



And the Desert Blooms

Iris Johansen

IRIS
JOHANSEN



*And the
Desert Blooms*

BANTAM BOOKS

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Dear Reader,

I really like the characters in *And the Desert Blooms*. I first introduced Pandora and Phillip in *Summer Smile*. "Introduced" isn't quite the correct word. Even though they were secondary characters I had trouble keeping them from dominating the book. I knew the moment I saw their interaction that I had to give them a book of their own. They were both strong, yet vulnerable, and the sparks flew.

I think you'll agree that those sparks developed into fireworks in *And the Desert Blooms*. All the ingredients were certainly present: sheikhs and show business and two people who were meant for each other and have to figure out a way to overcome odds to get there. I had a great time with them.

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Iris Johansen".

Iris Johansen

ONE

PANDORA QUICKLY UNFASTENED the chain of the medallion that hung around her neck. Her hands were shaking slightly as she took it off and placed it in the velvet-lined jeweler's box. She took a moment to draw a deep, steadying breath. It was stupid to be so frightened now. She had planned everything down to the last detail. No, nothing could go wrong.

The round medallion shone against the black velvet lining of the box. The morning sunlight streaming through the hotel room window picked out the design on its surface, a raised rose in full bloom pierced by a sword. She reached out one finger and touched the rose gently. She felt oddly naked without the necklace she had worn for the last eight years. She had a sudden impulse to snatch the lovely thing out of the box and fasten it around her neck again. It was *hers*, dammit. What if Philip had just opened the package and then carelessly tossed the medallion into a drawer?

What if he had forgotten her? It had been more than six years. Undoubtedly there had been a parade of women through his bedroom in that time. Perhaps he'd found one who could provide him with more than temporary satisfaction. Oh Lord, she mustn't think of that. It hurt too much. She *wouldn't* think about it. He wasn't married or engaged. She knew that for certain. It didn't matter if he had formed a liaison or not. She'd soon take care of removing any woman who had taken his fancy. Philip belonged to her. She had a prior claim and wouldn't hesitate to state it. She knew Philip better than anyone on the face of the earth. Surely that would be a powerful enough weapon to oust any rival. And she had other weapons now as well. She would use them all if she had to.

Philip wouldn't throw the medallion into a drawer. He was the most possessive man she had ever known. When he had given her this medallion he had done so as a gesture of ownership. What belonged to him would never be surrendered easily.

She snapped the box shut and reached for the most recent issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine. With efficient movements she wrapped the jeweler's box and the magazine in plain brown paper and addressed it to James Abernathy, Philip's London agent. From the gossip columns she knew Philip had spent a good deal of time in Great Britain during the last six years. Even if he wasn't in London, Abernathy would know where to reach him.

Just as she finished there was a knock on the door. She stood and snatched up the package and her huge shoulder bag from the chair beside the desk. "Just a minute," she called.

"Take your time," came Neal's deep voice. "I'm in no hurry to listen to you destroy my new lyrics with that sandpaper voice of yours."

A smile tugged at her lips as she crossed the room, and she felt some of her tension ease. Neal Sabine's dry humor always had that effect on her. She couldn't remember how many performances he had made bearable for her in the past two years.

She threw open the door. "Then why don't you sing them yourself?" she asked Neal with a grin. "We both know you've got a better voice." She made a face. "Hell, Kermit the Frog has a better voice."

"But Kermit the Frog doesn't have your sex appeal," he replied as he took her huge shoulder bag and slung it over his shoulder. "And neither do I. You may not be melodious, but you're definitely commercial."

“Thanks a lot,” she said. “If I was the least bit serious about all this nonsense, I’d probably be crushed.”

“If you were serious, I wouldn’t have said it,” Neal returned. “I’d be working your ass off to make a musician out of you, instead of just a star.” He shifted his guitar case and took her arm. “Come on, let’s get on the road. Pauly and Gene are already at the auditorium rehearsing.” One side of his mouth lifted in a lopsided smile. “They’re obviously more driven than we are, luv.”

She knew better than that, but said nothing as she closed the door and started down the hall toward the bank of elevators at the end of the corridor. “I’m afraid we’re going to be even later than you think,” she remarked finally. “I have to stop at the post office and mail this package.”

There was a flicker of curiosity in Neal’s eyes as he glanced down at the package. In the four years he had known Pandora he couldn’t remember her either receiving or sending any mail. She seemed to live totally in the here and now. “I guess I can handle that. Is it important?”

“Oh yes, it’s important.” Her hand was trembling again as she pushed the button of the elevator. She deliberately steadied it. She mustn’t be so transparent. She could tell by Neal’s expression that he had already noticed something was upsetting her. She’d never be able to fool Philip, who had always been extraordinarily sensitive to her emotional state, if she couldn’t control herself better than this.

She lifted her chin and gave Neal a blindingly beautiful smile. “Very important.” Her smile suddenly faded, and a faint frown creased her forehead. “Do you remember last year when you were sick with the flu and I played Florence Nightingale?”

He nodded. “How could I forget? I’ve never been so bitchin’ miserable in my life.”

“You said you owed me one.”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you calling in debts, Pandora?”

She nodded. “I need a favor.” She moistened her lips. Heavens, this was hard. She had taken care of Neal because he was her friend and he needed her. She felt shabby extracting payment now for what she had given freely. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to do it, but I thought I’d—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, be quiet. Pandora.” The doors of the elevator slid open and Neal nudged her into the cubicle. “You’re my friend, dammit.” His thumb punched the lobby button. “If you want a favor, ask. It’s not a crime to need a little help, you know.”

“Okay.” She drew a deep breath. “I want you to move in with me.”

“What!”

The doors of the elevator slid silently closed.

“Come in, Abernathy.”

James Abernathy hesitated a moment before he opened the polished oak library door. He wasn’t in any hurry to beard the lion in his den. He had deliberately taken his time getting to El Kabbar’s estate from his office in London. Usually it annoyed him to make the long drive when the sheikh wanted to sign papers or relay instructions on the more delicate transactions of his multicorporation empire. In James Abernathy’s eyes, London was the only civilized corner of the world, and he couldn’t see why the sheikh insisted on living outside its environs. He realized that El Kabbar was a fine horseman and possessed one of the most famous stables in the Middle East. Still, there was Hyde Park in which to ride, and he was sure the facilities were more than adequate. This time, however, he was grateful for the delay of the drive before the coming interview.

Even over the phone he had been able to tell that the sheikh was not pleased at the news Abernathy had received in the morning’s mail. Abernathy had thought El Kabbar would be relieved that the

blasted girl had surfaced at last. After all, they had been searching for her for over six years. Reigning sheikhs were notoriously arrogant and Philip El Kabbar was more difficult than most. However, as his agent, Abernathy was extremely well paid to put up with that arrogance. There wasn't any question that he'd continue to do so, not in today's economy.

When Abernathy entered the library El Kabbar didn't look any more pleased than he'd sounded on the phone. His black brows were knit in a frown over stormy blue-green eyes. "Where is it?" he asked curtly.

"I have it here." Abernathy strode briskly forward and placed the package on the Sheraton desk. He opened it, as I do everything addressed to you." He paused before adding apologetically, "I had no idea it was anything of a personal nature." He started to turn away. "Now, if you don't need me . . ."

"Sit down and quit trying to escape, Abernathy." El Kabbar was crossing the room with swift strides, his tall, lean body as lithe as a cat's. From his clothes it was evident he had been about to go riding when he'd received the phone call. Abernathy fervently wished the sheikh had continued with the plan. Perhaps he would have expended a little of his anger on his horse.

Abernathy repressed a sigh as he obediently sat down in the wing chair beside the desk. "Of course, Sheikh El Kabbar. I'm only too happy to be of service to you. I merely didn't wish to intrude."

"I doubt that I'm going to be overcome with emotion," El Kabbar said cynically. He flicked on the desk lamp before removing the plain brown paper from the package with impatient hands. "Unless that emotion is anger. You could say I'm a trifle annoyed with our little runaway."

"Not very little any longer, judging by the photograph on the cover of that magazine," Abernathy said mildly. "You must remember that she's no longer the child of fifteen she was when she disappeared."

"Must I?" El Kabbar asked as he opened the jeweler's box. The sheikh's face was impassive when he looked down at the medallion, but his hand suddenly tightened, snapping the box shut. He picked up the copy of *Rolling Stone* and glanced at the picture. "A rock star. I should have known Pandora would pick a profession suited to her rather bizarre mentality."

"She's turned into quite a raving beauty, hasn't she?" Abernathy permitted himself a small smile. "Who would have thought such a little tomboy could be transformed into the woman in that picture?" He had only seen the girl once, when he had picked her up at the airport some six years before. The next day she had decided to run away. She had left only a sealed note for Philip El Kabbar and a great deal of turmoil behind her. That girl had been thin and wiry, with silver-blond hair that had been brutally chopped into a boy's cut. From the photograph it was clear all that had changed. Pandora Madchen's features were by far the most classically beautiful Abernathy had ever seen, and her green dark eyes were truly magnificent. In the white satin Grecian toga that bared one shoulder her slender body was everything a woman's form should be. Her bosom might even be considered a little too voluptuous for her small body. It wasn't likely any man would complain, however. Pandora emitted an aura of sensuality that almost reached out and touched, stroked . . . Abernathy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. It was a very disturbing quality. "Do you suppose that wild orange hair is dyed or a wig? Why would she try to cover her own hair? The color was quite lovely, as I remember."

Philip El Kabbar didn't look up from the magazine. "A wig. But it wouldn't surprise me if she's had her head shaved and is bald as a jaybird underneath the damn thing. There wasn't a note?"

Abernathy shook his head. "Just the magazine and the jeweler's box."

The sheikh picked up the magazine and crossed to stand in front of the fireplace. "I suppose you've read the article?"

Abernathy shrugged. "Most of it. A good deal of it concerns the artistic merits of the group itself."

Evidently Pandora and Nemesis are very well thought of by popular musicians.”

“Nemesis?” Philip’s gaze lifted swiftly.

“That’s the name of the group itself. Rather fanciful, isn’t it? I wonder if she thought of it herself.”

“Probably.” Philip looked down into the heart of the crackling fire. “Give me the bare bones of the story. I can do without the critical review.”

“No one appears to know her last name in the United States. She’s known only as Pandora. Evidently that’s the thing to do in rock circles. It adds a certain mystique.” His lips pursed disapprovingly. “Most exasperating. Your detectives might have found her if she’d used her surname. She’s been in the public eye for almost two years.”

“That long?”

Abernathy nodded. “The group had a hit single about that time and became very popular. The members in the group are all British, so it’s probable that she linked up with them here in London.”

“Then why didn’t the fools find her? No city is that large.”

“It’s understandable. They were looking in the wrong places.” Abernathy’s expression was faintly reproachful. “You gave us no hint that she was interested in music. You said she had ambitions as an equestrienne.”

“I also said that you couldn’t put her into any cozy pigeonhole, blast it. There aren’t any limitations where she’s concerned. She doesn’t even know they exist.” His hand clenched around the magazine. “Why the hell didn’t they listen to me?”

“I’m sure they were thorough. Blackwell’s is an extremely efficient agency.” Abernathy could see that he wasn’t getting through and sought for an out. Unfortunately, he had been the one to hire the detective agency when the Madchen girl ran away. “Have you phoned her father in Sedikhan and informed him that she’s been located?”

El Kabbar nodded curtly. “Right after you called me. He wasn’t at the dispensary so I left word with his assistant.”

“Undoubtedly he’ll be overjoyed when he hears the good news.”

“Undoubtedly,” El Kabbar said caustically. “He lost a horse-crazy fifteen-year-old and finds an orange-haired twenty-one-year-old rock star. He’ll be over the moon.”

“She’s still his daughter,” Abernathy offered quietly.

There was a short silence.

“Yes, she’s still his daughter,” El Kabbar finally said. “Whatever that means. Madchen never treated her with anything but complete indifference. When I told him she was missing his reaction was a philosophic shrug. No, you can’t say they were exactly close.”

“Is that why she ran away? I thought she was just rebelling at being sent away from Sedikhan school here in England.”

“No, there was more to it than that.” El Kabbar’s lips were suddenly a tight line. “Nothing is ever simple when it comes to Pandora.”

“Isn’t it?” There was a note of speculation in Abernathy’s voice.

El Kabbar noticed it, and his lips curved in a cynical smile. “And, no, she wasn’t my mistress, Abernathy. I’ve never indulged myself with teenage Lolitas. I like my bedmates with a degree of maturity and experience.”

Abernathy was well aware of that. El Kabbar’s latest affair had been with a beautiful opera singer who possessed both of those attributes. Still, he had wondered a bit at the sheikh’s reaction when Pandora Madchen disappeared. El Kabbar had flown to London at once and supervised the search personally for almost a year. That, in itself, had been unusual. His demeanor during that period had

been even more surprising. There had been moments when the man looked positively haggard. I would never have intimated such a thing. I know that Dr. Madchen has been in your employ for number of years. I'm sure you would have been just as concerned for the daughter of any—"

"The devil I would," El Kabbar bit out. "My employees are well taken care of, but I wouldn't go through that hell as part of any fringe-benefit program."

"Then why—" Abernathy broke off. He was coming dangerously close to exhibiting a curiosity that he knew would not be welcomed. He had learned long ago that one ventured past the sheikh's wall of reserve only at his own express invitation. "She appeared to be an unusually appealing child. A little quiet, but very polite."

"It must have been one of her better days," El Kabbar said dryly. "Pandora was seldom quiet and never polite. She was wild as a hawk." His lips twisted. "From the looks of this photograph I'd say she hasn't changed all that much."

"You have to admit she's made a success of herself, in a rather offbeat manner."

"She could never have done it any other way. She hears a different drummer." El Kabbar turned away from the fireplace and strode briskly toward the desk. He dropped down into the massive leather executive chair and tossed the magazine carelessly on the blotter in front of him. "Does Blackwell have a branch in the States?"

"I believe so," Abernathy said cautiously. "If not, I'm sure they can make arrangements with a suitable counterpart." He frowned. "But why? We already know where Miss Madchen is located. Since she used a return address it's obvious she wanted us to know her present whereabouts. It's not like she'll disappear again."

"Pandora never does what's likely. I have no intention of losing her again." He met Abernathy's eyes steadily. "Besides, at last I have some work that your very thorough detectives can sink their teeth into. Not only are they going to keep Pandora under surveillance, but they are going to protect her as well. Who knows what kind of weird element she's surrounded herself with?" For an instant there was a flicker of humor in his eyes. "Though I doubt if anything could be worse than the tiger she was cuddling before she left Sedikhan."

"Tiger?" Abernathy asked in bewilderment.

El Kabbar made an impatient motion with his hand. "Never mind, it's a long story. Just see that she's protected. I also want a complete dossier drawn up on her, down to the brand of toothpaste she's using at present."

"How soon do you want it?"

"Tomorrow afternoon." He ignored the other man's stifled exclamation. "Did you say she's playing in San Francisco day after tomorrow?"

"According to the list of concert dates in the magazine. It's the last concert on the tour."

"I have some loose ends to tie up here, but I should be able to get away by tomorrow morning. Have your man report to me at the Fairmont tomorrow afternoon at five."

"They might not be able to complete a dossier that quickly."

"They'll do it," El Kabbar said grimly. "They've been milking me for the last six years—it's time they produced. I'm extremely displeased with them."

Abernathy swallowed nervously and stood up. "I must get back to the office and make a few telephone calls. Do you have any further instructions?"

"That's all." Then, as Abernathy started for the door, he added, "No, wait. Find a way of contacting Mrs. Zilah Seifert. I believe she and Daniel are cruising in the Caribbean on their yacht *Windsong*. He smiled sardonically. "Let her know the lost lamb has been found. She has a peculiar fondness for

this particular lamb.”

Abernathy nodded briskly. “I’ll see to it. If there are any problems, I’ll phone you in San Francisco. Good day, Sheikh El Kabbar.” He strode hurriedly toward the door. This time he was allowed to leave and he closed the door behind him with a sigh of relief.

It was foolish to be nervous around the man after so many years in his service, but the sheikh could be a very intimidating man. Abernathy wouldn’t like to be in the detective’s shoes if he didn’t come through with that dossier on schedule. For that matter, he wouldn’t want to be in Pandora Madchen’s place either. The sheikh’s emotions were exceptionally strong and volatile where she was concerned. Personally, he found it much more comfortable to be ignored by the man except when needed.

Philip leaned back in the chair, his eyes going compulsively to the magazine he’d thrown so carelessly on the desk. Lord, she was beautiful now. Even in that grotesque wig she shimmered with allure. But then, he had known she would be beautiful eventually because as a child she had possessed an enchanting grace and loveliness. Strange that he hadn’t noticed it more often when she had tagged around after him like an eager little puppy. He supposed he’d always been vaguely conscious of that glowing promise, but it had been all but obscured by her fire and intensity. He wondered cynically if that intensity was still as strong. Perhaps she had found, like most beautiful women, that society requires nothing more of her than a tempting body and an accommodating nature.

For some reason that thought sent a surge of rage through him, and he reached impulsively for the jeweler’s box on the far side of the desk. He flipped it open and stared down at the medallion, trying to subdue his anger.

He had given her the medallion to safeguard her when she was a child running wild around the village and encountering danger at every turn. Everyone recognized the rose and sword as the insignia of his house, and it had placed her automatically under his protection and possession. She had accepted the fact that she belonged to him. She knew he didn’t give up what was his. Not ever. Yet she had returned the medallion without even the courtesy of a note. What the devil did she mean by that gesture?

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he reached out to touch the gold of the rose. With the Pandora he had known six years ago, he would have been able to guess. Sometimes he had felt so close to her, he could almost read her thoughts. Now he couldn’t be sure. Beauty had a way of corrupting anything it touched, and Pandora had lived with the knowledge of her own exceptional beauty for years now. Perhaps she had changed.

If that was the case, her sending the medallion could mean any number of things. Invitation, rejection, reconciliation.

Of course she had changed. Everyone changed with time and experience. And the Pandora who was smiling out of the picture with such smoldering sensuality had obviously gained a lot of experience along the way.

Well, he’d find out how those changes would affect him very soon. Because, even if she didn’t realize it, she still belonged to him. He had only to decide in what capacity.

TWO

THE RECTANGULAR JEWELER'S box was lying on her vanity table when she walked into her dressing room after rehearsal the next evening.

Pandora recognized it at once, and for a moment the breath stopped in her lungs. So soon? Philip never hesitated once a decision was made. She had known he'd react at once—she'd even counted on it. Still she was stunned. She walked slowly across the room and flipped open the lid of the box, already knowing what she'd find there. There was a small card lying on top of the medallion. Her hands were shaking as she picked it up and read the bold script.

"It's not that easy. There's a car waiting in the alley outside the stage door. Don't keep me waiting." No signature. There was no need for one. Both the tone and the handwriting itself were poignant and familiar. *It's not that easy.* She would have laughed aloud if she hadn't been afraid she would burst into tears. There was nothing easy about this situation. She had never been so frightened in her life. Yet beneath that fear was an exuberant joy that was growing with every second. She was going to see him. Dear, sweet heaven, after six years without him she was going to see him again!

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. She mustn't get so excited. She had to convince Philip she was as sophisticated and blasé as the other women he took to his bed.

She'd be fine in another moment. She had learned to disguise her feelings in the past two years. She would be able to fool Philip if the masquerade didn't last too long. She would have to accomplish her purpose quickly.

She opened her eyes. Her reflection in the lighted vanity mirror was not reassuring. Her dark eyes were enormous in her white face. What if Philip didn't think she was even pretty? Other people seemed to, but beauty was a matter of taste. She felt panic rise in her. What if—No, she wouldn't let herself have these doubts. Move. Philip was waiting. The game was about to start. She wished she hadn't thought of that. She had always been too impatient to be any good at games. Philip was the one who excelled at them.

She unpinned her wig, threw it on the vanity, and took off the nylon wig cap. Her hair tumbled about her shoulders in a silver cloud. That was better. She must concentrate on being alluring and block out all those doubts. She turned and strode hurriedly toward the tiny adjoining bathroom.

Thirty minutes later she stood before the mirror again, gazing at herself critically. The makeup was just right, enough to accentuate her features and give her an air of sophistication, but not enough to look cheap. The square neckline of the black velvet gown she was wearing was so low that it barely covered the tips of the breasts swelling from its soft folds. Too sexy? It was a little obvious, but there was no way it could be too sexy for what she had in mind. She turned away from the mirror before any more doubts could weaken her resolve and walked quickly from the dressing room.

In a short time she was standing before the door of Philip's suite at the Fairmont. The door swung open at her first knock. He was dressed in white slacks and a collarless shirt in a forest green shade that turned his eyes to deep turquoise. He was just the same: the high cheekbones, the sensual mouth, the tanned hardness of his lean, tough physique. The air of leashed power that surrounded him was the same as well. She felt a curl of excitement in the pit of her stomach and had to stifle the impulse to walk into his arms and nestle there. Home. She was home again.

“That orange monstrosity is a wig, thank God. Abernathy was wondering if you’d dyed your hair,” Philip said tersely. “At least you look civilized.” His glance touched on her creamy breasts. “If not precisely modest.”

“Am I allowed to come in, or would you like me to stand out here so that you can continue tearing my appearance to shreds?” Her voice was light and mocking. She only hoped her expression was equally composed. “Hello, Philip. It’s good to see you again.”

“Come in.” He turned away. He was angry. Six years ago that fact would have devastated her and disturbed her even now. “And while you’re at it you can dispense with the polite chitchat. If you were so happy to see me, it wouldn’t have taken you six years to renew our acquaintance.”

“There were reasons.” She followed him into the room and closed the door. She laid her black evening bag on the low chest to the left of the door and smiled sweetly at him. “Isn’t it enough that I’m here now? I may have been a little slow, but I did contact you eventually.”

“No, it’s not enough.” He crossed the room and dropped into the cane chair by the window. “And what the devil did you mean by sending me the medallion? I don’t take back that particular emblem. You know that. It’s not just a pretty piece of jewelry.”

She nodded serenely. “Yes, I know. That’s the reason I returned it. We both know it’s a symbol of possession. I found I didn’t like the idea of being owned.” She shook her head reprovingly. “Really, Philip, the system you have in Sedikhan is feudal. I wonder that I didn’t object before to wearing it like a meek little vassal.”

“The vassalage system evolved because it was beneficial to both parties. It provided service to one and protection to the other.” His lips tightened grimly. “I don’t recall that you objected to being under my protection when it suited you.”

“But that was because I was a child.” She smiled again. “I understand the barter system much better now.”

His eyes narrowed. “Was that supposed to be loaded with implications? Don’t try to be subtle, Pandora. You never were able to pull it off.” There was a quick leap of anger in his eyes. “You never used to want to play word games.”

“I never was capable of it. There’s a difference.”

He studied her for a long moment. “You’ve changed,” he said slowly.

“I’ve grown up. We all do eventually.”

“Let’s find out just how much you’ve changed.” He held out his hand. “Come here and let me look at you.”

She felt her heart give a little jerk. She only hoped her reaction hadn’t shown in her face. She moved forward, swaying with deliberate grace. She felt a little shock as she slipped her hand into his. “I hope you think I’ve improved,” she said lightly. “That little scarecrow had a long way to go.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he drawled. “I had a certain fondness for that scarecrow.” He pulled downward with sudden force, and she found herself on her knees before his chair, looking up at him with startled eyes. His gaze was suddenly on the lush cleavage revealed by the low neck of her gown. “Though I can see a couple of advantages to the new you.”

She wouldn’t blush. “I’m glad. I suppose old habits are hard to break.” She met his eyes. “I still want to please you.”

His thumb began tracing a lazy pattern on the sensitive flesh of her inner wrist. “That’s not an old habit, that’s a new development. I don’t recall your ever caring whether I was pleased or not.”

Her lashes lowered. “I cared.” Oh Lord, how she’d cared.

There was a sudden note of anger in his voice. “Look at me, dammit. You remind me of a blasted

Khadim.”

She kept her eyes fixed on the middle button of his shirt. “But you like Khadims.” Her tone was gently teasing. “I remember that very well. There was always one on the horizon or one disappearing into the sunset. From what I read in the newspapers, you still use their services or that of the Western counterparts. Some of them are very lovely. Am I as pretty as they?”

His thumb abruptly ceased its movement on her wrist. “Are you inviting comparisons?”

She didn’t answer. Her throat was so tight she didn’t think she *could* speak.

“I take it silence is assent?” His voice was no longer curt, but a silky drawl. “That puts a different light on our little meeting. Interesting. But then you were always that, Pandora.” He released her wrist and leaned back in his chair. “Why don’t you get up and go sit on that couch across the room? I think putting a distance between us would be a good idea at the moment. A proposition like that has a distinct physical effect on a man that tends to cloud his judgment. I believe we need to resolve a few points before we take up the issue you’ve raised.”

“If you like.” She stood and crossed the room. “Though I’d have thought you would be accustomed to this sort of thing.” She sat down on the couch and gave him a brilliant smile. “It’s not as if I’m asking for any kind of commitment from you. We’re both adults and know what we want.”

“Do we?” He smiled cynically. “I know what I want. I’ve known since you walked into the room but I’m not sure I know what you want.” He paused. “Are you going to tell me why you ran away six years ago?”

She shrugged. “I left a note.”

His lips tightened. “A note that contained two sentences: ‘Don’t look for me. I’ll come back one day when I’m ready.’ Very melodramatic. Didn’t it occur to you that it was also a little inconsiderate?”

For a moment her control broke. “No more than it did to you when you sent me away,” she said fiercely. “I told you I didn’t want to go. You wouldn’t listen to me. I told you—” She broke off. “But that’s all in the past. It’s not important now.”

His lips curved in a curious smile. “For a moment there I thought it did matter to you,” he said softly. “My mistake.” He stretched his legs out before him with the deceptively lazy grace of a stalking cat. “So what have you been doing all these years?”

She glanced away. “Nothing much. I had a few jobs. I managed to survive.”

“You don’t intend to confide in me?” He clucked reprovingly. “And we’re such old friends, Pandora.”

“It’s not very interesting. I wouldn’t want to bore you.”

“On the contrary, I’d be very interested.” He waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. “All right, let’s move on to more recent history. Let’s talk about Luis Estavas.”

Her eyes widened. “Luis? But how—”

“Or perhaps you’d like to tell me about your weekend with that Texas millionaire, Ben Danford?” His expression hardened. “Or your current live-in companion, Neal Sabine.”

“You’ve had me investigated,” she said, her eyes wide with incredulity.

“You’re damn right I did,” he said harshly. “You stole those six years from me. I had a right to know who you were spending them with.”

“Stole!” She shook her head. “You’re impossible. Those were my years, my life, not yours.” She was so indignant that for a moment she didn’t realize what a lucky break this was. Philip had done her work for her. She wouldn’t have to drop any subtle hints about her shady past or dangle poor Neal in front of him. She was already established as a woman of the world thanks to Philip’s possessiveness. She tried to hide her relief beneath a careless laugh. “My men friends have been delightful

amusing.” She paused. “And quite protective. Life can be difficult for a woman on her own.”

“Financially?” He lifted a brow. “I understood rock stars made exceptionally good money.”

“They do while they last.” She made a face. “And good musicians can have lasting and lucrative careers. Unfortunately, I seem to spend money as quickly as I make it.” She touched the velvet of her gown. “I like pretty things, and I have no illusions about my talent. I have a good, strong pair of lungs, a style, and a body that’s appealing enough in the scanty costumes Neal dresses me in. I’ll coast along another year or so, but in the end I’ll be replaced by a new craze.”

“Still, you’re very watchable. I think I might like to see you perform.”

She tried to hide the sudden alarm she was feeling. He mustn’t do that. She revealed too much of herself when she was on stage. “You don’t like rock, and I’m hardly good enough to change your mind. You’d be disappointed.”

“You’re very realistic.”

“The life I’ve lived hasn’t encouraged anything else. I’ve learned to look for certain”—she paused delicately—“rewards in my relationships.” She gave him the smoldering look Neal had taught her for publicity photos. She did it very well by now. “That’s the real reason I sent you the medallion. I thought we might come to an arrangement. You’ve always been very generous to women who please you.”

His face was impassive. “You know I don’t indulge in permanent associations. You were streetwise even as a child, and I never tried to hide my relationships from you. I haven’t changed.”

She laughed. “Does that report from your detective agency indicate that I’m looking for commitment?” She shook her head. “Permanency doesn’t have any appeal for me either. It just so happens I have a three-month break after the concert tomorrow night and I thought we might spend it together.”

His face was watchful. “Let’s be very clear, shall we? You’re offering to become my mistress for the next three months, with no strings attached, in exchange for my”—his lips curved in a mirthless smile—“generosity?”

Her throat was dry. “Yes. Does the idea appeal to you?”

“Oh yes, it appeals to me. You’re a very beautiful woman, and I’ve always liked a businesslike approach in my Khadims.”

Khadim. There was no special emphasis on the word, yet it cut like a knife. She held her smile in place with an effort. “I remember that. Then are we in agreement?”

“Perhaps.” His expression was intent. “There’s something about your very tempting offer that makes me vaguely uneasy.”

“Uneasy?”

“Perhaps it’s my pride smarting. Maybe I enjoy having a woman put up at least a pretense of desiring me before the negotiations start.”

Pretense. Oh dear heaven, who wouldn’t want him? Her problem was that she mustn’t reveal how much she wanted him. “I don’t think you’ll find me lacking in emotion.” Her voice was a little husky but maybe he’d mistake it for sultriness. “I think you know I had something of a crush on you when I was a kid. It would have been hard to miss. I thought an affair might not only be amusing, it might serve to exorcise you.”

“Exorcise?” he repeated. “You make me sound like a devil incarnate. If you’re going to be a successful Khadim, you’re going to have to learn to choose your words more carefully. I’m not sure I like to be thought of in those terms.” His eyes narrowed. “But I admit the idea of being a fantasy figure is highly erotic to me.” He rose lithely and strode across the room. Before she knew what was

happening he had pulled her to her feet. His eyes were no longer cool, but burning brightly, and she felt her heart leap wildly. “Did you fantasize about me, Pandora?” he asked softly. “About how it would be when I made love to you?”

She couldn’t breathe. She could scarcely get a word out. “Yes.” She knew her eyes were revealing too much. She tried to shrug carelessly. “A few times, I suppose.”

“I’m beginning to have a few fantasies myself.” His strong, graceful hands were lightly cupping her shoulders, kneading the flesh through the black velvet. His eyes had dropped to the fullness of her breasts. “Do you know that when you shrug the way you did just now that the neckline dips just enough for me to get a glimpse of the pink of your nipples? Just a glimpse, and then it’s gone. Much more arousing than going topless. Did you plan it that way?”

“No.” Her voice was a whisper. She was glad his eyes were no longer on her face, for her cheeks were suddenly hot. “I didn’t know.”

“Whoever created that gown did. Its purpose is very clear. There’s nothing more voluptuous than black velvet against smooth white skin.” His voice was suddenly thick. “You have magnificent breasts. Your skin has an almost luminous quality.” One hand slipped slowly from her shoulder to her throat. “It reminds me of the women in the Delacroix paintings.” His finger reached the upper slope of her left breast. The touch was gossamer light, yet heat rippled through her. “But all paintings should have an appropriate frame.”

She felt as if she were mesmerized. She knew her breasts were tautening, swelling beneath his eyes. “Frame?” she asked vaguely.

He chuckled. “Why not? They’re obviously crying out for attention. You’ll be out of that gown in a minute anyway.” His other hand left her neck, and the velvet was swiftly pushed off her shoulder. Then her breasts were free of the velvet, the bodice now beneath them, lifting, offering them in the frame Philip had created. His face was heavy with sensuality as he looked at her. “Lord, that’s beautiful. I think I’ll have a black velvet halter made for you and have it sewn with pink diamonds.” His face slowly lowered until his breath feathered her nipple. “Black velvet, diamond hardness.” His tongue licked delicately, and an electric shock sent tremors through her entire body. “Against which velvet.” He sipped at her nipple, and she felt the muscles of her stomach clench. “And pink softness.” He was sucking gently, tasting, nipping, his words muffled and hot against her breasts. His cheek felt hard and faintly rough as he rubbed it against her. “Would you like that? You could wear it when I take you to bed . . . You’re so pretty like this.”

She could scarcely comprehend what he was saying. She was on fire. Strangely weak, yet vibrantly alive and yearning. “If you like. Whatever you want.”

He suddenly stiffened. His head lifted jerkily from her breasts as if he were unbearably tempted to remain. “How very accommodating.” His voice was still thick with desire, but it held a bewildering hint of anger as well. “What a good little mistress you’re going to make, Pandora. Perhaps the most passionate one I’ve ever enjoyed.” He swiftly put her bodice in order and stepped away from her. “But could it be that the offer of diamonds has something to do with that passion?”

She reached a shaky hand up to brush the silver-blond hair away from her face. She mustn’t let him see how much that remark hurt her. It was terribly hard to look coolly at him when her body was aching with suppressed hunger. “I always did like diamonds.” She smiled with an effort. “And pink diamonds sound lovely. You appear to be a little upset. Have you changed your mind?”

His gaze was once more on her cleavage, as if he were unable to keep his eyes away. “Not upset. Uneasy. You have a very primitive effect on me. I think I could easily form a minor obsession when you’re concerned.” He looked directly at her. “I don’t permit myself that sort of reaction to women.”

“I know.” She hadn’t meant to say that. Surface. Keep it all on the surface. “I mean, it’s obvious that you’re only interested in a casual affair. Surely a minor obsession wouldn’t be intolerable. You probably be bored to distraction with me in three months.” She mustn’t push. She turned away with another shrug. “However, it’s your decision.” She strolled slowly toward the door. “I wouldn’t want you to feel at all uncomfortable with it.” She picked up her black velvet evening bag from the low chest by the door. She opened it, pulled out the gold medallion, and dropped it on the chest. “But until you make up your mind I think you had better keep this.”

“An ultimatum?” Philip asked, his expression once more alert and watchful. “Sexual possession none at all?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but perhaps that is what I meant.” She opened the door. “Good night, Philip.”

“Pandora.”

She stopped and looked over her shoulder inquiringly.

“You haven’t asked about your father,” he said with a cruel smile. “Don’t you want to know how I overcome with joy he was when I called to tell him you’d been found?”

She felt the blood fade from her cheeks. She’d thought she had armored herself over the years, but she had trusted Philip to find a weakness and strike with blinding swiftness. For a moment she felt as naked and vulnerable as she had when she was a child.

“No,” she said shakily. “No, I don’t want to know.” She closed the door so swiftly she didn’t hear the violence of the curse Philip uttered behind her.

He took an impulsive step forward and then stopped. His hands clenched into fists at his sides. He had hurt her. He had known that if there was even a vestige of the old Pandora left, his remark would hurt her, and he’d deliberately used it to test the sophisticated facade that had filled him with such anger and frustration. Why did the agonized look on her face make him feel slightly sick? He had never been particularly kind to women, yet in the past his actions had never filled him with such guilt. Since the moment she had walked through that door, he had felt that the Pandora he had known was somewhere just out of reach, beneath the smiling sophistication. There was something wrong, something out of kilter with this Pandora. The change was too radical.

He walked to the chest and picked up the medallion she had dropped so carelessly. Why was he questioning the metamorphosis that he had always known would come eventually? She was a desirable woman, and he would be a fool not to take advantage of the offer she had made. He could still taste the warm sweetness of her breasts on his tongue, and he felt a sudden thrust of desire in his loins at the memory. No, there was no question that he was going to take her up on that offer. He was tempted to follow her now to the hotel at the address the Blackwell’s man had given him.

His hand tightened around the medallion as he remembered that she wasn’t alone in that hotel room. According to the dossier, one Neal Sabine had recently moved in with her. With a start he realized he was actually shaking with rage. He took a deep breath and unclenched his hand. His palm throbbed slightly from the welt the raised design had left on his flesh. For a moment he had visualized the black velvet gown being slipped off her body by the faceless man in the report. He had seen her smile and stretch out on the bed, hold out her arms . . . He shook his head to clear it. The emotion he was feeling was too strong. If he continued this way, the obsession of which he’d been so wary would grow until he could no longer term it minor.

He didn’t like not knowing everything there was to know about this new Pandora. The Blackwell report had been annoyingly scanty. Blackwell’s man, Denbrook, had seemed to think that Pandora’s romantic affairs were all that he was interested in.

He turned and walked slowly across the room to the phone on the table by the couch. He picked up the receiver and reached into the drawer for the business card Blackwell's man had given him. Mart Denbrook. He punched in the number rapidly.

"Denbrook? Philip El Kabbar. I've decided I want that in-depth report as soon as possible." He paused as he remembered Pandora's obvious reluctance for him to see her perform. "And I want a ticket for the Nemesis concert tomorrow night. Not too close to the stage." Denbrook started to protest, but he cut him off. "I want it. Get one for yourself too. There are scalpers at every sold-out concert. Get it for me." He hung up a few minutes later. He sat on the couch and stretched his legs out before him, his eyes fixed abstractedly on the door that Pandora had closed behind her such a short time before. His uneasiness persisted, but he knew that no matter what he discovered behind Pandora's alluring mask, his decision was already made.

The surge of primitive jealousy he'd felt when he'd imagined her with Neal Sabine was too strong to ignore. Whether she wore the medallion or not, she still belonged to him. This was the last night she would spend in her lover's arms. He should have kept her with him instead of letting her go to the bastard, dammit. He had an idea he was going to get very little sleep tonight.

Pandora in concert was electrifying. From the moment thousands of daisies rained down on the screaming fans until the moment she disappeared into the smoke and strobe lights at the end of the long, circular runway that led backstage, she was riveting.

She was dressed in the Grecian tunic that seemed to be her trademark. It was the color of old ivory and so silky and flimsy that it revealed legs as beautifully symmetrical as her body was curvaceous. But after the first few minutes neither Philip nor the screaming fans were conscious of her sexuality except in a subliminal fashion. It was her energy that captivated them. Her energy, and an emotion so raw and basic that it touched a response in every person in the audience. She exploded with it and thrived and shimmered in the flames that explosion left behind.

"She's fantastic, isn't she?" Denbrook asked as the lights went on. "I feel as if I've been put through a wringer and hung out to dry." He shook his head. "You know, I even forgot how luscious she is after the first few minutes. No wonder the concert was sold out."

"Yes, she's fantastic." Philip's face was thoughtful.

Seeing Pandora tonight had been a revelation. The woman behind the cool, sophisticated mask. So much power. So much emotion. Why had she tried to hide that emotion? Well, it would be interesting to find out. The next three months were going to prove very stimulating if tonight's concert was anything to go by. He rose. "I'm going backstage. Phone the airport and have the plane fueled and ready. Then go wait in the car."

Denbrook got to his feet. His expression was disapproving. "Why don't I go with you, at least until you get backstage? It's not safe to carry that little trinket in your pocket in this kind of crowd."

"I'm quite safe at the moment." There was a flicker of humor in the smile that touched Philip's lips. "Pandora has hung them all out to dry too."

It took him fifteen minutes to negotiate the cordon of security men that surrounded the performer and his temper was more than a little on edge by the time a message had been sent to Pandora and he had been granted permission to go backstage. Evidently the security measures he had ordered were completely unnecessary.

She was still dressed in the thigh-length tunic, but she'd already shed that awful orange wig which

he entered the dressing room. She looked up from brushing her hair. The annoying mask of sophistication was back, and it irritated him even more now that he'd seen what lay behind it.

"You must be very tired. That was quite a performance you put on out there," he said as he closed the door.

"You were in the audience?" She went still, halting the brush in midmotion.

"I saw a little of it," he said carelessly. "I may even be forced to go out to the lobby and buy a Pandora sweatshirt. I was impressed."

"Don't joke." The brush resumed its stroking rhythm. "I told you I didn't have any voice to speak of."

"But your lungs are every bit as admirable as you boasted." He paused. "I'm not at all sure you're the flash in the pan you claim to be."

He could see her hand tense on the handle of the brush. "That's because you're not a rock devotee. It's here today, gone tomorrow."

"Is it?" His look was quizzical. "Then we must make sure you have a little something to fall back on." He strolled toward her, reaching into his pocket as he did so. "I brought your medallion back."

"Did you?"

"But you didn't bring the box, so I was forced to substitute one of my own." He set down the object in his hand on the vanity in front of her. "I think you'll like this one better."

The box was perhaps two inches square and was the most fabulous piece of artistry she had ever beheld. It was composed entirely of large square-cut emeralds set between rows of sparkling diamonds. She stared in disbelief. "It's magnificent," she murmured. "It must be absolutely priceless."

"I bought it. Nothing that can be bought is priceless." He opened the box. "But I think you'll find an adequate demonstration of my generosity."

"I believe *adequate* is a gross understatement," she said dazedly. "I take it you've made up your mind?"

"Yes." He took the medallion out of the box and fastened it around her throat. "On consideration, I found the idea of this particular kind of possession totally irresistible." His eyes met hers in the mirror as his hands slid beneath the low neckline of the tunic to cup her naked breasts. "You're very responsive," he noted with cool objectivity. "You like my hands on you, don't you?"

"Yes." Her heart was beating so hard, she had trouble breathing. "I do like it."

His hands moved over her breasts in a slow massage that was like tongues of flame on her flesh. "That's fortunate. They're going to be on you a great deal in the next three months. I may find it impossible to keep them off you, in fact."

"I hope you don't have any plans that can't be changed. I'm taking you away tonight."

"Tonight!" Her eyes widened. Then she gasped as his thumb and forefinger closed on one of her burgeoning nipples and pinched just hard enough to send a liquid burning to the center of her being. She closed her eyes until the tremors had abated slightly. When she opened them they were still clouded with emotion. It was difficult to gather her thoughts. "We're leaving tonight? Where are we going?"

His eyes were narrowed and his face heavy with sensual pleasure as he watched her response in the mirror. "To Sedikhan. Where else? I have to meet with Alex Ben Raschid early next month about negotiating a new treaty." He was lazily plucking at her nipples, enjoying the dazed look of pleasure the action was bringing to her. His hands moved around to lift her breasts, and he studied the shape of the nipples pressed against the thin material of the tunic. "God, that's lovely." He leaned forward, his

breath warm on her ear. "This excites you, doesn't it?" he whispered thickly. His eyes were on her reflection in the mirror. "Another frame for you, Pandora. Perhaps I'll radio from the plane and have the servants install a full-length mirror in my suite. I love to see you excited."

Everything he did excited her. Just being in the same room with him excited her. "I have to pack," she said.

"No." His teeth pulled gently at her earlobe. "I'll buy you anything you need. Is your passport in order?" She nodded, her eyes fixed on the image of his dark, sensual face in the mirror. "Good. I'll send Denbrook to your hotel to pick it up and have him meet us at the airport. I want to leave as soon as you're dressed. You know I've never been patient when I wanted something." His tongue touched the sensitive cord behind her ear and a shudder went through her. "And I want you very much, Pandora."

She knew that. She could feel it in the hard tension of his chest as it pressed against her back. "All right." She leaned her head back against him and closed her eyes. What difference did it make? He was taking her with him—that was all that mattered. "I'll come."

"I want to see you again." His voice was a hoarse mutter as his hands left her breasts and fumbled with the back of her tunic. "Does this thing have a zipper? All I could think of last night after you left was how pretty you were jutting out of that black velvet. How good you tasted." There was an edge of frustration in his tone. "How the devil do I get you out of this?"

"It doesn't have a zipper. It slips over my head," she said dreamily. He wanted her. After all these aching years, at last he wanted her.

"Then take it off, dammit. I want to see you."

Her eyes flicked open. "Here?" she asked.

"Anywhere." His eyes were hot and smoky. "I want you. At the moment I wouldn't care if we were out there on that stage in front of your thousands of fans."

She felt a melting in every bone of her body. She didn't think she would care either. "Philip, I'm not . . ." She was interrupted by a new voice.

"Pandora, will you fasten this damn . . ." The door had opened, and through a haze she saw Neal in elegant tuxedo pants and a white dress shirt. He stopped just inside the door when he saw Philip. "Oh, sorry. Did I interrupt something? I just wanted you to fasten these damn cuff links." He strolled forward. "Be a luv and do them up for me?" He held out his wrist to her.

"What?" She shook her head and the room came back into focus. Philip straightened behind her and his hands fell away from her shoulders. "Oh, yes, of course. Neal, this is Sheikh Philip El Kabbani. Neal Sabine." Neal nodded civilly at Philip. Her hands shook as she fastened the cuff link. "I don't know why you bother to wear them. You never manage to get them fastened."

"Elegance, luv. I like to see the expression of shock on the birds' faces when they see the camp rock star in all this sartorial glory." He held out the other wrist, and while she fastened the cuff link he said genially to Philip, "They're the very devil, aren't they? Are you coming to the promoters' big concert tonight?"

"No." Philip's voice was so dangerously soft that Pandora stiffened, and her eyes flew to his face. "And neither is Pandora. Sorry to disappoint you. She's coming away with me tonight." He turned away and crossed the room. "I'll wait for you in the car, Pandora." The door snapped shut behind him.

"He's the one, isn't he?" Neal asked quietly. His blue eyes were fixed musingly on her face. He had never seen her look so glowingly alive, not even when she was on stage performing. "He's the man you wanted to impress with our cozy little setup." His lips twisted ruefully. "If I'd known he was so intimidating, I might have hesitated a moment or two. I wasn't sure if he was going to leave quietly

order me beheaded first.”

“They don’t behead people in Sedikhan anymore,” she said with a shaky smile. “Yes, he’s the one.”

“You’re leaving for good?”

“You won’t have any trouble replacing me. You’ll find someone else. Maybe she’ll even have a decent voice.”

His face was grave. “We’ll miss you. You’re sure you won’t change your mind?”

“I told you when we started out that it was only temporary, that there’d come a time when I’d walk away from it. It’s not my kind of life. It’s not what I want.”

He bent and kissed her on the cheek. “Then go for what you do want. I’ll be rooting for you.” He straightened. “I’ll send Gene and Pauly in to say good-bye. We wouldn’t want his royal munificence to get impatient, would we?” He stood there a moment, looking down at her. “I remember the first time you walked into that club in Soho where we were playing. You were only sixteen and you looked like a hungry chicken.”

“I was hungry,” she said. “And scared. God, I was scared.”

“I’d never have known it. You were the most boldly alive person I’d ever met.” His lips curved into a whimsical smile. “It’s a wonder I didn’t go completely bonkers over you. Isn’t it lucky that I didn’t?”

“Yes, very lucky,” she said gently. “I refuse to give you too much credit, though. It was probably my froggy voice that turned you off.”

“Maybe.” His hand touched her hair. All the light in the room seemed to be gathered in that silvery blond mass. “I always did have a sensitive ear.” His hand dropped away. “Well, if things don’t work out for you, come back to us. I can always wear earplugs if you offend my sensibilities too drastically. Good luck, luv.”

“Good-bye, Neal,” she said huskily. “And thank you. Thank you for everything.”

His shoulders lifted in a shrug as he turned away. “You gave more than you got. You always do. Keep in touch.”

She watched the door close behind him, her throat tight with tears. So many years. She hadn’t realized how hard it would be to say good-bye and walk away. She’d had her mind so fixed on the goal at the end of the road, she hadn’t realized what treasures she had acquired along the way. She stood up and pulled the ivory silk costume over her head.

If things didn’t work out, Neal had said. The memory of those words sent a frisson of panic through her. Things had to work out. She couldn’t bear it otherwise. Her whole life was wagered on this toss of the dice. Oh Lord, they had to work out.

THREE

“GOOD AFTERNOON, SHEIKH El Kabbar. Everything has been taken care of, just as you ordered,” Raoul Coupier said as he met them at the front door. The words were as casual as if it had been only a few hours instead of six months since Philip had left Sedikhan. Raoul snapped his fingers and two white-uniformed young boys appeared to fetch the bags from the limousine. His thin, pale face was impassive as usual as he turned to Pandora. “May I say what a pleasure it is to have you with us again, Miss Madchen?” he asked politely.

“Thank you, Raoul,” she murmured, trying to suppress a smile. It was difficult to believe that he could be sincere, considering all the uproar she had brought to his serene, well-ordered life in the past. She had taken a heathenish delight in playing the most outrageous pranks just to see if she could disturb the cool aplomb of Philip’s personal servant. She had never succeeded. “It’s good to be back.”

“I took the liberty of ordering dinner in your suite tonight, Sheikh El Kabbar,” Raoul said as he preceded them across the foyer and down the gleaming, mosaic-tiled hall. “You must be very weary after your trip, Miss Madchen. The time difference can throw your system a bit out of whack.”

“I feel fine.” It was good to have Raoul as a bulwark between them. He was ignoring Philip’s grim and forbidding demeanor with the habit of years. “I’m not at all tired.”

“You’ve forgotten what a powerhouse of energy Pandora can be, Raoul,” Philip said caustically. He stopped at the door of his suite. “Time zones and jet trips of thousands of miles scarcely faze her at all.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” A pained expression appeared on Raoul’s face. “Miss Madchen was always exceptionally enthusiastic in all her . . . endeavors.”

“However, we’ll definitely have dinner in my suite. I find I’m not as resilient as our Pandora. I don’t bounce back as quickly as the dynamic young rock stars she’s accustomed to dealing with.”

The barb in his last statement was obvious, but Pandora felt only a sense of relief. At least he was getting it out in the open. He had been in a foul mood since the moment Neal appeared in her dressing room. He’d practically ignored her for the entire trip, involving himself in a voluminous stack of paperwork from his many corporations. In a way it had been easier for her. She hadn’t had to keep up on her guard, to maintain that nerve-racking air of sophistication. “Oh, I don’t know. You should see us after two weeks of one-night stands. We practically fall into bed every night.”

“I imagine you do,” Philip bit out as he opened the door. “Though I’d guess you’re very fond of one-night stands as well. Your suite is next door. Please join me in forty-five minutes.” The door swung shut behind him with a force that was not quite a slam.

Pandora made a face at the door. Yes, Philip was definitely upset and on his imperial high horse. “Do you think I’ve been insulted, Raoul?”

For a moment there was a flicker of humor in Raoul’s brown eyes. “I wouldn’t presume to say, Miss Madchen. However, Sheikh El Kabbar has always been talented in that direction, as we both know. He had moved to the carved door a few yards down the hall. “I believe you’ll be comfortable here. When I received the phone call from the San Francisco airport I facilitated the acquisition of the wardrobe the sheikh said you would require.” His eyes rested for a fleeting moment on her full bosom. “He said you had filled out a trifle. I hope the clothing fits.”

“I’ll manage,” she said with a grin. “I’m not any more of a clotheshorse now than I was in the old days. If you remembered boots and jeans, I’ll be happy.”

“Oh yes, I remembered those.” He smiled faintly. “You were always at the stable or on the back of one of the sheikh’s horses. It would be difficult to forget.” He opened the door for her and stepped back, inclining his head in a small bow. “If there’s anything I can do, please let me know. Again, welcome home, Miss Madchen.”

“Thank you.” Her throat felt a little tight. This was home. Far more than the large house on the other side of the village that she had occupied with her father. “It’s wonderful to be home.”

She closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a moment. She was here at last. She felt a relief sweep through her. It was over. Her glance swept around the room, taking in the canopy bed with the ivory silk hangings, the white fretted windows, and the rich amber and wine oriental carpet on the floor. Her eyes were drawn to the door to the right of the bed. She knew it led to Philip’s suite. She was very familiar with this room. It was the one allotted to all of Philip’s Khadims. She remembered that once she had crept in here, filled with resentment and burning jealousy, to examine the place where the chosen ones were quartered. The beautiful ones who occupied his bed and received his passion. It had hurt so much, yet the temptation had been irresistible. It still hurt, she found. She mustn’t think about the past. She was the one occupying this room now.

She walked quickly to the louvered closet and threw open the folding doors. Thank heaven for Raoul’s good sense. There were not only sexy garments appropriate for one of Philip’s mistresses, but sport clothes, and even a practical terry-cloth bathrobe. She took the robe from the hanger and strode swiftly toward the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later she had showered, shampooed, dried her hair, and was once more standing in front of the closet trying to decide what a worldly-wise woman would select to wear for an intimate dinner for two.

“The yellow silk.” Philip’s voice made her jump. She hadn’t heard him enter. He was dressed in dark, fitted pants and a soft white shirt that clung to his broad shoulders and lean, hard waist. His dark hair was still damp from the shower and she was conscious of the familiar spicy scent of his cologne. “I told Raoul to get that particular dress for you. I like the texture of silk.”

She could have guessed that. She had never known anyone for whom tactile sensations were so important. She had a fleeting memory of Philip’s hand stroking Oedipus’s mane, his long fingers strong, yet infinitely sensitive. “All right. It doesn’t really matter.”

“On the contrary, it matters very much.” There was a glint of mischief in his eyes. “This one has a zipper. I heartily approve of zippers.” The humor suddenly faded from his face. “I imagine Sabine does too.”

“I have no idea.” She reached for the yellow dress. “We never discussed it.”

“You were too involved with experimentation to waste time on mere chitchat, no doubt,” he said silkily.

Oh Lord, Philip was definitely on the attack. She had wanted to arouse his possessiveness, but not to this extent.

She shrugged. “I suppose so.” She tried to smile teasingly at him. It was very difficult with him glowering at her like an incensed raja. “You appear to be fond of demonstrations yourself.”

“That’s different,” he said with royal disregard for logic. “You don’t belong to him.”

“And in three months I won’t belong to you either,” she said quietly. “This is strictly a temporary arrangement.” She made a mocking obeisance. “As decreed by the most honorable Sheikh El Kabbar.”

“We’ll see when the three months are up,” he said moodily. “I don’t like giving up what belongs to me.”

me.” He scowled. “And I didn’t like you fastening his cuff links. It was too . . . intimate.”

She blinked. “Fastening cuff links is intimate? Heaven forbid if I straighten a man’s tie.”

“You’re taking my displeasure very lightly. In the past you weren’t so unaffected by it.”

She wasn’t unaffected, but he mustn’t know that. Philip held too many weapons already. “You’re taking a small service far too seriously.”

“I just wanted to clarify that your services, both small and large, belong to me,” he said harshly. “I don’t share.”

“How selfish of you.” She lowered her eyes demurely. “I’ll try to remember.”

“I’ll be there to remind you if it slips your mind,” he said softly. “Be sure of it, Pandora.” He turned away. “I’ll leave you to get dressed. I have some phone calls to make.” He paused at the door. “Don’t bother to wear anything beneath the dress. I do hate to waste time.” He left the door open, and a minute later she heard the sound of his voice as he spoke on the bedroom extension. So intimate. *As* intimate as the last remark, which had taken her breath and frozen her to the spot with sudden shyness.

Please, not now. She was so close. She had to be bold and sure or everything would fall apart. She drew a deep, quivering breath and swiftly untied the belt of her robe.

Bold and sure. She mentally repeated the words like a litany through the almost silent candlelit dinner. Philip seemed withdrawn, even remote, as the white-clad servants brought the delicious dishes to the table that overlooked the fretted balcony. Was he still angry? She couldn’t tell by his expressionless face. It was still twilight, and the candles on the table weren’t really necessary, as the entire room was bathed with a golden light. It lent the room the luminous sepia tones of old photographs, giving the scene a strangely timeless air.

She never remembered what she ate and she knew she’d never remember the names or faces of the servants who attended them. The entire interlude seemed dreamlike, a vignette seen through a veil of antique gold. Then the table was being whisked away and Philip was handing her a crystal glass of wine as clear and golden as the twilight haze that surrounded them. The taste was golden, too, smooth and tingling on her tongue. “It’s very good,” she said as she stood up and moved to stand outside on the balcony. “Does it come from the south vineyards?”

“No, the north. They’ve been producing for over five years now.” He followed and stood at her side looking out at the lavender-shaded hills in the distance. “We started reclaiming some of the slopes of the hills that border the Madrona Desert three years ago.”

There was an element of excitement beneath the casual statement. Evidently the irrigation project was still as much an obsession of Philip’s as when she’d left.

For as long as she could remember he had been endeavoring to turn this desert wasteland into fertile farmland. “I’d like to see it. I’ll have to take a ride up into the hills and look at what’s going on.”

He frowned. “Not alone. There have been reports of bandit raids on the villages on the Said Abal side of the hills. They probably have a camp somewhere in the highlands. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to get back.” His lips tightened grimly. “I think I’ll just go on a little hunting party.”

“I’ll come with you.” The words were impulsive, and she almost bit her tongue.

“The hell you will,” he said curtly. “You have a more highly developed instinct for trouble than anyone I’ve ever run across. I doubt if that’s changed over the years.”

“Whatever you say.” She lowered her lashes so he couldn’t see the blaze of defiance she knew was there. “Perhaps I’ll go to the vineyards instead.”

His frown deepened. “As I remember, the last time you went there you persuaded the workers to have a moonlight grape-stomping party. My overseer was foaming at the mouth.”

“He wasn’t very reasonable.” Her lips curved with remembered laughter. “I was only trying to help

Everyone had a perfectly wonderful time.”

“Such a wonderful time that they were too exhausted to show up for work the next day,” he said dryly. “And you were just as bad off. I had to carry you home looking like something that had fallen into one of the wine vats.”

She had rested in his arms, she recalled, with her ear pressed to his heart. He had cursed her softly and emphatically with every breath, but his arms had been gentle. It had been a lovely memory to hold close when there was nothing in the world but barren loneliness. “Dancing on the grapes is tradition.”

“Not half-ripe grapes,” he said flatly. “And not when there’s a very efficient press to do the job. You don’t go within hailing distance of the vineyards until I have time to go with you.”

She frowned mutinously. “I can’t go to the hills. I can’t go to the vineyards. Where can I go?”

“To bed, like a proper Khadim.” His hands cupped her shoulders. “Where else?”

The words shocked her back to the present and her role. “Where else, indeed?” She took her wineglass and set it, together with her own, on the balcony balustrade. Her arms went around him. Bold. She had to be bold and desirable so that he would become too aroused to stop when he . . . “Do you know that you’ve never kissed me?”

“Haven’t I?” His hands were lightly massaging her shoulders through the yellow silk. “It seems as if we were beyond kisses before we even started.” His eyes were suddenly twinkling. “But if you insist . . .”

His lips touched hers. Delicate, sipping, sugar sweet and warm. So wonderfully warm. His tongue rimmed her lower lip, and she melted against him, opening her lips with a yearning that was as natural as that of the first woman. “I want you,” she murmured. “Give me all of you.”

She felt him grow rigid against her. Then his tongue was plunging into her mouth in a joust that was hotly passionate and hungry. So hungry. She was almost breathless when he raised his head.

“You’re going to get all of me,” he said thickly. “Over”—his tongue entered her mouth again, weaving an erotic spell—“and over.” His lips were buried in her hair now, and she felt his tongue enter her ear. “And over.” She was trembling, and her knees were so weak she sagged against him. Did his other women react so passionately? Probably not. Perhaps he wouldn’t notice, she thought in confusion. Shouldn’t she be doing something? She drew back a little, her hands quickly undoing the buttons of his shirt.

“Pandora.”

She looked up.

There was a tiny glimmer of amusement beneath the hunger in his face. “Don’t you think we should go inside? I’m flattered that you should be so eager, but I really dislike performing in public.”

She laughed shakily. “Well, it’s more private than the auditorium in San Francisco.” She turned and walked quickly from the balcony into the room. “You didn’t seem averse to performing there at the time.”

He followed her into the room and closed the French doors. “I’m on my own home ground now.” He took a step nearer so that he was directly behind her. With one sweeping motion, he slid down the zipper of her dress. “And I told you I won’t share you.”

His hands slipped inside the loosened dress. “Naked,” he said hoarsely. “There was nothing in the world more erotic than knowing that you were naked beneath that flimsy layer of silk.” His hands were squeezing her waist, his fingertips running over the supple muscles with a pleasure that was echoed in his voice. “While we were sitting there at the table I was thinking how beautiful you’d look when I took it off you.” His hands moved slowly up her back, and with painstaking care he pushed the

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