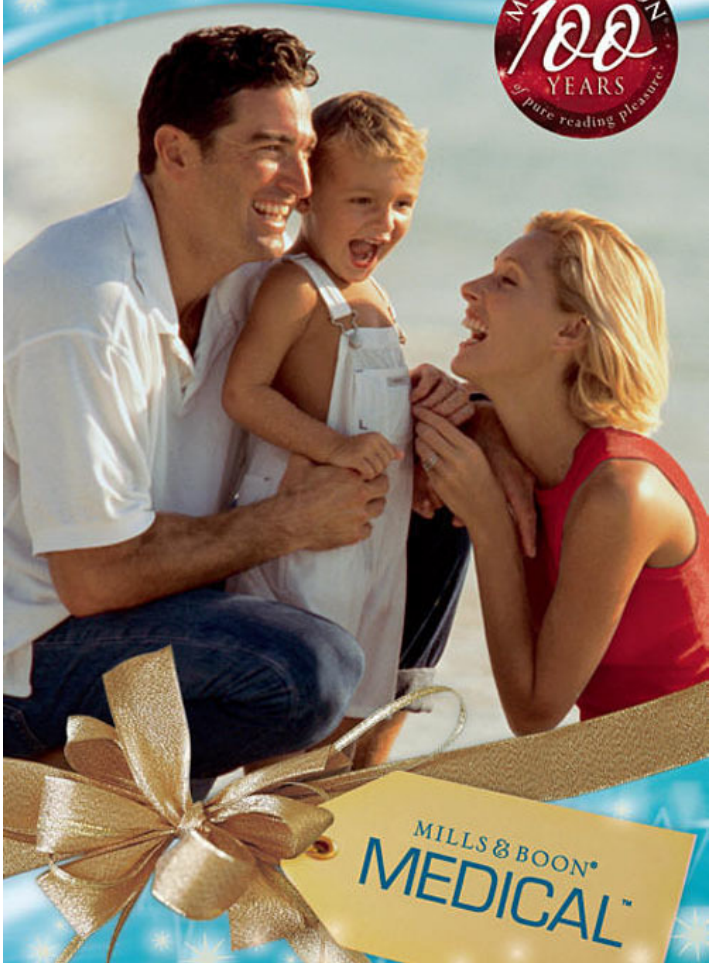
THE DESERT SURGEON'S SECRET SON

Olivia Gates



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The Desert Surgeon's Secret Son

Аннотация

Enter into the world of high-flying Doctors as they navigate the pressures of modern medicine and find escape, passion, comfort and love – in each other’s arms!The Sheikh’s new-found sonSeven years ago sheikh and surgeon Ghaleb Aal Omraan chose duty over love and left Viv LaSalle with a broken heart and – unknowingly – a baby. Now their little boy Sam is desperate to meet his father, but is Ghaleb ready to be a dad…?Stunned that his new Director of Surgery is Viv, Ghaleb finds his passion for her is as strong as ever. But his impending marriage of state convinces Viv that she must escape with Sam before Ghaleb discovers he is the boy’s father. Except now Ghaleb knows he wants Viv and Sam more than anything. More, even, than his throne.

Содержание

THE DESERT SURGEON’S SECRET SON 6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 54

He shouldn't feel this towards Viv's son. The son whose father was unknown—who surely couldn't be him.

Surely she would have told him if she'd even suspected it? He couldn't identify what "this" was, but it was too powerful, too…

"What are you doing here?"

His heart stopped as if with a close-range bullet.

Breathless, pulseless, he jerked his head up, around.

And there she was. Viv. In another camouflaging get-up, fresh out of a shower or a bath, hair darkened with wetness, flushed, fragrant even at this distance. And mad as hell that he was here.

It only sent his rioting emotions screeching. How he *hungered* for her. And now he knew how much she'd suffered, how much she'd endured, what she'd triumphed over, how much he'd mistreated her, the hunger was gnawing at him body and soul. And then there was Sam…

Olivia Gates has always pursued many passions. But the time came when she had to set up a 'passion priority'—to give her top one her all—and writing won. Hands down.

She is most fulfilled when she is creating worlds and conflicts for her characters and then exploring and untangling them bit by bit, sharing her protagonists' every heartache and hope and heart-pounding doubt until she leads them to their indisputably earned and glorious happy ending.

When she's not writing she is a doctor, a wife to her own alpha male, and a mother to one brilliant girl and one demanding Angora cat. Please visit Olivia at www.oliviagates.com

Recent titles by the same author:

DESERT PRINCE, EXPECTANT MOTHER

THE SHEIKH SURGEON'S PROPOSAL

THE DESERT SURGEON'S SECRET SON

BY
OLIVIA GATES

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my editor, Sheila Hodgson, for doing it yet again—getting the best book out of me.

To my mother, husband and daughter, for the support, enthusiasm and inspiration. Can't do it without you all.

CHAPTER ONE

SHEIKH GHALEB BEN ABBAS ben Najeeb Aal Omraan fought down another wave of reluctance.

He really needed to get over it. Admit it. That he couldn't be everywhere, do everything himself.

He'd long put being a surgeon and the driving force behind the advancement of Omraania's health system first, but his duties as heir to the throne weren't going anywhere. In fact, his father was pressuring him to be more proactive in matters of state. He'd chosen to press harder during the last months, at a time when

his new position as Head of Surgery at Jobail Advanced Medical Center, his crowning project, was threatening to overwhelm his schedule.

He'd resisted the need for someone to share that vital position, the one closest to his heart, from day one. It had taken almost making a fatal mistake during a kind of surgery he'd done in his sleep for years to make him admit he might have been pushing himself too far. Adnan had jumped on the admission, had suggested a replacement head of surgery, amending his suggestion to co-Head at Ghaleb's point-blank refusal. One to have until Ghaleb put matters in order and decided whether to make the position permanent, with the "co" in front of "Head" or without it.

Adnan had put out the ad for the position throughout the medical world, and applications had swamped him. Ghaleb's requirements had easily eliminated most of the applicants and Adnan had flown to the States to interview the few remaining candidates. His choice was arriving today. Right now, actually.

Ghaleb changed direction, heading to Adnan's office instead of to his own private elevator to the surgical floor. He caught him at the door.

Adnan swung around. "I'm going to receive your new cohead of surgery, *Somow'wak*, show her around. Would you like me to schedule a meeting after you finish your list?"

Her? He had nothing against having a female co-head, but it was a matter of statistics that there were more successful male

surgeons.

"Don't bother, Adnan," Ghaleb said as he bypassed him, had him almost running to keep up with him as he cleared his personal territory encompassing most of the top floor and swept through the workstations of his immediate staff. "The place to meet my co-head of surgery is in the OR. She doesn't have to impress me with her character, just her surgical skills."

"I'm confident she will, *Somow'wak*. She's the only applicant who answered all your requirements. Her résumé is astounding."

"If she answered *all* my requirements, Adnan, her résumé might be too astounding to be true."

"I truly don't think so, but in the unfortunate situation she doesn't live up to the promise—"

"I'll hold you responsible for wasting my time."

Adnan looked mortified. Ghaleb felt contrite at once. Adnan was his right hand and advisor. His friend. And he had few friends. None really. His position and vocation precluded intimacy, with its demands of time and trust, with its inherent dangers. He'd never been free to choose friends, to risk making errors of judgment. To answer the clamoring of his heart…

Apart from his father, he had only two allies he'd trust with his life. Adnan was one of them. He shouldn't pummel him with his frustration at being forced to admit his limitations.

He gave Adnan's shoulder an apologetic squeeze. "I trust your judgment, Adnan, more than my own sometimes. That's why I let you make this decision for me. But it's no big deal if she doesn't

live up to her promise. You'll just renew your search. I can hold out a few more months until you find a replacement."

"*That's* what worries me, *Somow'wak*, not that I wouldn't have lived up to your faith, but that you *can't* hold out under the same strain. You've been juggling responsibilities for too many years that would bring half a dozen men to their knees in months."

"We won't have this debate again, Adnan. I'm taking the most major step in managing these responsibilities, but I'm not going to settle for anything but the best person for the job. Better no help than inferior help."

Adnan knew this was where he fell silent. Ghaleb breathed in relief. He'd ended another confrontation with him. With himself.

He was admitting he'd only postponed it, was about to exit the corridor connecting his inner domain to the floor's reception hall when the momentum of his strides and thoughts faltered, died.

Four of Adnan's aides appeared at the far end of the glass-faceted, soaring-roofed space and walked toward them. They surrounded a statuesque woman in the formation of flanking an honored guest.

Everything about the woman bombarded him like punches.

Her clothes impeccable for the climate and culture, their looseness instead of obscuring, showcasing each long limb and ripe curve, each undulation of feminine assurance and fluid grace. The severe bun he just knew would cascade to a waterfall of gleaming butterscotch when released. The eyes deep-set in self-possession. The features sculpted by a god of beauty. She

had the bearing of someone who knew her worth, her effect, exuded it with each breath.

His lungs burned, imploded.

This woman was nothing like the woman who occupied his memory, the creature who'd seemed to have been powered by the sun itself, the intensity and instability of its solar flares emanating from every move of her extra-slim, deeply tanned body, from every flash of her golden eyes, every ripple of the untamed layers of her sun-blazing hair.

But there was no doubt. Not for a second.

That goddess in the distance was her.

Viv.

The woman who'd shown him what being totally loved felt like, who'd taught him what surrender to emotional and sensual overload meant. The woman he'd thought he'd never be able to live without. The one he'd rushed to that fateful day seven years ago to offer a life by his side here in Omraania, risking so much, only to overhear her saying he'd meant nothing to her.

Viv. The woman he'd been struggling to forget every day of those years. Here. Walking into his center as if she owned it, head held high, looking ahead like a princess in a royal procession, turning every head and turning to no one herself, uncaring of everyone's scrutiny. And unaware of his.

What was she doing here?

"Ah, there's Dr. Vivienne LaSalle, right on time."

Adnan's pleased words pummeled him.

She was the woman he'd picked to be his co-head of surgery?

Ghaleb staggered back into the shadows, his heart battering his ribs. Adnan turned to him in alarm.

"*Maolai?* Are you all right?"

No, he was *not* all right. He'd never been so shocked in his life. After all these years he'd remained secure she'd forever reside within the boundaries of bitter memory, she was here. In his kingdom, invading his territory, emerging from the shadows of addiction to become reality once more.

Ya Ullah, how had this happened? She'd applied for the job? Why? She was Adnan's choice? How?

There could be one answer. She'd managed to fool him. Just like she'd managed to fool him when she'd made him pick her for the position of his research assistant. It hadn't been on merit he'd chosen her back then either. He'd taken one look at her, had felt her eating him alive with her eagerness and singeing him with her energy, and he hadn't considered anyone else. He'd been smitten with a glance.

He'd still resisted. How he remembered how he had. He hadn't had time let alone a place in his life for her. But she hadn't taken no for an answer and within days his resolve had disintegrated. He'd touched her and had been consumed body and reason in the conflagration that had followed.

This time he'd relied on Adnan's reason, though she'd clearly tampered with his, as well.

Anger, bitterness and shock roiled with the surge of

unquenched hunger. And among the seething, reason struggled to be heard. It cried that the sane course of action was to send her out of Omraania on the spot. Without letting her know he'd seen her.

Without letting her see him.

He was in no condition to listen to reason.

She had a plan, coming here. No doubt the same one she'd had when she'd pursued and seduced him in the past. She'd wanted a life of luxury as his mistress. She'd even begged him for it when he'd come to his senses. Why not give her the chance to play it out? After all, he had to reward such effort, didn't he?

But what he really needed was to see her for what she really was, to erase her generous, guileless image, the persona that existed out of bounds of logic, retaining a viselike hold on him.

What he needed was closure.

He knew how to get it.

He turned on Adnan. "Restart your search for a co-head of surgery. Now."

After a moment of shock at his viciousness, Adnan rushed to say, "*Maolai*, I realize her looks are deceiving. I had the same reaction when I first saw her, thought she couldn't possibly have the experience and stamina to hold such a position, but—"

"But she convinced you otherwise," Ghaleb spat, his vehemence purging a measure of shock and anger, accessing his misplaced equilibrium. "Now she'll have to convince me. Send her to scrub and gown."

Adnan was at a loss now. “So you will still interview her?”

“*I* will start my list,” Ghaleb tossed over his shoulder as he strode back to his office. “*You* will restart your search.”

Vivienne walked deeper into the medical center touted as the most advanced on the planet, escorted by the four behemoths who made her feel like a head of state who might be assassinated—or a fugitive who might make a run for it—at any second.

She concentrated on regulating her breathing, her steps, stared ahead to ward off the curiosity bombarding her, fought down the waves of nausea and anxiety. And exhaustion.

She’d been in surgery till she’d gone to collect Sam and Anna for the trip here. Then, throughout the thirteen-hour nonstop flight aboard Ghaleb’s flying palace, she hadn’t had a wink of sleep. She’d set foot in Omraania two hours ago, had barely deposited her family in the lavish accommodation he’d provided before rushing here without pausing.

She’d been stunned by the royal treatment, but Adnan El Khalil, her recruiter, had enlightened her. This wasn’t personal. Being Omraania’s foremost surgeon and the crown prince’s co-head of surgery was a huge deal. Ghaleb would have treated anyone he gave the position to with the same extravagance.

She’d been stunned he’d given it to her, even if she did fit his requirements to a T. She’d applied expecting to be rejected out of hand. When she’d been chosen, she’d been forced to conclude either Ghaleb had forgotten who she was or he didn’t consider their past liaison, insignificant to him as it had been, a reason not

to accept her when she was the best person for the job.

Now she was in his territory. And though the job description assured her of minimal exposure to him, she was bound to see him.

And she didn't want to see him. Not in this life, not in the next. The man she'd once loved beyond sanity and self-preservation, the man who'd taken everything she'd had to give then walked away, not even sparing her a goodbye.

But anguish at losing him, agony and anger at being so cruelly discarded, had soon ceased to matter. Pregnancy changed a woman's priorities. Having a baby had changed her, period. Forever.

Still hurting from their breakup, she'd forced herself back to her feet. She'd no longer been a woman who'd been trampled on. She was a doctor who'd fought to be the best she could be to provide the best life for her son, and a mother whose life revolved around him.

She'd agonized over whether to tell Ghaleb he'd fathered a son or not. But she couldn't risk it.

As the heir to the throne of a conservative kingdom, Ghaleb had had no place in his life for her beyond the stolen, secret months they'd had together. She hadn't been able to predict what he'd do if he'd learned about Sam. The possibility that he might have taken him away to have him raised to his specifications away from the winds of scandal, had kept her silent. And just like she'd forced herself to realize she hadn't needed him, she'd become

convinced Sam wouldn't either. She'd been determined she'd be all the family Sam needed. And that had been before she'd been blessed to have her aunt become a part of their tiny family, too.

But as Sam had grown, so had his questions about his father. Lately they'd grown more insistent, often bitter, even frantic.

She'd been sorely tempted to tell him his father was dead, to close that chasm once and for all. But she couldn't bring herself to say the words, had spent the last months in an agony of doubt.

Was she being selfish? Was she heeding her scars and disregarding Sam's needs? If she took what Ghaleb had done to her out of the equation, could she believe he'd want to know his child? And if he did, surely now that Sam was this old and attached to her, he wouldn't consider taking him away from her? Maybe they could arrange something so he'd be in Sam's life? Would Sam's life be better if Ghaleb was in it? Was it time to find out the answer to these questions? If it was, how could she find them out?

Then Ghaleb had started combing the medical world for a co-head of surgery. Everybody thought the job an incredible professional and financial opportunity, which it was.

But to her it was a sign, an unrepeatable chance to enter Omraania for a while, be in Ghaleb's milieu, to make an informed and final decision, one she wouldn't regret. To bring father and son together, or not.

And she was here, and she'd see him again, even if in passing and mainly from afar, and maybe one day soon she'd tell him…

What if his reaction was to treat her with the same contempt he had when she'd offered him *carte blanche* with her life? What if he didn't believe her and all she managed was to sustain another humiliating blow? She couldn't afford injuries now that both Sam and Anna counted on her. What if he did believe her and her worst fears came to pass? What if he snatched Sam and kicked her out?

Had she made a mistake coming here? Was it too late to turn around, take Sam and Anna and run back home?

Stop it. Breathe. You've been over this a thousand times.

There was no other way to settle Sam's mind, his future.

She unclenched her fists, inhaled a tremulous breath.

She'd do this. It would be okay. After a no-doubt brief meeting with the insanely busy Ghaleb, who wouldn't give her the time of day anyway, she'd take on the responsibilities of her temporary position where she'd begin gauging his personality unblinded by the passion that had once swallowed her whole or by the hatred that had in the intervening years. She'd observe him from afar, in his working environment, analyze his character and predict his actions through his behavior, through others' view of him. She'd take her time about coming to a decision how to proceed…

"Dr. LaSalle. If you'll come this way, please?"

She rose from the depths of chaos to find Adnan two feet away from her. She'd been looking through him for what seemed like a while now.

She blinked, croaked, "What?"

“I’m sorry if I’ve spoken too fast, Dr. LaSalle,” the lanky, dark man said in an impeccable British accent much like Ghaleb’s, though his was devoid of the exotic inflections and intense undertones that had turned Ghaleb’s into a hypnotic weapon. “I was anxious to inform you of the surgery list awaiting you.”

“Surgery list?” she rasped, her voice roughened by disuse and confusion. “But we were supposed to have a reconnaissance tour —”

“We will have one later,” Adnan cut in smoothly. “Right now there’s been a change of plan.”

But there couldn’t be, she almost cried out.

She had counted on everything going according to plan. If that was changing already, she didn’t know what she’d do, and it had to be Ghaleb who’d changed them… *God, why?*

Calm down. “Is there an emergency?” she asked.

“No, Dr. LaSalle.” Adnan gestured for her to precede him.

So it wasn’t a situation where he needed every surgeon around to pitch in. So maybe he wanted her to get to work at once?

No matter what his reasons were, she had no choice but to comply.

Her love for Sam made sure of that. It would make her do anything. Even letting Ghaleb pull her strings again.

She gritted her teeth and let herself be pulled.

Ghaleb looked down at his hands, gripping the edges of the stainless-steel sink, fascinated by how white his knuckles were.

Any minute now his plan would unfold.

If he could call the impulse he'd acted on a plan.

Not that ten more days of contemplation would have afforded him a better course of action.

After all, Viv was here to be co-Head Surgeon no less, wasn't she? Then she had to abide by the test he'd had in store for said co-Head. Let them meet across the operating table so she'd show him her qualifications, or lack of them, at once.

He had no doubt it would be a lack he'd uncover.

During their time together they hadn't worked together much, and never in the OR. He'd heard of her proficiency as a surgeon but hadn't seen evidence of it himself. He'd concluded it had been her father's influence as financial director of the hospital where she'd worked that had gotten her good reports and opportunities. She'd boosted the latter with her beauty and charisma. Hadn't she made him give her a position he could have given to a dozen others who would have done it more justice? A position it had become clear she'd fought for to be near him, to seduce him? And once she had, work had been the last thing on his mind, too.

Now she'd conned her way into another position. One he didn't believe for a second she fit, as she'd proclaimed she did. Still, with him there to make sure she did no damage, he was interested to see her try to live up to her claims.

And fail miserably.

That way, it wouldn't be personal history or preconceptions that decided him against hiring her. He wanted it to be her inadequacy. He'd see for himself how much of that résumé of

hers was fabricated. Then he'd close her chapter forever….

All his hair stood on end, as if he'd been doused in a field of static electricity. A presence. Unmistakable even after all these years. Viv.

Every caution told him not to move, to let her initiate the confrontation. Every instinct screamed for him to turn, catch that moment when she was as off guard as he was. It was the hot, sharp sound that spilled from lips he knew to be rose-soft and cherry-tinted, which had once wrung incoherence from him in soul-wrenching kisses and moans, that shattered the stalemate.

He swung around. And déjà vu engulfed him whole.

Time rewound to that moment he'd first laid eyes on her. When she'd gotten him alone in another scrubbing/gowning anteroom, in another life, to convince him to choose her.

Had he brought her here to reenact their first meeting? Had she somehow made him do it?

Anything seemed possible as some override function inside him ignored mental commands, urging his senses to roam her, feast on her, relive again the unrepeatable attraction. It was as if everything that had happened since the last time he'd left her arms had been erased. It was as if it would be the most natural thing in the world to surge toward her, that she'd rush to a halfway melding, all the sooner to get lost in each other's arms.

She stood as transfixed as him, her eyes wide in shock as great as his. And, he could swear, as genuine.

The conviction jogged him out of the surreal timelessness

where nothing had gone wrong between them to the distasteful present with its preposterousness.

Shocked? When she was here in full premeditation?

But no. She *was* shocked. This was no act. Not any more than his own loss of control, his own plunge into that time warp.

So what did it all mean?

He exhaled the breath trapped in his lungs, admitted he had no grasp of this situation, much less control over it. He turned fully to her, stood straighter, preparing for the inevitable. The passing of shock and what must follow of her old methods of enticement and seduction.

But what was this, surging inside him, shocking him again with its power? Eagerness? Did he actually want to see blatant invitation in her eyes, in her stance, in the way she'd call his name as if to say, *Take me, ravish me, finish me, now?*

He licked parched lips, counting down the seconds before her gaze heated, her posture relaxed, beckoned…

"So, we meet again, Dr. Aal Omraan. Or do you only answer to His Royal Highness Crown Prince Ghaleb now?"

CHAPTER TWO

GHALEB COULD ONLY STARE at the woman who no longer resembled Viv beyond the basics.

She pursed her lips as the last of the shock he'd detected drained, steel replacing it. "I assume it was you who ordered me to report to the OR?"

B'hag'gejaheem—by hell, what was going on here?

Her voice was the same, velvety and rich like chocolate and red wine, but he'd never imagined it could sound so… cold. And that was nothing to how those whiskey eyes swept him as if examining an uncertain specimen and finding it deplorably wanting.

"Of course it was you." She answered her own question with a flick of an elegant hand. "I've been here only two hours and I already realize nobody breathes here without your say-so, let alone thinks, speaks or acts." She let go of his gaze, as if she found nothing about him of interest, hers sweeping around for something worthy of her attention. "I assume you want me to scrub?"

The answer that almost escaped his lips was, *I want you to tell me who you are, and where Viv, the old Viv, is.*

Where was the woman who'd fluttered around him, inundating him with hunger and appreciation? Though it had been an act, why wasn't she continuing it now?

From experience he knew women went to any lengths to capture or resurrect prosperous men's interests. And as one of the richest men in the world, a royal and a celebrated surgeon to boot, he defined prosperity, was one of the most vigorously pursued.

So was this her new act? The one she'd determined would reignite his interest?

If it was, it was succeeding. Spectacularly.

And why not? He'd play it her way. He'd give her all the rope

she needed to hang herself. Then, when he'd had the satisfaction of looking her in the eye and reading her admission of defeat, he'd send her out of Omraania, out of his life. This time forever.

"Your assumptions are correct," he finally drawled, advancing on her in steps he hoped looked measured when they were, in fact, impeded by lingering upheaval. "Those concerning yourself. I assure you I don't surround myself with automatons or thralls."

"Sure. Thanks for sharing that." Sarcasm? He couldn't be sure with her face and voice expressionless. "Will you, please, send your head non-automaton non-thrall to direct me to the OR where I'm needed after I've scrubbed? I'll be exactly ten minutes."

Sarcasm. His lips twitched, not on mirth, on indecision how to react. "Adnan isn't one of my medical personnel. His role ended when he escorted you here. I'll take over from here."

"Fine. Whatever." She moved toward one of the lockers. "So, what's on the list this morning?"

"Ten surgeries."

She didn't bat a lid as she removed her jacket, exposing a sleeveless beige blouse. He came to a stop, his gaze trapped by the perfection of her arms. And even in these sterile surroundings, with everything else making erotic thoughts out of bounds, lust kicked in his loins. His mouth watered.

Seemingly oblivious to his state, she strode to the nearest sink, picked up a prepackaged, presterilized brush impregnated with

surgical detergent, held her hands below the tap for the infrared sensor to kick in. “Care to elaborate?”

He tamped down the urge to stride to her, take her by those arms, run stinging-for-their-softness hands all over them before branding them with his tongue and teeth, tasting their cream, biting into their vitality.

Ya Ullah, he shouldn’t have abstained from feminine pleasures for so long. Now he was starved.

But no. He hadn’t been. Not until he’d seen her. So mental aversion hadn’t even dulled the sharpness of the hunger. So he hadn’t been cured, had only been an addict forced to abstain…

“Six minimally invasive procedures.” He supplied the answer a raised eyebrow pressed for, struggling to imbue his voice with a tone as offhand as hers. “Vascular and thoracic, one lumpectomy and one simple mastectomy, and two second-stage damage-control surgeries. All up your street, I believe?”

She nodded without looking at him as she wet her forearms to the elbows, assurance itself. “Dead center, yes.”

Then she began to scrub. Just as he felt he’d disappeared from her senses’ radar, she raised her eyes. “You have someone around to help me gown, or shall I go the solo route?”

He couldn’t answer right away. Not when his mind was being swamped with all the times he’d ungowned her, so to speak, exposing her to his impatience and hunger.

When he answered, his voice sounded like raking through gravel. “I’ll gown you.”

That exquisite eyebrow rose again. Had she heard the gruffness, known its import?

But her gaze wasn't taunting, or knowing. It was empty. "I know I'm here to share a position with you, but isn't gowning me taking the coworker thing outside the job description?"

Share a position. A thousand images inundated him, of every position he'd shared with her, the ecstasy they'd wrung from each other's bodies in each. Had she meant the double entendre?

No. She hadn't. He was sure her comment had been professional. If her dismissal of his authority could be called that. But there was no sexual innuendo in anything she said or did. *Or* she was a more undetectable actress than he'd imagined.

Thinking a closer look might avail him of better judgment, he closed in on her. "I assure you that helping fellow surgeons gown isn't outside my job parameters."

She finished scrubbing, held up her hands to drip-dry before picking up a sterile towel folded over the gown/glove packs and began a flawless drying technique. "Really? So does Crown Prince and Head of Surgery have Scrub Nurse or Circulator in the fine print of expected duties? Who would have thought?"

A jolt coursed through him again. No one talked to him like that. Ever. Not even her. Especially her. Not in the past.

But why the jolts? Had he come to expect deference beyond decorum and professionalism that it shocked him she was speaking freely in his presence? Admittedly, he hadn't been approachable in recent years, but had she been right? Had he

gone beyond maintaining the distance his status demanded into imposing a form of oppression?

Not that she was affected by whatever intimidation he emitted. She hurled out her thoughts as they formed.

"Isn't life full of surprises?" he drawled, almost to himself.

She volunteered no answer to that but reached for a gown and began unfolding it, her sterile procedure perfect.

He advanced on her then, unable to stay away a second longer. The closer he got, the worse it got. Her scent reached out to him, enveloped him. Yes. This was *it*. Unchanged. Sweet and fragrant and exuding sensuality.

He reached her as she placed her arms inside the sleeves, circled her in one aching sweep, careful not to come into contact with any part of her. For sterile conditions, he told himself.

He began adjusting her scrubs around her lush body, focused on regulating his breathing, his urges. She stood there all through, eyes downcast, seemingly unbreathing.

He was tightening her belt when his surgical team entered the hall en masse.

He almost groaned in disappointment. Now he'd have no excuse to demand that she return the favor. She was already moving away, snapping on gloves on her own.

Resigned that this interlude had come to an end, that this face-off had gone against his expectations and certainly in her favor, he turned to his own scrubbing and gowning, acutely conscious of her every movement, every breath.

In minutes he turned to her again, impatient to continue his study of her—and sustained another shock.

She was smiling. At anesthesiologist Hisham Sukhr and resident Aneesah Othman. She hadn't smiled at *him* since she'd walked into the hall. Not even a mockery of a formality.

She'd *never* smiled at him like that.

And he suddenly realized what had been missing from the smiles she'd once lavished on him. This, what flowed from her smile right now. Ease. She'd always been…tense, even forced, for the lack of more appropriate words, around him.

Had it been a manifestation of the artifice she'd practiced? Looking at her now, it was impossible to believe she was *capable* of artifice. Which was too stupid a thing to think.

Even more stupid was the surge of anger and animosity he felt as he watched the scene unfold. Anger toward her for showing him how delightful her ease was, but that he'd never warranted it. Animosity toward Hisham, his most trusted anesthesiologist, whose eyes sparkled with the covetous thoughts any male would have about Viv…

Ya Ullah. Was he on the verge of a breakdown, as Adnan insisted he was? Was he angry at Viv for not being cordial with him? Was he jealous that another man coveted her on sight? When in either case he should expect nothing less, nothing else?

It was time to put an end to this stupidity, get on with his plans. Before he forgot what they were and why he'd hatched them.

He moved to the door connecting to the OR he'd chosen. As

the door slid open, he turned and a hush fell over the buzzing room.

"Now that Dr. LaSalle has introduced herself, we're ready to start our list." With that, he entered the OR.

Everyone followed in a silence loud with surprise that he hadn't given Viv the esteem of a formal introduction and welcome in front of her future team and subordinates. From her there was only opacity. She'd closed her mind to him.

Viv walked into the OR last, struggling not to wobble.

This wasn't what was supposed to happen.

She'd accepted the position because it dictated she'd meet Ghaleb possibly a couple of times initially, to set things up, then she wouldn't see him again as she did his job when he wasn't around. He shouldn't be here, about to begin a ten-surgery list with her. Why wasn't he leaving her to it?

This *had* to be a test. One he would have subjected anyone he'd install as his co-head to. A one-off. Yes. She could live with that. She thought. She hoped. If she survived the next hours…

Stop it. Why was she going to pieces like this?

But she knew why, didn't she? She'd entered to scrub, had seen him standing there with his back to her, and it had been like being catapulted back to the past, to that time she'd sought him out, to sell him on choosing her for his research assistant's position.

She'd seen him many times from afar till that moment, each time suffering a jolt of awareness at the power and charisma

compounding the impact of his phenomenal looks and physique. She'd known he had the same effect on every female with a heartbeat, but had been convinced one close-up look would take care of all that.

Then he'd turned to her and her self-assurance had boiled and evaporated, then his answering awareness had turned hers into compulsion. She'd hurled herself at him, a moth fully aware of its fiery end yet hurtling deliriously toward the flame. Then he'd left her and her world had turned upside down. It had taken months to set it right. How could she let herself be taken by storm again?

Oh, she knew how. This time he'd turned to her only to show her her memories had been merciful. Or the years had been cruel, conspiring with maturity to chisel his physique to godlike perfection, hone his beauty and effect to lacerating levels.

She didn't know how she'd looked at him, answered back. She guessed she'd launched into sarcastic mode, her automatic defense mechanism when overwhelmed. She barely remembered what she'd said, all her focus on keeping her face and tone empty so she hadn't betrayed her upheaval to his scrutiny.

And, damn him, he'd scrutinized. His eyes, the eyes she would once have done anything to see igniting with approval, with passion, had left her face, only to travel over her, leaving burn marks wherever they landed, scorching away her hard-won stability.

While he'd been as stable as a mountain, betraying nothing at the sight of her but the certainty that he remembered her, and the

same indifference with which he'd ignored her offer of her life to mess up for as long as he pleased. Then, as if he hadn't treated her like a leper, as if they'd never even met before, her pitiful barbs breaking off his force field of assurance and superiority, he'd approached her like an inexorable storm, rattling every cell in her body with alarm and awareness. Then he'd *gowned* her.

He'd circled her, like a predator biding his time, giving his prey a nervous breakdown wondering if he'd pounce at once or if he was sated and was only playing, would prolong the sadistic game until he was hungry again. He'd let her feel him, quake with his nearness, had flayed her with his breath, his scent, his hands hovering over a body that was suddenly a battleground for every forbidden hunger and recollection, tugging at her with strings made of her gown's ties, her cruel memory and his far more pitiless reality.

She didn't know how she'd remained on her feet.

She had to stay away from him. For the time she was here, and until she reached a decision. She couldn't let his effect tamper with her logic and self-control again. Sam. She was here for Sam.

But she couldn't stay away right now. He was looking at her, clearly summoning her.

Rigid, grudging steps brought her opposite him, across the table he'd elected, as the well-oiled machine of his surgical team brought in the first two patients, placing one in front of them.

She cast her gaze to the patient being placed at the next station. She may be here to settle a personal issue, but she'd also signed

a contract, had made a commitment to do the best job she could, as she always did. She'd better locate her misplaced composure and professionalism.

She gulped down a steadying breath, forced her eyes to seek his. The moment those obsidian infernos slammed into her she was tempted to say *Let the test begin or Do your worst*.

Instead, she said, "Where do you want me?"

Back in my office, spread on my desk, naked and open and begging for me.

Ghaleb gritted his teeth. These lust attacks were getting preposterous. And infuriating.

He harnessed his anger—at her for the weakness only she had ever engendered in him, at himself for letting her still wield that power—and emptied his gaze. "I want you right here."

"You mean I'll take this patient?"

"I mean you'll work with me on this patient."

"Two patients, two so-called head surgeons handling one. Anything wrong with that picture, I wonder?"

"We'll handle every patient together. Es-Sayed Elwan in station two was brought in now because it'll take the length of es-Sayedah Afaf's operation to get him prepped."

She gave him a glance that made him feel she was probing him, fathoming his motivations.

Then, without giving away her conclusions, she turned to their sedated patient, took in the field of surgery being prepped. "So, what will it be for her? Lumpectomy or simple mastectomy?"

“Lumpectomy.” He asked for their patient’s films to be clipped on the backlit screen feet away. Viv examined them.

She was back in a minute. “Localized tumor in a breast with no signs of lymph-node involvement.” She murmured her diagnosis, mirroring his. “Perfect for a breast-conserving procedure. Will she have radiation of the rest of the breast afterwards, or is the lumpectomy the limit of her treatment?”

“Why do you ask?”

She shrugged as she examined the woman’s breast, translating X-ray evidence into the physical one. “I ask because she must be over seventy and some schools of treatment think radiation doesn’t offer a better prognosis for her age group. I don’t know if your center subscribes to this belief or not.”

“What would be your recommendation?”

“Radiation afterwards, no question, if her general condition allows it. Even though women of her age are said not to be at risk of a hormonally induced recurrence and therefore wouldn’t benefit from radiation while risking a higher incidence of its side effects, recent research overwhelmingly proves those receiving radiation remain free of cancer longer than women who don’t.”

“And what do you think my center opts for?”

“How would I know? You may be the most advanced center in the world but I’ve seen many who run a close second who suffer from unchanging attitudes and biases toward new research. Superiority spawns prejudice, not to mention an all-knowing streak and the tendency to play God.”

And that *had* to be a double entendre. Making reference to the way he'd walked away from her?

He didn't see a connection but was certain this summation wasn't all about the pompous and misguided decisions and views many highly regarded surgeons and medical establishments made and advertised.

Unable to fathom the rebuff he felt singeing him, he drawled, "Let me assure you that at the Jobail Advanced Medical Center we embrace all substantiated research and commit a major part of our resources, human and financial, to furthering said research and to cementing its results into facts. Radiation after lumpectomy for older women is our recommendation."

She only gave a nod, continued examining the patient.

Just like that? No comment? No more digs?

No. None. Was that what she'd become? Not given to saying a word more than necessary? Closing a subject once it had been satisfactorily resolved? What had happened to cause that reversal? Where had the gushing, hyperactive, excitable young woman gone? Where had this serene, stable and centered woman sprung from?

And was now the time to ponder such mysteries, *ya ghabbi?*

Exhaling his frustration, he murmured for a scalpel. Once it was in his palm, he stared at it. He'd almost forgotten his plan. Now he remembered, he no longer wanted to go through with it.

Before he gave in to another impulse, he extended the scalpel to her. "You do the honors."

She didn't spare him a glance as she palmed the scalpel, adjusted her position. Before he opened his mouth, she made a sure-handed incision around the areola. The approach he hadn't had time to recommend, maximizing accessibility to the tumor.

He moved forward, tension draining by degrees as he fell into step with her, assisting her as she accessed the tumor and extracted it with a surrounding layer of healthy tissue, somehow managing to leave the breast looking untouched.

She placed the specimen in a collection vial and one of his nurses hurried with it to the adjacent lab. Viv turned her eyes to him, all he could see of her behind her mask.

"We'll have our verdict in minutes," he murmured. "You can move on to the next step while we wait."

She at once made an incision in their patient's armpit.

He tensed. "Removing the axillary lymph nodes?"

"I'm going for sentinel node biopsy." She paused. "You have a different course of action?"

He didn't. He gestured for her to go ahead.

She started dissecting the first node. His muscles tightened, ready to jump in. This was where surgeons of less than extensive experience messed up. But with every fluid, precise movement of her hands his tension eased. He couldn't have done it better.

After he sent another nurse to the lab with the nodes, they spent the following minutes exchanging opinions.

The nurses came back with a favorable verdict and the rest of his tension dissipated. It ratcheted up again at Viv's tremulous

exhalation. He studied her, gauged her reaction.

Yes. There it was. Unmistakable. What echoed inside him.

She validated his analysis when she murmured, “Now I can hope this procedure will be the last es-Sayedah Afaf will suffer on account of that tumor.”

He muttered his corroboration. And as if to show him that was of no consequence to her, she removed the drain he’d inserted, murmured for suturing materials, then proceeded to give es-Sayedah Afaf one of the most undetectable suture jobs he’d ever seen.

They finally pulled back from the table, leaving the others to wrap up, and Viv slipped from the chair she’d asked for in mid-surgery and stretched her back. His eyes clung to her movements, each accessing memories of nights when he’d massaged that resilient back, luxuriating in her feel, in her pleasure, before he’d mounted her, given her what by then she’d been whimpering for…

He remained seated. He’d remain seated until she’d long left the OR, otherwise he’d have a scandal on his hands.

He realized she was looking at him when his face began to burn. He swung his eyes back to her, found her gaze on him, steady, neutral. Then she only said, “Next.”

And for the next ten hours, even forgoing a lunch break, they went through the varied, demanding list. By the time their last patient was wheeled to Resuscitation, there was no doubt in his mind anymore.

Doubts had started to crumble with that first incision she'd made. From then on, as she'd passed every test he'd thrown at her with ease and confidence, they'd disintegrated faster. They now lay pulverized at his feet. He had the verdict of his own eyes.

The only thing she'd been guilty of had probably been to understate her skills. As a diagnostician she was uncanny; as a surgeon she was unparalleled.

And he couldn't believe how much that upset him.

It meant she really could just be here for the job.

Everything validated this theory. Her every nuance said she'd become the opposite of her old accommodating, approval-seeking self. Her antagonism had been superbly leashed in front of those she believed she'd oversee, but it had been unmistakable to him. And it was no act to whet his interest. His approval was the last thing she coveted. And it outraged him.

It was contrary of him when he had every reason not to wish for any personal reaction or interaction with her.

But now she was withholding it he wanted it, had to have it.

He *would* have it.

He would also find out how she'd become the woman who'd stood up to him, who'd surprised him at every turn, the woman he'd depended on through some of the most demanding surgeries possible.

And when he did so, he'd find out what her game was this time. He was certain there was far more than met the eye to Dr. Vivienne LaSalle.

But her secrets *would* be surrendered. He wouldn't think of a next step until he was in possession of every last one.

Viv staggered into the—thankfully deserted—ladies' room, groped for the support of the nearest solid surface.

Her hand slipped off the quartz vanity top. She barely steadied herself then met her reflection in the mirror—and gasped.

It was like looking at the worst days of her life.

She looked nothing like the scrawny, sunburned, crackling-with-need woman Ghaleb had used and discarded. It was her expression—the vulnerability, the despondency she'd become resigned to after Ghaleb had left and throughout her pregnancy.

Bile rose, mortification splashing through her system, melting the grip of resurrected insecurity and misery.

She was damned if she'd let herself sink back into those. She was double-damned if she let him affect her this way, or at all.

But, damn it all, he did affect her. Worse than before. He got to her so badly she'd had to ask for a chair during surgery for the first time ever, murmuring something stupid about jet lag.

It seemed absolute power and endless privileges agreed more and more with Ghaleb the longer he had them. And he knew his effect, used it.

One thing made it all bearable. She'd passed his test. And then some. She'd almost had a nervous breakdown holding up under his pressure, but she had. She let reaction rack her now.

In hindsight, she would have preferred it if he'd forgotten her name, had hired her unaware it was her then been enraged at

seeing her and sent her out of Omraania on the spot. The more she thought of it, the more she didn't understand why he *had* hired her for such a position when he'd once thought her beneath the position she'd begged him for, that of a mistress he would frequent on his infrequent visits to the U.S. Was he really that detached and professional?

What was going on in that convoluted mind of his?

One thing she knew. If she'd thought meeting him again would settle her mind, she'd been catastrophically wrong.

She lowered her head to the sink and the tap turned on. Water streamed over her face, warm yet still cooling her burning skin…

"Are you okay, Doctorah Vivienne?"

She inhaled water, jackknifed up spluttering, found a pile of paper towels being shoved into her hands. She dried her watering eyes, focused on the younger woman with exquisite dark eyes and exotic features. The surgical resident whose name she'd forgotten.

God, that was all she needed. To cultivate a reputation for being a spaced-out lightweight among the people she was supposed to spend her two months in purgatory leading.

"I'm so sorry I startled you." The woman looked contrite. "I heard you moaning and got worried."

Viv forced a bright smile. "It's jet lag catching up with me."

The woman smiled back at her. "I can't imagine how you lasted ten hours without a break, and with jet lag, too. I thought no one but Somow' wel Ameer Ghaleb was capable of such

staying power."

At hearing Ghaleb's name, her stomach gave a violent lurch.

She pressed a hand to it, forced another smile. "That must be hunger rearing its head, too. I'd better go and catch a bite to eat."

"There are some of the best restaurants in Omraania here in the center. And before you go, let me tell you how great it was to see you at work. I'm now really excited about your appointment."

Pleasure bubbled at her sincerity. Maybe today hadn't been a total disaster after all. First successful surgeries, now an ally.

For the first time since she'd set foot in Omraania her smile turned genuine. "Thanks…uh…Dr. Ani—Anai—"

"Aneesah," she supplied. "It means soothing companion."

Viv's smile widened. "I bet you are, too. Literally your name. You just made my day a hell of a lot better. Thanks again."

Aneesah chuckled and headed farther into the ladies' room. "Anytime, Doctorah Vivienne. See you in surgery."

Viv watched her, her tension draining. She *was* soothing. Nothing seemed as bad as it had minutes ago. She was probably overreacting with exhaustion anyway. It was also normal to feel drained after a confrontation she'd been dreading for years. Sleep would cure everything. Tomorrow she'd figure out her next step.

She put on her jacket as she walked to the foyer, this time noticing every detail, marveling at the intricate patterns on the marble floor, the designs paneling the walls, the gigantic flower arrangement on the centerpiece *fer forgé* table. What did hotels look like here if a medical center was this luxurious? The medical

facilities were a century ahead of anything she'd ever worked in, too. As for their accommodations, Sam and Anna had flipped when they'd seen where they'd spend the next two months.

Maybe she should adopt their attitude. Maybe it was the key to surviving this experience. Considering it an interlude, going with the flow, hoping for the best… Yeah, right.

Still following the patterns on the floor, she cleared the automatic doors, only for her gaze to stumble on large feet in camel-colored shoes, planted wide apart.

Without volition, her gaze traveled up the endless legs and powerful thighs attached to them, encased in superbly cut same-colored pants, hands deep in their pockets, stretching the fabric over the potency that had once…

She dragged her eyes up farther, only for them to cling to a black shirt covering an abdomen and chest forged from steel, three buttons left open to expose the mat of silky hair she'd once lost herself to the luxury of threading her fingers through, that had once settled on her breasts, chafing her into a frenzy…

She tore her gaze up to his, found him watching her.

As soon as he gauged he had her attention where he wanted it, he drawled, "I've designated a driver for you. He'll be at your disposal 24/7. He'll now escort you to your new residence. Since it's a quarter to seven now, you should be there by a quarter past. I trust you can get ready in an hour?"

She replayed his question in her mind. It still made no sense. She swallowed, croaked, "Ready? For what?"

“For our working dinner. At eight-fifteen sharp.” Before she could say anything, he turned away. Just before he’d gone out of hearing range, he threw over his back, “Be ready.”

CHAPTER THREE

BE READY.

The order reverberated in Viv’s mind until she was ready to scream. He’d tossed it at her, expected her to abide by it.

But what did she expect from a despot anyway? Sure, he enveloped it all in layers of benevolence, modernism and tolerance, but in reality he was the same as his desert-raider ancestors, tyrannical rulers and decadent sultans all. Aarrghhh…

Okay. Enough of that. She should concentrate on something else. The magnificence of Jobail at sunset, for instance. She may as well enjoy it. Driving through the city that had materialized out of architects’ fantasies, cocooned in that rarefied atmosphere of a limo of a level of luxury she hadn’t known existed. Without the evidence of her eyes, the sight of the city rushing by, she could have sworn they weren’t moving at all. So smooth were the roads…

It wasn’t working. And it was Ghaleb’s fault.

It was his fault she was victim to volcanic emotions once more after she’d long mastered herself, found tranquility, enjoyed the rewards of control. And all he’d had to do to achieve this reversion had been to expose her to the sight of him, his voice and scent, to breathe near her, look at her. To utter those two words.

She closed her eyes. She should consider this not succumbing

to his order but strategic acceptance of an opportunity. This dinner could provide her with time in his company to decide how to proceed. Yes. She could live with that.

Nodding to herself, settling back into the frame of mind she'd accomplished in the past seven years, she opened her eyes as the villa Ghaleb had provided for her came into view at the end of the palm-tree-lined street. A three-story building that could house thirty people, not only three, nestling among at least five acres of impeccably landscaped grounds. It looked far more beautiful now as spotlights showcased each detail in an ingenious play of light and shadows.

Guards opened the remote-controlled gates and the limo slid in through, traveling at least two hundred meters before coming to a stop in front of the villa's main door.

Before she could move, her driver opened her door. She hadn't known anyone, especially someone of his size, could move that fast!

He stood aside, awaiting her exit from the vehicle. He hadn't said one word to her so far. In fact, she hadn't even really been aware of the guy. That was saying something with him so imposing.

That cloak of invisibility must be Ghaleb's conditioning. That really clashed with his assertion that his people possessed independent wills.

Well, she wouldn't treat her driver as if he were some advanced piece of hardware to operate her car and run her

errands.

She stepped down from the car and didn't walk away, but turned to face him. He did a double take then resumed looking ahead, but she could see him tensing.

What did he think? That she'd blast him over some imaginary mistake? Was that how Ghaleb kept his subordinates functioning to optimum capacity? Browbeating them with unreasonableness, never satisfied with any level of competence they achieved?

Not that she'd noticed any bullying today. Ghaleb had just murmured a word and his team had met his demands with a speed and efficiency any genie would have envied. And if something inside her whispered that Ghaleb had never needed intimidation of any sort to get what he wanted, that without even trying he'd had her falling over herself to please him, she smothered it. Viciously.

She looked way up at him and smiled. "I just wanted to thank you for the smoothest ride of my life."

The man blinked, seemingly stunned that she'd addressed him at all, and with thanks no less.

He finally rumbled gruffly, "It's my job, *ya sayedati*."

"It's only right to be thanked for a job well done, uh…" She flashed him an apologetic smile. "I don't know your name yet."

He hesitated again. "Khadamek Abdur-Ruhman."

She didn't get the first word, but knew the second was a name, one of those starting with "Abd," slave or worshipper—of Ullah, of course, in this case one of His other ninety-nine names.

Unsure if the first word was his first name, she made note to ask about it later and extended her hand. “And I’m Vivienne LaSalle.”

He barely touched it before withdrawing his own, dark color staining his intimidating face. And she realized.

This guy wasn’t only under orders to treat her like some sanctified entity. His culture was vastly different than hers and he—who by the silver band on his left ring finger was married—really was unsure how to deal with women who weren’t part of his family. All that coarse maleness was just a misleading exterior. He was out of his depth here, was actually blushing!

She smiled at him again. “I will call you in good enough time when I need you to drive me to work.”

“But…*ya sayedati*, you won’t need to. I’ll be right here in the service houses in the grounds of the villa with the guards.”

“Why?” she exclaimed. “Even if you live on the other side of Jobail, you’d get here in less than an hour. In days I’ll have a schedule and won’t even need to call you!”

“You’ll need me for more than commuting to and from work, and you have family with you. They’ll need me when you’re at work.”

“They can also use a phone to call you if they can’t use the incredibly efficient public transportation. No. You spend your nights with your family. I will call you, well ahead of time, when I need you. And that’s final.” He gave her a pained look. He was about to say he couldn’t do as she asked. She knew why. Ghaleb.

Well, tough. If Ghaleb thought having an enslaved driver would impress her, he was in for a surprise. “It’s *final*,” she ground out. “I’ll tell Prince Ghaleb. Now, go home. Please.”

She waved goodbye and turned away, but could tell he remained there until she’d reached the second floor. She was passing along the corridor leading to the bedroom Sam had chosen when she heard the purr of the limo. She wondered if he’d do as she’d demanded or if his orders would prevent him from obeying anyone but Ghaleb. Yet another bone to pick with said prince.

She opened the door to Sam’s room, tiptoed in. Not that she needed to. The thickest carpets she’d ever walked on made her steps soundless. But she couldn’t be too careful. Sam was a very light sleeper. Like his father. She’d once asked Ghaleb if he ever slept properly, or if he only closed his eyes and pretended to. She’d only had to breathe more deeply as she’d watched him sleep for his eyes to snap open, alert, focused, devouring…

She’d long added this inherited trait to her resentment against Ghaleb. It made her unable to kiss Sam while he slept.

But tonight she couldn’t help it. She had to touch him, smell him. Feel his precious life. She needed the strength that connecting with him always gave her. The strength to take on the world and win. She was going to take on something far more cruel tonight. Ghaleb. And her own resurrected weaknesses.

She came down on the mattress Sam had given a test the best trampoline wouldn’t have passed, and he didn’t stir. A tingle of

anxiety slithered down her nerves. She bent closer, inhaled his sweet, beloved scent then touched her lips to his downy cheek. He gave no reaction and panic slammed into her.

She groped for his pulse with one shaking hand and for the bedside light with the other.

"Mo-*om*… Sleepy… Don't wanna go to school…"

Viv sobbed, hiccupped, her eyes watering. And she couldn't hold back. She swept him into her arms in a fierce hug, to grumpier protestations. She let out a chuckle of distress.

"No school, darling. Mom just missed kissing you goodnight."

He cracked one eye open. "You've kissed me ten times now."

And she laughed. "You were counting?"

He buried his head under the pillow, mumbled what sounded like, "Wasn't…too many…too fast…give you more…when I wake up…"

She chuckled, turned off the lamp, took the pillow off his head, put it back under him, kissed him and hurried from the room.

Once outside, she leaned on the door. She was in worse shape than she'd realized. She was obsessive where Sam's safety was concerned but that attack of suffocating dread was a new level.

She looked at her watch. She had exactly thirty-five minutes until Ghaleb's eight-fifteen deadline!

She started to run before she caught herself then stopped, stared into space. What was she *doing*, rushing to make his

appointment? She'd take a bath, wash her hair, dry it, dress at leisure. Whomever he sent to fetch her would just have to wait.

Even with this resolution, she had to force herself not to hurry to her room. And she'd thought her driver—Abdur-Ruhman until proven otherwise—programmed? When she couldn't rise above her own programming? To give Ghaleb anything he wanted?

No. Just to be punctual, to strive to fulfill others' expectations. Even when she didn't have a hand in creating those.

She entered the large, cheery room she'd picked haphazardly that morning, again getting only impressions of soft pastel colors and floral designs, having no time to take stock of her surroundings. She collected her things, headed into the plush bathroom and started filling the huge tub, muttering to herself all through the rushed procedure.

And, no, it *wasn't* rushed on account of wanting to fulfill Ghaleb's expectations. She'd become a time freak, as her colleagues called her, so she'd squeeze all the time-consuming things she had to do into each twenty-four hours. She'd bet she couldn't soak or take time to style her hair if she tried.

In thirty minutes she was bathed, dried, body and hair, and dressed. Damn. She wouldn't make Ghaleb wait. But…she *could* lie down in bed until she was fashionably late.

She shook her head at that idea. The moment she hit the bed she'd plunge into a coma. She didn't want to be *that* late.

A melodious bell rang. She sighed, squared her shoulders. On the strike of the minute. Still painfully punctual, huh? A

condition he'd clearly imposed on the lackeys sent to fetch her.

She forced herself not to run down the stairs.

The bell rang again. What did those guys expect? That she'd be propped behind the door, waiting for their arrival? Sheesh.

She reached the door, struggled to wipe the frown from her face as she opened it. She couldn't be annoyed with Ghaleb's underlings for being anxious to fulfill their master's orders.

Next moment her heart emptied of blood, her mind of thoughts.

Not underlings on her doorstep… Him…here…

Ghaleb. Obsidian eyes drilling into her, taking her apart a cell at a time, ruthlessly sensuous mouth set, sculpted bone structure showcased by the lights illuminating her entrance, body molded in the darkness of the first formal suit she'd seen him in, handmade, detail-worshipping pure silk, looking so good it was unfair…

As unfair as him popping up on her doorstep like that.

Anger chased away paralysis. Hoping she hadn't gawked at him for too long and thanking God that Sam and Anna were asleep, she raised her chin and glared at him.

"What happened to your army of errand boys?"

Ghaleb stared at Viv, once again unable to breathe.

The scent of cleanliness and femininity had sizzled into his lungs the moment she'd opened the door. He didn't dare draw another breath laden with her uniqueness before he'd dealt with the first dose. Before he dealt with the response that laying eyes

on her again had ripped from his depths.

And he'd been hoping his earlier response had been exaggerated by shock? If anything, it had been dampened by it.

He crackled with her nearness, with the onslaught of her every detail. The ripeness encased in another neutral-colored creation that made his hands sting to tear her out of it. The hair shining like burnished bronze transforming the sting to the pain of needing to thread them through it. Then came the stain of peach spreading through her scrubbed skin, the pursed generosity of ruby lips, and the flash of eyes that burned like incandescent coals…

Her eyes. He should concentrate on her eyes. Focusing anywhere else would lead to consequences he hadn't charted. But her eyes arrested his spiraling reaction, put the brakes on what could develop into a runaway situation in heartbeats.

They were full of—what? Annoyance? Defiance?

That tilt of her chin, that remark confirmed both.

He could have stared at her for an hour before he forced himself to answer her, injecting his tone with an outstanding imitation of calmness. "You thought I'd send assistants to escort you to the dinner I invited you to?"

Her chin rose higher. "Were we both in the same scene an hour and a half ago? You *invited* me? In which parallel universe?"

His lips twitched. *Ya Ullah*, every irreverent word that spilled out of her mouth zinged something electric behind his sternum. Was it elation? How could it be?

She went on. “You *told* me we were having dinner. You *told* me when. And let’s not forget the ‘be ready’ parting shot.”

“And I can see that you are ready. So I assume you accepted my…suggestion, if you will.”

“Oh, I certainly won’t. That was no suggestion, that was a decree. As crown prince you live to issue those, don’t you? Though I guess I can’t blame you. I wouldn’t blame a predator for making meals of other animals either.”

It was no use resisting. It *was* elation. The twitch broke into a full-fledged smile. “I’m a predator now?”

She raised a matter-of-fact eyebrow. “Aren’t you?”

The way he felt right now? The way he’d always felt around her? Certainly. A predator in a perpetual mating frenzy.

He wondered what cool answer she’d volley back if he told her that. Instead he said, “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

She flinched, as if he’d sprayed her with something scalding. His request horrified her that much?

The next moment he didn’t have to wonder what her reaction was.

She said a clear, and clearly final, “No.”

So. She wasn’t inviting him in. Good call. He certainly had no idea what he was doing, inviting her to dinner, coming to her.

Oh, he’d told himself he’d extend the same courtesy to anyone he’d be working that closely with, however temporarily, that he’d had to come as he sensed she’d send anyone else away. He hadn’t dwelt on why her aversion to being in his company put him out.

After all, she was the woman *he'd* left for the best reasons.

But no reason felt valid anymore. He could no more stay away from her now than he could stop breathing indefinitely.

He tilted his head at her, devouring her expressions, struggling to fathom them, only her deepening color betraying the effect of his nearness. "If I can't come in, you must come out."

"What I must do is bid you good-night and go up to bed."

Bed. Exactly where he wanted to go, too, where he wanted to sweep her, all fire and defiance, and drown in her all night.

But again he knew she hadn't thrown a suggestive word for his mind to latch on to and wander into erotic abandon.

He exhaled. "You are not going to bed, Viv." A thrill rattled through him at having her name on his tongue again after so long, the shortened form she'd told him only he had ever used. The sensation heightened at her indrawn breath, the admission of her reaction to hearing it. "We are having dinner, even if I have to order a table to be placed right in that doorway with us on either side."

"And you'd do it, too." Her lips spread in the closest thing to a real smile he'd had from her so far. "This is too funny. You standing across the threshold like a vampire denied entrance."

He smiled back at her even as he damned himself for it. "First I'm a predator, now I'm a vampire. Interesting."

Her eyes scalded down his body, before taking the same path back up to his eyes. "A cape and more pointed canines and you'd fit the bill." Before he could gauge if her eyes contained the

awareness he couldn't wait to detect, they hardened. "But you can't do a thing without my consent. Or are you going to call your men to carry me out of the house?"

It *had* been awareness. And she was as angry as he was with himself for succumbing to it.

So could it be true? She *was* here for the job? Could he want her to have it? Could he be so reckless he'd have her in a position that would keep her in close proximity with him, no matter how temporarily? Wasn't that courting catastrophe?

Yes, it was. He was in no position to indulge his desires, with his every action having widespread repercussions on a whole nation, now more so than ever, with his marriage of state looming closer. As soon as a suitable bride was decided on.

That was his mind talking. His body sanctioned nothing, was punishing him as it always had for denying it its one desire. Her.

But the ugliness of the past or the volatility of the future weren't what stopped him from surrendering to its clawing demands. It was that hostile look in her eyes.

But what shook him was the need to wipe it away. The need dampened even his anger that she dared have it. Acting the wronged party? Sure she was. She had no idea he'd found out the truth.

They had been only three months into the affair he'd insisted on keeping secret, fearing the repercussions back home. He'd been recalled to Omraania but, suffering from his first infatuation at thirty-two, a man of his position and experience,

he'd had no defenses against her power over him. He'd rushed to her to propose a continuation of their secret affair, this time in his kingdom.

He'd arrived at that doctors' room to overhear her saying that he meant nothing to her. She'd used those very words.

His first impulse had been to storm in, confront her, shout accusations at her. But she would have only retracted her words, and he couldn't have borne to see the mask of sincerity falling back into place. He'd left, feeling crushed by what he'd heard. She'd pursued for the same reason as every woman he'd ever known had—a bid to attain wealth and power. What he'd been about to offer her, for as long as she'd have him.

Oblivious to his eavesdropping, she'd caught up with him, had acted distraught on finding him departing. She'd clung, begged to be with him, anywhere, anyhow, whenever his duties let him. Even with what he'd learned, it had been almost impossible to conquer the temptation, his still raging hunger and emotions.

But he'd done it. He'd walked away, without one more word.

Then he'd made the mistake of taking one last look. The sight of her standing at the gate of his mansion, watching him drive away, looking devastated, would never fade from his memory.

He'd spent endless months tormented by that memory, by every nuance of her passion, the conviction of her confessions of love. He'd berated himself for forgetting what he'd heard with his own ears instead of being grateful for it. He wouldn't have been able to pay the price of keeping her in his life. Hearing the

truth had saved him insupportable trouble. Had set him free.

Or so he'd tried to tell himself all these years.

Suddenly a gust of breeze threaded through his hair, seemed to pass through it to comb through hers, brushing the strands away from her face. He moved, as if he'd catch the subtle change in her expression, and the silvery rays of the dawning full moon flooded her beauty. Such beauty. All new. All hers. As he'd once been.

Memories made him surge with their flow toward her, needing to close the gap, end the separation. She muffled a gasp, receded, maintaining the distance between them.

Suddenly he was fed up with it all. Seven-years'-worth, end-of-his-tether fed up. With the doubts, the foul taste of how it had ended, the holding back. But mostly with the pretense.

A step back resumed his position across the threshold before he muttered, "All right, Viv. Enough. Let's drop this charade. Let's stop behaving as if we don't know each other."

She leaned on the door, hands clutching its edge, as if to keep herself up. "I did no such thing."

"*Zain*. Fine. I did, then. You have to excuse me, though. Seeing you walking into the center and realizing you were my new co-head of surgery wasn't something I could get over quickly."

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