair behind her shoulders. "Yeah, he stays there sometimes, brings his *dates* back."

She felt a pang of jealousy. So he did this often. Would he cheat after marriage? After all, theirs would only be a marriage of convenience.

"He hasn't had anyone with him for a while," a young Latino woman said, her accent appealing. "Josie has a crush on him, so she's being mean."

"I don't have a crush on him, and I'm not being mean!"



“Yes, you are.” The girl turned back to Vanessa. “I’m Juana. Didn’t Karim tell you we’d be here today?”

“No. We came home late.” And didn’t have time to talk much before making love. “I take it you guys are fixing up this...mansion.”

“Yes.” Juana beamed with pride. “This mysterious owner hired us and it’s been two years we’ve been working on the one house.”

Vanessa’s interest peaked even more. “Mysterious owner? So none of you know who owns this?”

“I have my suspicions,” Josie said, her voice coy.

“Nobody knows for sure,” a chubby, African-American lady inserted. “Whoever it is, I pray for him every night. Now I have a chance to support my children.”

“Yeah, the owner, whoever he is, hired all of us rejects to make this a decent place to live.” Juana smiled as she held up a paintbrush.

“We’re quite a group,” said a middle-aged, balding Caucasian man. “We’re recovering drug and alcohol addicts, refugees from other countries who just got here, or some of us, like me, are just plain poor.” He grinned. “This owner is paying us well. You should see what we did with the inside.”

“I’d love to see the inside,” Vanessa said, thinking about the huge estate’s market value. “May I?”

“Boss has the key.”

“Boss. The owner.” She felt her blood racing, a suspicion nipping at her toes.

“Why won’t this person tell you who he is? I don’t get it.”

“Guess he doesn’t like anyone to know he’s doing a good thing.” Josie shrugged.

“Who do you suspect?” Could it be Karim? No, even with the mansion in this condition, the real estate value in this neighborhood was sky-high. If Karim had enough money to purchase the mansion, why didn’t he just fix it up and live in it? Or, if he wanted to provide jobs for needy people, why wouldn’t he live in another nice house? His small ranch house was cute, but small. It didn’t add up, but she couldn’t dismiss the possibility either.

The mystique of her handsome fiancé grew as nobody answered her question.

Two men in an old work van drove up the winding driveway, waving bags from a fast food restaurant out the window. Everyone turned towards them, some clapping. Both men opened their doors and jumped out of the van, friendly grins on their faces.

“Food!” Josie squealed.

“Ohhhhhhhh, you two are so nice!” someone else gushed.

Vanessa looked at the men, both no older than their early twenties. One was a tall, African-American with close-cropped hair, an earring, and blue overalls. The other was maybe an inch shorter and looked part Middle Eastern, with a strong build and laughing blue eyes. The eyes contrasted with his chocolate brown waves and olive skin. For some reason, he intrigued her. *Guess I'm attracted to Middle Eastern men...*

"Y'all sit down, folks," the African-American said, with fake authority in his voice. "We'll eat before we start working today. Gonna be a long day."

"We'll pass out the goodies," the Middle Easterner added. "Tyreese?" He glanced at his partner.

Tyreese nodded and started pulling bags out from the passenger window of the van. He handed them to the other man, who started handing them to the workers.

"Back off, folks," Tyreese said, yelling in an obviously mocking way. "Don't be mobbing Bandar. You'll kick up his claustrophobia."

There were giggles as bags were exchanged.

Vanessa felt a hand close around her shoulder and whirled around, startled. "Karim!"

Shouts of hurried greetings towards Karim filled the air, but the workers seemed more interested in their food.

“Hi, Reese, Bandar.” Karim flashed them his smile. In the sunshine, he looked dazzling, his powerful shoulders and thighs showcased in a white muscle shirt and tight blue sleep pants. She noticed he wore no shoes. He must have jumped out of bed, hastily dressed and come out to join her. Her heart contracted at the thought as she watched him. His hair blew carelessly in the warm wind and his deep eyes stared into her, more penetrating than ever in the brightness. He lifted his gaze above her head for a moment and said, “Bandar, you eat such crap. I’ll never get used to fast food.”

“Leave me alone,” Bandar replied laughingly. “Talk to your lady. I eat what I want.”

“I know.” Karim’s smile slowly faded as his stare lowered to meet hers. Then his expression grew serious, his forehead wrinkling as he looked at her.

His expression confused and puzzled her. “What is it, Karim?” She reached up to brush back a curl that blew over his cheek.

He paused and something flashed in his eyes, but she couldn’t pinpoint the emotion. Finally, he massaged her shoulder. “I thought you’d left me. I reached out for you and you were gone.” His voice was calm, factual.

She studied his face. Did he care about her? Oh, that was ridiculous. He’d known her one whole night.

Brushing off her silly notions, she told him, “I heard noise out here and came to see what was going on.”

“I know.” His long lashes now hooded his gaze. “It’s just that — for a moment — I thought you’d changed your mind. Did you?”

She flashed back to last night, and as she watched his beautiful, full lips, she could almost feel his kiss, his tongue exploring her most intimate spots. A strange hot and cold sensation overtook her.

“No, I haven’t changed my mind.”

His lips kicked up at the sides and she swore he looked relieved.

“Hey, Karim!” Bandar called. “Lots of chemistry between you and that lovely lady.”

Karim blushed a manly shade of red and smirked at Bandar, while a few people in the crowd snickered.

“You wish you had a lady like this with you.” Vanessa heard the steel underlying his casual words.

“You’re right. I do.”

Karim laughed, and it sounded genuine. “If you’ll excuse me,” his gaze scanned the line of people, “my fiancé and I need to go inside to discuss our wedding plans. Bandar, I’ll let you know more about this later on. Good-bye, everybody.”

He urged Vanessa gently towards his house as the crowd buzzed.

“Fiancé!” Bandar finally shouted after him.

Karim opened the side door to his house and guided her inside. After he shut the door, he shoved her against the wall beside it and devoured her in a desperate, hot, possessive kiss that made Vanessa melt in his arms. As she ran her tongue through his mouth, tasting minty mouthwash and his own special flavor, her knees almost collapsed.

Karim grabbed her tightly around the small of her back, pressing her into him, not allowing her to fall. When he finally lifted his lips from hers, he moved them to her ear and licked it.

“I can’t let you leave me,” he told her in a low voice that gave her chills. “We will gather our documents together and be ready to marry in two days.”

Vanessa, breathing hard and full of white-hot sensations, couldn’t think of any other response than, “Yes! Yes, we will!”

## Chapter Four

Karim pressed his body into hers, his swelling cock shoved against her sex. As his lips feathered her face down to her neck, he couldn't stop his heart from pounding, both due to lust and fear. When he'd awakened and not saw her, his first thought was that she'd run away from him. He couldn't bear the notion, even though he'd just met her.

He could feel her weakening and felt triumphant that he had such an effect on her. This time he let her sink to her knees and sank with her. As he hastily unbuttoned her blouse, his mouth watered at the sight of her perfect, round breasts. How he loved a lady who didn't wear bras, especially Vanessa! His mouth cupped her breast and he heard her gasp. Damn, he wanted to take her right there on the floor, but knew it would be uncomfortable. Whisking her soft, feminine form into his arms, he carried her into the closest bedroom, which had no bed. But as his feet sank into thick carpeting, he knew this would work just fine. Setting her down on her back, he knelt before her and raked her from her head to her toes with his gaze, then back up again. They're eyes locked in a heated stare.

*What if she'd left him?*

He knew already, as irrational as it was, that she was the only woman he could love. Maybe he already did love her. His father had fallen for his mother at first sight. He believed it was possible and this more than just lust. He already felt a connection to her. With swift movements, he literally tore off her clothes, and then started removing his own.

“Let me do it.” He smiled at her and lay on his back as she peeled off his shirt, pulling it over his head and then moved to his feet to pull off his pants. He barely paid attention to his own unclothing as he stared at her rosebud nipples and curvy hips. He found himself hardly able to restrain from springing up and grabbing her in his arms.

*What if she'd left him?*

Vanessa sank to her knees, and then stretched out beside him, running her hand over his chest, making him nuts.

Breathing hard, he straddled her. “Don’t ever leave me in the mornings. I want to wake up with you right there.”

She looked puzzled. “For a marriage of convenience, don’t you think you’re being a little silly?”

He’d never tell her that he wanted it to work out. “I’m your bodyguard. If you’re missing, perhaps you are hurt. It’s my job to keep you safe.” Before she



could respond, he enveloped her in his arms and kissed her, rolling them to their sides so he didn't crush her.

His body jolted as he felt her soft hand around his cock and he deepened the kiss, drinking in her fresh womanly flavor, running his tongue deep into her mouth, then across her smooth teeth. He licked her lips, tasting them as she rolled his cock in between her hands. She had a touch like none other — gentle yet scorching hot. His staff grew harder as she caressed him in her hands and he ran his own hands over her breasts, then downward toward her pussy.

Her soft curls tickled his palms as he reached lower. When he found her damp opening, he slid his fingers up and down her slit. When his fingers were full of her cream, he lifted them to his mouth and licked them, watching her as he did so. Her beautiful honey brown eyes seemed to glow and she smiled, obviously turned on and pleased to be pleasing him. Her flushed cheeks told him that she was as white-hot, as eager, as him.

“My beautiful one,” he mumbled, bringing his hand to her pussy again, inserting three fingers inside of her, reaching for her sensitive G-spot.

She came all over his fingers and cried out as she arched. “For the love of God, what did you do?” she managed, her words mingled with breathlessness.

He smiled at her. “It's a secret. I take it that's new to you.”

She arched against him, coming again, dripping still. “Um, yes!”

He laughed, enamored by her innocence. Yet, innocent or not, she was so responsive to him.

In her passion, she'd removed her hands from his cock. Now he guided her hand back to his rock hard, pulsing staff and she purred like a kitten.

"I love touching you, Karim," she purred in a throaty voice.

"Oh, not as much as I love you doing it." He swept her into a hug, trying to catch his breath. Impossible. He couldn't breathe while her hand ran up and down his cock, but that was all right. When she ran her thumb over the head of his shaft, he could feel thunder inside, pounding at him to erupt. It sure didn't take him long under her hot ministrations.

Tightening his arms around her, he swung her body easily over his, and from his back, looked into her questioning eyes. Obviously she didn't know what to do, which turned him on all the more.

"Hold my cock and slide it inside of you," he instructed, itching to have her, his voice pained. "Sink down as far as you can, love, and ride me. Can you do that?"

"Oh! Yes!" She lifted his cock and he watched her as she guided him inside her pink opening, sitting on it as she took him deep. Hot throbbing flesh gripped his shaft and he quickly felt his body's wild sensations building to a peak, but tried to hold back as she rocked upon him. With desperation, he rocked his hips in

tandem with hers. He could hear himself growling through clenched teeth as her hips fell to his, both of them still rocking madly.

“Karim!” she called out, throwing her head back. “Omigod! Karim!”

His body shuddered wildly. He let out a guttural sound as hot seed filled his penis and exploded inside of her. He had no more wits. He was pure animal sensation, coming again and again, arching and releasing as she did the same.

Once sated, with Vanessa in his arms and both of them breathing loud, he still felt the aftershocks of his conclusion. Her head rested on his chest and he patted the back of her it. When he could finally speak, he said, “At least we’ll have a good time with one another’s bodies. That we know for sure.”

She turned her head and surprised him by licking his flat nipple. It shocked him all over again.

“Yes,” she said, laughing. “There’s no doubt about that. I just love your body. I could enjoy it all day.”

And he could enjoy hers forever. But they couldn’t just make love today — there were other things to do. He kissed her sweet lips. “We need to shower and get ready to leave.”

“Shower...together?” Her eyes twinkled.

His groin tightened. He'd love to take a shower with her, but he wanted to tease her a little, make her lust for him. That meant he couldn't do everything she wanted right away, even if he craved it desperately.

Cupping her chin, he promised, "We will do that soon, but not now."

She let out a cry of protest.

He couldn't help grinning. "It will be so much better if we wait."

"Why?"

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Ness, trust me. I've had a lot of experience."

"But..."

He put a finger over her lips. No woman had ever delighted him this much, but he wasn't about to tell her that he wanted her to feel desperate for him. And, he didn't want to show her every way that he could pleasure her, all in one day.

"There's a shower in my room. You can go first. I have some phone calls to make."

He stood up, and seeing her gaze on his cock, stepped into his sleep pants. The hunger in her eyes showed him that he'd achieved his goal of frustrating her, making her want more of him.

After she'd stared at him for at least thirty seconds, she frowned. "You won't change your mind? I've never taken a shower with anyone before."

“Later, dear.” He crossed his arms. If only his cock would cooperate with his plan. She finally shrugged, looking disappointed. “All right. So who are you calling?”

He could barely think, watching her naked beauty, so he turned his head. “I need to talk to Bandar first.” Laughing, he asked, “He looked pretty shocked, didn’t he?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Who is Bandar to you?”

“My brother. Half-brother. My father had two foreign lovers that he had sons with — his only sons — but I also have six sisters.”

“Oh! Um, Bandar doesn’t look much like you.”

“We both favor our mothers in some ways. His mother is of Swedish origin and mine is Irish. I have to call her, too. She’s going to be quite shocked that her bachelor son is getting married.” He grinned, thinking of his mother.

“My parents...I’m not even going to tell them,” she admitted with eyes round. “They won’t understand. Can I just call you my boyfriend?”

“You can call me anything you like, dear.” He felt a softness coming over him. She did that to him. “I will respect your wishes. But my mother...I want you to meet her soon. I’m certain you’ll like one another.”

She bit her lip.

He laughed. “You will.” He knelt down and stroked the underside of her chin. “We’re very close. She’s the only woman my father really loved.”

“Did he marry her?”

He hesitated. Did he really want to go into all that now? Having decided to marry in two days, he wanted to get the license. “I’ll explain at another time, when we aren’t so rushed.”

She shrugged again, then nodded. “My birth certificate and everything else is at my apartment.”

“We’ll go there.”

“I need to pack some of my clothes.”

“I’ll help you.”

She grinned at him, a gleam in her eye. “I have a shower.”

He laughed hard. No, she wouldn’t get what she wanted so soon. “Go take a shower *here*.” He tugged the bottom of her hair, then ran his thumb down the side of her face, trying to ignore his growing hard-on. “Alone,” he finished in almost a whisper.

“You drive a hard bargain.” She pouted as he stood up and pulled her to her feet, trying not to focus on her lovely shape.

“Yes, I do.” He kissed her knuckles then turned away. “Go. If we want to marry in two days, we have much to do.”

“All right.” She was obviously pretending to sound angry, but when he glanced over his shoulder, she stuck her tongue out at him, grinned, and then ran out of the room.

He strode to the wall and collapsed against it. His damn cock wouldn’t give him a moment’s rest. He’d be sore, there was no doubt about that.

A moment later, he was on the phone with his mother.

“*Getting married?*” Doreen McCrae was obviously stunned, not an unexpected response.

“In two days.” Karim stared out the window at the workers. “Mother, I have to do this.”

“Why? Is she pregnant?”

“No. I just met her.”

“What do you mean, Karim?” Her voice was harsh. “You just met her and you’re marrying her? Does she know what you do? The danger?”

Karim let out a breath. “I am going to tell Father that I’m no longer involving myself with his business while I’m married. I also plan on quitting my job on this side of the ocean. If the marriage doesn’t work out, then I may resume my activities, but I feel I’ve done enough. The why is simple. I want her. I’m tired, Mother. I want to settle down and simplify my life.”

“Well, that’s a relief, but I’m not liking this sudden marriage. It’s so crazy, Karim. Why not just live together and get her out of your system like all the others? It seems as if this marriage is just another role you’re playing, like you do for your father or the government.”

“I can’t believe I’m getting this advice from my mother.” He wanted to laugh, but held it in. “You, who fell for my father at one glance.”

“And got hurt by it. I don’t want you to get hurt. I can’t support this for you.”

Karim felt stung. He adored his mother. “I admit I’m playing a role to get her to marry me, Mother,” he admitted, feeling a sinking sensation in his stomach, “but please understand this.” He took a deep breath. “I need to marry her. I have to do anything I can to achieve that.”

“And why is that?”

Karim knew he was in for more criticism. “Well...I told her I needed to marry her in order for me to stay in the country.”

“*What?* Doesn’t she know you’re a citizen?”

His conscience smote. He had promised himself after that lie that he would never lie to her again, if only she’d forgive him one day for this one. “No, she doesn’t know. I admit I used it as a ploy to get her to marry me. I could not tell her the truth.” Now he was sorry he’d brought his mother into it, but how could he



have left her out of his plans? They were so close and he loved her so much...how could he explain something he didn't fully understand himself?

“Why are you marrying this girl, Karim?” Her words snapped at him.

He shut his eyes. “Well, she’s being stalked and needs a bodyguard.” He laughed ruefully. “I can certainly protect her, with all the training and experience I’ve had.”

“And that’s it? You needed to marry her for that reason?”

He paused, sucking in a deep breath. “I love her, Mother. One look and I knew she’s the only woman for me.” Rushing ahead of her protest, he said, “I know you believe in love at first sight. I’ve never acted impulsively before in such a serious matter, but I trust my instincts. If she marries me and does not fall in love with me, I’ll divorce her. But I hope she does learn to love me.”

“Oh, Karim, there’s no such thing as instant love. You’re so much like your father.” She spoke in her scolding mother voice. “This is going to hurt you both. I don’t like this.”

“I knew you wouldn’t, which is why I warned you. Still, I hope you will join us at the justice of the peace and give us your blessing.”

There was a long pause on her end, and Karim held his breath.

“Are you going to tell Omar?”

He thought of his father and longed to tell him, but couldn't. "He has his hands full right now. I will tell him at a better time."

"He can't be reached now anyways." His mother sounded sad now and Karim felt for her. His father often couldn't be reached. "I'm afraid for you, Karim." He heard her sigh. "You engage yourself in such dangerous activities and now you're setting yourself up for a broken heart."

"Ah, don't worry about my heart, Mother." He felt badly for his mother, never being able to comfort or touch the one she loved. Omar wouldn't allow her near him, and if she took matters into her own hands, she'd cause him more danger than anything else. She'd be a distraction that he couldn't afford.

Which brought Karim back to Vanessa. He was fortunate that he could protect and comfort the one he loved. "Mother, I need a favor."

"Of course, dear."

"There's a policeman in Chicago. His full name came up on Vanessa's cell phone last night in the caller ID..."

"Vanessa's your...fiancé, I take it." Her voice became icy.

"Yes. I have the full name of her stalker — Kenneth Wentworth. If you could — for me — please find out as much about this character as you can." He paused, knowing his next words would send his mother through the roof. "The bastard is on the Chicago PD."

“A policeman is stalking her?” His mother sounded furious. She let a string of four letter words.

“Yes. Makes it hard for her to turn him in. She’s tried, but they don’t take her seriously. I want to learn as much about him as I can so I can anticipate what he might do. My belief is that he’ll find her again and try to do her harm. If I’m prepared for him, I can do a better job of protecting her.”

“My dear boy. Must you always play the hero? This is a police officer.”

“I’ve faced terrorists in the Middle East. I can take care of one sleazy cop, Mother.”

“If that’s supposed to stop me from worrying, Karim, it didn’t work. Seems that even when you’re in between missions, or not in the Middle East smuggling people out of some dangerous country, you’re bored and you look for danger.”

Karim frowned and was silent a moment. She was right. At one time, he’d almost craved the adrenaline rush of taking a life-threatening risk. He’d believed in his causes, too, and had no regrets, but he was older now. He wasn’t getting off on danger anymore. The last thing he’d have wanted to do was face off with some crazed stalker cop.

“If our marriage works, I told you, I promise to give up the drama,” he finally said in a calm, soothing voice. “But I have to get rid of this stalker first. I can’t let him hurt Vanessa.” Before his mother could cut in, he rushed on. “Perhaps

somebody on the CPD knows that this man is a pervert and can give clues as to how he does things. Vanessa believes his friends are telling him where she is. That they don't think he's dangerous and are encouraging their so-called romance. Please, Mother." He balled his fist tightly; just thinking of Ken enraged him.

"Son, I'm a Glencoe police officer. I have no ties to Chicago."

"But you may know officers who do."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "I suppose if I ask around, maybe I can find somebody who can help you."

He felt his body sagging. "Thank you, Mother."

"I hope to hell this impromptu marriage works." Her anguish rushed forth. "I don't want to worry about my only child any longer. I'd love it if you put down the sword. Omar is choosing his dangerous lifestyle, but I know he also wants you alive and happy."

"Did you speak to him before he went MIA again?" His interest piqued.

"No, no. But the last time I did, he told me he wanted you and Bandar to live peaceful lives. He worries about you, like I do."

Karim's heart melted for his father. He almost felt tears tugging at the corners of his eyes. Each time his father disappeared, he never knew if he'd see him again. Hell, he had to face facts. Even if his father was hail and hearty, he didn't

want Karim back in Saudi Arabia. He still might never see him again. He needed to change the subject or he'd get all sentimental and sad. And for what?

“Mother, you will be at the wedding, right?” Somehow thinking about his marriage to Vanessa made everything seem all right, and attainable.

“Of course, dear.”

“I have to go.”

Quickly, Karim shut his cell phone and set it on the kitchen table. Vanessa came out, hair fluffy and damp, skin smelling of soap, and her blouse and skirt from yesterday adorning her strong-boned body. He held out his arms. She went to him and he folded her against him, his cock kicking up big time. “How was your shower?”

“Refreshing and wonderful, but it would have been better with you.”

Damn, the little innocent sure knew how to turn him on. He cupped her cheeks and lifted her head, drinking in her lovely face and soapy scent. “When I take my shower, I'll close my eyes and pretend that you're washing me. That will happen soon enough.”

He devoured her sweet lips, aware that she'd become less shy, and more forward as her tongue overwhelmed his mouth with as much enthusiasm as his devoured hers. They melded together like two jigsaw puzzle pieces in a perfect fit. He wanted her like crazy, but as she reached for his cock, he pulled away. Holding

back on her was his best weapon until she developed feelings for him that went beyond lust.

“Tease!” She tossed as he grinned at her, stepping to one side.

“That I am, but if you’re patient, we’ll both get exactly what we want.”

Then, before he could grab her in his arms and do everything to her that he longed to do, he quickly strode out the door, heading towards the bathroom.

“I never met a man who was a tease!” he heard her yelling from the doorway, sounding incensed.

As he walked with a rock hard cock, he broke into laughter. Like she’d had enough experience to know men.

“Stop laughing at me, jerk!” she called louder as he shut the door to the bathroom.

He laughed harder, but tried to mute the sound with his hand. Leaning his back against the door, his groin ached like crazy. This time he’d have to relieve himself.

He couldn’t wait to get the sexy minx into the shower with him. She was so full of unleashed passion, and he was eager to help her let it out.

## Chapter Five

Ken sat in the office of his comfortable bungalow and stared outside at the birds. He wished he felt as peaceful as his surroundings, but his altercation with the Arab last night rankled. Who was that scum who dared to be with the woman *he* loved? Well, fortunately he had connections, even though the Arab wasn't in the phone book and had never been arrested.

They hadn't called him "Ken the Cad" at the Police Academy for nothing. He had many women on the string, one of them a receptionist for North Chicago Hospital. The hospital had a huge outpatient clinic and Vanessa was a patient. Every time she changed her address or phone number, he called his adoring woman and she gave him an update.

Ken snickered. Stupid Wilma. She thought he loved her and that Vanessa was a criminal he was tracking. It blew his mind that anyone could be as stupid as Wilma. She never failed to give him any information he wanted. What a loser.

Now he had another name for her to check out, Karim Zaldana. The guys at the bar who'd helped him out last night had given him the Arab's name, none too happy with him either. After all, he wasn't even an American and he stole all the

women. Ken wondered if he could find Zaldana's address through stupid Wilma. Couldn't hurt to try. It could save him the bother of searching through public records.

Ken sat back in his comfortable chair and called her on his land phone.

"North Chicago Hospital. This is Wilma. How may I direct your call?"

"Hi, Wilma. It's Fred."

"The joke is old, Ken."

"I need you to look somebody up for me, babe. Some Arab guy by the name of Karim Zaldana." He spelled the last name.

He waited while he heard her punching the keyboard, tapping his fingers on his desk while he waited.

"Yeah, we have him," Wilma said brightly. "What do you need?"

Ken's heart sped up. "To start with, his address."

"Oh, Kenny, you know all this is confidential..."

"Is it true that ladies love diamonds?"

She paused and he grinned. He had no intention of marrying her, but he needed to string her along.

"Don't tell anyone I told you," she said, her voice quiet.

"I never do, do I?"

"N-no, but I'd get into a lot of trouble."



He laughed. "Think of it as your civic duty. You're helping a cop."

He heard a gasp on the other end of the line. "Oh, wow. He lives almost next door to my grandma in this gated community. He must be rich."

Ken seethed. "Yeah? Do you visit your grandma a lot?"

"Sure."

Well, that was one way to get into the gated community. He could tell Wilma to meet him there for a date at her grandmother's and then he'd have access to Karim's house. Wilma was so dumb she'd meet him anywhere he asked and not ask questions.

"You ever see the Arab?"

"Don't pay much attention to my grandmother's neighbors, Ken. So no."

"Well, just give me the address then."

She did and he jotted it down, aware that it was in a nice part of Chicago in his police jurisdiction. Lately there had been robberies there, gated or not. He planned to capitalize on that.

"Thanks, babe." He folded the piece of paper he'd written on. "I have to go..."

"Can I come over tonight?"

Shit. With Vanessa on his mind, he didn't want to have Wilma around.

"Maybe. I'll call you later." He hung up, figuring he could take her out to dinner

just to keep things friendly. Then he could pretend to get a police call and drop her back off at her home.

Ken stood up and smiled out the glass doors of his office. The only woman he wanted was Vanessa. One could say he was obsessed with her. With his co-workers thinking he was in a serious relationship with her, it was always a snap to get people to find her for him. They thought it was cute that he loved her so much.

He did love her. So much, in fact, that if she wouldn't willingly go with him, he'd love her to death. The Arab was no match for him. It was brains that counted, not size. Ken's mom had been told he had an IQ of a hundred and sixty.

The Arab wasn't nearly as smart as him. Nor was Vanessa. When his father, also a cop, had beaten him up, he'd called him a sissy and told him to never let anyone take him down, not even him. His father had taught him well. Ken was a good cop who almost always got his man.

Or, in this case, his woman.

He whistled as he walked out of the room, ready to go to the target range.



Vanessa took a look around her apartment, as if seeing it for the last time. Yet she knew she'd be back soon. So why did she feel...almost *know*...that it wouldn't happen?

Lust was such a powerful emotion. As she glanced behind her, she saw Karim languishing with his back against the wall, his arms crossed, one foot kicked carelessly in front of the other. His dark curls fell just above his eyes and his delicious lips curled upwards.

"This place is so homey with your little touches," he commented, looking around. "Why do you live here? As a realtor, could you not afford a bigger place?"

"I give a lot of money to my parents." She shrugged. "My father has MS and my mom had a heart attack. They're both disabled. They hate me doing it, but I pay their mortgage..."

"Their house is not paid yet?" He lifted dark eyebrows.

"No. They have about ten years to go. I won't allow them to lose the house. Every month I go to the bank and pay. I don't mind. They were so good to me growing up."

She stared at his eyes and something flashed in them. Admiration? Respect? Something good, she felt and smiled.

"It's no big deal. I really don't need a big place. It's just me. And my parent's house is perfect for them — has accommodations for wheelchairs and stuff. I'm the

only child, so it's my responsibility. Or, I feel it is. I love them so much." Did he get it? His dark eyes were blazing into her, as if trying to read into her soul. They caused her to melt inside.

"That's kind of you." He moved forward and took her into his arms, thrilling her. "I can't wait to see how you decorate our little home."

She smiled up at him, reaching up to trace his luscious lips. "I do a lot of crafts. I'll have afghans everywhere and I'll pick up knickknacks at garage sales and fix them up."

He pressed her cheek against his hard chest and she heard his heart beating .

"It may turn out we have much in common." I make furniture; made a lot of what you saw."

"Really!" She pulled back and cocked her head at him. "So you're handy."

His eyes gleamed. "In a few ways, yes."

She laughed, a chill running down her spine. He cradled his hands around her face and kissed her, snaking his tongue inside her mouth. She was becoming familiar with him and not so shy. Pressing herself into him, she made sure her sex pushed against his hardening cock. Reaching down, she gave it a squeeze and he hugged her tightly, moaning into her mouth.

To her surprise, he slid his hand down her back, then gave her a hard little slap on her buttocks, sending ripples of pleasure from her ass straight through to

her clit. She would have gasped if he'd let go of her lips. Perversely, she wanted him to do it again. It had turned her on so much. Since he wouldn't let her pull away from him, she dropped her hand and spanked his hard, tight buttocks, hoping he understood that she'd liked it.

He let her go, her lips still tingling, her ass still prickling, and they looked at one another and laughed. His hot breath tickled her face. "I take it you enjoyed that, you bad girl," his voice winsomely teased.

She could feel her face heating. "I don't know. Wasn't I supposed to like it?" As she stared into his wickedly flushed face, she rolled her eyes. "Does this mean I'm a pervert?"

He laughed again, stroking back her hair. "No, a lot of women like being spanked. I rather liked your spanking *me*, but from now on you can only do that when I allow it." His playful voice made it impossible for her to resent his order. In fact, she shivered at his words. His beautiful dark eyes narrowed at her. "I can introduce you to some sex play that you've probably never dreamed about, not in your innocent little head." He was still teasing her, stroking her hair back, making her scalp tingle.

It amazed her when her sex spasmed as he spoke. What was wrong with her? What kind of mind games was this man playing with her? She wanted him to

show her anything — everything — he knew. Did it matter what they did? They were consenting adults.

“So you’re into spanking and whips and chains...?” How far would he take it? She didn’t really want to do anything risky.

“Nothing that extreme, love. I’d never want to hurt you. But I’m a little non-conventional. I hope that’s all right.”

Her body was flaming. Something about his hot eyes caused her to curl up inside. His hands grasped her arms and rubbed them up and down. She felt the calluses of hard work and admired him for obviously participating in hard labor. Soft hands on a man turned her off. Her thought made her giddy with laughter — like she had so much experience!

“I didn’t expect...a man brought up in Saudi Arabia...to do those things.” She immediately felt stupid.

He smirked. “Much goes on behind closed doors. Plus, I’ve been with many American women. I won’t do anything you don’t want, but I’ll do everything — if you allow it — everything I know, which is considerable. And, in case you’re worried, I’m not into serious pain. A little pain here and there can be tantalizing; like that spanking, right?”

“I...I don’t know why. I must be nuts, but I trust you not to hurt me.” The words just blurted out, but she meant them. Why she trusted him so much, so fast,

she had no idea. The idea of letting him have his way with her, doing anything he wanted, drove her nuts. She could hear her own quick breathing and was so ready for him, she wanted to rip off his clothes.

“I hate men who abuse women.” His eyes grew dark as his lips tightened.

She felt a rush of warmth towards him, believing his words were sincere.

“Mean people suck,” she said and then grinned. “I saw that on the bumper sticker of somebody’s car.”

Karim’s face softened and he nodded. “And nice people rock.” He gently shoved her backwards, walking with her until she fell onto her plush blue sofa. He knelt beside her, fondled her breasts, and the breath left her lungs. “Lay down for me, please,” he said, in a gentle voice.

She felt like she was floating as she lay down on her couch, her head on the cushion. She kept her gaze on his, never wanting to stop staring at him. “Do you have a vibrator?” he asked quietly.

She felt a wet spot on her underwear. Damn! “I hate you for figuring that out.”

“You’re a passionate woman. If you didn’t have a man, certainly you found a way to relieve your urges.”

“Really, I didn’t use it much.” She knew she was blushing, but it was true. “Mostly I just relied on my trusty hand.” She laughed, and his low laughter followed.

“I’ll show you some tricks with it.” Gazing over at her dresser, he asked, “Is it in there?”

“Top drawer. Really, Karim, I think *you* turn me on more than any vibrator could.”

He was walking to her dresser. “I appreciate your kind words, but I can satisfy you in different ways with this.” He pulled open her drawer and pulled out her plastic toy.

“I...always thought it was sick of me to have one of those.” Her face flamed with embarrassment.

Karim shut the drawer and turned to her, holding it up, pushing buttons to make it buzz. “It’s an old one,” he commented half to himself. Then he caught her gaze. “But it will do.” As he came forward, he grinned. “It’s not strange. It would be odd if you weren’t interested in sex at all.”

Part of her wanted to sink into the sofa and disappear, but another part of her, a stronger one, wanted to let Karim do exactly what he pleased. She’d have to put her embarrassment of her naivety aside and go with the flow. Karim seemed to



enjoy her innocence. As he knelt beside her, his gaze caressed her, toes to head, then his stare locked on hers. “I love your eyes.”

“I love yours.” And she did. Just saying the words made her tingle.

He pushed up her skirt and slowly pulled down her briefs. She started to shake.

“Should I be doing something to you?”

“No.”

“But I want to...”

“You will. When I say so. Let me be in charge in the bedroom, all right?”

His words sent a thrill through her. Something about him being in charge excited her. She needed a psychiatrist badly, but needed Karim even more.

“Am I in charge?” He started sliding his fingers up and down her slit, and her breath left her lungs. “Am I?”

“Y-yes.”

He ducked his head and licked her, wiggling her clit with his tongue.

She arched her back and cried out, coming. When she was flat on her back, staring at him as she breathed fast and hard, she wondered how he could make her come so quickly.

Before she could ask, he switched on the vibrator. “Where has this been?” he inquired, his voice amused, his eyes bright. “Besides in the dresser, I mean.”

Oh, God, help her...she again felt her face flame. “Where do you think?”

He shrugged. “Your pussy, sure. But did you ever put it in your mouth? In your buttocks?”

His low, velvet voice washed over her and she turned her head towards the couch. How did he know? She’d always felt that her enjoyment of the vibrator in her ass was sick.

He placed the humming toy against her thigh and she jumped, looking at him.

“You can tell me. I asked because I want to know what gives you pleasure. I really don’t care what it is, but if you don’t tell me, you’ll deprive yourself. Have you put this vibrator in your lovely ass?”

Her lovely ass shuddered at his question.

She swallowed hard. “H-how did you know?”

He grinned and she melted inside. “I didn’t know. I just asked. Good. I like anal play, too. So, you aren’t so tight that I can’t slide my cock in there?”

“Are you trying to drive me insane with this sex talk?” She could feel her nectar spilling from her sex.

He nodded, still grinning. “Sex talk can be...” he bent to kiss her pussy, flicking his tongue as she gasped, “...sexy.”

She couldn't help laughing, even as her body turned both hot and cold at the same time. "You're incorrigible. I'm marrying an incorrigible man who is going to corrupt me."

"Indeed. Spread your legs for me, dear."

Her sex was already spasming. When he set the humming vibrator over her sensitive pink flesh, pressing harder on her nub, she screamed. She couldn't help it. For a moment, she couldn't think, didn't know who she was, couldn't even remember her name.

"Stop!" she shouted. "Please, stop! I can't take it!"

"If you really want me to stop..."

"Never stop!" She had no idea what she was babbling as she shuddered with icy-hot sensations, her mind leaving her. She came over and over again. He finally shut it off, and then climbed beside her on the sofa, bending his knees to fit. He held her as she continued to shake and gasp.

Finally, her body quieted and she wrapped her arms around him. "God, you're naughty!" she whispered as she eyed his lips.

"Indeed."

She kissed him long and passionately, drinking in his delicious, minty flavor and male juices, but when she reached for his cock, he pulled away and stood. She sat up and looked at him, puzzled. "What the hell...?"

“Later.” He was breathing hard.

“I’m ready...”

“Of course. As am I. But you’ll have to wait.” He turned and strode to the closet door across the room. Opening it and finding her clothes, he said, “We need to do a lot today and you have to change. Let me pick out your clothes.”

“No! You can’t boss me around...”

He interrupted. “And don’t put on underwear, all right?”

God, her body was shuddering again. She couldn’t help laughing. He looked at her over his shoulder, a wicked gleam in his eyes and a boyish grin on his face. All right, so it turned her on to have him boss her around, at least sexually. He wasn’t hurting her. He was making her feel attractive. No man had ever done that before and she certainly didn’t understand why a super-hunk like Karim could be so enamored with her.

*He needs me to stay in this country...but he seems to really find me sexy. Why fight it when I like it, too?*

“What do you want me to wear, Master?” She crossed her arms.

“Oh, I like when you call me Master.” He grinned wider, then turned back around and pulled down a low-cut red shirt. “I love red, the siren’s color. Wear this.” He walked back and sat next to her, placing it in her hands. His nearness undid her as she inhaled his musky scent.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “All right. I like this top anyways. What else do you want me to wear?”

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. “Do you have a black skirt that isn’t too long — or too short?”

“You care if it’s too short?”

He laughed. “When we go meet my mother, I mind. Do you have a matching jacket — maybe a short one — to cover how low this shirt comes down?”

“Yeah, both black. Will that satisfy you?” Even she heard her teasing sarcasm.

“Very much. Wear sandals, too, not with heels though. Save that for the bedroom. I don’t want you to hurt your feet looking sexier for me. As if you could look any sexier.” He kissed her ear and she took in a shaky breath.

“I don’t see why you think I’m sexy.”

“You’re not me. If you were, you’d understand. Are you ready to meet my mother?”

With her body still craving more of him, it was hard to think. “Sure. God, I hope she likes me!”

He kissed her ear again. “She will. We’re going to her house. She lives in a beautiful estate home. You’ll like it.”

Vanessa froze. “Estate home?”

“Omar bought it for her.”

“Your father?”

“Yes. He takes excellent care of her.”

Questions sprung into her mind. Should she ask? Why not? “So he’s...wealthy?”

“I would say, yes.” He sounded a little strained for the first time and his body stiffened.

“Sorry I asked.”

“It’s all right. You’d realize he was sooner or later.”

“But he doesn’t help you out?” She couldn’t help her curiosity.

Karim snorted. “I don’t want him to help me out. I will make it on my own. One thing you must know about me. I don’t depend on anybody. Does that bother you? Would you want his wealth?”

She pulled back and stared at him, aware that his eyes had hardened. So he wanted reassurance that she wasn’t after his money. If he had any. She really didn’t know if he did or didn’t. “You want me to sign a pre-nup since this is just a marriage of convenience and hot sex?” She tickled under his chin. He relaxed and chuckled.

“You would do that?” he finally asked.

“Sure! I don’t even want to know what you do and don’t have, Karim. I need a bodyguard. You need an American wife. I don’t really want anything from you if we part.” As she said “if we part,” she felt her heart contract a little. She already knew she didn’t want to leave him. At the same time, she questioned her common sense for being so sure, again. The man played head games with her.

Karim pressed his lips against her and they locked in a particularly passionate kiss, with Karim putting his heart and soul into it. She could feel him changing the slant and pressure of his lips to tease and torture her. His tongue flicked to the roof of her mouth and almost down her throat. Then he pulled back and licked her lips before saying, “I don’t want you to sign a pre-nup. If it doesn’t work out, I want you to have half of my assets.” His eyes gleamed with mischief. “Even if we are only splitting a can of peas.”

## Chapter Six

Karim could feel Vanessa's awe at his mother's house, a huge Georgian with pillars holding up a roof over the large stoop. He had his arm around her shoulders, massaging her arm because her muscles were tight.

"You're curious," he noticed as he rang the doorbell. "Omar wanted her to live in this gated community for her safety and added every luxury in the world. Mother fussed over it, but Omar bought it for her anyway. Then he talked her into living here by speaking of how he would worry if she didn't. It's quite high security."

"I've shown houses like these, but never known anyone who actually lived in one." She leaned harder into him, which he liked, and he tightened his grip around her. "Does she live alone in this huge place?"

"She has lots of servants to keep her company."

"Servants?" She looked up at him. He saw the disapproval in her eyes and laughed.

"Omar insisted. He didn't want her alone and he knew she'd never marry since she couldn't be with him."



“It’s so sad to be separated from somebody you love so much,” she said with real feeling. “Is it a cultural thing why he wouldn’t marry her? Or couldn’t?”

Karim took in a deep breath of fresh, lukewarm air. He couldn’t get too specific, but could tell by the way her amber eyes bored into his gaze that she’d demand an answer. “He does things — good things — in his country, but they’re risky. He needs to play the good Saudi Arabian and an foreign, western wife would not work. Her welfare would have been at risk, my dear.”

When he saw the alarm on her face, he twisted a lock of hair around his finger.

“What exactly does he do that’s so risky?” She obviously was not placated. “Do you do it, too?”

He was relieved when the door opened.

“Sir!” The short, balding man in a suit greeted him with a white smile. “Please come in. It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Karim. Your mother is in the sitting room.”

“Thank you, Benjamin.” Karim took Vanessa’s slender hand and pulled her into the living room.

“Good heavens,” Vanessa mumbled as she looked around. “There’s an almost a nineteenth century elegance to this place. Love these tall ceilings and windows,

and the furniture are so elegant. Love the ornate designs on the wooden parts.” Her gaze darted to his as they strode along. “Did you make any of this?”

“Some of the tables,” Karim said, feeling embarrassed, but happy at her interest. “That oak coffee table is mine. I also made that table and the chairs in the dining area.” He pointed to a table with a chandelier hanging over it.

“Shit, now that’s talent,” Vanessa said, shaking her head. Then she laughed. “And I thought I had a touch of talent, just because I could decorate well.”

“That is talent, love.”

They walked through several rooms before Vanessa asked laughingly, “So is this sitting room two miles away?” He chuckled, aware of how large the house must seem to somebody unused to it. “Right through that door, dear.” He felt her hesitate, as if she were a little afraid, so he stopped and turned, giving her a wink. “She doesn’t bite,” he whispered loudly. “Not too hard anyway.”

“I heard that, Karim.”

He turned and saw his mother standing in the arched doorway, her arms crossed, upturned lines tugging at laughing dark eyes. She was tall and sturdy, with beautiful auburn curls that cascaded past her shoulders, and a winsome smile. He wondered if Vanessa was surprised at his mother’s attire — a light blue jogging suit.

Karim kissed his mother. “Out running?”

“Not yet, but soon.” Her gaze flickered from him to Vanessa and he held his breath, desperately wanting the two of them to like one another. If he had his way, they would be in each other’s life for as long as they lived. He watched as his mother flashed her grin at the woman he loved. Vanessa hesitated, and then responded with her own beautiful grin.

“I’m Doreen McCrae,” his mother said, her voice gentle. “Please call me Doreen.”

“I will.” Vanessa’s tone was warm. “I’m Vanessa Nash.”

His mother’s forehead wrinkled. “Young lady, are you Irish?”

Vanessa’s face relaxed even more. “On both sides. My grandfather was born in Dublin and my mother came to the United States when she was two years old.”

They started chatting and walked into the sitting room together, the sunlight spilling in from French doors and large windows. When Karim took a seat across from the two women — who sat on a cushy deep blue sofa talking as if they’d known one another forever — he took a handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his brow.

A few minutes after they all sat down, Florence, the maid, stepped into the room. She was a white-haired, no-nonsense looking woman with a heart of gold. Karim remembered how she used to fuss over him when he was young.

“Would anybody like coffee or tea?” she asked, watching Karim with mischief in her eyes.

“What do you think?” He teased. Florence knew what he liked to drink.

“You haven’t been here much lately,” Florence answered. “That’s what I think. It’s good to see you. Miss Doreen, should I bring you tea?”

“Yes, thank you, Florence,” Doreen responded in a warm voice.

“And you, miss?” Florence asked Vanessa.

Vanessa seemed flustered as Karim watched her.

“Do you want me to help you get the coffee and tea?” she asked the older woman.

Karim quickly shared an amused look with his mother, whose lips curled up.

“What a sweet young lady you are,” Florence commented with a laugh. “But I get paid to do this.”

“Oh, I’ll help.” Vanessa stood up, shooting a shy smile at Karim. “If nobody minds, that is.”

He flashed a smile at her, feeling better and better about his choice of a bride. Spoiled, she wasn’t. “I don’t remember anyone offering to help Florence before, but go, if you want.”

When she disappeared, talking quietly to Florence, Karim moved from the chair to the sofa and sat close to his mother. Whispering, he asked, “What do you really think?”

Doreen pressed a maternal hand on his arm. “If she’s for real, I like her very much.” She smiled. “With your birthday at the end of the week, I’d say she’s a wonderful present.”

Karim frowned, hearing about his birthday. “Thirty-five.” He shook his head. “It’s definitely time for me to get married, and I could tell if she was fake, Mother. You forget that I’ve survived by deciding who to trust, and I made good decisions.”

His mother’s face sobered. “Well, you have no idea if you can really trust the girl, Karim. You don’t want to risk exposing what your father does. And what you and Bandar also do.”

“Told you, I’m done.” He felt tired at the mere thought of continuing to shadow possible terrorists. The agency he worked for was virtually unknown; only people very high up in the government knew about its existence, but it was effective. He was its top agent. Because of his ethnicity, he could easily infiltrate places that others couldn’t — not that all terrorists were Arabian or from the Middle East. Not by a long shot. But for those that were, he was the man always chosen for the mission. The Secretary of State had begged him not to quit when he’d told the director of SURVIVE that he was thinking of retiring.

“I’m sticking to renovating homes. It’s an appropriate livelihood for a husband — and father.”

“Karim, you’re taking this too far. Stop the fairytales! You don’t know if this will work!”

He dropped his head as her condemnation rang in his head. He knew it would work; had to make it work.” I put out a few feelers on this Kenneth Wentworth, the Chicago policeman,” Doreen continued in a softer voice.

Instantly, he met her gaze.

“Jason Martz is going to talk to his friend from the Chicago PD today, see if he can get any information on him. I’ll call you as soon as I hear. In the meantime, since he’s stalking her, keep her at the servant’s quarters. He’ll have more trouble finding you there, since your address is listed elsewhere.”

“That’s what I plan on doing.” As he watched her, he felt a wave of love for the brave mother who had often raised him all alone. “Are you working the night shift tonight?”

“Yep.”

“Be sure you aren’t working when I marry Vanessa in two days.” He smiled at her, knowing she’d support him, even though she thought he was certifiably insane.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” She smiled gently at him. “I just hope that you overcome the extraordinary odds and the marriage works.”

“I’ve always overcome bad odds,” Karim replied, feeling his lips kick up.

And it was true.



Ken was in his police car when he drove past Karim’s house, gaping as he saw the enormous estate home locked behind a gated community. As he drove, his head whirled. So the stupid Arab was probably some damn sheik. One of those slimy terrorists from abroad, who came here to rob hardworking Americans of their money, bragging about their oil, and blowing up buildings. Ken seethed. He hated this Karim all the more now after seeing his impressive digs.

And, if Vanessa hadn’t lied to him — the bitch — she lived in the mansion with an enemy of their country.

How could Vanessa do this to him? Since the day he’d stopped her for speeding, he’d wanted her. Hell, he’d let her off with a warning on the condition that she had dinner with him that night. She’d been thankful and offered to go out with him *as a friend only*, but he’d seen the desire in her eyes. When he’d tried to kiss her in front of her apartment, she’d teased him by turning her cheek. He’d

forced the issue and she'd slapped him, then run inside her building. He would have followed her and made her face her feelings, but an old geezer was standing in the lobby reading a paper, looking like he'd be there all night long.

Ken returned to her many times, with good intentions, but she kept turning him down, eventually running from him. Still, he knew that deep inside she loved him as much as he loved her. She was just playing hard to get. The Arab couldn't mean anything to her. He'd followed her around enough to know that she never dated, that she was waiting for him.

And now she'd pulled this, the little slut. *My slut! She's mine!* He would own her or she would die. Hadn't his father, the man he admired most on earth, almost choked his mother for cheating on him? Well, Vanessa was cheating on him and he wouldn't allow it.

Ken breathed heavily. The tramp probably wanted to marry the Arab for his money. She couldn't possibly care about him. Well, he'd teach both of them a lesson they'd never forget. *If they survived.* If not, he'd know that he'd destroyed the only woman he would ever love. The thought of the Arab's sleazy hands on her turned his stomach. One way or another, he would stop that from ever happening again.



Being a policeman, he'd seen it all. He knew how to get away with things. His record was stellar. Nobody would suspect him, especially when he grieved deeply for the woman that all of his co-workers believed was his bride-to-be.



After a long day visiting with Doreen and then going to the County Clerk's office, Vanessa was more than ready to relax when Karim opened the side door to his home. As soon as they stepped inside, the smell of strong spices filled the air. Vanessa jolted as she saw a young Arab woman at the stove. Immediately, the woman turned to smile at her.

"This is my friend, Cala," Karim quickly introduced, his hand resting on Vanessa's shoulder.

"I see." Vanessa tried to smother her jealousy. "Hi."

Cala nodded at her then turned back to the stove and stirred a pot. On the stove sat a coffee percolator, one like her grandmother had used. "Karim, do you always let Cala come to cook when you're not home?"

"No. Let's leave her finish and go relax — in bed."

Her gaze rose to meet his and he gave her a mysterious little smile. Then he spoke Arabic to Cala. She answered without turning around.

Vanessa felt uneasy as Karim guided her out of the kitchen and into the bedroom where he'd devoured her the night before. She couldn't get excited with Cala in the house. Turning to face Karim as soon as he shut the door she commented, hoping she sounded casual. "An old girlfriend?"

His eyes twinkled.

*He knows I'm jealous and is enjoying this.*

In spite of not wanting to feed his ego, she couldn't help blabbing on. "So who is she? I'm sure you don't allow strangers to have your key and start cooking, right?"

"Right." He eyed her with a heated look and started running his hands over her shoulders, down towards her breasts, but she stepped back.

"So my little one is maybe developing a care for me?" His dark brows lifted. "You sound jealous."

Shit, she hated that. "No, just curious."

"She's a cousin of mine. I helped bring her to America."

As Vanessa almost wept with relief, he pulled her into him, his chest vibrating as he chuckled. "You're going to experience a Saudi Arabian meal tonight, my dear."

She looked up at him, suddenly light, her heart fluttering

“In bed.” He kissed her nose briefly. “I was going to set a cloth on the floor. That was a custom at Father’s home, but I can’t do that. The bed is here and so inviting, right?”

Suddenly her body trembled. “Right. Wow.”

“I assume you’ve never had Saudi Arabian food before.”

“You assume right.” The idea of sharing a meal in bed with him was strangely erotic. She felt her knees weaken.

“It’s spicy.”

“I like spice.”

His eyes lit like two flames. “So do I. And you provide lots of spice. Cala is going to serve us as we...relax. She will knock on the door to let us know the food is there. We certainly don’t want her to walk in on us, do we?”

“N-no.”

“Food and sex kind of go together.” Karim nibbled on her ear, making her blood heat up. His breath tickled her.

“Never tried that before.” She was zealously anticipating the experience.” I didn’t think you had.”

They gazed into one another’s eyes. Again she felt as if she loved this man that she’d just met. The air between them seemed to sizzle with invisible electrical bolts.

He lifted her hands and kissed each finger separately. “You’re shaking. Are you cold?”

She laughed a little, nervously. “Not with you near me. Hot is more like it.”

He lifted his chin and smiled with closed lips. Finally he said, “And you are beautiful enough to cause a man to burst into flames.”

She couldn’t handle his compliments. “Come on, Karim. Let’s get real here. I’m an average looking woman who could stand to lose a good thirty pounds.”

“So you mistake curves for excess weight. No, my dear, you are perfect as you are and with that honey blond hair and those light, golden-brown eyes — you seem more delicious than any cuisine.”

She trembled as he pulled her top over her head and tossed it aside.

“You don’t need this.” He tweaked her nipple, almost pinching it, and a shudder racked her entire body. She fell into him, knees buckling and he lifted her into his arms. “If you weighed so much, I couldn’t carry you,” he teased as he carried her to bed.

“Wh-what did you do to my...?”

He lowered his head and used his teeth to move her other bud back and forth, and she arched in his arms. “Karim! Oh, hell! Oh, shit! I’m going to pass out.”

He let go and lowered her to the quilt, grinning at her as she watched him through glazed eyes. Breathing hard, she shuddered once again as he pulled off her skirt and let it flutter to the carpet. "I'm going to shave you."

She felt her face heat. Hadn't she done a good enough job of shaving her legs? Were her armpits hairy?" Your pussy. I've done it many times. It won't hurt. You'll like it."

"Oh!" She knew her mouth had dropped open.

He stood and grinned wider. "I'll do all the work."

He pulled off his t-shirt, exposing the most enticing, delicious shoulders and six pack abs she'd ever seen. Hell, he looked better than most models. As he stepped out of his pants, she gasped. Like her, he also wore no briefs.

"Undergarments are such a pain." He winked at her, his eyes amused. He could obviously read her expression.

Her gaze dropped to his giant cock. Was he normal? She still couldn't believe a man could have a cock that hung halfway down his muscled thigh. It was already getting hard.

Trying to distract herself, and aware that she'd already come once, she asked, "Do you always undress yourself when you shave somebody else?"

“Always,” he responded in a low, velvety voice. “It’s a sexy thing to do. I don’t mind if you cop a feel while I’m busy, but don’t get me too turned on. I need a steady hand.”

As he turned to walk into his bathroom, she watched his sexy ass. Shit on a shingle, she’d never seen anyone so beautiful in her life. It felt as if this man wasn’t really human. He was too perfect. The man that she loved looked like an Adonis.

Loved! She slapped the side of her head as he disappeared into the bathroom. Lust, not love! She let out a breath and tried to calm her raging hormones, at least for a moment. She knew that, soon enough, she’d be spasming out of control. The man did that to her.

If she could only have him forever. Why did this have to be a marriage of convenience? Well, she’d enjoy him while she could.

## Chapter Seven

Karim came out of the bathroom with an old fashion bowl of shaving cream and a razor and she winced.

“I’ve never hurt anyone.” He sat beside her and she could feel him.

The atmosphere was surreal, the kitchen odors permeating the room. To sate her combined fear and excitement she questioned, “So this will be a real Saudi dinner?”

He smiled at her, letting the bowl rest on his powerful thigh. “Not really. I told Cali to leave out the garlic and onions, which are a big part of Saudi dishes.” His eyes twinkled. “I have no idea how it will taste without them, but I thought it was best.”

She couldn’t help laughing.

“There will be nice...sweets for desert. In Saudi Arabia, sometimes dinner isn’t served until ten at night, but guests are offered sweets to fill them up.”

She noticed that he spoke in a seductive way. When he talked about sweets, her pussy spasmed. “Sweets before dinner?”

He nodded. “And you’ll like Saudi Arabian coffee too.”

“Is it different than American coffee?”

“Yes.” He touched her thigh with his fingers, just tapping her lightly.

God help her!

“Karim, are you really into your Saudi culture?” She knew she couldn’t hurry him into pleasuring her, so she tried even harder to distract herself from her crawling skin.

“I’m a good mixture. I take what I can from both of my heritages.”

“Are you a Muslim?” She took his free hand and pressed it to her cheek as she asked the question, hoping he didn’t feel she was asking it with hostility.

His darkened eyes and tightened muscles told her he was on-guard. “What if I am?”

She shrugged.

“You wouldn’t care?”

“Why should I? You think I believe *all* Muslims are terrorists?” She turned her head to kiss his calloused palm. When she looked at him again, his face looked soft.

“My father is one, and he strives hard for peace. I’m more spiritual, still finding my own path. One thing I know is there is something bigger, more powerful than us. Perhaps that is what brought us together.”



She felt a rush of excitement. He was turning her on in so many ways, she wanted to pull him over her. His voice alone could make her tremble.

“I don’t know what brought us together,” she told him, hearing her voice shake a little, “but I’m glad something did. I...like you.”

He bent down and kissed her neck. She threw back her head, eyes shut, enjoying the sensations rushing through her. “I like you too,” he said, as he nibbled on her flesh.

A disturbing tension started building inside of her. She liked it when he used his teeth and tongue to play with her skin. He was so close to her, she smelled his earthy manliness. “H-how old are you, Karim?” She forced the words out, although they sounded an octave higher than usual.

He moved his lips down towards her breasts and buried his face in her cleavage. “Thirty-four,” he answered into her bare skin, causing her insides to vibrate.

She fluffed the back of his hair, spotting goosebumps on the back on her arm. “Old man.” He laughed, his breath fanning over her skin and causing more shivers. Finally he sat up. “Time for me to play barber. Spread your legs for me, please.”

Her body tingled, but she hesitated, not sure why.

“You’ll like this.” In a stronger voice, he commanded, “I insist.”

She spread her legs, prickles rushing through her. He watched her and she felt her breathing speed up as he dipped his hand into the bowl of shaving cream, then lathered her mound with his hand, sticking a finger into her slit as he did so. She gasped as her belly tightened, and he shot her a wicked grin. Next he brought out the razor. Before she could wonder if it would indeed nick her, he started shaving her with smooth, erotic strokes.

“You can’t move.” She thought she detected amusement in his voice. “You have to stay still until I finish.”

She bit her lip until she was certain it bled as he shaved the last of her hair. When he stood up to take the bowl and razor back to the bathroom, she arched and came, her body rushing a delicious release of tension that she’d been forced to hold back.

When he came back out of the bathroom, his dark eyes sparkled. “If you hold it all in like that, it’s better.” He stretched out beside her on the bed. “There are times I may restrain you myself to give you the same effect.”

She lifted her gaze, and found herself watching the headboard of the bed. “You’re going to kill me while we’re together, Karim. I don’t know how much of this I can take without dying.”

He wrapped his fingers around her hair. “How will you die?”

“Heart attack.”

He laughed. "Then I will just have to give you CPR." He leaned over and kissed her, his tongue reaching for her throat, and she could feel his body moving. She turned away from him just long enough to ask, "What are you doing, Karim? I don't trust you."

"Quiet." He sealed her lips and ran his big hand over her breasts while she shook, groping for his cock. But before she could pleasure him, he pulled away and held up a dish. "I found this under the bed."

She stared at it and a naughty thrill washed over her. It looked like a brownie with honey spilling over the sides.

"Cali must have left this here for us." "You told her to."

"Maybe."

"There's no fork."

"Guess we'll just have to feed it to each other." He lifted it to her lips. She took a bite as the sweet honey coated her lips and tongue. He watched her lips for a moment, then leaned over to kiss her, both of them dissolving in chocolate and honey.

God, he tasted so good and his mouth and tongue moved around with such hotness. When she swallowed the wrong way and started to cough, he quickly pulled her up and patted her back, concern in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

Banging her chest with her fist, in between coughs, she gasped, “I think I’ll live.”

He rubbed her back and pulled her against him until the coughing spell subsided. She melted into him, her eyes shut, her body on fire. As he stroked her hair, she wondered if she was in heaven.

After she’d stopped coughing, he licked her ear, then whispered, “I like the taste of you with honey.”

“Y-you taste pretty good yourself.”

“I’m glad you think so. I have a recipe we both need to try.”

Everything he said oozed of sex and she shuddered again. He was like a drug to her now. She couldn’t do without him.

“Lay back now.” He pulled out a jar from under the bed.

“Honey.” She laid back and chuckled.

He stuck a finger in the jar and coated her tender slit with its juices. She felt goosebumps all over her, even on her toes. “Shit, I’m a goner.”

“I hope so.” He suddenly set the jar on the bed stand and straddled her, his large, thick, throbbing cock dangling over her belly. “Put some honey on me, dear. We can feast on one another at the same time.”

“That...sounds good.” Hand shaking, she dipped her fingers into the jar, then smoothed the honey over his throbbing cock, teasing him, making herself hotter.

“Oh, yeah!” he murmured. Suddenly he turned himself so that his head was just above her sex and his cock dangled over her lips.

“What the hell...?” She felt her heart racing.

“Make sure you lick all the honey off of me and I promise I’ll make sure I clean you completely.”

“Oh...my...goodness.” She was a little shocked, but couldn’t stop herself from flicking her tongue out to taste him, stealing a few drops of salty pre-cum off his head, along with a taste of honey. It was glorious. The pleased sounds from deep within his throat made her smile.

“Damn, your pussy looks hot without the hair. So sweet and inviting,” he mumbled, his voice soft yet husky.

She felt her hand tremble even more as she reached for his cock to take him in her mouth. She’d certainly been missing out on a lot, but — would it have been so good with somebody else? As she milked his honeyed cock, feeling deep affection washing over her, she didn’t think it was possible.

He was worn out, yet ecstatic as he held her soft naked form close to his. He hadn’t gotten enough of her. Would he ever? Inhaling her scent mixed with honey, he knew that this was heaven; she was heaven to him. Who needed four wives

when one could do such a fine job of satisfying him? As he stroked her soft hair, he asked, “Are you still awake? Cala will be bringing dinner soon.”

“What?” She quickly lifted her head, her eyes wide open as she pulled the sheets up to her chin, blushing. “I don’t want her to see us this way,” she said in a panicked voice. “Karim, she can’t just walk in here...”

He laughed long and hard at her delightful modesty, pulling back the sheets enough to expose her luscious, plump breasts. His cock bucked as he spoke to her. “Cala will leave the tray outside the door, knocking to let us know she put it there. Nobody is going to invade our privacy.”

Vanessa’s blue eyes hit the ceiling as she blew out a breath. “Well, that’s a relief. You’re full of so many surprises that I didn’t know.” Her amused gaze fell to his and she slid a soft finger down his face.

Oh, did that feel good. He ran his hand up and down the hot flesh of her arm. He’d be ready to make love again soon.

“Tell me about yourself.” He nuzzled her neck. He wanted to know more about her, everything about her — her secrets, her hopes, and dreams. “You haven’t told me much.”

She shrugged, still running her fingers up and down his face, spoiling him in a wonderful way. “There’s not much to tell. I was a late-in-life baby. Mom was over forty when she had me. I lived in your stereotypical Brady Bunch family, only I was

the only Brady kid. Lots of attention and love. Private school. Vacations. College. Dad was a carpenter and Mom was an interior decorator. I'm a lot like Mom."

He smiled at her. The love for her parents was evident in her eyes. "And now they're sick," he said, growing serious. "Both of them. That's sad."

"Yeah. They're in their seventies. I'm not really ready to lose them. Then, I'll be all alone." She sighed.

He didn't like that she doubted him, even though he'd given her no reason to think this was a forever kind of love. Maybe it was time to alter his plan to romance her.

"You have me." He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, a shot of heat rushing to his cock.

She slid him a look, then dropped her gaze.

"I mean it. You don't ever have to be alone again. I'll take those vows seriously. Ness, I won't make you leave unless you want to go." Damn, his groin...he'd always had a healthy libido, but this was nuts. He felt as if he could make love to her all night.

"I can't stay with you if you don't — if we don't love each other." She gave him a look that he tried to read, but it was gone too fast. Before he said anything, she spoke again. "If we're going to be married, even for just a while, I think I should

know a little about you too. Will you tell me about yourself?" She stroked his hair back and looked into his eyes, melting his insides, fueling his erection.

But her question troubled him. If he told her about his years in Saudi Arabia, smuggling those in danger out of the country, could he trust her not to tell anyone about it? With her inexperience, she could innocently give secrets away. Nobody could guess who had the wrong connections in Saudi Arabia. Enemies were cloaked in secrecy and functioned as waitresses, doctors, ditch diggers, anything. His father could be endangered if she spoke to the wrong person. It wasn't likely, but it could happen.

And what about his job at SURVIVE? Only the President, Vice President and those employed even knew of the efficient homeland security agency. Agents were ordered not to tell their wives the truth about their jobs because too much was at stake. If Ness knew about SURVIVE, she would be in grave danger if she spoke a word about it to anybody. He could never let her know about its existence.

"Karim?" She broke into his thoughts, her lips close to his, her honey breath tickling his face. "Tell me about yourself, anything. When did you come to America?"



“Nothing to tell, love.” He felt his stomach twisting. He had to change the subject fast. “There are better things to do than talk about me.” He moved closer, grabbing the back of her head. “Don’t you think?”

He watched her carefully, enjoying the lust on her face, cupping her breast, making her mew like a kitten. She wanted him again. He could divert her questions. Pulling her into him, he aimed for her lips, but got her cheek. “Hey.” His voice lowered. Quietly, he said, “You can’t tell me you’re not turned on, dear heart. I can feel you trembling.”

“Really.” She reached up to touch his face. “You turn me on like I never thought possible, but I do want to know something about you. Please?” She kissed his lips, but pulled back quickly.

Shit, his cock was on fire. He throbbed against her. She deserved an explanation, any explanation, even a half-assed one. “I can’t get too specific about myself. It could get you into trouble, love, and I won’t do that. Let’s just say I’ve lived an interesting life and hope it gets a lot more boring.”

“You said that your father does good things in Saudi Arabia.”

He didn’t want to think about his father. “He does.”

“Will I get to meet him?”

“I don’t know.” He decided to take matters into his own hands and lifted her up, taking her onto his lap, her sex spread wide against his throbbing shaft.

She moaned and pressed hard against his cock, making him swell with arousal, blotting out his unpleasant thoughts.

“Is that mansion...the one behind us...is it yours?” She rubbed her breasts up and down against his chest.

Wildfire raged through his body.

“The mansion,” she repeated, rubbing her breasts against his flat nipples, throwing back her head to expose her long, elegant neck.

Karim groaned. What the hell was she talking about? He could barely think as he lifted her, tucked her under him and started sucking her delicious, hard nipple.

“Is it yours?” she asked again, panting as she spoke.

He grunted as his lips traveled south. He rolled his tongue around her navel...

“What do you do for a living? Do you sell renovated houses?”

He lifted his head to stare at her, his breath hard and ragged. What woman asked those questions in the middle of making love? Her eyes were half shut, glazed. He went back to her body and buried his face in the bare, sleek skin under her navel, and further down where he’d shaved her.” What’s the big deal...if you told me...you bought houses?” she questioned in a strained voice, rife with arousal.

He was hot, sweaty, and breathing even harder just above her lovely pink flesh. “Yes, damn it, I buy homes, hire people to renovate them. Can we talk about this later?” He was a moment away from losing his mind.

“Yes, Karim!”

He licked her slit a few times, then returned to her and held her in his arms as he plunged inside her eager entrance, his passion bursting inside her as he flung back his head, called out her name, and went senseless. His heart pounded madly as she tightened around him, then came. He groaned and shuddered over and over again, filling her with his seed, making her his. She raked her nails down his back, but he didn’t care. It meant she enjoyed it.

Moments later, he held her in his arms again, still breathing hard, amazed at what this woman did to him.” That was wonderful. *You’re wonderful.*” She held onto him for dear life, after-spasming, and he kissed her damp forehead.

“No,” he panted, “You are, Ness.”

“You’re so kind to give jobs to people who need them.”

He was still half witless, but her words amused him enough to force a laugh. “I thought you meant my sexual prowess was wonderful.”

“That’s wonderful too.” She kissed his neck and her lips felt soft and cool against his hot skin. He heard contented sounds coming from deep within his throat. Ness continued to talk, half of her words going in one ear, out the other.

Finally she said, “Even if...we’re only together until we get what we need from one another...I’ll be proud to be the wife of such a caring, brave man.” Her hands played with the damp hairs on his chest, tickling him, teasing him, *arousing* him.” You said you don’t take money from your father.”

What the fuck? Why was she trying to hold a conversation now? “I don’t,” he said, trying to clear his head.

“Then how do you get your money to buy houses? You must have another job.” Her breathy voice wafted in his ear and he shut his eyes, enjoying the essence of Vanessa Nash, soon to be Zaldana. She licked his ear and sent chills down his spine and to his shaft. “What’s your occupation? Why won’t you tell me?” She licked the inside of his ear this time. “Is it some big secret?”

He threw his arm over his eyes and laughed. Ness was pumping him for information about himself while he was still hot from her. He tried to hold in a grin and thought that she’d make a hell of an agent. He couldn’t tell her the entire truth, certainly nothing about SURVIVE, but he’d give her a nugget. After all, he was appreciative and amused by her effort.

“All right!” He still felt lightheaded. Wrapping an arm around her, he pulled her into him and said, “I’m on leave — may never go back — but I work for an agency, a government agency. Often I’ve gone undercover and gotten paid big for the risk and the results. Are you happy now?”

Expecting more questions, he was surprised when she froze in his arms, then pushed him away, her eyes as round as two saucers as she sat up.

Puzzled, he also sat, still damp, still panting, and his head still foggy.

“You work for a government agency? The U.S. government?” She stared at him and suddenly, he groaned out loud. She’d beaten him at his own game. Hell, why had he revealed part of it? How many times had he pleased some woman to get information from her? Well, Ness had just done it to him and only his inability to think clearly around her had loosened his tongue, made him careless. He never screwed up like this on the job.

Of course, Ness wasn’t a job either. She was the woman of his dreams who made him senseless. Damn!

He gripped her arms and pulled her into him.

“No!” She pushed against his chest and he finally let go, holding her gaze. It was hard to look into sky blue eyes, now wary and mistrustful. “You aren’t here on a visa. You’re a citizen, aren’t you?”

The silence screamed at him, but he couldn’t speak at first.

“Aren’t you?” Her voice had risen.

“Yes.” Now what? Was she going to get up and walk out? “You still need a bodyguard, Ness. I’m sorry I lied to you. It’s really not how I am.” His heart was banging like a drum. *And she’d believe that because...?*

She moved away from him, resting her back against the headboard. At least she didn't get up and leave. One good sign, even if she looked pissed off and a little afraid.

"I'll never hurt you, Ness. If the lie makes you change your mind about your safety with me...I hope that my actions so far reassure you that I want to treat you with kindness." When she didn't respond, he heaved a breath then said, "I loathe violence. I've spent my life working against it."

She shot him a dark look. "Why did you make that story up?"

He flashed back to the moment he'd lied to her and shut his eyes, briefly. "It was a lie to get you to marry me. So I can protect you as your bodyguard and husband."

"Why in the world would you want to *marry* me, a stranger, so badly that you'd lie?" Her eyes looked stormy. "This *marriage* is going to be just for *my* benefit, not yours. You're a white knight to a damsel in distress." She shook her head and laughed in disbelief, before locking her eyes with his.

"I didn't want you to think that, which is partly why I made up that story. So that you'd feel there was a benefit to me, as well as you." Why did modern women, especially western women, have to be so independent? In truth, he wanted to protect her with his very life. But he couldn't let her know that.

"If Ken wasn't a cop, I could handle him myself." "I'm sure you could."

“I know martial arts.”

“Really? You can try them on me sometime, maybe. I may do something that will make you want to flip me over your shoulder.” He tried to lighten the mood. Could he salvage this?

He had to.

“I feel like doing it now,” she said, her eyes narrowing.

“Go ahead. I deserve it.” He felt like a jerk and couldn’t stand watching her pulling away from him. It broke his heart. If only she knew...

“Don’t tempt me.” Her eyes were on his exposed, vulnerable groin.

“I’m sorry for the lie, Ness.”

“But it doesn’t make sense!” She threw up her hands. “It doesn’t make sense for us to get married when we could just live together until the problem of Ken is solved. I make a good living and I can pay you...”

“I think we already went over this. I won’t accept any money, and that’s final.” He felt his muscles tensing.

She firmed her chin and turned her head. “I’m not going through with this marriage of convenience since you won’t be getting anything out of it.”

“I will!” He moved forward and reached for her, but she twisted away.

Laughing, she tossed her long blond tresses. “Is it my tremendous amount of money and influence, or my movie star looks? I know! You wanted a trophy wife!”

She laughed again with self-derision and anger. “Tell me the truth. Am I just like all the others you’ve rescued? Why not live with me then? Why on earth would you marry me?”

He grabbed her hand. She tried to pull it away, but he held onto it. “I love you.” It just burst from him and he could feel the emotion rumbling from deep within him. “I loved you as soon as I saw you from across the room. That’s the truth. I know you don’t love me — or believe in love at first sight — but I know it exists. I know because I love you.”

She looked so shocked that he pulled her towards him and fiercely possessed her lips.

This time she didn’t pull away from him and he slowly lowered her to the mattress, holding her as tight as he could.



## Chapter 8

Ken and his father sat in the park, staring out at a shimmering pond that picked up the sun's orange setting rays. He remembered this park from his childhood and it always calmed him down. Being with his father was wonderful. His father had given him almost no attention as a kid, but now he seemed to want to be with him a lot. Since he'd sobered up, his dad sought him out often. Ken wondered how long his father had to live. He had cirrhosis and looked old and frail, far more than his fifty-eight years.

"Ken, I'm worried," his father said as he stared at the lake.

Ken frowned and looked away from him. *You never worried about me when I was a child.* No, no. He couldn't think badly of his father...

"You keep talking about Vanessa," his father went on, "but I've never met her. You say you're engaged to her, but you never bring her to see me or your mother."

Ken felt a nugget of guilt. His father had cleaned up his life and found God and all that other stuff that you do at AA meetings. He didn't believe in hitting people anymore and regretted how he'd beaten Ken. But Ken felt it had been good for his character.

“I’ll introduce you to her. One day. I will.” He searched his mind for something to change the subject to.

“Son, are you sure you’re not stalking her? The little hints you’ve given me make me think she’s running from you, but you’re following her. This really bothers me. I’m concerned about your mental health in general. You know I have to take medication for bipolar. You could have inherited something from me.”

“You don’t need those drugs.” He hated that his big, strong father now took drugs for some bogus psychiatric disorder.

“I do and you might too. I think you’re losing touch with reality regarding Vanessa.”

Ken felt torn. He was both irritated with his father and eager to please the old man. “I promise I’m not stalking her. I love her, and would never hurt her, Dad. Have faith in me.”

“I think you could use some help.”

Ken seethed inside. Snapping at his father, he said, “What for? I’m a good police officer with a stellar record. I’ll be a detective one day! Just because you think you have some mental illness, don’t hang the same label on me. I’m fine.” Ken didn’t dare tell his father that sometimes he worried about the things he did. He rarely even let himself think about his sanity. If he had mental health problems,

how could he be such a great police officer? The guys on the force all knew Vanessa loved him...

*Because that's what I tell them. They don't really know by seeing us together.*

"I won't hurt her, Dad. I love her."

"I hope you mean that, son. You mean a lot to me. I'm sorry about your childhood. I wish I could take it back."

Ken felt his muscles tighten as he met his father's dark eyes. "I'm not sorry," he said, and he firmed his chin. "I'm happy you taught me to be strong."

His father's eyes hit the sky. "Ken..."

"I won't hurt her, Dad. I promise." As Ken quickly started talking about his mother's medical check up, he successfully navigated his father off on another direction. But as they conversed, Ken felt a wave of nausea washing over him.

He didn't know if he could control himself from hurting Vanessa. If she didn't leave the Arab and admit her love for Ken, he probably would. And he doubted he'd feel very bad about it.

Shit, his father would be pissed if he carried through on his inclination. Oh, well. His father had done what he had to do by going to AA and taking drugs from some shrink. He had to do what he had to do — conquer the woman he loved. He knew she loved him back. He just had to make her realize it.



Vanessa spent the morning with Doreen, getting to know her further, while Karim took off on a mysterious outing. Still gleeful at his declaration of love, she was in a good mood and enjoyed interacting with Karim's perky mother and her friendly servants. In the back of her mind, she worried about Karim.

"He isn't out doing something dangerous, is he?" she asked Doreen, as they sipped coffee in the sitting room. Doreen sat on the sofa and she sat across from her on the same chair Karim had occupied the day before.

"Why is he out on our wedding day?" She felt a strange tightness around her chest, thinking of Ken, and wondered if he'd found out anything about Karim and was after him. In the depths of her soul, she totally believed that Karim wanted to protect her. *But don't do it today, Karim.*

"Karim is always disappearing," Doreen said, smiling mysteriously.

"Well, he won't when we're married. I don't like that." She wanted to be privy to everything he did, no matter what.

"Maybe you can tame him. Nobody else has been able to." She laughed. "Not even his father could, but a young woman may be different."

The front door opened and Vanessa rose in anticipation, her heart racing. "Thank goodness he's back." She could smell his musky scent from two rooms

away, maybe just from memory. As his footsteps got louder, her head reeled. *I'm like a twelve-year-old with a crush on some rock star and then I finally get to meet him.*

Karim stepped through the doorway with a large white box in his hands. He set it on the coffee table then straightened and fingered his silky black tie as he watched her. Vanessa caught her breath.

“Do I look all right for the occasion?”

Her mouth went dry. *He looked like a prince.* With his thick dark hair styled off his face, and wearing a black tuxedo and crisp white shirt, she could eat him up. His broad shoulders, chest and powerful thighs stretched the expensive material. He wore elegant, shiny Prada shoes. From head to toe, he looked sinfully delicious, flawless. At least to her.

Shit, how she loved him.

“No reaction?” he asked. “Should I wear something else?” He looked down at himself then at her, his eyes uncertain. “On this special day, I want to please you.”

She went to him and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek against his chest. She didn't care that Doreen was looking on. Let the world look on. “I've never seen anyone look as good as you do right now.” She noticed an almost oriental scent, elusive and sexy. “You smell good too.”

He played with her hair. “I'm glad you approve. Go look in the box on the table. I have a surprise for you.”

“Yeah?” She pulled back and opened the top of the box, then gasped. As she pulled it out, holding it up, tears filled her eyes. “A satin wedding dress.” There was pearl embroidery and a long, elegant train. Her eyelashes wet, she turned her head to watch his indulgent expression.

“Try on the dress, dear. I’m good at guessing sizes, but I could be off. We have time to return it before the ceremony.”

A lump clogged her throat and she couldn’t speak or move. She’d never thought much about marriage. When she had, it was always that she picked out her own wedding gown. But this one was so perfect — she would have chosen it herself. Did he know her so well in just a few days? No, this was a lucky guess.

“You can go upstairs and use the third room on the left. That’s my room,” Doreen said, in a firm voice. “You’ll find I have some wonderful mirrors to view yourself. The lighting is also good — you can adjust it.” She then smiled with secrets in her eyes. “Or—Karim has a room here—”

Vanessa felt the force of her words and rippled inside.

With shaky hands, she set the dress back on the coffee table and stared at a pleased-looking Karim. “Why are we dressing up for the justice of the peace? The marriage may not even work out.”

Karim looked at once as if she’d slapped him, but recovered quickly and grinned. “It will work out. And after you are convinced, and love me, we’ll have a

grand ceremony anywhere you like. But this is a special day for me. I want to dress right and I want you to be the most beautiful bride that ever lived. And you are.”

He kissed her, sweeping his tongue through her mouth and she melted into him...

“I’m going to leave the house now.” Doreen broke the mood and they pulled apart, her quickly and Karim with reluctance, keeping his hands on her arms and his gaze on her face. Vanessa alone looked at the older woman who so resembled her son. Doreen smiled at her and winked. “I have to pick up my dress and get Bandar. His car is in the shop.”

Karim laughed, sliding his gaze to his mother’s. “I keep telling him to dump that piece of junk.”

“Well, he seems attached to that car, even though it’s old and he could afford a new one. I’ll meet you at the justice of the peace.” She came forward and hugged them both. First she kissed Karim on the cheek and said, “I’ll see you later.” Next she squeezed Vanessa’s shoulders and met her gaze. “You are part of the family now. I can’t wait to meet your parents, but I understand why you can’t tell them about this. It’s hard for a parent to accept such a quick decision to marry, but I will hope for the best. I actually think you’re a good match for my son.”

“Thank you,” Vanessa replied, feeling herself flush with pleasure. She hoped that Karim’s mother’s intuition was correct.

Doreen picked her purse off the coffee table and strode away, quickly disappearing into the next room. Soon they heard the door slam. Karim turned back to Vanessa, his endlessly dark eyes full of...love? They were soft and glowing, as if two candles had lit them up. She knew he thought he loved her, but could it really be true? She loved him, but that made sense — he was strong, warm, gorgeous and a fantastic lover. She couldn't wrap her mind around him loving her, which was why she couldn't tell him she loved him. If he hadn't really meant it, that would make him dump her all the faster.

*Yet he doesn't have to marry me, and he seems to honestly care about me...*

She had to clear her mind. Karim was a complicated man who lived a complicated life. It was best for her sanity to just enjoy him while she could and hope for a miracle, that he really did love her.

“What are you thinking, dear?” he asked, stroking her hair at the temples.

His fingers chilled yet heated her at the same time.

“I was just thinking about...you.” Well, *that* was true. “Only my parents have ever been this nice to me. I usually get the shaft in relationships, even just friendly ones.”

His forehead etched in concern. “Why do you think that is?”

Looking into his eyes, she was so drawn in, she felt she could tell him anything. “I think I'm too nice.”



“I think you’re nice too. Is that a bad thing?”

“It can be. People use you and then leave. At least, that’s what happens to me a lot.”

“What about that friend that was with you at the bar? That’s the one you invited to our wedding, right?” He sounded genuinely disturbed by her recurrent problem.

“Amy is one of my few good friends. I’d call her my *best* friend.”

“I never let too many people get close to me. I never knew who was really my friend or enemy.” He ran a finger down her nose, a strangely erotic gesture to her. “Ness, you and I will be one another’s best friend. Sorry about Amy being bumped to second.” He grinned and she felt the force of his presence, it made her sway in his arms.

“We do seem to get along well.” She could feel her throat working hard as she watched him, his hypnotizing eyes and his wicked smile. “You seem easygoing.”

His eyes suddenly narrowed. “I can be, but I can also be one cold bastard if somebody wrongs anyone I love.”

Prickles of heat climbed down her back. It felt great to feel so protected, even if she still couldn’t make herself believe he loved her.

“You need to try on that dress,” he urged, his voice lighter.

“I want to shower first.”

His dark eyes lit up and fell to her breasts, thrilling her. “I already showered,” he said.

Damn! Well, they couldn’t very well take a shower together in his mother’s house anyway.” But you make me sweat,” he finished with a winsome smile. “I don’t think another shower would be a bad idea. Then we can dress one another for the ceremony. What do you think?”

Her heart was pounding. “Here?” Her trembling hand reached for his crotch to tease him. “In this house?” She squeezed his groin just a little and he sucked in deeply, his face almost pained.

“Mother’s gone.” His gaze burned into hers. “The servants won’t say anything if we go upstairs. I’ve brought women here before. It’s such a big house, we’ll have privacy. I have my own room for when I sleep here. There’s a large bathroom — with a shower.”

“Is this my wedding present?” She could feel her knees trembling.

“Part. I told you I’d let you have your way with me in the shower when I thought the time was right.” He took her hands, bent over, and whispered in her ear. “The time is right.”

Goosebumps climbed down her spine as he scooped her up and carried her out of the room and up a winding staircase to a long, carpeted hallway. As he

walked with her in his arms, she snuggled into him, burying her face in his neck.

“This hallway goes on for miles,” she murmured, talking into his hot flesh.

He kissed the top of her head. “It does seem that way. My room is at the end, perfect for privacy. Ah, here we are.” He shoved the door open with his shoulder and stepped inside and she smiled.

The room was as big as a living room with paneled walls, high windows, a sofa and two wingback chairs, and a king size bed with a mahogany quilt with matching curtains. An oriental rug was tossed over gleaming hardwood floors. “Do you like it?” She hugged his neck tighter. “I’d like any room you’re in.”

“Really?” He sounded pleased, and she realized he’d let down his guard, probably without wanting to, she guessed. “I’m glad you feel that way,” he added, in a low, soft voice. Setting her on the huge bed, he stepped back, observed her with a frank appraisal then pointed a finger at her. “Get naked for me while I go fix the shower for us. If you aren’t ready when I come back, I’ll have to spank you.” He winked.

Flames shot through her body as her ass sizzled.

He shut the door and soon she recognized the sound of the shower. Giddy and aroused in anticipation, she quickly slid out of her blouse and jeans, letting them fall to the floor. Then she sat on the edge of the bed, deciding to try striking a

sexy pose for Karim. She crossed her legs and tossed her long hair until it fell over her breast, a nipple exposed.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he too was stark naked and they both froze at the same time, gazes fixed on one another. Vanessa could feel her pussy dampening as she admired the length and hard veins of his cock. Karim broke their hypnotic stare and went to her quickly, sweeping her into his arms again. He forced her to grab his body with her legs, spreading her sex wide open.

“You bewitching minx,” he whispered into her ear, and he slid her body up and down his washboard abs, making her laugh and sob as her sensitive nub wiggled against his hot flesh. “I thought you’d like that.” He chuckled and gave her a tight little smack on the ass. Vanessa threw her head back and yelled his name as she arched against him. The ticklish waves from her shaking ass shot straight to her pussy, and she shuddered. “I...can’t...take...it,” she complained, collapsing against him, still on fire.

He let out a wicked laugh and spanked her again and she felt nectar dripping from her sex as her body literally dissolved in a mass of white-hot sensation. She was deadweight, but he managed to hold her without breathing hard.

“More,” she begged when he started walking towards the bathroom, her clit brushing against him with each step he took. He slid his hands under her ass and lowered her body until his hard cock rubbed her wide-open slit.

“Karim!” She hardly had breath to speak, but she had to try, had to have him. He was driving her out of her mind. “I want to fuck you. Please...spank me again.” Vanessa had never spoken that way to anybody before, but she wasn’t in her right mind. “I demand that you fuck me now!”

“I’m in charge,” he said, laughing with good-natured amusement. They crossed into a large bathroom with steam billowing from behind two beveled glass shower doors. “There are so many things to explore and you’re so innocent.”

Vanessa mumbled incoherently. Whatever he said or did, she was his. She didn’t bother taking in the bathroom beyond the excitement of the shower. She was too aroused to care about anything but Karim, how he would touch her, how she would touch him, how they would possess one another.

He strode to the shower doors and opened them, setting her down under a soft spray of warm water. Shutting the door, he joined her and they faced once another, the air between them crackling with invisible electricity. She looked up into his smoky dark eyes and felt the world swirl around her once. Vanessa felt almost petite as he towered over her and she giggled as his thick waves molded to

his head. “You look silly with wet hair,” she said, although she didn’t mean it; he could never look silly.

He took no offense. “You look beautiful with wet hair.” He took her into his arms, and tweaked a hard nipple. “Beep, beep,” he teased.

She slid her hands across his chest, tugging gently on his wet hairs, blinking away drops of water that landed in her eyes. Lord help her, he was perfect. Perfect. On a scale of one to ten, he was a fifty...

He picked up a bottle off the shower’s ledge and poured liquid into his hand. It was green and smelled of ginger. Before the water could wash it out of his palm, he rubbed her shoulders and massaged her upper half with the cool, slick fluid. “Body wash,” he said as he got to his knees. When he lathered her hairless pussy, she bent over and laughed, her knees almost buckling.

He caught her and stood up, squeezing the liquid into her hair. He slowly, sensuously piled all of her locks on top of her head as his fingers worked lightly through her scalp.

She could barely think with his hands in her hair, massaging her in such a soothing, strangely erotic way. Her head felt light. “So, um, the body wash is also...shampoo?”

“Yes.” He reached for a comb, also on the shower’s ledge and turned her around so she was facing the marble shower wall. As her teeth chattered, not from

the cold but from him, he combed her hair with long, gentle strokes. The man had a magic touch. Anything he did to her made her liquefy inside, turning to mush. When he spun her around again, holding her hand, his eyes glittered with approval. She felt both excited and naughty, standing in the shower, naked with the man of her fantasies. Her fiancé. A thrill shot to every extremity. “I liked having you wash me.” She heard her voice tremble.

He smiled, droplets of water on his lips, and handed her the bottle. “Do that to me now.” He tried to look serious. “Make this hot for me, baby.” He winked. “If you do a good job, I have a wonderful reward.”

She could barely hold the bottle after she heard “reward,” but nonetheless, enjoyed scrubbing his waterlogged thick waves and his oh-so-powerful male form. She even scrubbed his legs and toes then came up again to finally lather his cock. He grabbed her arms before she could.

She looked up at him, trying to dodge the water droplets, puzzled. He looked so sexy with his longer-than-average hair plastered to his skull and neck. Her breath caught again and he flashed an amused grin. “I have something better for you to use than the body gel, at least for that particular part of my body.” He took the bottle from her, placing it back where it came from. His hand returned with an open tube. “This is what you use.”

She looked down, trying to read it through the water that fell on the tube's writing.

"It's a lubricant." He massaged her face with his thumb. "Water-proof. It will make this easier."

"This? This what?" She felt a rush of sweet anticipation, guessing that she'd like the "this." She gleefully took his hard cock in her hand and squirted the lubricant over the pulsing skin. After she coated it, she threw the tube on the shower floor and watched as his elegant shaft throbbed in her palm.

Eyes on his beautiful penis, she asked in a hoarse voice, "Why did we need the lubricant? You're big — probably huge — but I didn't have any problem fitting you inside of me." As she spoke the words, her body shuddered with the memory. She could always feel his cock inside of her pussy, and she needed him again or she'd lose her mind. Swallowing hard, she continued. "I liked the way it felt without the lubricant."

"You talk too much, love." He sounded amused though. As she looked up at him, his cock still pulsing in her hand, he said, "You're going to have to let go of me."

"I have to...what?" She rubbed her fingers over his slippery cock, not wanting to give it up. "Why do you want me to let go?" Was he going to tease and torture her?



Even through the sprinkling water, she saw a glint of mischief in his eye and her pussy convulsed. In a low, velvety voice, he ordered, “Get down on the ground and stick your ass in the air.”

## Chapter Nine

Vanessa's heart almost stopped before it regenerated, almost thumping out of her chest.

"Yes, Karim!"

She did as he commanded, knowing what was coming, her breathing already hard and ragged, her eyes filled with tears. She heard him get down to his knees behind her and she let out a mewling sound as he started sliding the side of his hand up and down the pulsing opening of her ass.

When he stuck a finger inside of her, the air left her lungs, but she didn't even try to breathe. When he inserted three, she bit her lip, her belly seeming to disappear. He pushed his fingers up higher, and she went boneless as the flesh inside of her grabbed and held his fingers like an unrelenting fist. Blasts of pleasure shot through her and she arched her back, coming.

Karim withdrew his fingers and she cried out in protest. "No, Karim!" The icy hot tingles from her ass to her pussy still possessed her and suddenly she beat a fist on the tile floor. "Oh, shit. Karim, this is wrong. Isn't it sick of me to like it...in *there*?"

He laughed. "No, and you've obviously used your vibrator there *a lot*. You seem loose enough for me. You want my cock in your ass, don't you, baby?" He

stroked the crack of her ass and she whimpered. “Don’t you?” He gave her a few short, hard, hot spankings and she bit her lip again, this time tasting her own blood. She came with a violent shudder, her teeth rattling as her bones dissolved.

Karim massaged the area he’d swatted and that was just as hot as the slap. She felt little tremors going off inside of her. Hell, she could do this forever and ever, but only with Karim.

“Are you all right with this next step, babe?” He actually sounded concerned. “I’m in charge in the bedroom, but I refuse to do anything that you’re not comfortable with. Do you really want my cock in there? Say it or I won’t do it.”

“Yes! Yes! *For God’s sake, yes!*” She was trembling all over by now, sticking her ass up as high as she could for him. The flesh inside was already grabbing, like little fists, ready to hold onto him for dear life...

And then he tested her, sliding his head inside her tight portal. She felt an earthquake starting to build up inside of her. He pushed in further and the earthquake built, shaking her as he filled her up, blasting heat through every cell while she grasped him hungrily. Her body spasmed as he slid his cock so far up that he lay on her.

Then he rocked on top of her and groaned. She could feel his hot cum rushing inside her ass just before she collapsed, a writhing mass of jelly, spasming on the shower floor.

He soon released her, pulling her into his lap as he sat with his back against the wall, the droplets pelting their bodies, making everything so much sexier. She couldn't control her aftershocks. He held her tight, trembling himself. When their bodies finally calmed and he held her tightly, he whispered, "What did you think of that?"

She rested her head on his shoulder. "Gawd, I'm still shaking."

They sat together for a few more minutes, then he pulled her to a stand again and they washed one another again, this time quickly.

"You still need to try on that dress," he mumbled as they scrubbed each other's chests. Her breasts hummed as his clever hands worked their magic.

When they were both clean and free of soap, he turned off the shower abruptly, leaving her cold and shivering. Quickly he darted out of the shower then back in with a large, soft green towel, which he wrapped her in. As he dried her, she smiled, loving what had happened between them, loving his thoughtfulness, loving him, a man she barely knew who would be her husband by the end of the day.

When he finished drying her, she dried him, which completely aroused her. Afterwards, Karim lifted her into his arms and brought her to the bed, tucking her under the covers. He climbed in behind her and snuggled into her, his chest hard against her back, his hands mischievously playing with her tits.

Moaning, she couldn't believe she was ready for more. She was insatiable in his presence. Had she once believed that sex was a waste of time? She almost laughed out loud at the memory.

She could feel he was hard again, his cock solid against her backside. Would he take her in the ass again? She felt herself breaking into goosebumps at the thought. But he didn't have lubricant on his cock; she didn't think he'd try anal sex without it.

"Ready for a quickie before we get married, love?" His breath tickled her ear.

Her body tingled at his words. "For you, I think I'll always be ready."

He nibbled on her ear a little, and then spoke into it again, his voice arousing her. "You're great for my libido. Get up on your hands and knees, Ness."

She did, ready for whatever would happen. Her pussy hadn't quieted much, was still damp. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Karim kneeling behind her and wondered again if this would be more anal sex. "Don't we need the lubricant?"

"Not for this, if you're still wet." He reached in front of her and slid a finger down her sensitive slit and she almost collapsed.

"Wow, you're dripping."

His hot stroke had touched her clit, which was already hard, standing up, ready for him. She groaned, dropping her head, but keeping her body prepared for whatever he planned to do. Both his hands came around to her pussy. He pulled

her labia back with one hand and found her raging nub with the other. With wicked intent, she knew, he wiggled her nub with his thumb and forefinger. And he didn't stop.

Vanessa was gone in a moment. Even after he stopped, she wept and shuddered, crying out his name. When his rock hard cock entered her overly sensitive sex from behind, rubbing her clit again, she laughed, cried, and went insane. The out-of-control wildfires blasted throughout her. He thrust hard, over and over, taking himself as high as possible, bringing her to orgasm and beyond.

She felt like a rag doll being flung into space. The convulsing and shuddering within her was out of her hands, she wouldn't have stopped it if she could. At some point in time, she must have actually fainted because Karim appeared over her, fuzzy but near. His fingers brushed back her hair as she breathed hard, lying on her back. But maybe she hadn't really blacked out after all because she remembered everything. Every incredible moment of an unforgettable journey.

"Are you all right, my love?" Karim asked, and, as her vision cleared, she saw the worry on his face.

Her body had never felt so relaxed, so completely sated of tension and she smiled lazily up at him, cupping his jaw with one hand. "I've never been better in my life." It was the truth.

He looked relieved and plopped down beside her, pulling her into him, and she buried her face in his neck. “You took me for quite a ride,” she said, talking against his chest, loving his scent of ginger and sweat.

“I don’t want to hurt you though. I never want to hurt you.”

She laughed and lifted her head to gaze into his beautiful eyes. “You didn’t. I loved everything you did. But I doubt I’d have liked it as much with anyone else.”

He broke into a slow, sunshiny smile, one that lit up the room, her world. “Good. It’s nice to hear you say that.” He ran his calloused palm down the side of her face. “You need to try on the dress, dear heart. I wouldn’t allow my future wife to take her vows in the nude, in front of my oversexed brother and some elderly judge who will be jealous of me.”

She laughed, thrilled and delighted by his complimentary words. “I don’t want anyone to see me nude, except for you. What size is the dress you bought me?”

“Sixteen.”

She smiled at him. “Lucky guess.”

“Not really. I checked your clothes last night when you were sleeping.”

She laughed and traced his features with her fingers. “Not all size sixteens are the same. If the dress doesn’t fit do we still have time to return it for another

size or did we waste so much time making love that we used up any spare minutes?”

“If it doesn’t fit,” he said, and he was so close, all she could see were eyes — big, beautiful dark, soulful eyes — the eyes of a puppy dog, “you will get another dress and everyone will have to wait for us. The judge who is marrying us is an associate of mine. I have lots of connections. We’ll marry today, but on our terms. So don’t worry too much about the dress.”

“We can’t keep your mother, Bandar and Amy waiting forever.”

“Cell phones are wonderful inventions. They will know if we’ll be late.”

“I think they’ll understand,” Vanessa replied, wanting very much to stay here, in bed, rather than ever leave the room. Hell, she wouldn’t mind spending her entire life right here with Karim.

But she did want to marry him. Her desire grew stronger with each second that passed.

“Wait until you see the ring I bought you,” he said, his gaze unwavering. “And the ring you will put on me is a family heirloom.”

“The rings don’t matter,” Vanessa informed him, not even curious. “I just want to be your wife.”

He pulled back and stared at her, a searching gaze that made her weak inside. There was a vulnerability on his face, something hard to define.



“You really do think you love me,” she said.

He nodded without hesitation. “One day maybe you’ll see that we belong together.” He paused to give her a fast kiss. “Or, have you already realized we are soul mates?”

She moved her lips close to his, ready to taste him, her eyes suddenly misty. “I don’t know if we’ll work out,” she answered, speaking her deepest fears. It was becoming more imperative to her that they *did* work out. “This happened so quickly. I was brought up to believe you waited a long time before you married.”

“I know.” He sounded a little disappointed as his breath teased her eager mouth. “I understand your feelings.”

Something suddenly burst inside of her. “No.” She ran a finger down the side of his face, watching his eyes as they filled with confusion. She smiled softly at him, fluffing back his hair. “Even I don’t understand my feelings, why I have them. I love you, Karim. I’m in love with you too. And I hope this marriage works out, and will try hard to make that happen.” She held her breath and waited.

His eyes widened then he broke into the most beautiful smile she’d ever seen. Without another word between them, he urged her head forward and kissed her, and she seemed to be floating straight to heaven as she concentrated on nothing else in the world except Karim, her future husband.



Oblivious to Karim and Vanessa's current bliss in the shower, Ken drove around in his police car, listening to his annoying partner babble. Cleo was a young African-American man, good looking, with women coming out the ying-yang, and Ken hated him. Usually Cleo spent his time boasting about his latest conquest, making him jealous and angry. Often, he wanted to beat the crap out of the new recruit.

As Cleo told Ken about the woman he'd had last night, a call interrupted his story.

"Fire on one-ninety-two Rainbow Drive. That's in *Paradise Homes*, the gated community. Can you get over there fast? There may be people inside."

Ken's hands were shaking on the steering wheel. "10-4." His heart sped up. Zaldana's house! He turned on the siren and stepped on the gas pedal. *What the fuck is going on? I was going to burn that house. Somebody beat me to it. Maybe it's a natural fire. No, somebody else hates the Arab.* His stomach kneaded. Was Vanessa with him? He really didn't want Vanessa hurt. Hell, since his talk with his damn father, he was starting to wonder if he should seek counseling before he hurt anyone...

"Fuck, man! Don't drive over curbs!" Cleo shouted. "You want me to drive?"

*"No, I don't want you to drive! I'm in perfect control!"* Shit, he hadn't realized he'd driven over a curb. He had to calm down, but he couldn't. What if Vanessa was in that house and had died? He'd never forgive himself, even though he'd been thinking of killing her.

*Ken, your dad is right. You need serious help. Meanwhile, try to save her. Let the Arab die, but save her. You'll be her hero.*

Billows of smoke covered the sky, along with a strong odor that stung his throat and made him cough. Cleo was coughing, too. Fire trucks and other squad cars were already there, their flashing lights almost blinding him.

"That looks bad," Cleo mumbled as Ken sped up and finally reached the place.

People were standing outside the area, fixated on the flames that spat from windows. "Come on," Ken said to his partner. "Let's see if we can do anything." His heart sped up one thousand fold as he ran at top speed through the open gate and towards the crumbling home. If Vanessa was in there, she couldn't have survived.



Karim sat at the round oak table in the restaurant, his hand tightly clutching that of his new bride, still feeling dazed that she was his. Although his

mother insisted they all go out to celebrate, he couldn't wait to get her home. Still, maybe it was good that he had time to wrap his head around his amazing luck. His aching cock could wait. He hoped. As he slid a glance at Vanessa's lovely face, she smiled back at him, her blue eyes liquid soft. He had a flashback to the wedding.

*"I now pronounce you man and wife."*

*He could barely stand, and felt vulnerable to a pair of bright blue eyes and rosebud lips — his wife. As his gaze fell to the five-carat ring on her finger, he realized she hadn't paid much attention to it, hadn't stopped staring up at him. His own band of heavy gold, passed down from generations and given to his mother to hold for him, weighted his finger, making him feel the symbol of his marital union. He bent his head and kissed her awaiting lips. She lifted her head and wrapped her arms around his neck...*

"This is like a dream." He shook his head.

"A good dream, I hope." Vanessa tossed him a teasing smile.

"Yes." He kissed her quickly on the lips and the others said "Awwwww" in unison.

A champagne bottle popped and Karim turned towards Bandar. His brother's eyes, a darker shade of blue than Vanessa's, smiled at him as he poured drinks into glasses. He handed one to Karim, Vanessa, his mother, hesitated and smiled before handing one to a gorgeous looking Amy, then he kept one for

himself. Raising his glass, he toasted, "To the lovely bride...and her less lovely husband."

They clinked glasses, laughing softly.

As Karim slid his chair closer to Vanessa, he took a sip of champagne. He glided his free hand over the material of her satin wedding dress, the part that covered her thigh. Mischief on his mind, he squeezed. She acknowledged his sensual move by rubbing her leg against his under the table.

Karim half listened to Doreen saying to Bandar, "Too bad your mother had one of her spells today. I wish she could have been here with us, since we're all so close." To Vanessa she explained, "Omar told us he wanted the boys to spend a lot of time together, so the two of us became friends, almost sisters. A few times, I kept Bandar with us." Lowering her voice she said, "Linda is prone to debilitating depression."

"I'm sorry," Vanessa said to Bandar and Amy murmured her regrets too.

"The medicine is keeping the recurrences to a minimum," Bandar said, his eyes receding slightly, as if he were lost in thought. "She's just having a bad day. She sends her best wishes, although she thinks you married too soon."

"*She* thinks so?" Karim laughed, amused. "Does she forget she married after just six months of knowing her husband?"

“Six months isn’t three days. Also, she worked for him a long time before he asked her out.”

Karim grinned and shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. It seems like she married him faster because none of us met him before they ran off and eloped.” He looked at Vanessa. “Brilliant Aunt Linda is so logical. I can imagine just how nuts she thinks this is.” He rubbed her thigh back and forth under the table before stopping and giving her the lowdown. “Linda’s a technical specialist for *Microwave*. Bandar did not inherit her intelligence.”

“I certainly did!” Bandar said, faking a scowl as he took a sip of champagne.

Amy patted Bandar’s hand with elaborate consolation, and then turned to Doreen. “It’s great that you two are friends,” she said. “There could have been resentment. Vanessa told me...” Amy coughed suddenly and Karim snuck a glance at Vanessa, who was staring hard at her friend.

“It’s all right to talk about it,” Bandar said with a shrug. “Omar loves Doreen and sort of used my mother. He was in the U.S., visiting Doreen, and they had an argument, so he slept with my mother a few times. That’s the story of my conception. Omar and Linda never fell in love. They’re just friends. They talk with each other amicably. When he gets around to contacting us, that is. It’s not very often.”

Karim reached across the table and poked his brother in the shoulder.

“Father doesn’t contact *us* often either. You know that. Between you and me — his sons — I don’t think he shows favoritism.”

“You’re his firstborn and the child of the woman he loves. He tries hard to treat us the same, but I often wonder if he loves you best. It would make sense.” He lowered his gaze.

“Bandar, has he ever treated me any better than you?” Karim understood his brother’s musings. Older sons were cherished in Saudi Arabia, but Omar was hardly a typical Saudi male. “Is he more loving towards me than you, brother?”

“No,” Bandar said, regaining his composure. “He certainly made sure I had all the best and has been good to my mother.”

“And you say your mother suffers from depression?” Amy asked, changing the subject, possibly on purpose. “I’m a psych tech at North Chicago Hospital.”

“Interesting.” Bandar flashed her a big grin, one that wiped any fretfulness from his face. “You’ll have to tell me about your job sometime.”

Amy gave him a shy grin, which seemed to say, “Yes.”

Karim felt Vanessa pressing her knee against his and focused back on his bride and only her. Teasing her back, he forced his hand between her thighs, material and all, and tickled her pussy the best that he could. She kicked him hard

under the table, and he tried not to react, still smiling at the others, laughing inside at Ness's adorable gall. And his own, which wasn't as adorable.

"Tell Linda to call me," Doreen said. "I'd love to have her and Robert over for dinner. They've been married a month now and I still have never met him."

"She keeps him under wraps," Karim said, grinning. "Actually, she says he's very shy. Socially awkward, a bit like Bill Gates," Vanessa looked up at him. The naughty little minx. She was wiggling his cock under the table and staring up at him with innocence on her face. God, he loved her.

"Robert's all right," Bandar said. "At least I know that the CEO of Microware didn't marry her for her money." He smiled. "He doesn't say much to me, but he treats Mother like a queen. That's all that matters."

Karim peeled Vanessa's fingers from his cock, ready to lose it right then and there. In a moment, he'd make their excuses and take his wife to the sexiest hotel suite in town for a brief honeymoon. In six months, when they were even more in love and it was clear that their marriage was for real, he'd take her on a honeymoon to Europe and the Middle East...damn, his balls! He wasn't even going to wait for the main course, just have the salad and...

"For two people who married for a business arrangement," Bandar said, "you both look very happy."



Karim picked up his salad fork in one hand and tapped the fingers of his other hand on Vanessa's knee. "Think so?"

"Maybe it's more than a business arrangement," Amy said, crossing her arms and smiling.

Karim glanced over at Vanessa. Her cheeks were stained pink and she had a close-lipped smile.

"Let's just say this is a good day," she finally said, and she squeezed his balls under the table. Karim's cock almost burst against his zipper. He was glad to be seated.

There was the sudden ringing of a cell phone and Bandar swore to himself, pulling it out of his suit jacket's pocket. "Thought I turned the damn thing off." He looked at the caller ID, his eyes widened, and then he put his phone to his ear.

"You're looking for Karim? Well, he turned off his cell phone because...what? *What?* Yes, this is he...*Oh, shit, you're kidding me!*" His gaze shot to Karim. "You...what? You found *what* there? That's impossible. I have my wallet right here with me." He dug into his pants and his eyes grew rounder. "Um...I guess I dropped it, but I wasn't there. Yes, he's here with me now. I'll give him the phone."

Bandar looked pale as he handed Karim the phone, his hand trembling.

Karim took it quickly, knowing already that he wouldn't like what he'd hear. The caller who identified himself as Officer Cleo Flanders, told him his main

residence had burned to the ground; arson was suspected. Bandar's identification had been found lying near the ruins.

Karim felt dazed as he listened. When he could finally speak, he said, "Thanks for informing me of this, and I'm happy nobody was hurt. A house can be rebuilt. I'm just grateful nobody was harmed. Bandar would never vandalize my home or anyone's, though." As he said it, he felt a wave of dread pass over him. "Did you look at the security cameras?"

"Couldn't," Cleo said. "Whoever burned your house was clever enough to shut down the security cameras. Could your brother figure out how to do that?"

He could, Karim knew. Bandar worked with him at SURVIVE. But the idea that his brother did it was ridiculous, and he fumed inside. "No," he said to the young sounding police officer. "He wouldn't know how."

"His wallet being here is certainly odd," Cleo said. "My partner found it. Does your brother have any reason to hold a grudge against you?"

"We're very close," Karim said, his heart banging against his chest. He saw the fright and disbelief in Bandar's eyes and tried to give him a reassuring smile. "I know he didn't do it. He's with me. He's been with me for over an hour."

"Well, the arson team is going to figure out when this fire was probably set."

"I'm not pressing charges against my brother, even with that coincidence of the wallet. I suspect somebody else." He thought of Ken, but couldn't imagine how

Ken could have gotten hold of Bandar's identification to set him up. And he was sure it was a set-up.

"We'll talk about who you suspect when you come down to the police station."

"No!" Karim ground his teeth before talking again. "I just got married and, even with the news of the fire, I don't want to ruin my wedding day. Or night. We will both come in and talk to you in the morning."

There was a pause on the other end. Finally Cleo said, "You're not reacting much to this." He sounded suspicious. "Did you know about it? Maybe you're in on this with your brother for the money?"

Karim laughed. He couldn't help it. He had more money than he knew what to do with it. "I own fifty houses," he said and heard Vanessa gasp. "Fifty-two to be exact. I have no reason to burn down my main residence and I know Bandar didn't do it. Look, you can bother me about it later, but not now. I suspect somebody on your police force, a man by the name of Ken Wentworth. He's been stalking my wife."

There was dead silence on the other end for a moment, then, "Ken Wentworth?"

"Yes, why? Do you know him?"

“Look,” Cleo said, “I think you’d better come down to headquarters right away...”

“No, and I suggest you wait until you hear from Rebecca Weinert before you accuse me or my brother of this crime.” He waited.

“R-Rebecca Weinert?”

“The ex-governor. She’s my lawyer, actually. If you still want us to come down after you talk to her, we will, but I’m going to enjoy my wedding night. Thanks for contacting me about my house.” He hung up, shaking, aware that all eyes were on him.

## Chapter Ten

“Bandar, will you call Rebecca for me and tell her what’s going on?” Karim asked his clearly shaken brother. “Call her right away. I’m sure she can convince the chief of police to look for the real perpetrator of this crime. Be sure to mention Kenneth Wentworth.” The ex-governor had been an agent with both himself and Bandar and was a brilliant lawyer to boot.

Bandar’s lips were one straight line. Finally he said, “How could Wentworth have gotten my wallet?”

“I don’t know.” That *was* the kicker. “Maybe you dropped it last time you visited me and you didn’t realize it.”

“I would have missed it, Karim, and I haven’t been to that house since last week. You weren’t there. Why would I go?”

Karim hated that this had put a damper on his wedding day. He glanced over at his bride, who looked downcast.

“This is my fault,” she said, with self-reproach. “Ken is so sneaky. He always found me, whenever I moved. He’d find out stuff about me that was private, like my cell phone number. I truly believe he could have found out your identity, Karim, and that you have a brother, and somehow managed to get his wallet. In

fact, that's just like Ken. He's diabolical that way. Nobody will believe it though. They never do."

"Rebecca will believe it." Karim put his arm around her and pulled her close, brushing his lips against her hair.

"I doubt even she can get the Chicago PD to believe me. Ken has such a good record, and cops stick together."

"Maybe not all cops, love. At any rate, I refuse to let this spoil our night." He ran his hand up and down her arm and looked at Bandar again. "Give Becky a call, then come back here and finish dinner with us. We've been at the edge of death together. This is small potatoes. Don't let it bother you today or I may have to beat you up, big brother style."

Bandar finally broke into a tense grin and rose. "I'll call her outside. The reception will be better." He turned to leave then suddenly halted and turned back, eyes on Amy. "Want to come with me and get some fresh air?"

"Sure!" She stood up, smiling at him.

He took her arm and led her away, and Karim looked at them as the silver lining in a bad turn of events. He turned his attention to his mother. "Be sure you get aggressive, Mother. Try to find some cop on the Chicago PD who doesn't like Wentworth."

“Trust me, I will,” she assured him, her voice brisk and no-nonsense. “I’m extremely motivated now. As soon as I get home, I’ll speed up my effort.”

“It’s him,” Vanessa said, in a small voice. “Damn it, it’s him and nobody ever believes it.”

Karim wanted to whisk her away from the restaurant, lay her on a bed and ravish her, assuring her that Wentworth wouldn’t hurt her or anybody once he was finished with him. Instead, he held her tight and said, “You’re my wife now. I don’t want you to worry about it anymore. Let me do your worrying for you.”

“But your house...”

“Compared to you, my house means nothing. I’m more concerned that somebody probably thought you were in it. Nobody will harm you on my watch. No one. Ever.” He felt protectiveness surging through him as she rested her head on his shoulder.

“Karim, I am so sorry about this.”

“Let’s finish our celebration.” Karim squeezed her arm. “Please, Ness. Whoever did this wanted to upset us. Are you going to let him succeed?”

She stiffened and looked up at him. “No, Ken will *not* ruin it for us,” she finally said, her eyes suddenly hard. “I don’t want to give him what he wants.”

The waitress came with the appetizers and Bandar and Amy returned at the same time.

“You get through to Becky?” Karim asked his brother.

Bandar nodded. “She assured me that she’ll take care of things and sends her congratulations. I also told her about Wentworth and she promised to do what she could. I feel better now, although I’m sick about your house. It took us so long to renovate it and it was so beautiful...”

“The next one will be more beautiful,” he promised, giving Vanessa’s arm a hard squeeze. “Ness likes to decorate and it will be her project.”

She gasped and he grinned at her.

“I like to take bad situations, of which I’ve had many, and turn them into good ones,” he said, getting lost in the beauty of her eyes. But it was more than outward beauty. She seemed to resonate goodness from within. He could almost feel it. “Would you like to do that job?” he asked her, speaking very close to her lips.

“I—I don’t know what to say. Of course I would. We can do it together.”

His breath caught in his throat. Could one person truly fill him so completely? Would it last? He felt certain that it would. As the other three at the table rang their glasses with spoons, Karim and Vanessa locked in a passionate kiss, while all of the restaurant’s customers broke into loud applause.





Ken sat in Detective Grant's office, facing the glum man's cold stare.

"Were you stalking Vanessa Nash?"

He tried to relax and maintain his veneer of cool professionalism even though he could barely hold in tears of fury. Who the hell had been saying that about him? "No, sir."

"Look, the woman called up complaining about you, but her complaints never reached me. Apparently your buddies believed she was your girlfriend and upset with you because you'd had a spat. I'll deal with them and their dereliction of duty, but right now I'm turning my focus on you. You've been a damn good cop, Ken, but I can't sweep this under the carpet. You'd damned well better tell me the truth."

"No." He turned his head, his father's image taunting him. Had his father betrayed him? It was a possibility that made his mind whirl. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to concentrate, think up a story his boss might buy. He flashed what he hoped was a man-to-man smile, letting it fade when his boss didn't reciprocate. He still had to try. Hard. "It's all a game she's playing, Chief. She played up to me and then got mad because I was seeing another woman. Ever since then, she's been lashing out at me, trying to make me jealous."

"If this Vanessa loved you so much, why did she marry this other man?"

He almost burst into tears, but held it in, shaking. “He tricked her, wowed her with his wealth. Even so she hasn’t stopped playing with me. The marriage won’t last, she’s a cop groupie.” He relaxed when his boss nodded. Women hitting on cops was old news, one his boss had probably heard lots of times.

“There’s still the matter of arson. It’s damned suspicious if you ask me.”

A swelling of rage made him stand up and ball a fist. “*I didn’t burn the damn house! Cleo and I got the call. It shocked us both.*”

Detective Grant’s face remained unyielding. “I hope you’re uninvolved. You didn’t have to be there to plan for it to happen. The facts are you *were* stalking the young woman.” Before Ken could start on his righteous protest, Grant said, “Tell me about finding Bandar Zaldana’s wallet.”

Ken’s mind raced as he switched gears. “I just found it. I didn’t steal it from him. The damn Arab was probably involved in the arson.”

“So you hate Arabs, do you?”

Ken tried not to squirm under his boss’s distasteful stare. “I hate terrorists.”

“Then you’re saying...”

“No. I’m just saying it’s suspicious. Karim Zaldana and his tribe showing up here, throwing money around, being secretive about their whereabouts, having multiple addresses.” He knew he should have kept his mouth shut when the detective’s gaze sharpened.

“Hmmm. You seem to know a lot about the Zaldanas. How did you find out about the multiple addresses?”

“I did a quick check on him.” Shit, he’d have to cover fast. “I’m damned good at my job. Ask anybody.”

“That’s plausible, I suppose. But you must agree that it’s highly coincidental. Karim Zaldana doesn’t believe for a moment that his brother would do that to him, and Bandar Zaldana has other reliable character references. I’m not ruling him out though. So his wallet was just lying on the ground?”

“Yes, sir.” He lifted his head, his spirit revived for a moment.

The detective let out a sigh and rattled some papers. “You’ll be placed on leave while I investigate this matter. There are some people in high places calling for your blood. In the meantime, keep your nose clean. Your father was a fantastic detective and you’ve had an exemplary record, that’s why I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt. Don’t make me sorry.”

Ken was heartsick. Leave! His work, his uniform, his badge, his gun...they were his self-esteem. What was he supposed to do with himself while on leave?

“May I go now, sir?” he asked, hearing the depression in his own voice.

“No, there’s one more matter to discuss. I got a phone call from your father.”

Oh, great, he’d guessed right. His father had betrayed him. “What did he have to say?” He felt his stomach knotting.

“He’s *worried* about you. Says you need help.” His gaze bore into his own.

“Psychiatric help.”

“Nothing like family loyalty.”

“Your father had issues, but was able to pull himself together and have a great career in law enforcement. If you want to stay a cop, you also need to go for help.”

Ken was ready to protest, but the look on Grant’s face stopped him.

“This isn’t up for discussion.”

“But...”

Detective Grant’s stone cold eyes stopped him again.

Fuck, he was screwed. Shaking, he knew he had no choice.

“I’ll get help,” he said, sure they’d want to put him on pills, like his father.

Detective Grant firmed his chin. “Good. Your father will be relieved and, frankly, so will I. Do we understand each other?”

Ken wanted to both laugh hysterically and weep. He did neither. His face stoic, he answered, “Yes, sir.” One thing he knew, he would try to find out who attempted to kill Vanessa, even though he’d been stripped of his duties. He was furious at her, livid, but he realized now that he didn’t want her to die. “Can I go now, sir?”

“Yes, you can.” He slid him a sheet of paper. “Here are the various psychiatrists approved by the Chicago Police Department. They are well aware of police burn out and other issues that go along with the job. I wish you luck.”

Ken stood, looking down at the sheet.

“And you aren’t to go anywhere near Vanessa Nash, now Vanessa Zaldana.”

Ken felt a shiver rack his body. “I won’t.”

It was the biggest lie he’d ever uttered in his life.



“Can I open my eyes now?” Vanessa was snuggled in Karim’s arms. She’d let him walk her across a parking lot, check in at the front desk, and ride up an elevator and hadn’t peeked once, not caring what others might think. Nobody had ever made her feel as special as he did, not even her parents. For his kindness, the least she could do was contain her curiosity and not look.

A door creaked open and he stepped through it, jostling her playfully. “When you look,” he said, speaking directly into her ear, “you’ll see our home for the foreseeable future. I’m not taking you to any of my houses until I get rid of your nemesis Ken and anyone else who may want to harm you. I don’t really think you’ll complain about staying here. You can open your eyes now.”

She did and gasped as he set her down. “Wow!” She looked around at the dark red velvet walls with lacy red curtains, the deep white carpeting, and the king-sized four-post bed with velvet bedspread adorning it. Chairs and a sofa, plush and also deep red, sat around a glass coffee table. One side of the room was a mini-kitchenette. On the other side was a bar, chilled champagne in a bucket. It was so romantic. Eyes wet, she turned to Karim. “The wedding suite?”

“Yes. And if you haven’t figured it out, this is *The Valentine Hotel*, the only honeymoon hotel in the entire Chicago area. Yet it’s out of the way, in a small village. I hired discreet security to watch the entire place while we’re here, much more extensive than the two security guards at my gated community. It would be damn near impossible for anyone to get to you here. And I do believe you and I will have a lot of fun here until we can go home.”

She ran to him and hugged him. “It’s beyond gorgeous.”

He patted her back. “Nothing is too good for my wife. There’s a fitness room, a few pools with saunas, several restaurants and lots of activities.” He lifted her chin and stared into her eyes. “However, I was hoping that you’d prefer your activities with me. Our clothes — and other things — will be delivered soon.”

“There’s something already up here.” Vanessa pointed to a red bag near the bar. She loved how everything was red — the color of passion.

“I told them to have that up here for us.” Karim stroked her hair. “You can order one of many bags of tricks and I did.”

“Bags of tricks?” Her sex spasmed at his words. Did he mean...?

“They have a shop of sex toys here.” Karim’s eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. “I just told them to send up the biggest bag. I’m sure we’ll find things that are to our liking.”

She felt lightheaded. “I-I’m sure we will.”

“Maybe there’s a paddle in there.”

Her ass puckered with heat when he mentioned paddles.

“Yeah, you’d like that.” He held her at shoulder’s length, peering hard into her face. “The thought turns you on, doesn’t it, my sex goddess?”

She giggled at his pet name for her and he smiled.

“What else is in that bag?” “Lots and lots of great surprises. I know what you want and need.” His hand slid to her backside and he gave her a hard, tight slap on the ass. As she almost sank to the ground, he grabbed her around the waist with one arm and carried her to the bed, then set her over his knee.

Her wedding dress had a long skirt. With deft hands, he pulled down the zipper and peeled the dress over her head, letting it fall to the floor. Next he unfastened her strapless bra and gently pulled it from under her. She shut her eyes and bit her lip as he smacked her on the left cheek with a sharp slap. Surprised

again by how hot a spanking got her, she moaned as the vibrations rippled to her pussy.

“No briefs even under your wedding dress,” he said. “My kind of girl.”

“Woman!”

He laughed and spanked her again, then again and again, telling her not to kick her legs or move.

She was breathing hard, body still buzzing. “I can’t control it.”

He ruffled her hair, playfully. “Try.” She felt a swoosh of air as he lifted his hand high and she wanted to scream with pleasure when his palm struck her bare ass, causing the familiar ripples that shook her to her nub. Although she wanted to flail and kick, she held back, her sweet juices pouring from her pussy.

It drove her nuts to restrain herself. She spasmed every time his big hand came down on her ass. He finally massaged her red-hot bottom. That made her come, too. By the time he lifted her under the arms and sat her on the edge of the bed, she was panting hard and felt as boneless as Jell-O.

Leaving her on the bed, he stood, gazing down at her, while she stared back at him, her mouth going dry. She couldn’t believe that she was married to this handsome man. First he loosened his tie, then carelessly threw it aside. Next, he slid his jacket to the floor. He looked beautiful in a white silk shirt that hugged his massive frame. Quickly he unbuttoned it, the white clashing with his dark body.



When he tore it off, he stood there with his muscles rippling. As he unzipped his pants, she swallowed hard. He stepped out of them, with only a pair of black bikini briefs covering the bulge of his cock. With graceful movement, he slid off the last of his clothing and finally met her gaze, waggling his eyebrows at her. “Did you like my little striptease act?”

“I loved it.” She giggled, her head giddy. “You put the tease in striptease.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” But he broke into a huge, dimpled grin.

As she watched him from a feverish haze, she noticed how his muscles contracted when he moved. Lord, he was a picture of pure masculine delight. She wanted him to jump her bones, but instead he backed away, his long cock slapping the side of his thigh.

“Where are you going?” she called out, weakly.

He didn’t answer and his mysteriousness turned her on. She followed his path as he walked to the bar, picked up a bottle of champagne, then bent down to pick up the hotel’s bag of tricks.

Her breathing grew deep as her heart fluttered in her chest. “What are you up to?” She held herself up on her elbows, staring at him.

He came towards her, with his sexy, confident swagger and his hands full. When he sat on the bed, she bounced a little bit and her sex hit the mattress,

quaking with delightful hot sensations. Touching him drove her nuts. As he dug into the bag, she reached over to play with his cock. “Not yet.” He gently removed her hand, and then popped the cork of the champagne bottle, pouring the liquid into two glasses. He handed her one, and clicked his glass with hers, his eyes glimmering as he toasted, “To us.”

“Yes.”

“To forever.”

She hesitated. “Forever,” she agreed, hoping that it came true.

They both drank champagne as they stared into one another’s eyes. She could get lost in such dark pools of blackness.

Breaking her trance, Karim took her empty glass and set it next to the champagne bottle. “I hope you’re a little tipsy now.” He grinned then reached down, into the red bag. She watched him pull something out, and the pulse in her temple throbbed.

“What’s that?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

He held it up, a hint of a smile on his lips.

Puzzled, she took it from him, looking hard. “You want me to wear a blindfold?” But she could feel herself shuddering, almost dropping it. The mask was a soft material and she ran her thumb over it.

His hot hand rubbed her thigh, very close to her sex. “Yes,” he murmured in a low, silky voice, very close to her ear. “I want you in suspense.”

She swallowed with difficulty. “Wow. What did I get myself into?”

He took it gently from her hands and slid the soft material over her eyes, the elastic holding it close to her head. The eyeless mask effectively shut out any hint of light. In the darkness, all she could do was concentrate on his spicy scent, the hot feel of his big hands as he lovingly pressed her to the mattress. She lay there, heart pounding, wondering what to expect, eagerly awaiting his next step.

She could hear him rummaging in the bag, and keenly wondered what might come next. Her sex pulsed, dripping nectar. As he took her wrist in his hand, she suddenly realized he was fastening a Velcro strap around it, and then attaching her arm to the bedpost.

“You’re my prisoner.” His soft voice washed over her with sexy promise.  
“You’re a prisoner of my love.”

She arched as he came around to attach her other wrist to the bedpost.

“I’ve...never done this before.” As she said it, she realized she couldn’t wait for him to have her in captivity.

He laughed as he lifted her ankle. “I kind of figured this was new to you.” He attached her ankle to the bed’s foot post.

*Holy shit. I’m going to die, but at least I’ll die happy.*

When he finished binding her, she tugged on her restraints, testing them, but couldn't get free. Her belly felt funny, a little ticklish; she had no idea what he'd do, and the waiting tantalized her. She trembled, her pussy convulsing.

"Ever have capture fantasies?" It sounded as if he were lying beside her.

*How had he known? He couldn't have read her diary...*

"Yes."

"I thought so."

"What are you going to do to me?" She heard her voice shaking, but from eagerness, not fear. She wasn't scared of him at all. He'd never hurt her. She was sure of that. And, she was also horny as hell. For him and only him.

She felt Karim laying his rigid cock on her abdomen and she pulled hard at her bonds, dying to hold it. He laughed and retreated and she mumbled, "Tease! Let me out of these things so I can play with your cock!" Was this her talking? She used to blush when somebody told an off-color joke. "Please, I want your cock."

"No. I decide what we do in the bedroom, and you love it that way."

Again, her belly turned to liquid. He was right, but oh, how she wanted to stroke his elegant cock...

She felt him lowering himself between her widely spread legs. His tongue swung around her inner thigh and she tightened up, unable to sate the luscious

tension. He moved to her other thigh and swirled his tongue around there and her pussy started shaking. She heard herself purring like a cat.

When he tasted her nectar, she arched and wept, yanking as hard as she could on her unyielding bonds. He set his mouth over her cunt and sucked on her hardened clit and she exploded inside, calling his name, losing her mind. Her sex pulsed with new vigor as he entered her, swelling inside of her, causing her flesh to clamp down on him, bringing tears to her eyes as she arched and strained.

Something felt different. As the blunt head of his cock pressed against her, she felt a rubbery, cool contraption on his shaft. “Did you put something on?” she managed to ask, her brain half gone.

Suddenly he laughed, then she felt the rubber contraption buzz to life against her wide-open sex as he thrust inside of her. She moaned as he surged into her, over and over again. The vibrator on his cock, mixed with the plunging organ itself, blasted white hot flames of pleasure through her and she threw her head back as she came, an earthquake erupting inside of her. Her pussy spasmed over him and didn’t want to stop, and she didn’t want it to stop. She knew she was babbling out of her head, but she didn’t care. Her hips powered upwards to meet his thrusts and to feel the vibrations of whatever-the-fuck he had on the end of his shaft.

“I love you, Karim!” she knew she was saying as their bodies fused together madly, forging a bond, making them one. He didn’t stop his thrusts until he was soft and then he got off the bed while her pussy still sizzled and shook, her nectar dripping down the sides of her ass.

Gently, he undid her restraints and she dropped to the mattress, sweat-drenched, breathing hard, and making little kitten noises. Finally, she felt him fall beside her. He removed her mask, finding her lips so they could kiss. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and drank him up completely as he ran his hot tongue through her mouth. When he pulled back a little, they both licked one another’s lips, laughing a little, breathing hard, still locked together.

Running a rough palm up her body, to her face, he grabbed her blindfold and pulled it off. She blinked in the unaccustomed light and the first thing she saw was his dark, sexy face and tender expression. He brushed her hair back, his eyes radiating both love and lust.

“My sexy Sheik.” Vanessa threw herself at him, drinking in his lips, her own love and lust exploding from her head to toes. When she finally pulled away, she stroked his hair back.

“Are you a Sheik?”

## Chapter Eleven

Karim hesitated, as if reluctant to answer, and then admitted, “I am.”

“And I’m your harem.” She ran her tongue over his heated lips.

“You’re all the harem I’ll ever need. Believe that, Ness.”

They wrapped their arms around one another in a tight cocoon, meshing their bodies together. It seemed like they lay together that way forever.

Finally, Karim gently peeled himself off of her and she scrambled to sit beside him, her arms hugging his body, her head on his shoulder.

“My Goddess,” he said, kissing her temple. “Want to know what I did to you when we fucked?”

“Yes! What happened? It made me lose my sanity, what little is left.”

He held up a blue plastic ring and said, “It’s a cock ring that vibrates. An excellent toy for both me and you, babe.”

His words, his voice, caused a shudder to shoot through her. She took the ring from him turning it over in her hand. She could smell the erotic scent of sex all over it and kissed it, not sure why she did that, but he didn’t question her.

“I never heard of a cock ring before,” she admitted, her blood rushing quickly through her.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “Did you enjoy being held captive?”

“Oh, yes, damn you!” The world still looked fuzzy in her heated eyes, including him, but she blinked his image clear and saw the sensual curve of his lips. Tracing them with her finger, she asked, “Wh-why did I enjoy being tied up?”

He grinned and stroked her cheek. “You like being my sex slave, that’s why.”

She shook her head, her pussy still pulsing. “I guess you’re right.” She wondered who this woman was, this insatiable sexual being.

“I’m going to teach you a lesson for being so naughty.” His eyes twinkled as she whimpered, curling up inside. Sitting up, he reached into the bag and pulled out a red paddle. Slapping one hand over his muscled thigh, he commanded, “On my lap now, bad girl.”

Shit. She liquefied inside, as she laid her body across his hot lap, feeling his cock as it pressed against her hip, sticking her ass up in the air, ready for him.

He laughed gently. “Lay still, and don’t move.”

She tried to obey, squirming a little, trembling in anticipation, her body hot and ready, tingling in advance.

When he looped one arm around her waist, holding her fast, she knew she was in for a serious orgasm.

Looking over her shoulder, she could see him spinning the paddle. “Naughty girls deserve to be spanked.”

“And I’m very naughty.” Would he hurry up already?



“I know.”

He stroked her ass and she sighed.

Suddenly he raised his arm and slapped her tightly on the bottom with his paddle. The hot vibes that shivered through her tunnel to her clit made her eyes water. He did it again and she tried to writhe, couldn't, and wept as her clit grew hard. The paddle connected with her flaming ass again and she arched and came all over him. After that, she was powerless against the bonfire that roared through her loins and she lost count of all the times she shuddered and spilled her nectar. It seemed to go on forever.

He stopped and set the paddle aside to a cry of protest from her lips.

“No more right now.” He pulled her into his arms and dragged them both onto the mattress, rolling over so that she was on top of him.

“I love you, Mrs. Zaldana.” He took her lips in a slow and passionate kiss.



He walked into the family diner, smiling at the waitress. She'd worked there forever, was part of the furniture, and always made him feel welcome.

“Sir!” she exclaimed happily, striding up to him with a good spring in her step for a woman who had to be in her seventies.

“Evie,” he returned, with reverence due to her age. They’d sat together through the years, telling tales during her coffee breaks. At the same time, he’d carefully held back telling her anything of a personal nature. Still, he felt a strong connection to her, a son’s love of a mother figure.

“You haven’t been in here for so long, I wondered,” Evie said, handing him a menu.

“Let’s have a chat while I eat,” he said. “Can you take a break?”

“I’ll ask. Seat yourself.” In a rush, she said, “I’m just so glad to see you again.”

“The pleasure is quite mutual.”

As she strode away, he took a seat in the nearest booth. Soon she joined him and another waitress came to give them coffee and take their orders. After that was settled, she took his hand and pressed it warmly. “So tell me what you’ve been up to. And why are you here so early? It’s not even six o’clock.”

He smiled, with no intention of telling her. Nobody could know his secrets. “I couldn’t sleep so I took a stroll and ended up here.”

“Well, this is wonderful, son. Actually, I worked the night shift, so if you’d come here two hours later, like you usually do, I would have been gone and missed you. That would have been a shame. Please tell me how you are. You look well.”

He smirked inside, feeling far older than his years. "I'm enjoying my early retirement, ma'am. Some people like to work. I prefer to play." Not exactly true. Sometimes you just burned out.

"I'll bet you have a lot of women on your string," she said, mischief in her eyes. "I would take a stab at you if I were thirty years younger, yes, I would."

"I'm flattered. Compliments from such a beautiful woman go straight to my head."

She blushed and giggled. "Still a charmer."

He really wasn't. Not anymore. The glib, flirtatious lines were still there, but he rarely used them anymore. Mentally, he was just too tired. He had one last matter to resolve and he could relax for the rest of his life.

"Are you here to visit anybody?" Evie asked. "You never talk about family. I assume you don't have any, at least not near by. Did you ever marry and have children?"

"I'd rather talk about *your* family. Any new pictures of your newest grandchild?"

While she pulled her brag book out of her waitress's apron pocket, he laughed.

"I knew you'd keep it very handy," he said, feeling warm inside. It always felt good to visit the diner. It was a ritual for him; he visited every time he was in town.

“This little boy — he is going to play football,” he said, handing her book back to her. “Handsome little man.”

“Would you like to come over for dinner tonight?” Evie’s eyes brightened. “My daughter and grandson will be there. You’re so good with my grandchildren.”

“I’d be honored to come over tonight. After that, I’m going to be busy for a while.” *He couldn’t wait to see the shock on their faces...* “That’s great,” she said triumphantly. “My whole family thinks you’re so nice.”

“I can be nice.” He tensed inside as their waitress brought a tray of food.

Few people knew his dark side and he liked it that way. He smiled at the waitress as she served him his meal and she smiled back, warmth in her eyes.



Karim stood outside the hotel, breathing in the sweet early morning air. He was restless, but didn’t want to wake his angel of a wife. She’d looked so peaceful, a gentle smile on her face. Before leaving the room, he’d called the head of the security firm that he’d hired. “Send two of your best men upstairs to guard my room.” Soon they arrived, stepping off the elevator. After approving the two tall, athletic looking brutes, he’d taken the elevator down to the first floor and had strolled past the desk clerk who batted her eyes at him and waved.

He waved back and hurried out of the hotel.

Now Karim stared at the beauty of the summer morning, the orange ball of sun, the leafy oak trees lining the street, the park and its fountain across the street. The air smelled of grass and flowers. He decided to drive to Starbucks to get himself and his woman a good cup of coffee. The hotel had a coffee shop, but he didn't like the brand.

Striding through the parking lot, he had the odd sensation of being watched. Looking around, he kept walking, but lifted his guard. He had good instincts about things like this — had been forced to have good instincts. Yet the few times he halted and swung around, nobody was in sight. Which didn't mean he wasn't being watched.

Disturbed, he spotted his car and slid inside. He was just about to turn the key when he felt prickles of discomfort again. Something wasn't right. He felt it. His agent's intuition told him so. Lifting the hood from the inside, he got back out of the car. After a careful inspection, he shut the hood and got down on his hands and knees to look on the underside of the car. Swearing, shocked, he slid underneath the car and disabled the bomb, shaking as he stood with the dead bomb in his hand. *He was just here. Whoever did this was just here, I know it.*

Quickly, he grabbed his cell phone out of his blue jeans back pocket and called 9-1-1. “Lake Forest Police Department Emergency Line,” some young man answered.

Karim jumped all over him at once. “My name is Karim Zaldana and I’m staying at *The Valentine Hotel*. Someone put a bomb in my car. Get the fuck over here. Also, send a few squads out also looking for possibly suspicious people in the area. I think he was just here and could be near.” He felt a white hot rage along with his fear. He’d promised to protect Ness, and he would. But it would be harder than he realized. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand then suddenly spotted a piece of paper blowing around a large rock. Newspaper letters had been cut and pasted to it.

His heart quickening, he bent to pick it up.

“In case you stopped me this time, know that I won’t stop until I’m finished.”

Blinking, he stared at it as he slowly stood up. Who the hell was doing this? Folding it carefully and sliding it into his pocket, he called upstairs to one of the security guards. “Tom, when my wife wakes up, tell her I went for coffee and donuts and that I’ll be back soon.”

Tom agreed in an apathetic voice.

Next Karim called Rebecca, who answered in a sleepy voice.

“Sheik Karim Zaldana, you’re a pain in the ass,” she said. “What the hell do you want from me now?”

When he told her, she grew serious.

“I’d say it’s more than her stalker, Karim. Somebody bigger than that, not out to get her, but out to get you.”

Karim was in agent mode. “I can’t rule anything out at this point. I think the letter is amateurish for anyone connected to...the agency.”

“It could be somebody you busted or a friend of an enemy. But, you’re right, the letter seems amateurish.”

Karim felt a discomfort in his belly. “Maybe whoever did it wants to look amateurish so we’ll look elsewhere.”

“Certainly possible. Karim, don’t get mad at me. Is there any chance it could be Bandar?”

Karim’s body tensed. “Are you crazy, Becky? You worked with him. Is he capable of that, even to a stranger? He’s my brother, woman!”

“A jealous brother. He loves you, but he envies you.”

“Please. He wouldn’t hurt anybody unless they deserved it. Let’s not go there. What about the cop who is stalking Ness? You said you feel it’s bigger than him. Maybe it isn’t. Stalkers can be pretty crazy.”

“Yes, they can. But I talked to the chief of police yesterday. Wentworth was with his partner all day yesterday when he responded to the fire. It couldn’t have been him.”

“You’re sure? They aren’t covering up?”

“The chief is a good guy. Maybe some other cops would cover for Wentworth, but not him.”

Karim let out a long breath, his eyes shut. “I wonder if the same person did both these things. It would seem so, but nothing is certain. And for all we know, Wentworth got somebody else to burn my house for him. Nothing can be ruled out yet. All I know is, I have to protect my wife, yet I must tell her about this. She needs to know the danger, and as much as I hate to do this nasty business on the day after my wedding, I don’t think the police will let this go. I’ll be forced down to the station. This is so full of shit.”

“Nobody’s tried to kill you before unless you’ve been on a mission, right?”

“Right, but I knew it was always possible. And until I married Ness I accepted it. Now I want to be alive to make her happy. And I certainly don’t want anything to happen to her.”

“I understand.”



Karim heard sirens as a few police cars pulled in, plus a few regular cars that he knew also had cops in them, or maybe members of the Bomb Squad. “I have to go. Get down to the Lake Forest Police Department. I’m sure I’ll join you shortly.”

“Will do, Karim.” She hung up.

Karim poised himself to face a bunch of questions that he couldn’t answer. At the same time, his mind was very much on Ness and he worried about her reaction to this sudden, unpleasant excitement.



Vanessa was both disappointed and alarmed to wake up and find Karim gone, but she smiled when the bodyguards at the door explained he’d gone out to get her the best coffee and donuts. It was a sweet gesture and so like him. Somehow she knew that this was Karim’s true nature; that he wasn’t putting on an act. She had learned to read people well while selling real estate.

Her job! She needed to call in and explain to her boss why she hadn’t been in. Would she get fired? She doubted it. She always sold the most of all the realtors in her office. But if she did get fired, somebody else would hire her. She had lost track of time and reality while with Karim and wouldn’t trade in a moment she’d spent with him. Nor was she upset about facing the consequences.

While waiting for Karim to return, she took a shower and used some fresh smelling soap provided by the hotel. Then one of the bodyguards knocked on the door, telling her that their clothes had arrived. Vanessa was both surprised and excited to see that Karim had obviously given somebody her apartment's address. All her clothes had been packed in brand new leather luggage. Bless him. Karim had arranged all this just for her. She'd have to plan a nice surprise for him soon.

As she changed into her only sexy nightie — black, sheer and falling just above her thigh — she thought about Sheik Karim Zaldana. Did she know enough about him to make this marriage work? Probably not, but she liked what she knew. They seemed to have things in common that they could build upon. They both liked to fix up houses and obviously shared some talent in art. He loved his family, as she did hers. His adventurous nature turned her on, even if she had never been adventurous. It would be interesting to see if this worked out. She certainly already felt that she'd never meet a better man than Karim, certainly would never feel this way about anyone else.

She walked to the bed stand and picked up her cell phone. Two minutes after nine. She'd been awake for a half an hour. How long did it take him to get coffee and donuts? And why didn't he just get them at the hotel? The big, round-faced security guard had said that Karim favored Starbucks, which the hotel didn't

have. That worked for her, but she hoped he'd be back soon. She wanted him with her, couldn't stand the separation.

The door opened and he stood there, looking scrumptious in a simple white tee shirt that his shoulders stretched and a pair of tight-fitting dark jeans. He smiled as he held out a cardboard tray with coffee and a white bag. "To my sweetheart," he said, and she ran to him, hugging him. "You look yummy in that nightgown," he mumbled, tugging seductively on her shoulder strap.

Something was wrong. His muscles were tense, in spite of his relaxed words. She pulled back and took the donut bag from him, staring into his face. He looked as if he hadn't gotten any sleep, although he favored her with a soft smile.

"Do you feel all right?" "I am well, as you see. Let's sit by the window and eat." He headed towards the sofa on the other side of the room and she followed him, feeling uneasy. He pulled the drapes open and sunshine warmed her. "From this high up, I doubt anyone can see the way you're dressed." He winked at her.

She sat on the sofa. "I don't think so either. Sit down, Karim. Are you sure you're all right?"

He sat down and unfolded the donut bag, holding out a chocolate éclair. "I guessed that you'd like this."

She took a sip of her coffee. It was rich and good. He nudged her cheek with the éclair. She couldn't help grinning as she turned to take a bite. He took one too and lifted his own cup of coffee.

"I'm going to be honest with you all the time." He stared out at the landscape and park.

For some reason, she felt compelled to take his hand in both of hers and squeeze it. "I appreciate that. Honey, what's wrong?" The "honey" slipped out naturally.

He tossed her a wry smile. "You read me well. Something's very wrong, but I don't want you to worry about it."

She shut her eyes for a moment. "Karim, I'm not made of fine china. You met me at a vulnerable time, but I can be tough. Just tell me. Whatever it is, we're in this together." She thought of Ken and faltered a little inside. But now that she had Karim on her side, even Ken didn't scare her as much. "What's going on?"

Karim finished the last of the éclair, swallowed, then turned to her, taking her into his arms. "You know, when I hired that security company, they really did a good job manning the hotel itself, but they didn't think to have people watching the parking lot."

She felt her stomach clenching. She'd been right. Something was wrong — very, very wrong.

He stroked her hair back. “Look, don’t be frightened. They’re watching it now, and as you see, I’m fine, but — somebody put a bomb in my car. Fortunately, I sensed something was wrong, so I checked the car before I turned it on.”

The blood drained from her face and she felt faint. Karim quickly grabbed her and set her on his lap, holding her close.

“I disabled the bomb. I’m an agent, sweetheart. I’m good at taking care of myself.”

She could feel her body trembling with fear as he she snuggled into him. “You’re not invincible. You could have died.”

“I have nine lives. Just ask anyone who has worked with me.” He continued stroking her hair.

“Ken did this. He told me he learned to make bombs online.” She held him tighter.

Karim patted her back. “I was at the police station. He’s one of many suspects. We’ll stay here until the killer is caught. I don’t want you to worry about it.”

She laughed derisively. “Of course not.” Pulling back, she looked up at him, seeing the tension around his eyes. “I’m always going to be afraid for you if you’re in danger,” she said, and she meant it. “If I’d been responsible for your death — if my stalker had done it — I would never recover. Of course, I won’t recover if

anything happens to you at all. I already love you so much.” She tried to control her babbling, but her fear for him loosened her tongue. “Ken has to be stopped! I’ll bet he has some PI following me — that would be just like him.”

Karim set his jaw. “Well, we’re going to cover our tracks from now on. I’m having armed security guards follow us wherever we go. Whether it’s Ken or somebody else, we won’t leave here alone.”

Vanessa felt tears springing to her eyes. How she hated to be trapped inside, even with Karim. Her mother had called twice already, wondering why she hadn’t visited them for a few days. She couldn’t tell her the truth. She’d get sick with worry. Instead she’d told her in a cheery voice, that she had a new boyfriend and was busy with him and with work. Still, if she didn’t visit soon, her parents would start to worry about her.

“What’s on your mind, sweetie?” His warm words washed over her.

She wiped her eyes, angrily. “Oh, I was just thinking about how Ken is screwing up my life.”

“If not for him, we’d never have met. We’ll stop Ken, and whoever else may be after you or me.” He rested his cheek on her head as he stroked her hair. “I promise.”

She warmed inside, but that didn’t solve her problem. “Karim, my parents can’t know I’m in danger, and it’s unusual for me to go even two days without

dropping by. And I also stop over there on Sundays. I have no idea how to keep them from worrying about me if I don't see them soon. And they're both so frail..."

"You'll visit them Sunday, all right?"

She blinked her eyes dry and looked up at his compassionate face. "How?"

He wiped her tears with one finger. "We'll go, just with security guards. I'd love to meet your parents. I won't tell them we're married, just that we've started dating."

She couldn't help smiling at him through wet eyes. "That's sweet, but I can't have my parents see that we need security guards."

"Of course not, love. They'll park across the street and watch the house, but they won't come inside. All right?"

Lord, he was so kind. It seemed he'd do anything to please her. She nodded, feeling a little relieved.

"You worry about your parents as much as they worry about you." It was a statement, not a question.

She sucked in a shaky breath. "Yes. I can't be there all the time and they're so medically fragile, yet they won't leave their home."

"I'm hiring full-time nurses."

She stared at him, touched. "You'd do that?"

“They’re family now, plus I want to ease your mind. Until they know we’re married, you can tell them that you’re paying for the care.”

“They know I’m not that rich.”

“They don’t know how much you make, do they? Isn’t it dependent upon sales?”

“Well, yes...”

“Tell them you’ve sold some very expensive homes. It’s a white lie, to get them to accept the help. Insist that they do it for your sake, so you don’t worry over them. They’ll allow it for you, won’t they?”

She lifted her eyebrows and tried to inhale a normal breath, but it was shallow. “For me, yes. I suppose your idea would work.” Suddenly she leaned forward to hug him. “You’re amazing.”

He patted her head. In a voice meant to downplay his kindness, he said, “After we visit your parents on Sunday, we’ll go to my Aunt Linda’s estate for my birthday party. I canceled because of...the recent events, but I think it’ll do us good to have some normal fun.”

“It’s your birthday on Sunday? And you didn’t say anything?” She was temporarily distracted, looking up at him, catching his now evasive gaze. “Karim! Why didn’t you mention it?” She broke into a smile.



“I’ve been otherwise occupied.” He stroked back her hair, tickling her cheek. “I really didn’t think about it, since I wasn’t planning on celebrating. But I’ll call Aunt Linda and tell her I’d like to see the family, after all. It’ll be a diversion. You can watch me get spanked thirty-five times.”

She couldn’t help laughing. “Can I do the spanking?”

“Everybody gets a crack at me on my birthday.” He twisted a lock of hair around her finger.

She reached up to smooth back a few errant curls. “We’ll bring security guards there too?”

“To the gate, yes. It’s a very safe location. Aunt Linda lives on a huge estate in the middle of nowhere. No other homes around. No people closer than a mile or two. It’s beautiful. Her security system is state-of-the-art. Nobody can get on the property unless they have a keycard. The guards can accompany us to the gate then wait for us to return — that’s extra eyes. Plus, they have two Rottweilers who would tear any stranger to shreds. They’re attack dogs. Aunt Linda is sweet, but paranoid. She has a good idea that Bandar is involved in dangerous work and she worries about her own safety, as well as his. He lives there in a separate wing.”

She kissed his inviting lips. “I can’t wait. It *will* be nice to do something away from here, although I’m still going to worry about you.”

She suddenly hugged him tight. “God, I almost lost you.”

## Chapter Twelve

Karim smiled. “I’m hard to lose. Please stop worrying.”

“I can’t.” She kept touching his face, his chest, his hands, his thighs, assuring herself that he was alive.” I never cared about my safety before,” he admitted, taking both of her hands in his, kissing her fingertips.

She pulled her hands out of his grasp and grabbed onto his arms. “Please — after this problem is solved — don’t live on the edge anymore.”

“I already promised, and my word is good. I don’t want — our children — in danger.”

Their gazes met and locked and she took in a shaky breath.

Her heart thudded. She was on the pill. Her doctor had put her on it to regulate her cycle. If this marriage worked out, and every moment with Karim made her want that more and more, she certainly wanted to bear his child, or even children.

“I can’t lose you,” she said, as she hugged him again, this time for dear life. “I could never bear to lose you, Karim.”

His soothing touch calmed her as he pressed her to him and circled his hands around her back. "I couldn't bear to lose you either, love. I believe we are destined to be together and nothing can stop fate. We can face adversity, but we'll overcome any thrown our way. Do you believe me?"

In his arms, she believed anything. "Yes."

His hand crept up into her hair. "I'll take every safety precaution imaginable. We won't use my car anymore. I'll hire a limo service that won't arrive until the time we get inside. Ever been in a limo?"

"No." She calmed herself by listening to the steady beat of his heart. He'd survived. That was all that mattered to her now. Running her hands down his chest, she leaned in to give him a desperate kiss, a kiss that satisfied her that he was here and in one piece. Drinking him in, feeling his arms wrapping around her, reassured her, but she swept deeper into his mouth, tasting chocolate and the coffee he'd just drunk. She felt his hands sliding down her nightie, his fingers taking her nipple, scissors-like, as he wiggled it, starting a low roar of flames within her. She slid her hands to his cock and squeezed it gently, and his body reacted by tightening.

Finally, they pulled apart and she said, staring into endlessly dark eyes, "I have to make love to you. I'm so relieved you're not hurt."

“That can be arranged.” He lifted her off his lap and set her beside him, and then got off the sofa and knelt before her, squeezing her thigh. “I’m overwhelmed that you care so much about my welfare.” Smiling at her, he lifted her leg, exposing her sex to the air-conditioned room.

“What are you up to?” She felt herself melting in advance.

He lifted her leg higher and kissed the back of her ankle, which surprisingly aroused her. A lot. His lips and tongue moved slowly, erotically to her calf, tickling her, making her laugh. He stopped each time he licked her and shot her wicked grins. Goosebumps climbed up her body. Lowering his head, he blew on her knee and she sucked in and held a sharp breath. How did he make her leg an erotic object?

She didn’t care. He just knew how. He spread her legs apart and massaged her inner and outer thighs with his free hand, mixing light and heavy strokes. She shuddered. “L-let me pleasure you too,” she blurted out.

“Later.” He placed light kisses against both inner thighs, and then used the edges of his teeth, lightly nipping her, driving her out of her mind. Her sex pulsed even though he hadn’t touched it. Then he moved on to suck the tender flesh on her right inner thigh, very close to her pussy, softly applying the pressure of his teeth, but not enough to hurt, just to arouse. He sucked the other side and she could hear her ragged breathing.

“Please!” she heard herself saying. “Let me pleasure you too, Karim.”

“Shut up.” His words were soft, tender. “I’m in charge in the bedroom, love. I want to feel your orgasms. They make me crazy.”

Her heart thumping so hard she thought it would leave her chest and dance on the floor, she suddenly had a naughty idea, something she’d never have thought about before Karim. “I never realized a woman’s pleasure arouses the man.” Her body was sizzling as she took in his gorgeous face and form.

“It’s erotic to me, but I can’t speak for any other man. Nor do I care about them at this moment.” His eyes twinkled. “I’m the luckiest man alive and I’m going to have my delicious bride for breakfast.”

Spontaneously, she decided to act on a fantasy of hers and pulled out of his grasp, standing before him, ready to take off. “If you want me, catch me.” Giggling, she ran from his grasp just as he stood up and reached for her. Heading for the closet, she slammed and locked the door once she got inside and was bathed in blackness. As her pussy poured nectar down her thighs, she couldn’t believe she’d initiated this game. The short time with Karim had certainly changed her, at least sexually. She heard him howling with laughter.

“Why, you little witch!”

Her pussy shuddered as she heard him running towards the closet. When he knocked on the door, her knees turned to jelly.

“Who’s there?” she asked teasingly.

“The man who can make your dreams come true.”

How true. She giggled and slid to the floor. It was a rather large closet, empty of clothing since neither had unpacked yet. A soft rug cushioned her knees and bum. It was very dark, giving her an eerie feeling of hot unreality. Even though it was only a game, her heart raced as a prickly feeling of excitement rushed through her.

“Let me in,” he said, in a low, silky voice.

“No.” She was so aroused she had to run her hand up and down her own pussy, catching her nectar. She felt her nipples hardening; in fact her entire body tightened up.

“This calls for drastic action,” Karim said, and she heard him walking away.

What the hell was he up to? She shivered. Whatever it was, she knew she’d like it. Soon she heard him coming back and her pussy spasmed. Again, she caught her cream and rubbed herself, finally sticking her fingers up her pulsing sex.

She heard something rattling in the door’s lock and it flung open, before the towering height of Karim stood there with the red bag of tricks in his hand.

“Picking locks is child’s play for an agent,” he commented, and then he stepped inside and slammed the door shut, enclosing them both in stark blackness.

She let out a little scream, panicking though she knew he'd never hurt her, scooting backward on her butt until her back hit the closet wall.

"There's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide." He closed in on her; she could see his shadow and feel his presence. She felt hot and cold prickles blast through her body, hearing her giggles as he set big hot hands on her shoulder. "The nightgown has to go." She could feel his hot breath and shivered.

"Your clothes have to go too." "Indeed." She saw his darkness lower and rest on his haunches. A lock of thick hair fell forward and brushed against her face as he reached out and wrapped one arm around her shoulders, the other under her knees. "You need to lie down, babe." Then he set her softly on the thick carpeting, running a hot palm across her, head-to-toe and back again. When he tweaked her nipple, she let out an involuntary sigh as she curled up inside. "What are you going to do to me, Karim?"

His warm chuckle washed over her like hot chocolate. "You don't really expect me to tell you that." His words sent a shudder through her as he added, "First things first." He grabbed the bottom of her nightie and blew on her sex before sliding the netted material over her head.

While she tried to cool down, she fumbled in the darkness for his tee shirt and he helped her yank it over his head. Sliding her hands down, she found his zipper, his cock bulging behind it, and with shaky fingers, unzipped his pants. He

wasted no time in kicking them off and she let out a little breath as he pulled her to face him. Sliding down a little, he made sure his cock pressed against her sex and kissed her ear. She felt strangely romantic and loved, even though this was a sexual situation. Somehow it seemed like so much more.

Hugging his head, she whispered, “I could kill you for scaring me.”

“Kill me with passion.” His arm left her body and she heard him rummaging into his bag of tricks. Her body was getting used to responding to him, even before she knew what he’d do. She went cold and hot inside, melting like butter. “Pearls,” he mumbled, holding a string up in the air.

She tried to see it in the blackness. “This is an odd time to give me a present. I don’t really like jewelry.”

“Not to wear.” He hugged her again and kissed her lips, varying the pressure from light to strong, his tongue sparring with hers, but with more force than play. As they kissed she suddenly felt a slippery string of little beads sliding up her pussy. The electric shocks jolted through her and she thrashed as she held him tighter.

“Don’t kick me, love.” He was laughing.

She was crying, but not unhappily. “What did you do?”

“Pearls are erotic.” He slid the necklace over her sex again and she arched and came.



“Holy shit!” she managed after she collapsed.

He ran the pearls over her breasts and around her nipples and she arched again, crying out, and finally grabbed them out of his hands. “Two can play at this!” Sliding down his body, she placed her head near his cock, licked him a few times, and then swirled the beads around his hard shaft, over and over again, while he tightened, grunted and cursed. Setting her mouth over his head, she licked his pre-cum, but he grabbed her hair and gently tugged on it, urging her up.

“Not yet. This time we’re going to come at the same time. Understand?”

She kept milking him, not wanting to stop. His flavor was so delicious.

“Understand?” He sat up, and knocked playfully on the back of her head as if rapping on a door. “Please.” His voice gentled. “I don’t want to come yet, but you’re making it difficult, dear.”

Disappointed, she lifted her head. He pulled her over him and rolled her to the side again, kissing her. She reciprocated with the animal ferocity that she felt from him. His hands slid to her breasts and hardened her nipples, and her clit stiffened. She was already so eager for him.

As they continued their deep kiss, she heard him rummaging in the bag again and suddenly felt a tiny plastic rocket in her hand, wondering what it was or what she needed to do with it. Not wanting to break the eternal kiss, she held it tight, but threw her arms and legs around his sweaty torso, rubbing her sex up and

down against his hard cock. She thought of the pearls and knew she'd use them on him again. She was beginning to understand how arousing it was to make your loved one come.

Karim slid his lips to her neck and smothered her in kisses. His breathing was harsh and hot and tickled her flesh, turning her on even more.

"What did you give me?" she asked, panting as she spoke.

"Mini-vibrator."

"To use on you?" She was still panting, he was still devouring her neck.

"Yes."

"How?"

"However you like." He thrust his cock's head inside her cunt — she felt naughty now at the thought, her pussy had become a cunt to her — and she cried out as she clamped onto his cock's head. He pulled out and slid in again, this time against something inside of her that filled her to the brim at first, and then burst like a balloon, causing her to actually squirt her nectar at him as he again pulled out.

Her body spasming, teeth chattering, she managed, "What d-did you just do?"

"That's your g-spot again, remember? Got you good this time." He sounded pleased.

“Go inside of me again, Karim. Please.”

He set her on her side again and entered her, this time thrusting up, high into her passageway, filling her, warming her, tickling her, teasing her, stopping at her womb as he filled her with icy hot flames. His hips and hers thrust at the same time and she gritted her teeth, seeing stars, seeing bright lights.

Suddenly she remembered the tiny vibrator in her hand and she instinctively let go of him with one arm, turned on the vibrator and set it behind his balls, as if guided there by a magic fairy. The result shocked her. He let loose with a primal growl, then arched and flooded her cervix with a rush of hot come. No sooner had he finished than he arched and came again, hard and long, and he drove Vanessa nuts as she rode along with him, her orgasms coming one on top of the other.

Her leg rested over his shin and he lifted it, opening her wider as he came in her again. She arched into him and held on tight, her nails digging deep, as he crushed her into him. As they climaxed one last time, he fell over her, his weight holding her down, but feeling good as he stroked her hair while she stroked his.

Both of them were breathing as if they'd run an eight-mile marathon. In the darkness, Vanessa felt closer to him than she'd ever felt toward any human being. His breathing and heartbeat soothed her, reminded her again that he was very much alive in spite of the bomb scare. She held him even tighter.

“Don’t ever leave me.” She knew how strange it was to say that to someone she just met. It was even stranger that she was so sure she’d love him forever.

He pressed his sweaty forehead against hers. “You just try to get rid of me, love. I’m like a boomerang. I’ll just keep coming back.”

Later on, after they’d ordered room service and were eating on the edge of the bed, still naked, Karim’s cell phone rang. They looked at one another and groaned. Karim didn’t really want to answer, to have his perfect world intruded upon, but he did pick his phone up off the bed stand and checked the caller ID.

“Let me see who...oh, Bandar. I’d better get it.” He rested a hand on her bare thigh and clicked on his phone. “Nice timing, little brother. What’s going on?”

“I was questioned about the bomb.”

Karim shut his eyes. Good heavens, if they’d only look in the right direction instead of at his brother! “I’m sorry. I know it wasn’t you.”

“But they don’t. I’m just relieved you’re all right. They’ll never find anything to link me to these horrible incidents. I’m innocent.”

“Of course you are.” Karim felt big-brother protective toward Bandar.

“Look, I have no doubt that it’s either Ken or some old enemy who has decided to get even with me. I tell you, my days as an agent are over. I can’t put Ness through this again.” He squeezed her thigh and her arms wrapped around his torso.

“In all our years working together, Karim, nobody ever accused me of trying to hurt you. I know you don’t think I did these things, but it’s mind-boggling that anybody does.”

“Look, we’re used to dealing with more important people than the police. Call Becky again, she’ll help. Then try to forget about it for now. The mystery will be solved. It always is.” It wasn’t always, but he felt it best to be positive for his brother’s sake.

“I hope so. My real reason for calling was to make sure for myself that you’re all right. I’m relieved that you are.”

“Couldn’t be better. And...” What would cheer Bandar up? “Ness and I are coming to your place for my birthday, after all. I’ll finally get to meet your elusive new stepfather.”

“Thought you were skipping your birthday this year.”

“I was going to, but I decided it would be a good diversion. And Ness can meet your mom and stepdad and see how much fun we have as a family. I’m making sure security guards follow us.”

“Well...good. As you know, Mom has been depressed. This news should cheer her up, give her something to look forward to. She loves to entertain.”

“Good. Then we can all benefit from this.”

There was a pause on the other end. Finally, “Since we’re having the party, do you care if I bring Amy?”

“Who?” His mind was on Vanessa and her sweet flowery female scent.

“Amy. Vanessa’s friend who was at the wedding. We’ve decided to see one another.”

“Oh!” Karim broke into a grin and slid a look at Vanessa. “Sure, Amy is welcome to come.”

Vanessa’s pretty face lit up, her cheeks turning pink.

“And you’re sure that you don’t suspect me as the one doing these horrible things to you?” Bandar sounded grim again.

“I would bet my life on it,” Karim assured. “You’ve always had my back. I trust you...and I love you.” He knew he was blushing. That sort of talk did not come natural to him when he spoke to his brother.

“I love you too,” Bandar said, and Karim could tell he was also embarrassed.

“I have to go now,” Karim said, in a brisk voice, wanting to brush the whole thing off. “I have a beautiful bride to satisfy.”

Bandar laughed. “And I’m taking Amy out to lunch, so I need to get ready.”

“Have a great time,” Karim said. “I’ll see you Sunday, probably talk to you before that.”

“Bye, bro.”

Karim set down the phone. He wrapped his arm around Vanessa and held her close. "They questioned him. He seems to really be afraid that I may suspect him, poor guy."

"That's ridiculous," Vanessa said, patting his side. "It's probably Ken."

He didn't really think it was Ken, but didn't believe it was Bandar either. In his line of work, though, you never really knew who your friends were. Even brothers turned on brothers, but he didn't believe that Bandar would do that...not ever. Still, he felt a wave of uneasiness inside of him, one he didn't really want to acknowledge.



Ken sat back in the chair by his computer, fighting tears. Life sucked. His father had turned him in. He'd deal with him later, but...he loved his father. No, he'd take his anger out on the Arab. The bastard deserved it. He couldn't hurt his father, but he could certainly hurt Karim. Maybe he could even kill him. Did he want to do jail time for murder? Maybe get the death penalty? Ken felt as if his head was being ripped in half.

The phone rang.

“Wentworth,” Ken said, trying to sound blustery and confident, although he felt as helpless as a baby.

“Ken, it’s Jerry.” Jerry Ackman, the private eye he’d hired.

Ken sat up straighter. “You got anything, Jerry?”

“I do, Ken. Told you I’m good.”

“Stop the bragging and tell me what you have.” He wanted to explode but he knew he had to keep his cool.

“Sure, Ken.” The man had a gravelly high voice that bespoke years of smoking. “Well, my people found Karim Zaldana and his wife...”

*“Don’t say that! She’s not his wife.”*

“Whatever.” Jerry sounded annoyed. “Look, my men found them. They’re staying at *The Valentine Hotel*. Romantic, huh?” He chuckled.

“I’m not feeling the humor. Tell me more.”

“Did you set a bomb in Zaldana’s car?”

“*What?*” Ken smiled at the unexpected news. “No! There was a bomb in his car? Did he blow up? Oh, God, is Vanessa all right?” His voice almost hit soprano, but he didn’t care. He felt his heart breaking.

“Nobody was blown up. Zaldana found the bomb before he started the car. I got that from my informant on the police department in Lake Forest.”



Ken fanned himself, relieved that Vanessa was still alive. But it was too bad the Arab didn't get killed. It would have solved all his problems. Now what would he do? "Is that it?" he asked, his mind whirling with conflicting ideas.

"No, I have a little more than that."

"I hope so, for what I'm paying you." He felt so out of sorts, almost like tearing the walls down and tossing over all the furniture. Maybe his dad was right and he did need medication...

"Karim hired *Raynor Security*. They're guarding the hotel and now I'm sure they're also guarding the parking lot." He snickered.

"So I won't find them alone?" Damn!

"I don't see how. But they will be leaving the hotel's grounds on Sunday. I shoved some money at one of the guards and he said that Zaldana is planning to visit his aunt's house for his birthday. Some of the guards are going, so the groom and his blushing bride won't be alone."

"What aunt?"

"He didn't know her name."

"You're so worth the money." His voice dripped sarcasm.

"Who needs the name? I have the address."

Ken sucked in a breath. "Wow. Good work then."

"Got a pen?"

Ken reached for a pen on his desk and grabbed a Post-it too. "I'm ready."

Jerry rattled off the address and Ken scribbled it down, his hand shaking.

"Anything else?" Jerry asked, arrogance in his voice.

Although he'd gotten the goods on Zaldana, Jerry's demeanor aggravated Ken, who was irritable and hadn't slept all night. "Nothing. Look, I gotta go." He hung up then banged a fist on the computer desk. What the fuck was he supposed to do now? He knew where Zaldana and Vanessa were staying and where they were going on Sunday, but they'd have guards following them everywhere. How was he supposed to do anything with that sort of protection surrounding them?

*"You have an IQ of one-sixty, Kenny," his father had yelled at him during his drinking and slapping days. "Your intelligence is a gift from the Almighty. Use it!" Crack!*

Ken halted and took in a strengthening breath. His father had been so much more useful to him when he'd been harsh. The old words rang through his head and he lifted his chin. He could think of something. It would just take time. But, not too much time.

He needed to find a way to get past the security guards and near Zaldana. With an IQ of a hundred and sixty, that should be easy for him to figure out. He smiled, picturing himself holding a gun to his enemy's chest.

Maybe he'd only maim the Arab instead of killing him. That would land him in jail for maybe five years, if his dad got him a good lawyer. Vanessa would wait

for him and everything would be alright. He knew she still loved him. She was just playing hard to get, and Zaldana was standing in their way. After he maimed Zaldana, she'd come to her senses. She wouldn't want the Arab after he was physically handicapped. He bet she'd love him even more to know that he shot the Arab out of love for her.

In his heart, he knew she'd married to get back at him. He knew she couldn't really love anyone besides him, especially not somebody of Zaldana's ethnicity. In the end, she'd see that he'd done her a tremendous favor.

## Chapter Thirteen

Vanessa smiled at the picture in her hand, the home that she and Karim would fix up, along with his usual gang of people who desperately needed jobs. As she sat on the sofa with the sunlight from the window pouring over her, she tried to wrap her mind around the fact that she'd married such a wonderful man.

The bathroom door opened and Karim strode out, dressed in his normal tee shirt, jeans and gym shoes. He flung his hair back and his unlined, dark face looked sexy as hell. As he sat beside her, he looked at the picture. "So this pleases you?"

"Yes!"

"I'll show you all my houses; you can pick the one we'll live in and fix up as our home, as soon as we can safely get out of here."

She looked at his face and saw the concern he was trying to shield her from. Kissing his ear, she said, "I know that thanks to you we'll get out of here soon. I suspect you're a wonderful spy." She grinned at him, noting his startled smile as she acknowledged that part of him. "If nobody else finds the suspect, you will. I still think that it's Ken."

Karim let out a breath, his eyes growing vague. "Maybe, but it almost seems too pat, too easy an answer," he cautioned.

“But haven’t you found that sometimes things are just what they seem? Bad guys are bad guys.” She was pleased when he nodded.

“You’re right. I’m probably looking for conspiracies where they don’t exist. Part of my training, I’m afraid.”

“You ever gonna tell me about your training, the mysterious missions you’ve been on.” Her tone was teasing, but she wanted to know everything about him.

“Someday,” he said with a nod. “In the meantime, I’ve got an assassin to find before he strikes again. But I don’t like leaving you here while I go out to try solving this nasty business.”

Her good mood dampened. She took his hand. “And I get scared when you go.”

His sensual lips kicked up and he shook his head. “I know how to take care of myself, darling. Plus I’ll have security guards with me, not to mention Bandar and other agents. I’m not the least bit worried about me. You are my concern.”

“Well, I’ll worry about you until you come back to me.” She felt the pull of his hypnotic stare, his lips and turned to face him, a leg up on the sofa, bent at the knee. “I want to go with you next time so I don’t have to wonder where you are. I promise not to get in the way.”

He shook his head. “Darling. There’s no way I would never let you come with me and put you in danger, even if it means I have to tie you up and spank you

to keep you here.” He peered hard into her face. “Since when did you get so brave? I’m *your* bodyguard, remember?” He grinned at her, taking her shoulder and shaking it.

“I’m not brave.” She looked up at him, feeling a new found steel within her, that she knew radiated in her voice. “Really, I’ve never been brave until now. I would die for you, Karim, because living without you would be so empty. I love you, so I want you out of harm’s way.”

His gaze softened, but his expression was amused. As his thumb stroked her cheek. “That is the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me, but I don’t want you to be brave for me.”

She rested her head on his chest while he fluffed the back of her hair. “You can’t change that, Karim. If you go out again, trying to figure out who is doing this, I’m going with you.”

“We’ll discuss that later on. I’m actually taking the weekend off from all this bad stuff.” He kissed the top of her head. “I can think of lots of fun ways to spend today. I think we should take advantage of the whirlpool downstairs, just relax, and have fun.”

She could feel his heart speeding up so she pulled back to look at him, eating him up with her eyes. “We could just make love all day. You’ve turned me into a

nymphomaniac. All I want to do is have crazy, wild sex...but only with you.” She reached down to cup his crotch, feeling his growing erection.

He groaned, lengthening against her palm, then moved her hand and kept holding it as she grinned, batting her eyes at him.

“We’ll make love later. I promise. Meanwhile, I want us to have fun doing other things too. There’s a lot to do at the hotel.” Suddenly he lifted her up and set her over his knee, spanking her as she kicked, screamed and laughed. “So get dressed and ready. The security guards who usually watch our room will be following us, just to be safe.”

“Tom and Ed? I’m beginning to think of them as family. *Spank me again, damn it!*”

He brought his hand down against her quivering ass with lightning quick smacks until she came with a shriek, and then he stood, setting her on the floor with him and gave her one final spank, in the direction of the dresser. “Don’t forget your bathing suit.” She turned towards him, a little embarrassed. “I don’t have one.”

“In that case I’ll book the pool for us exclusively and take you skinny dipping,” he said with a grin.

She gasped, scandalized. “You wouldn’t.”

“Believe me, I would. But lucky for you, there’s a store downstairs. I’ll pick one out for you, sexy.”

She could feel her cheeks heating. Getting naked for Karim was one thing; she knew he liked her body, even though she felt she was overweight. But she never wore a bathing suit in front of others who might laugh at her. “I don’t know.”

“I’m not asking you, I’m telling you.” He sounded benevolent, but firm. By the set of his jaw, she could tell he meant it. “There’s no reason to be ashamed of your body. I love your curves. Why do you care if anyone approves of you but me?”

He had a point. “I don’t.”

“Good. Remember, to me you’re the sexiest woman on earth. I prefer somebody I can actually hold and feel rather than a stick. I don’t want you to change yourself in any way. You are my soulmate.”

She felt tears fill her eyes and ran to hug him, knowing she’d wear anything he asked.



About a half hour later, they played together in the nearly empty pool. Karim bought her a black bikini that was actually not that revealing.



“I don’t want everyone to see what you have,” he’d told her. “That’s for my eyes only.”

Now they dunked one another and swam after each other in about eight feet of water. Vanessa was pleased that she could still handle water well. Years of avoiding bathing suits had kept her away from pools. When Karim dove and grabbed her legs, plunging her into the cool liquid, she reveled in it...and in him. They tried to kiss underwater, bobbing up to laugh, and, since the pool was so empty, touched one another erotically under the surface as well.

Lunch was spent by the poolside eating nachos. Both of them had a beer and watched the swimmers. More had arrived as the day wore on. Vanessa caught Karim staring at the children splashing in the shallow end.

“One day we’ll watch our own sons and daughters play,” he said, as he slid his gaze in her direction, catching her stare.

They both smiled at one another and she took his hand.

After lunch, they grabbed Tom and Ed and took a walk on the grounds, the security guards a discreet distance behind them, other security guards also looking on from their posts. The scent of flowers and freshly cut grass permeated the air as they held hands and slowly strolled together. Vanessa found that Karim had a sharp eye for beauty and would point little things out to her — a hummingbird, a

four-leaf clover, the golden lights from the sun's rays dancing in the fountain's water.

"Do you paint anything but houses?" she teased.

"You're asking if I have artistic talent," he said with a smile.

"Yeah."

He shrugged. "I've won a few art contests."

Her heart contracted. "I'd like to see your pictures. What do you paint?"

"Whatever catches my eye..." He stopped walking and turned to her, grabbing her free hand. "Like you. You'll have to pose for me some time." His eyes shimmered when she blushed. "Do you also paint?"

"I try. I'm not that good." She thought about her frustration, trying to sketch a portrait of Amy when the two of them had been in college together.

"I'll be your teacher, if you like."

Her sex pulsed at the double meaning. "I'd like to learn from you. You've already taught me plenty."

His knowing smile made her break into a grin. "You're so wicked," she added.

He laughed as they started walking again, hand in hand, side by side.

The whirlpool was warm and wonderful. Karim kept his arm around her as the water rushed around their bodies, caressing them both, relaxing her. "This is

heaven,” she murmured, leaning her wet head on his shoulder, ignoring the others who were also there.

“A whirlpool is a must-have item,” Karim said, speaking softly in her ear. “I have one in most of my homes, and you’ll be able to use one any time you like.”

She looked at him, his face so near, and kissed his cheek. “I’m not really a materialistic person, Karim. I’d be fine just living in the house you took me to. Not having everything at your beck and call makes it all the better when you have the chance to indulge.”

His brows came together as he took on a deeply thoughtful expression. Finally, he said, “I never thought of that. Really, I always had all the material riches at my fingertips. I take these luxuries for granted. I envy the enjoyment you get from things like this.”

She shot him a devilish grin. “Spoiled, that’s you. Have you ever camped?”

“Only on assignment. Never for fun.”

“Then, once we can, I think we should go camping. I’ll bet you’d really like it. It’s relaxing.”

“I suppose I could buy a recreational vehicle...”

“No!” She laughed, totally immersed in him, delighted by him. “I meant, camp in a tent.”

“That’s fun?”

“Yes!”

He kissed her long and passionately, his tongue sweeping through her mouth, his hands on her cheeks. When he pulled back, his eyes lit like two candles. “I need to try these new things with you. I look forward to camping. It’s not like I’ve never gotten my hands dirty before.”

She pulled him back into a kiss.

He took her to dinner at the hotel’s restaurant, a dimly lit room with candles on the table and a fire in the hearth. By then, both were talked out and tired. As they ate, feeding one another, they locked gazes.

“In a way,” Karim finally said, as he wiped his mouth with a napkin, “I’m sorry we’re leaving the hotel tomorrow. I really enjoyed this day. And I’ll enjoy the night even more.” He smiled, flashing his dimples.

She lifted his hand and kissed his palm. “Seeing my parents will make me happy, and celebrating your birthday should be fun. Old man,” she added.

He put his arm around her and pulled her close. “How dare you call me old!” he teased, and let out a breath that bathed the side of her face in his warmth. “I suppose that tomorrow will be fun. I’ll finally see Bandar’s reclusive stepfather.”

“Yeah, you said you never met him.”

“He’s an eccentric genius. Aunt Linda has worked for him for years, but they started dating six months ago and they married quickly after, kind of like us. He

took her to Vegas, so they never had a wedding. I'm glad she found somebody. In spite of her intelligence, she's very needy. That depression of hers gets really bad, too."

"So I heard." She was starting to get antsy and wanted to go upstairs.

The waitress came back and asked, "Are you finished?"

"Yes," they both said at the same time, then they looked at one another and burst into laughter. Karim pinched her thigh under the table and she couldn't wait to get him in bed.



Ken drove the speed limit, the Mason Estate his destination. Both his love and enemy would be there and he was going to force a final confrontation. He'd thought hard about what to do with the security guards that the Arab had hired, and decided that they'd respect his badge — everyone did. If he said he was there on police business and they'd better let him in, he didn't expect to get much resistance.

Well, it wasn't exactly *his* badge that he wore. He'd visited his parents earlier in the day. When they'd left the house together to drop something off at a friend's, he'd gone into their room to borrow his father's old uniform and badge.

*“You want to come with your mother and me, Kenny?”*

*“No, that’s all right, Dad. It shouldn’t take you long to give those tools back to the Allens.”*

*“Well, we may visit a while. Sure you don’t want to come with?”*

*“Naw. I’ll just make some more coffee and read the paper until you two get back. Before I came, Mom told me you’d have to run out for a short while. That’s just fine. Take your time.”*

As the air conditioning blasted in his face, drying his sweat, he steadied his hands on the steering wheel. He felt lighter than air, almost giddy. Hell, he felt like God himself. He giggled, remembering how his father had mentioned that he seemed like he could be a little manic. He wasn’t manic; he just had confidence that this would be his lucky day.

His damn father, always thinking he had bipolar just because *he* had it! Well, he wouldn’t let his father’s grim assessments of him ruin his mood. He had a plan that couldn’t fail. On that exciting thought, he pressed his foot harder on the accelerator pedal. Screw the speed limit. He was wearing a cop’s uniform. Nobody would pull him over.

Ken whistled off-tune to himself. He was tired of being vague and shadowing his woman from a distance. Today he’d be bold and make her his, just like she wanted. The guns in his holster were both loaded. He knew Vanessa would thank him for maiming the Arab. Spending a few years in jail, with her

faithful visits, especially the sex visits, would keep him going until he got out. Then they could live together in bliss.

Vanessa was far too perfect to want to be with a man who limped or had a gimpy arm. And when he, Officer Kenneth Wentworth, was done with Zaldana, Karim would be a crippled mess. Ken hoped he didn't lose control and kill the man. Killing Zaldana could result in the death penalty, something that Ken most certainly didn't want for himself or his bride-to-be.

"I know you want me, babe," he said out loud, feeling anger seeping into his blood again. "You didn't have to marry Karim to make me jealous. I can feel the vibes from you to me, the sexy little signals you send me in my head and cock."

He turned the steering wheel hard as he drove down a deserted road. "Just don't play me again," he continued out loud. "I can only take so much of your game. If you reject me today, after I take care of Zaldana for you, I have two guns and I can't be held responsible for what I do."

He started whistling again.

## Chapter Fourteen

When Karim and Vanessa arrived at the Masons estate, he made sure he kept a protective arm around his bride. If she'd been overwhelmed by Doreen's home, Linda's lavish estate blew her away. He saw her looking around at the sleek modern furniture while everyone crowded around to greet them. He grinned as Amy gave Vanessa a hug, again happy that his brother had found her. He tossed off the momentary dark thought that maybe Bandar...

No. Never. Bandar was his ally and best friend. He smiled at Linda, who looked as if she'd forced herself to pull together for the party. She'd always been pretty — petite with milky skin, blue eyes, and small features. Today, she'd pulled back her dark hair and piled it on top of her head and she looked like an understated beauty half her age. Karim bent over to kiss her hand. She smiled at him, a little sadness still in her eyes, but he knew her well. The last of her latest depressive spell seemed to be abating.

As the welcoming faded, the others stood back and stared at Karim in a way that made him uncomfortable. They were trying to hold in smiles and had secrets dancing in their eyes. He could feel spirited energy in the air; something was going on.



“All right,” he said, squeezing Vanessa’s shoulder. “What have you planned for me? I can tell something’s up. Are you going to double up on the spanking machine? Seventy spanks instead of thirty five?”

“We can do better than that,” Doreen said, and he could see that underneath her tough cop veneer, she was bubbling with excitement.

His breath caught. His mother’s face was flushed like a teenager’s. Could it be?

He entered from the next room, tall, erect, his dark hair and neatly trimmed beard sprinkled with gray. His dark eyes seemed a hundred years old, but the laugh lines he remembered were as pronounced as ever, turning up, making his father look as if he smiled all the time. He wore a blue jean jacket and pants, a black tee-shirt underneath, and Karim could tell he hadn’t gained an ounce from the last time he’d seen him, almost two years ago.

Nobody moved. Or breathed.

“Hi, son. I’m here for good,” Omar said in excellent English, his accent minimal. “My Saudi enemies finally found out about me, making me ineffectual over there and so my friends smuggled me out of the country.” His lips kicked up. “The smuggler was smuggled.” His gaze temporarily slid towards Doreen, and Karim saw their magical connection, the one they’d always shared. Then his father

moved his warm gaze back to him. Vanessa, holding his hand, squeezed it as Omar continued to speak. "I'm your birthday surprise." His eyes twinkled.

Karim's head reeled. "I...this is wonderful, my best present ever. Are you here on a visit?"

"No. I was granted permanent asylum. So, this is my new home. I've seen everyone else, called Linda to plan this surprise, and visited Bandar." He paused, then without flinching, continued, "I spent the night with your mother." He paused again, "Karim, it's our time now."

He started walking towards him and Karim's world faded to focus only on his father. He stepped forward, his heart on his sleeve and suddenly the two of them were hugging, his father thumping his back and both laughed and cried.

"The others — my sisters — your wives in Saudi Arabia..." Karim pulled back, a lump in his throat. "Are they all right?"

"Before I left, I made sure all the girls and their mothers were whisked away to safety. It took some time, and cleverness, but everyone is well, and settled in different parts of Europe."

Karim was afraid he'd break down so he turned his head, and looked down at Vanessa. "I want you to meet my wife, Father."

"Yes, meet her, Omar!" a deep male voice from the upstairs balcony shouted. "Meet her for the first and last time."

“Habib!” Omar looked shocked. Karim whipped his head up to see a short, dark man in a suit coming down the winding staircase, an Uzi in his hand.

“Don’t move or I’ll kill you all,” Habib said. “The Uzi can take you all out in the blink of an eye. I’m skilled in its uses.”

“Robert!” Linda cried out in disbelief. “What are you doing? I don’t understand!”

“Shut up, you stupid bitch! I’m not Robert! That’s just a name I use in your decadent country, when I’m a CEO for *Microware*, and that gig is up. I’ve been very patient, waiting for Omar to come into my trap. Now that I’ve got Omar where I want him. He and his worthless sons must be eliminated before I leave this soiled country.”

Karim eased in front of Vanessa, blocking her from the assassin’s view. He was pleased to see that she followed his lead and stayed back. His agent’s instincts kicked in as he assessed his options. He was careful not to make any moves that would startle his enemy. He didn’t recognize the man from the Al-Qaeda hit list, but he certainly had that zealot’s gleam in his eye. Obviously, he and Omar were old adversaries. A gun warmed his back pocket, waiting for him to use it ,but he’d have to wait for the right moment to strike. He looked at his father to see what he’d do.

Omar appeared calm. Only the twitch of his mouth betrayed him. “They said you were dead.”

“You were a fool to believe it. I’m too strong to let your traitors defeat me.”

“You’ll never get out of the country, Habib. Put the gun down. We can talk, man-to-man.”

Habib laughed. “I’ll get out of the country as long as I have hostages.”

Karim’s blood went cold at the word “hostages.”

“Send the young women outside,” Habib ordered. “I’ll use them as insurance that I’ll get a free ticket out of this fucking country.”

Vanessa started trembling, Karim could feel her fear, but she remained by his side, rather than move.

“I won’t let her...”

“If they don’t go, I’ll kill them too.” Habib stared at him, and Karim could tell by the ice in his eyes, that no compassion lived in that body. “Look,” Habib continued in a frosty voice, “Omar is a dead man, and I want to leave the country after he dies before my eyes. I want to watch him bleed.” He paused, his Uzi still poised, his gaze scanning everyone’s face, then resting back on Karim’s. “If my hand is forced, I’ll kill all of you, every single one — yes, Linda, you too — and if I’m in jail, I’ll still be a hero to my people.”

“Who exactly are your people?” Doreen spoke up, her voice steady, her police training keeping her levelheaded.

“Freedom fighters in the Middle East! Few know that I was born in Saudi Arabia. Then I was brought here and achieved quite well, as you know. I hide my identity from most and work underground to aid those who want to destroy this filthy country, America — this materialistic world — and Omar...” there was a catch in his voice, “...he killed my partner and best friend...”

“You mean your lover.” Omar took a step forward.

“Father!” Karim called out.

“Karim, we’ve always played a dangerous game. If this is the end of it for me, I can die knowing I did the right thing. Habib, don’t kill these innocent people. You can have me. That should be enough revenge.”

“No, way! You took away my lov...very best friend. I will kill all you love before I kill you,” Habib let out an ugly laugh. “I want you to see how it feels. Your son Karim will be first.”

“No!” Vanessa suddenly stepped in front of him, shocking him.

Karim shoved her away from him. “Don’t.” Habib waved the nose of his gun toward the door as he finished a slow, dramatic descent down the rest of the stairs and moved closer to them, making Karim crazed to grab his own gun and take a chance — but not with the women around. He couldn’t.

“Get her out of here.” Habib yelled, his eyes on Vanessa, and Karim’s body tensed. “I want her and that other young American woman outside so they don’t get hurt when I spray this place with bullets. I want my hostages healthy, at least for now. I’m sure they’ll stay put out there. They can’t get out of the gates unless somebody lets them out and there’s nobody there to help. I already took care of the security guards.”

“How?” Omar asked, obviously trying to bide his time. “There were quite a few.”

“What clever plan did you cook up to take care of six security guards?” Karim played along, sneering at him on purpose, baiting him so he’d feel compelled to explain.

Habib grinned. “I went out and offered them coffee, like a good host. They all accepted my offer. It was laced with strong pills that have no taste. They’ll sleep for a while. Even after they get up, they’ll be disoriented.”

Linda started to cry and Doreen put her arm around her.

“That’s right, I never loved you,” Habib said to his wife. “I used you once I found out you had connections to my enemy. You shouldn’t have trusted me so much, confided in me. Of course, I know I’m good in bed.” He grinned.

Karim could feel his gun burning a hole in his pocket, but Habib’s Uzi could do far more damage to all of them than his own handgun. He’d have to wait it out,

like Omar, and hope his father kept the man talking until one of them could take the man out.

“Girls, get the fuck out of here,” Habib said, his teeth clenched.

“I’m not leaving Karim!” Vanessa shouted, a sob in her throat. “If you kill him, you may as well kill me!”

“Get out!” Karim demanded, horrified. “Now, Vanessa, this isn’t a game!”

“No!”

Suddenly Habib unloaded a round of bullets and everyone dove to the floor as the deafening noise exploded all around them.

Karim had fallen over Vanessa. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

She was crying. “Yes, but...”

“Get out,” he told her quietly, his heart beating so hard that he wondered if he’d have a heart attack. “I’m going to try to get us out of this, but I can’t do it with you here.”

“Is everyone all right?” Habib asked, with mock concern. “Get up now. Next time, I’ll mean business. I’ll say this again, and for the last time. I want the two young women to get out of here or everyone will die.”

Karim and Vanessa were on their feet. She stared at him, tears in her eyes, but when he nodded and winked at her, she turned toward the door, taking Amy’s arm as the two of them left. Karim was relieved that she was out of the line of fire.

Maybe she could find a way to escape, although the grounds were a virtual fortress.

Karim's gun seemed to scream at him and he snuck his hand closer to his back pocket.

"Don't even think about it," Habib shouted. "You think I don't know you agents are armed? What can one gun do against this weapon in my hands? I was going to let you keep them on you. It would be amusing to me to watch your faces, as you thought of your guns, knowing I'd fill you full of bullet holes if you dared to raise one to me. But I think I'll have you drop them to the floor. Omar, Karim, Bandar — toss them aside."

Karim felt exhausted; he was naked without his gun. He angrily flung it to the ground, as did Omar and Bandar.

"Enjoy your last few minutes on earth," Habib said, his gun pointing directly at Karim. "The oldest son of Sheik Omar Zaldana will be the first one to die."

"Can't you at least tell me a few things before you kill me?" Karim asked, making sure he didn't show his fear.

"What do you want to know?" Habib asked, impatiently.

"You burned my house and put the bomb in my car, didn't you?" He had to keep him talking. Time was his only friend. "I take it you tried to kill me to hurt my father."



“Yes, that’s correct. Besides, I hadn’t heard Omar had managed to get into the U.S.” He grinned, flashing white, even teeth. “I had operatives do the jobs for me. Did you like my touch of leaving Bandar’s wallet at the fire? Since he lives here, it wasn’t hard to take it. Linda really went off the deep end afterwards which made her easier to handle.” He lifted the gun. “Now, that I’ve answered your questions...”

“When did you develop so much loyalty for a country where you never even lived? I don’t understand. Can you explain that to me?” He was reaching, but could see that he’d bought himself some more time. Habib’s eyes seemed to light up.

“Before I ever joined *Microware*, I lived in Saudi Arabia,” he said, and he launched into a story, starting with his childhood, but the Uzi in his hand never wavered, nor did the sharpness of his eyes. “I’d never felt at home in America and hated it with a passion even before I went to the university in Saudi Arabia. It was there that I met the first of my comrades.” He stared hard at Karim, not a flicker of humanity on his face. “I’ve sympathized with the Freedom Fighters ever since then and vowed to take down the West. There is nothing you can say to make me think of you, or anybody in this room, as worthy of life. You are my enemies, enemies of Islam.”



Ken couldn't believe what he saw as he got out of his car.

All six security guards were fast asleep, sprawled on the lawn and driveway, many snoring softly.

*What the hell is this?*

Quickly, he reached for his cell phone to call the chief — then froze.

Detective Grant had put him on leave. Why the fuck should he call the police when *he* was the best cop on the force? Obviously, these men had met with foul play. If he could figure it out and arrest the people who'd done this he'd be a hero, get his job back and the girl. His heart seemed light as he lifted his face to the heavens.

Call his sudden giddiness mania, call it insanity, call it whatever the hell his father wanted to label it. He knew better. This situation with the security guards was a gift from the Almighty, a chance to prove to everyone in the Chicago PD *and* Vanessa how special he was. He would take care of this himself and get reinstated, maybe even promoted. They'd probably give him a medal. But best of all, Vanessa would think him a hero.

His blood started racing through his veins as a more evolved plan unfolded. Maybe he'd get lucky and Zaldana would already be dead. If not, he'd take care of the bastard himself and kill the witnesses. After all, with God on his side, certainly he could easily shoot and kill all of them. Then he'd blame the murders on Karim,

saying that Vanessa, not knowing he was on leave, had called him to beg for help. His idea solidified and he could almost hear Vanessa on the phone, pleading with him for help. It almost seemed as if her voice was speaking in his head.

“Karim Zaldana is threatening to shoot everyone at his aunt’s house. I-I managed to sneak away and call you on my cell phone. Please help before he kills everyone, including me. Oh, Ken, help me, be my hero...”

Ken felt so excited that he masturbated his cock inside his uniform trousers. His mind raced on. His plan to maim the Arab quickly changed to murder. After all, if Ken killed the others who were there, what was one more? He and Vanessa, his love, would vow that Zaldana was the one who had killed them all, then himself. Hell, Ken let out a whoop, thinking about how he’d get off scot-free. And all of this would happen with God smiling down upon him. He could feel God’s approval. He didn’t like Arabs either. Vanessa, who loved Ken so much, would stick by his story. Once her hard-to-get game ended, he knew she’d jump to defend him.

Not that he’d forgive her so fast. He’d beat her a little, much like his father had beaten his mother. Ken had watched as a child and was appalled that his father was actually remorseful for having disciplined his mother when she’d deserved it. Well, he may be the son of a wuss, but he wouldn’t be one himself. No, Vanessa would get beaten when she deserved it. It was for her own good, and it

would prove to her that he was a strong man. They'd be so in love, she'd thank him for it, and probably do anything he asked of her.

He shook his head as his father's parting words replayed in his head. *"You need psychiatric care, son. You can't go forty-eight hours without sleep. Your thinking is disjointed. You aren't making sense. I recognize the mania. I think you should come with us to see the Allens. I hate to leave you alone, in your state."*

*"Let me think about getting help, Dad. I need time alone. You go visit, and I'll think and we'll talk some more when you get back, okay? I'm not in the mood to socialize with that old geezer and his babbling wife. Do you understand?"* His fist hit the table.

His father stared hard at him. *"We'll be gone no more than a half hour. I hope you think seriously about going to the hospital as an inpatient."* Shaking his head, he added, *"I hope you have enough presence of mind to think at all. I'm not criticizing you, boy, I'm worried."*

*"Ken!"* his mother said sharply. *"Don't talk that way to Kenny Jr. He don't want to come with, he don't have to. Don't keep thinking he's got mental problems. Hurry! Let's go."*

*And so they had left.*

*And so he had been gone when they got back, after having stolen his father's old police uniform and badge.*

Ken shut his eyes to clear his head. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he wasn't "right," but he felt too good to care. Lifting his gun out of his

holster, he shot the estate gate's code box. Smiling that he'd thought to get a silencer on the gun, he knew he was smart enough to get away with murder. He pushed open the gate, and suddenly halted, his breath catching. To his shock, and after a moment, delight, he grinned to see two young women standing outside the estate.

More proof that God was smiling on him.

One of the young women was Vanessa.

He ogled her ass for a second, then sauntered towards the goddess, certain that today he'd win the prize.



Habib kept his Uzi steady as he looked around the room.

Karim felt grim pride that almost everyone looked stoic. If they went down, it would be with bravery. Except for poor Linda, who was sobbing into her hands.

“Get a grip, you fucking woman!” Habib shouted at her and she jolted straight up, her lips twitching. His attention moved on to Omar, but his eyes kept moving, as if watching everyone almost at the same time. “Omar, my friend, you are an embarrassment to Saudi Arabia and to Muslims.”

Omar never batted an eye. “Islam does not mean this sort of violence, Habib. However, being sympathetic to Al-Qaeda, I don’t expect you to understand.”

“I understand Allah. It’s you who don’t understand. We should be on the same side.”

“I don’t think so. I have a strong dislike of terrorists and you support them. In fact, you’re a terrorist-wanna-be.”

Karim tensed, hoping his father’s baiting would work rather than backfire. He watched the small man carefully, looking for signs of his faltering.

“Those I support with my money and my deeds are Freedom Fighters.” Habib’s arms were shaking a little now, destabilizing his hold on the Uzi. “Enough of you, Omar!” His eyes suddenly looked wild as he lifted his weapon. “I think it’s time for you to say good-bye to your son. Say it, Omar! Tell him good-bye!” He stepped closer to Karim, but not so close that he lost track of the others.

Karim knew he’d never go down without a fight, but he didn’t want to endanger anyone else. He was acutely aware of his handgun, lying on the floor beside him. If he could only get it, he knew he could take out Habib — he never missed when he shot. However, with the Uzi pointed at him, he knew the man would shoot first if he dove for his gun.

“Father,” Karim said carefully, suddenly spotting Vanessa peeking at him through the front window. *Damn it all, why hadn’t she run!* He didn’t want her there.

He wanted her to get as far as she could go. Swallowing hard, not reacting, he continued, "I guess this is it. I want to thank you for your love and support throughout my life."

"Make it short and not so sappy!" Habib snapped. "You're making me sick."

"Habib, let us have our last words," Omar replied calmly. "You have us trapped. What does it matter if I get to talk to my son one last time? Are you afraid that, if you give us time, we'll outsmart you?"

Habib set his jaw. "No," he answered, his gaze burning from Omar to Karim. "I'm not afraid of you. Have your last conversation. But I'm not going to stand here forever. I want to finish this unpleasant, but necessary business."

"Thanks for the extra time," Karim said, meeting his father's gaze, reading him well. His father had no intention of going down easily either. Maybe they had a chance, after all. If only Vanessa would get away from the window, he could think more clearly.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Vanessa! My love! What are you looking at through the window, sweetheart? Look at *me*. I came for you!”

Vanessa whirled around, tears blinding her eyes, and couldn't believe Ken was running towards her. God, not now! She couldn't deal with him now!

“Ness, maybe he can help us,” Amy whispered, from her spot behind a bush, also looking inside the window.

Vanessa had never thought of Ken as somebody who could help her, but she was desperate, and he was a cop and most likely armed. Everything that happened after that seemed to occur in slow motion, including the voices she heard, even her own.

“Hold me, Ken! Hold me! You were right about Karim being trouble, and now he's going to get shot!” She ran to hug him.

“What the hell? Somebody has a gun to the Arab?” He laughed. “God truly is on my side today. That was what *I* planned to do! Well, good, saves me the trouble! Let's get out of here and you can be with me!” He grabbed her arm.

Amy jumped on his back. “The guns, Ness!” she called out.



Vanessa kicked Ken in the groin and he let out a primal yell before falling to the grass, swearing. A second later she had his gun and rushed toward the window. Behind her, she heard Ken groan again as Amy kicked him, but didn't have time to even care. She had to save Karim. She gasped when she saw Habib's eyes narrow as he lifted his Uzi, aiming it at Karim.

"No!" she screamed at the top of her lungs and the gun went off in her hand, shattering the glass, a wild shot, causing chaos inside the mansion as everyone hit the ground, including Habib, who spun and took a wild shot at her, shattering the windowsill, spraying her with debris.

Vanessa shook off the sting, shooting again, tears falling off her face, and was shocked when blood spurted from Habib's shoulder. She'd actually hit him. But she didn't have time to celebrate because he was aiming at her again.

A moment later, Habib pitched backwards, as Karim grabbed his gun and shot him in one fast draw.

Vanessa held onto her gun as she ran madly into the house, ignoring a groaning Ken and missing how Amy kicked him in the head, knocking him out as she grabbed his other gun. Inside, Vanessa was just in time to see Linda smashing a vase over Habib's unmoving torso.

Karim, seeing Vanessa, set his weapon down and went to her, taking her gun from her and putting it down carefully. Then he lifted her into his arms and hugged her with all his might. “Rambo,” he said, as he kissed her ear.

After that, Vanessa wasn’t even aware of anybody except the two of them. “I didn’t know you could shoot a gun,” he said, his eyes dark with both admiration and terror, a strange combination.

Hanging onto him, she sniffed. “I can’t. I don’t know how. Well, I didn’t until I saw him holding that machine gun...at you...” She broke into tears and collapsed against his chest.

He kissed her lips, saying, “I love you, Ness. I love you. I’m so glad you’re all right.”

When she managed to pull back to look at him, touching his face tenderly to make sure he was all right, she was shocked to see his dark eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Karim,” she said, pressing his forehead to hers, holding him as his shoulders shook. “Darling, please. I’m fine. We’re both fine. And everything is going to be all right.”

A moan from outside interrupted them.

“I have him!” Doreen called from the open door. “Omar and Bandar, too. He isn’t going anywhere. The Lake Forest PD is on the way. Bandar called Becky. This little wimp isn’t going to see the outdoors for a good long time!”



Karim held Vanessa tight as they lay naked in bed, the last night of their hotel stay. He couldn't stop touching her, didn't want to let go of her. She seemed to feel the same way and their hands caressed one another's faces, bodies, and hot spots. But they hadn't made love.

He ran his fingers through her hair as she massaged his back. "My hero."

She pulled back and her brow furrowed. He could see her complexion was still white; damn, he hated that she'd been so scared. Yet, she'd reacted like a trooper. Realizing she wasn't in the mood for joking, he quietly explained, "You saved me, all of us. You're my hero."

"Um, not exactly. I was scared shitless." She blushed, and she looked so beautiful with pink on her cheeks.

"What do you call shooting Habib?"

She bit her lip, staring into his gaze, and then gently ran a thumb over his cheek. "I couldn't let him kill you. We've just begun and he wasn't going to take you away from me."

"See? You saved me." He shook his head. "How embarrassing! Saved by my wife when it should have been the other way around."

“Don’t belittle your role,” she said, stroking his hair back. “I shot wildly, not sure what I was doing. You killed him. To think he was so badly wanted. You’re the hero. If not, why did the Secretary of State call you?”

“He likes to talk to me.”

She smiled weakly, and they kissed, their bodies fusing together.

When he pulled back, he tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear. “Aunt Linda really rose to the occasion. I liked her spunk. Instead of falling apart, she gave her statement and stood tall.”

“Your father was good with her.”

“I think deep down, Linda has always loved my father, although she never let it affect her relationship with my mother or me. I’m glad she listened to him and decided to pay for a week in the hospital so she can rest and make sure her medication is at a good level.”

“I’m glad too.” She paused and cocked her head at him in an incredibly sexy way, her blond hair spilling to one side. “Your dad was good with everyone. Bandar seemed a little rattled until your father talked to him. He appeared calmer after they sat down and had that long conversation.”

He ran his fingers over her ruby lips. “Bandar, as an agent, has seen things like that before. However, the target wasn’t his family. That’s what rattled him.

Your friend Amy was braver than hell. She recovered fast and I think her sitting next to Bandar, holding his hand, restored his strength.”

“She’s something else.” Vanessa managed a grin. “I think they’ll make a good pair.”

“I hope so. Speaking of pairs looks like my parents will finally get to be together. I doubt he’ll ever leave her again. He’s already moved into her house. I doubt if the entire Army could dislodge him.”

“Yes, that’s wonderful.” She rubbed his chin, tickling his face, obviously feeling his five o’clock shadow. “And it’s wonderful for you, too, that he’s here to stay.”

“I have always wished to live near him, but never thought it would happen.” He was more touched than he let on. She seemed to know how he felt as she snuggled into him and gave him a long, passionate kiss that aroused his senses.

When she finally pulled back, it seemed hours later and his cock was as stiff as a board. It was amazing that she could arouse him after a day like the one he’d just experienced.

“You know,” Vanessa said, laughing a little, “for once Ken had great timing.”

Karim felt a wave of distaste. “Stalker. I’m glad he was carted away to the psychiatric hospital. There is clearly something wrong with him and, unlike Aunt Linda, he doesn’t seem to know it or want to get help.” He frowned, but refused to

dwelling on him. “All I care about is that he won’t go near you for a long time. If he’s not considered insane, he should get a nice jail sentence. And, although he has issues, I doubt he’ll be found legally insane.”

“Yes, I’m very relieved about that.” She reached down to wiggle his balls and he groaned.

“It’s sick of you to want sex after what we’ve been through today.”

“Comfort sex,” she said, rubbing his cock up and down, her hand hot and stimulating. “I’m serious, Karim. I want to hold you as close as I can. I...it was scary today. I can’t get that image out of my head.”

He understood. He remembered his fear and dread when he’d seen her peeking through the window, his terror that Habib would turn his Uzi on her. Without a word, he cupped her ass and pulled her against him, entering her with an eager thrust.

She let out a shaky breath, shut her eyes, and thrust her hips to get him higher inside of her as she muttered his name. He rubbed his hand over her round bottom, then reached behind himself, still inside of her. His bag of tricks was on the nightstand beside the bed and he fumbled in it until he found what he wanted.

She was thrusting and moaning as he set the rocket vibrator in the crack of her buttocks. As soon as he turned it on, she arched into him wildly, yelling his name even louder, blasting the word in his ear, and their hips thrust together in a

frantic rhythm. He unloaded his cum into her womb and she threw her head back, weeping as she again arched her body into his. When he turned off the vibrator, she was still arching and coming. It took her a long time to calm down, long after he'd emptied the last of his seed inside of her pussy.

Eventually, she calmed in his arms and they lay there, both of them panting with eyes that were shut. He lifted one lid and watched his angel as she cuddled against his shoulder, her long eyelashes crescent-shaped and curved upwards, her mouth a beautiful heart. He pulled back a little and rolled to his side, lifting her chin. That caused her eyes to flutter open. She smiled at him, her gaze soft, shimmering, filled with her love.

He felt an odd sensation taking over him, one he'd never felt before meeting her. "Do you know what I love the most about you?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"My breasts?"

He laughed, but softly. "No." He touched his finger to her nose. "The best part about you is the sweetness of your soul. I would love you even if you weren't so beautiful."

"I'm fat..."

"Stop." He gave her a warning stare. "You're very beautiful, but I wouldn't care if you were disfigured or scarred. I would love you anyway."

Her eyes watered. "I feel the same about you."

He enveloped her in his arms and pulled her into him, ready to take her again. All his troubles were behind him forever because the woman of his dreams loved him. Nobody, nothing mattered anymore as long as they were together.

And he knew it would last a lifetime.



## Epilogue

The mansion in the background was only beautiful because Vanessa, Karim, and their friends had renovated it. It was hard to believe that this house had once been burned, because it was so perfect now.

Vanessa watched, with tolerant eyes, as Ali ran up and down the grassy hill in their backyard. Karim glanced over at her from the grill and his eyes drew her in. Her heart fluttered, as it had the first time he'd stared into her face.

She strode over from the middle of the large yard to the patio to join her husband. Ali trotted over and grabbed her hand. When they reached Karim, Ali hugged him and said, "Can I have three hotdogs, Daddy?"

Karim patted his head. "Of course. You're growing so fast, it's no wonder you eat all the time."

"I'm tall for five years old," Ali said, proudly, looking from his father to his mother.

"Yes, you are," Vanessa said, smiling down at the child who so resembled his father.

“Can my grandpas, grandmas and Uncle Bandar come over later?” Ali asked, jumping around and clapping his hands.

“Maybe,” Karim said. “We can call and see.”

“I want them to come over.”

“You see them almost every day,” Vanessa said, laughing. “Why, Grandpa and Grandma Nash live right next to us. You can just run over and say hello.”

“Okay, I will, but I want to see everyone else too. Can I?”

“We’ll see, honey,” Vanessa said, casting loving eyes on her child.

Karim stacked hamburgers on one plate and hotdogs on another. “Eating time.”

After Karim made sandwiches for everyone, they sat on lawn chairs under the setting summer sun. Vanessa had a big appetite these days, since she was eating for two.

Ali had his own little chair. With a hotdog in his hand, he glanced from Karim to Vanessa and had that familiar look in his eye. “You know what I want,” he said, and he took a bite of his sandwich. “Tell me again, will you?”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth, honey. You’ll choke,” Vanessa said, reaching over to rub his soft dark hair.

Ali obediently swallowed. “Will you tell me the story again? Daddy? Tell me. You tell it the best. Please?”

Vanessa gazed over at her handsome husband who, if anything, looked better than when she'd met him. He hadn't gained a pound and his face was still fairly unlined. His features, of course, were dark, mysterious and, in her eyes, perfect.

"Should I tell him?" Karim asked her in a teasing voice.

"Dad!" Ali said with a grin.

Vanessa met Karim's hot stare, which spoke of promises for later on. Then Karim winked at her and moved his gaze to his son's. Taking in a deep breath, he said, "Once upon a time, a long time ago, six whole years ago, I saw a beautiful woman who needed a bodyguard..."

Vanessa grinned broadly as she took the first bite of her juicy hamburger.

*The End*

<http://users.solarus.biz/~pammarshall/>

Nicole L. Pierce grew up in the NW suburbs of Chicago. Her mother reports that she drew pictures and printed words in an attempt to tell stories, even at the tender age of two. As a born storyteller, she kept writing and won awards for creative writing, becoming known as "The Writer" by peers. Having married at 20, she put writing on the backburner and worked in many interesting fields, including a position at The Chicago Tribune.

When all her children were finally in grade school, Nicole started writing again. She had always been a voracious reader of the genre and decided to focus on writing romance. Ms. Pierce is a member of Romance Writers of America and WisRWA.

Nicole's special interests include adoption, Bipolar Disorder, Domestic Abuse, Animals, and Autism as they have all touched her life. She currently resides in central Wisconsin with her loving husband and their children.

She has the following books out for your reading pleasure!

Red Rose Publishing

Sexual Secrets

Seduced By The Sheik

Loose Id

Kidnapped And Spanked By An Alien

Whiskey Creek Press

Unexpected Passion- Coming November 2008

Insatiable Passion