

Kahramaan

This is copyrighted material, and may not be sold, distributed, or reproduced, without prior, written permission from Castle Publishing. You are granted permission to save this sample on your own system, for evaluation purposes only.

This sample is 54 pages long, You may find it more convenient to read it offline.

If you click on the diskette icon next to the red Adobe icon (Upper left from this text), you should be able to save it on your own system for offline reading.

We hope you enjoy it!

Kahramaan

a novel

by Rhonda Collins and Sandra McLaren



Castle Publishing

This novel is a work of fiction. Several well-known people and places appear in the work, but are used to give the story background and a feel of authenticity. Anwar and Amber may well have existed somewhere; they certainly do in our hearts, but otherwise any resemblance to real people and events is purely coincidental.

Kahramaan

Copyright © 2000 by Rhonda Collins and Sandra McLaren

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Published by Castle Publishing
1633 Babcock, #330
San Antonio, Texas 78229

ISBN#0-615-11823-2 (Paperback)

For our husbands and for lovers everywhere.
Dima'an.





Kahramaan

by Rhonda Collins and Sandra McLaren

Prologue

The English countryside outside her window was bright with the blooms of spring. With the promise of new life and hope. Amber drew the soft, damp, sweetly scented air into her lungs and wondered if she'd miss it. Glancing down, she was startled anew at her own hand. It seemed alien to her, somehow. *So old*, she thought with surprise. *It's been so long*. Yet, she felt no different now than she had then, so many years ago.

Some memories never die, nor do they fade, yet remain as fresh as the day they were made. No matter how carefully you pack them away or how long they stay hidden within the secret chambers of your heart, they sleep there safely until the time comes to take them out and hold them in your hands so you can breathe life into them once more. It's all gone now...the passion and the fire. Now, there are only quiet moments when I remember the love and joy which was ours. He no longer fills my life, but he's always with me, as close as a single heartbeat from my own. The warmth of his love settles around me, and I nestle into it like an old favorite blanket. Familiar and comforting.

It was only his body that had died. His love was alive within her. When he promised her 'forever' he truly meant it, for she'd never spent a moment of her life without feeling his love surrounding her. Protecting her.

We touched eternity together. I exchanged my heart for his, my soul for his, my love for his. They are all mine by right, just as mine belong to him.

She turned away from the window to survey the empty room. Her luggage stood by the door, awaiting her son, David, to come and take her to the airport.

Her soul was singing, for she was returning to Egypt. To Anwar. And her thoughts returned to how it all began....

~~~~~

## **Chapter One**

### **The Beginning: 1958**

Anwar bade his father goodnight, then carefully placed the receiver back in the cradle. *Ever since grandfather died everything has been a disaster*, he thought morosely. Even Nazeer, ever the optimist, was discouraged, fuming that, “Eisenhower thinks Nasser a ‘dangerous fanatic’ because he insists on a neutralist course!” Saud and Nasser were continually at each others’ throats, and now Saud talked of summoning Faisal to act as Premier to get him out of the pit he’d dug himself. Nor did it matter that Nazeer didn’t approve of Nasser any more than Eisenhower did. *Old feuds, new alliances. It seems it’s always one step forward and ten back with our people.* Anwar sighed heavily and went to the window of his office to look out at the cold, damp English evening. The warmth of the desert was very far away, and at times like this he wasn’t very fond of the life he had to live. He loved England, with her vistas of changing green that seemed to go on forever, but he tired of it and longed for the fierce desert heat and shifting sands of his homeland. If he’d had his way, he’d never have chosen commerce over life as a simple Bedouin prince...but he’d never truly had a choice. The most he’d been allowed to choose was between politics and commerce, and responsibility often weighed heavily upon

him. A soft knock on the office door disturbed his homesick reverie. "Yes?"

The door opened and his secretary, Terri, poked her head in and asked distractedly, "Anwar...um...are you ready to go?"

"Go?" Puzzled, he tried to recall if there was some meeting, or party he was supposed to attend...then he remembered: he'd promised Terri that he'd fill in as interim pianist with her Amateur Operatic Society. Passing a hand over his shaven head, he said, "I'm sorry, Terri! I forgot." He gestured to his gallabeah, "I've already changed to go back to Hadleigh for the weekend."

"That's all right," she said with a relieved smile. "I'm sure no one cares what you're wearing as long as you can play!"

"Very well, then," he responded. "Shall we go?" As he followed Terri out to the garage, he felt his spirits lightening. At least he'd have the opportunity to play tonight. He loved his music. Not as much as he loved Egypt, but it came a close second. Playing always lifted his heart. It was certainly better than going home to Hadleigh alone.

\*\*\*

It was damp and cool in the old church, but Amber was hot with her long, heavy hair down in her neck. She reached up and lifted it to let the breeze cool her a bit. At the advanced age of twelve-and-a-half, patience wasn't her strong suit. The stage floor was hard and her heels drummed a ragged beat on the old wooden panels under her feet as she swung them back and forth. As the hands on the clock reached ten past seven, Amber was wishing Mrs. Hilson back. She might've been a bit of a tyrant, but at least she was on time. She'd walk in the door with Tom, her husband and their producer, dead on the dot of seven, and by five past, she was belting out the notes on the piano and another

rehearsal would have begun. But now that the Hiltons had retired and Terri taken over, things were a bit less rigid—which was generally fine with all of the members. But tonight everyone was anxiously waiting to see what Terri's boss was like.

The boys were pestering Amber again, but she ignored them as she watched and waited. She knew that Terri's boss, Anwar, was a foreigner, very rich and powerful, and Terri seemed to like him well enough.

As the outer door opened, the chatter ceased, and even the boys stopped their horseplay as they looked toward the swinging doors at the other end of the church hall. *I'll bet he's fat, balding and middle aged, and has no sense of humor at all*, she thought with trepidation.

But the figure that came through the door was not at all what she expected. Her jaw dropped, and it took her a few moments to realize how foolish she must look, sitting there gaping. The man with Terri barely cleared the top of the door, and even then he had to duck his head, he was so tall. He was bald, all right, but he was anything but dull! Dressed in flowing robes, he reminded Amber of some huge genie with his dark skin and hooked nose. Surprised as she was, she couldn't help but notice how huge his hands were, as without a word he seated himself at the piano and played a few scales before settling into a piece.

As the impact of his strange appearance wore off, Amber began to notice other things. Things she wasn't sure she liked, despite the fact that he played very well, indeed. As he sat at the piano, he scarcely acknowledged the presence of anyone else in the room, and as she crept closer to see him better, he lifted his eyes and looked around the stage with such an arrogant glance that she couldn't help but feel he had far too high an opinion of himself.

She glared back, determined not to let him feel she wasn't as good as he was. As his eyes met hers, he frowned, pulling

together bushy brows. It was then she noticed his eyes. They were blue. An incongruous brilliant blue—like bluebells or cornflowers—and fringed with thick, dark lashes. Yet somehow those fierce, beautiful eyes made him even more intimidating. At least to her.

After a long moment, he turned his gaze away from her and back to the piano, and began playing one of the pieces they'd been practicing. His music enthralled her. It made her feel as if she'd never heard the piece played properly before.

\*\*\*

Anwar felt ridiculous as he entered the church. *What am I doing here?* he asked himself as he scanned the anxious young faces staring at him. *I don't belong here.* But he'd promised Terri, and...the piano stood enticingly alone beside the stage: a bright shaft of sunlight fell through the stained glass and drew him to the polished wood. He forgot for a moment the curious eyes and unfamiliar faces...the feeling of not belonging that never quite left him when he was among Westerners despite his many years among them. Smoothing his hand over the wood, he opened the piano, pulled his robes aside and sat.

Suddenly, he felt the stares again and looked up...straight into a pair of the loveliest green eyes he'd ever seen. Ancient eyes. Eyes that seemed to bore through him and into his soul. They belonged to a young girl with porcelain-pale skin and long, lustrous dark hair, and the passion and fire in her gaze froze him for a long moment. Turning back to the piano, he closed his eyes to force his attention to the music...and began playing. But even as his hands and heart reached for the music, he could feel her eyes on him.

\*\*\*

Amber stared out the car window as Terri took her home. If Terri noticed her silence, it wasn't obvious as she raved about Anwar's playing. "Doesn't he play beautifully?" she asked, then went on without waiting for Amber to answer. "I'm so glad he agreed to fill in for us. I think he's missed playing in front of people. You know, he was trained to concert level...." Terri glanced over at her, and Amber shrugged a bit...not certain what she was supposed to say. Terri frowned, but turned back to her driving. "You're awfully quiet," Terri noted finally. "Is there something wrong?"

Amber sat up a bit and tried to appear more interested than she was. "No. Nothing's wrong. He *does* play well."

Terri smiled and continued with her praise of their new pianist. "He's studied music most of his life."

Realizing that Terri wasn't going to stop talking about her boss, Amber decided she might as well find out a bit about him, since they seemed to be stuck with him. "Why does he wear those robes?"

"That's how he'd dress at home, in Egypt." Terri explained. "He doesn't always dress that way, but that's how he's most comfortable. That's understandable, I think."

"I guess," Amber conceded. They were nearing her home, and Amber fell silent again. She didn't understand why she felt so ambivalent about this man...so certain that they weren't going to like one another, but she'd never before had such an uncomfortable and *powerful* feeling upon meeting anyone.

Terri chuckled a little. "He's really very nice, Amber, once you get to know him. Don't let how he looks frighten you. I know he's not exactly handsome, but...."

Surprised that Terri would think her frightened, Amber blurted, "He doesn't scare me. And he's not really ugly," she added as an afterthought. "Just...big. And he dresses funny."

Now Terri laughed out loud. "He *is* big. But how can you say he's not ugly, with that hooked nose and bushy brows?"

Amber remembered how the big man had looked when their eyes met. “He does have nice eyes, though,” she said quietly. It rather confused her that she would be trying to say something nice about the man after she’d been sitting here thinking how they weren’t going to like one another.

Pulling up in front of Amber’s house and parking, Terri reached over and hugged her. “I guess he does, at that. And when he smiles, it makes him look much nicer, too. You’ll like him. You’ll see.”

But as Amber watched her friend drive away, she sighed heavily. *We’ll see*, she repeated to herself.

\*\*\*

“Who is she?” Anwar asked Terri the following day. They’d decided to lunch together so Terri could fill him in on the various members of the Society and tell him a bit about their individual talents. The one who interested him most was the lovely dark-haired girl who’d stared at him so aggressively. He couldn’t get her out of his mind.

“Amber? She’s the daughter of an old friend of mine. She’s a very talented young lady, don’t you think?”

Anwar sipped his drink before answering. “She has a good voice, but she’s undisciplined.”

“She’s had a difficult time...had to grow up far too early, in my opinion,” Terri commented.

“Why? What’s wrong?” he asked, more curious than before.

“Nothing *wrong*, really. Her family situation has been less than stable...” Terri glanced up, seeming a bit apologetic.

“Not terrible, you understand. But her family isn’t well-to-do, and as attractive as she is, she started modeling recently to bring in more income for the household. It’s difficult, I think, for one so young to have such responsibility thrust upon them.”

“How old *is* she?” He lit a thin Egyptian cheroot and drew the sweet smoke in.

“She’s only twelve...” Terri began.

“*Twelve?*” he asked, more than a bit surprised. “I would’ve thought she was at least fifteen.”

Terri smiled. “She *is* lovely, isn’t she? She won’t be thirteen for another six months. I’ve known her all her life and I suppose I feel more like an older sister to her than merely a friend of her mother’s. She spends a great deal of time with me...weekends, that sort of thing.”

“I see,” he said, still thinking of the child’s age. He’d never thought the girl was so young. She was tall for her age and well-formed. Terri was busy chattering away as she ate, but Anwar scarcely heard her. He only managed to pay enough attention to make an appropriate comment here and there. *Thirteen*, he thought with a feeling of dismay. *No...not even that. Only twelve.* She was so *young*. Suddenly, he felt the weight of his own years. In forty-three years he’d done so much—*seen* so much—his experiences could have filled two men’s lives. *I could be her grandfather*, he thought dismally. Yet, there was within her eyes something veiled. Some ancient wisdom—merely slumbering. Waiting to awaken.

Terri glanced at her watch. “Oh, dear. It’s getting on. I suppose I’d best get back.”

Brought abruptly back to the present, Anwar laughed and stubbed out his cheroot as he stood for her to rise.

“Nonsense. You’re lunching with the boss. There’s no rush.”

He rose, left money for the bill, and escorted Terri out to her car. It disturbed him that for the rest of the afternoon, he kept remembering the young siren’s fiery green-eyed gaze.

\*\*\*

Weeks passed, then months, and Anwar showed no signs of giving up his role as pianist. He seemed to have settled in

and grown roots, and at times Amber resented the fact. Simply his presence in the same room was enough to make her feel sensitive and angry, and tonight as they practiced it was worse than ever. This time, Anwar lost his temper completely. He slammed the lid of the piano down with a crash, his fierce blue eyes flashing as he uttered a long string of unintelligible Arabic. Amber heard him telling Terri in a furious tone that he refused to play until “She” ceased to fool around with the boys and was prepared to consent to do some work.

*I was just having some fun*, Amber thought with resentment. She peered past the veil of her hair to where Terri and Anwar were engaged in heated conversation. *We used to play around a lot and Mrs. Hilson didn't care.*

Amber pursed her lips and pouted. It was frustrating and unfair. This was all supposed to be *fun!* *I try*, she thought to herself, trying to decide how to face Terri when she brought it up. *I really do try! But he's harder on me than on anyone else.*

It was true that Anwar was a hard taskmaster. When it came to music, he demanded the perfection it deserved. Amber recognized that at the same time as she resented it. The voices buzzed in the background as he and Terri argued...his like an angry bee, and Terri's coaxing and encouraging.

“*Why* did you give that child a part in this production?” he ranted at her. “I can't understand her! Have you seen the way she torments the boys? Take your eyes off her for a moment and she's giggling and whispering!”

“Anwar,” Terri replied in a quiet, calm tone, “you have to understand that girls in this country aren't raised like they are in yours.”

He glared at her, his face a mask of fury, and Amber shuddered a bit, glad that for the moment at least his anger was being vented on Terri. “That much is obvious!” he

snarled, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “But the other girls don’t behave in the same manner. They behave much more appropriately.”

Terri laughed at him then—which was a mistake because it only seemed to fuel his anger. Amber watched in fascination as Terri tried to placate him. “She’s a normal teenager, Anwar. But she’s attractive and talented, and not unaware of the fact. She’s only having fun.”

But Terri’s attempt at explanation fell short of its mark as well. He paced the floor, gesturing fluently as he raged. “That’s the problem! To her, it’s all a game! One day, mark my words, she will fall foul of it! I tell you, she will!”

“Please, Anwar,” Terri coaxed, “calm down. She’ll hear you.”

Anwar’s voice was loud enough for his words to be easily understood. He obviously didn’t care if she heard or not. Amber smiled a tiny, secret smile. She could tell that it was really bothering him not to be the boss. *Here*, Terri was boss, and he didn’t like it much.

Amber could see Anwar’s jaw clench, then he said something she couldn’t understand...something in Arabic. But his tone was softer, less angry. Then, he threw his head back and took a deep breath before telling Terri, “Perhaps she *should* hear! *Someone* needs to instruct the brat!” But when Terri started to respond, he laughed and shook his head, saying something too softly for Amber to hear.

Anwar turned to leave, and Terri began packing up the music. It was obvious that rehearsal was over for tonight, and she knew Terri wouldn’t be pleased. *I won’t cry*, Amber told herself as she clenched her fists.

Terri was very quiet as she took Amber home, but at least she didn’t seem angry. As Amber gathered her things together to get out of the car, she mustered enough courage to tell Terri, “I’m sorry.” Her voice shook a little, but she didn’t cry.

“I know,” Terri answered. She patted Amber’s cheek. “I know. He’s probably sorry, too, but you’re both too stubborn to meet each other halfway.”

“I’m *not* stubborn! And I’m not a *brat*! He’s so *unfair*, Terri! He’ll spend hours going over and over pieces with the others. With *them*, he’s patient, but nothing I do pleases him.” She felt the prickle of tears, and blinked them back. “Everyone can tell how much he dislikes me.”

Terri had no answer for that. *Because she knows it’s true*, Amber thought with a certain glum satisfaction.

\*\*\*

Slamming the door behind him, Anwar called for Robert, angry that his personal assistant and chauffeur had been unable to pick him up in town. “Robert! Robert!”

There was no answer. Stalking down the hall, he surveyed his domain for someone hapless enough to cross his path, but no one obediently presented themselves. With a low growl, he crossed the expanse of rug to the bar and poured himself a drink. *It’s too damned quiet*, he thought furiously. He knew that his entire staff was in hiding. Tossing the Scotch back, he settled onto the hassock and pulled off his shoes and headdress. *Why do I let the little bitch get to me? This is ridiculous!*

It had gotten worse with every rehearsal. Every time he saw her, it seemed she went out of her way to annoy him. She flashed those iridescent sea-green eyes at the young men, her smile lighting the room like a beacon—drawing them after her. Oh, she knew her power, the little vixen...but she had no idea what trouble it could get her into. *If she were my daughter...my sister...his hands clenched...I would strangle her*, he thought with venom. *No woman should act so!*

He walked to the door and opened it, standing for a moment looking out over the garden and at the pool. The

moon was surrounded by a nimbus of light and the air was brisk. Taking a deep breath of the cool air, Anwar went out to the pool and pulled his gallabeah over his head. The water was icy as it closed over him, but his body soon warmed as he cut through the water with sure, even strokes.

Eventually, exhausted and with all his anger worked off in physical activity, he pulled himself up onto the side, where Robert waited, holding a towel for him. Anwar glanced up at his chauffeur's face where a slight, silent smile was the only evidence of the man's amusement. As he dried himself, Anwar grumbled, "So what the hell was wrong with the car?"

Robert handed him his robe. "Flat."

"I suppose the spare was flat as well," Anwar muttered sarcastically.

"Yes, Sir."

*Hopeless, these English,* Anwar thought in disgust. He knew Robert was merely making excuses so he could avoid his master's foul humor, but he'd known Robert long enough to realize there was no point in arguing. Robert was quiet, but had a stubborn streak. "Where's Akhim?"

Robert walked beside him as he headed back to the house. "Akhim is upstairs preparing some of that nasty Turkish coffee you like so much."

"Good"

Just before Anwar started up the stairs, Robert asked quietly, "If you don't mind my asking, Sir, why do you continue with this...frustration...if you find no pleasure in it?"

Meeting the man's amused gaze, Anwar merely shook his head and shrugged as he felt the anger drain away. "Allah alone knows, Robert." He turned to go upstairs where his slave awaited him.

"Goodnight, Sir," Robert said gently.

"Goodnight, Robert."

## Chapter Two The Awakening: 1960

Amber stood numbly watching as her grandmother was lowered into the earth. She wanted to throw herself onto the casket and wail...to scream in defiance of death itself. Mum stood beside her, holding one of her young twin brothers, the tears slowly tracing their way down her face, and her Dad stood beside her holding his other son. Amber felt as if they barely knew she existed. She felt excluded, though she knew they didn't mean to make her feel that way. *I want to be held...comforted. But there's no one to comfort me.* It was her grandmother she'd been closest to, who had still petted and babied her, never waning in her attention, even after the twins had been born. Amber didn't think she could bear it...living at home without Gran.

Too proud and stubborn to let anyone know how she felt, Amber refused to cry, refused to let anyone know how deeply bereft she felt. *I wish Terri were here,* she thought. But she knew Terri couldn't have come. Tonight was the Society's first rehearsal for "Carousel," and she had to be there. *With Anwar gone, there's no one else....*

Amber wondered how Anwar's father was doing. The old man had suffered a stroke, and Anwar had left suddenly for Egypt. She hoped Terri would be able to manage without him; she'd become very dependent upon him, and the two had become a marvelous team. Amber was a bit surprised to realize how much she missed him, as well. As much as they fought...as nasty as he was to her, she found she'd come to respect him a great deal. She hated to admit it—even to herself—but she wished him back.

As they rode back toward the house for the wake, Amber kept her mind firmly upon the details of the play, rehearsing her part in her mind. It kept her from dwelling too heavily on what she was leaving behind her in that graveyard. Her

mother finally asked how she was doing, and Amber managed a smile. Having to answer brought back the pain, and she fought tears. "I'm fine, Mum." She patted her mother's hand and felt the fingers close around hers for a moment. She knew Mum was hurting, too. She thought of Anwar with sudden sympathy, and hoped his father was doing well. *It hurts so much to lose someone you love.*

The wake was almost intolerable for her. At times, she felt as if she'd fly apart into tiny bits, and every time someone spoke to her and required an answer, the tears threatened to spill. Everywhere throughout the flat Amber could see the evidence of her grandmother's presence. *It's so hard to believe she's gone...that she won't be coming back.*

Eventually, though, the torture was over and Amber was able to retreat to the privacy of her room, where she finally allowed herself to shed the tears she'd kept hidden.

\*\*\*

The sun was gloriously hot and the day bright as Anwar gazed out over the garden from his balcony. The smell of his father's roses drifted to him and as always, he felt a bit of awe at the miracle that brought roses to the desert. Alexandria was lovely and it felt so good to be home, despite his reasons for being here. A soft rustle of the curtains behind him told him Akhim had returned. The slave spoke softly to him in his native tongue, telling him that his father was awake and wanted to see him. Nodding to the small man and dismissing him, Anwar made his way through the elaborate corridors of the house to his father's rooms, where the slaves standing guard moved aside for him.

The room was quiet, dark and cool. The huge ceiling fan circulated the air here, keeping the room pleasant. As his eyes adjusted from the brighter light outside, Anwar could see the slave woman beside his father's bed, keeping watch over him.

Nazeer didn't seem to notice he was there, so Anwar approached as quietly as he could, thinking that perhaps his father had fallen back to sleep. *He looks so old...so frail*, Anwar thought anxiously. The thought of his world without his father terrified him. Nazeer had always been there...a strong father, a strong ruler.

Kneeling beside the bed, Anwar gestured to the slave to leave. As the door closed, Nazeer opened his eyes and smiled up at his son. "Ah. Kamal told me you'd come."

"Did you think I would not?"

Nazeer chuckled softly and reached for his hand. Anwar took his father's hand in his, relieved to note that the grip was still strong. "I'm glad you did," Nazeer told him with another smile, "but as you can see, these old bones have a few years left."

"More than a few, I hope," Anwar insisted. "The doctor tells me you should recover completely...if you do as he tells you."

Nazeer tried to sit up and Anwar reached to help him and settle pillows behind his back. Once sitting, the old man seemed much stronger, his presence as commanding as ever. Drawing a deep breath, Nazeer met his son's eyes. "Allah has sent me a warning, and I must begin deciding who will succeed me in these troubled times."

Anwar bowed his head. He'd dreaded this time for years. But he knew his wishes had no bearing on who his father would choose: Nazeer would choose the man he thought would rule the family most wisely. "As you wish, father."

"I know...*you*...do not wish this." Nazeer rested his hand on his son's shoulder, squeezing tightly. "Rashid...." Nazeer signed heavily.

There was little Anwar could say. His brother would be a poor choice to rule, but he *was* eldest. The two men sat in silence for several long moments, then Nazeer released

Anwar's hand and changed the subject. "Have you seen your family?"

Anwar shook his head. "Not yet. Daoud is out in the field and will not return until this evening. I was told Bayiri was resting. I'll see her when I leave you."

"It's difficult for you, I know...being gone from here so much. But it's necessary. There must be those of us who know how to deal with the Western world in the years to come. Our lives here are no longer as simple as they once were. The issues are not as clear-cut."

Anwar knew very well what his father meant. He struggled daily to balance differences in cultures. He'd been trained to rule by the laws of the Qur'an—laws which could be cruel. Desert laws were black and white, with no grays between, for the desert left no room for indecision. Westerners did not think, or live this way. Even in the world of commerce, the dance of politics was a dance on the razor-edge of danger. "It is difficult at times," he admitted. "But as you say, necessary."

Nazeer was obviously tiring, so Anwar excused himself, making certain the slave woman was back at his father's side before he left.

\*\*\*

Amber tossed and turned, unable to sleep. With a heavy sigh, she sat up and pushed away the cover. Hot and sticky with sweat, she slid out of bed and went to the window where a slight breeze teased at her hair and cooled her face. She felt odd—not at all like herself—not sad, exactly, though she was unhappy at losing Gran. Not happy either. But she felt different than she ever remembered feeling before this moment. All her senses seemed so alive and she was so...aware. It was almost as though Gran's death had forced her to feel the life inside herself so acutely that the realization

of it was almost painful. Her bare toes curled sensuously as she delighted in the smooth feel of the waxed floor, the breeze against her face was cool, but her body was damp and hot beneath her cotton shift. The weight of her hair was almost intolerable.

Amber pulled the nightgown over her head and stood naked in the middle of the bedroom, sighing in relief as the delicate touch of the breeze cooled her overheated skin. Raising her arms, she lifted her hair to cool her neck and back...and as she did, she saw her reflection in the mirror.

The young woman Amber saw looking back at her was bathed in moonlight and seemed far older and wiser than she felt. She let her hair back down and tentatively ran her hands over her body, shivering a little at the sensations that assaulted her. Biting her lip, she studied her image for several long moments, then she sighed, suddenly feeling very alone and unhappy, with all her sudden sensual sensitivity fading.

Confused and tired, she went back to bed, sliding in between the now cool sheets. Eventually she slept...and dreamed.

*In the dream, Amber wandered in a vast, featureless land. It frightened her by its very immensity...its emptiness. In the back of her mind a soft, familiar voice told her firmly, "It is your life. Take it in your hands. Into your heart. Fill the emptiness with your passion. It is only what you make of it...no more, no less."*

\*\*\*

It was early evening, not quite sunset, when Anwar reached the women's quarters. As he entered, the women hastened to cover their faces, all but two who belonged to him: Anya and Tamra. He smiled as Anya threw herself into his arms, but Tamra knelt at his feet. Speaking to her gently,

he gave her permission to stand. Tamra had been beaten and abused by her former master before Anwar had purchased her, and he could never convince her that such servility was not necessary with him.

With his arms around the two women, he walked with them to a low divan. Pulling gifts for them from under his robe, he smiled as he watched them unwrap their presents, listened to their delighted laughter. Anya took the bright scarf and held it up in front of her face, winking at him above it, but Tamra looked as though she were about to cry, her dark eyes glistened with tears. He merely touched her face softly to reassure her, knowing that no words would change the way she looked at her world. "Is Bayiri awake?" he asked Anya, who nodded. He rose and smiled at them again, saying gently, "Then I suppose I should go. You're both lovely."

He left them then to seek out his wife in her private quarters.

Bayiri *was* awake and was expecting him. She held her arms out for him as he came to her. "Anwar! It's so good to see you!"

"Ah, Bayiri," he said, "it's wonderful to see you, too, my dear friend. I've missed you." Lifting her from her bed, he was careful of her legs—useless for so long now, since the birth of their son, Daoud, so many years before. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, and though they loved one another dearly, they were not *in love* with one another. It was a strangely satisfying relationship for both of them. "Come, Bayiri. Come and enjoy the evening with me! It's been too long since I've watched an Alexandrian sunset...or shared one with you."

Carrying her out onto the balcony, he settled her on the lounge chair, then pulled up a chair beside her. They were silent as they watched the spectacular sunset, the roses and brilliant oranges deepening to indigo. He was lost in the beauty, feeling that Allah was painting the heavens to

welcome him home. As the final rays of sun disappeared, Bayiri took his hand. "What's wrong, Anwar?"

Once more surprised by Bayiri's unusual understanding of him, he merely shook his head. "It's nothing for you to concern yourself over. I'm just worried about my father."

"Nazeer will be fine, Anwar. He's a strong man. It's *you* I'm concerned about. You've been unhappy lately. Talk to me."

Anwar pulled his headdress off and laid it aside. Sighing heavily, he shook his head, unable to put his frustrations into words. Especially to Bayiri.

"How are you enjoying playing for the Operatic Society?" Bayiri asked gently. When he turned and met her eyes, she smiled and added, "How is Amber?"

Jolted into sudden and unexpected anger by her innocent question, Anwar stood and paced to the filigreed railing around the balcony. "Amber. Why do you ask?"

She laughed. "How can I not? Your letters are full of nothing else."

"She *infuriates* me! I have no one else to tell about her! Bayiri...how is it that Westerners can allow their women to behave so...so...outrageously? So shamefully? Sometimes I want to beat her! I swear she deliberately angers me."

She chuckled and motioned to him to come back and sit down. He did. "Anwar, haven't you realized yet that you love her? You don't want to beat her...you want her in your bed!"

"She's a child!" he blurted in abrupt denial. "And a Westerner at that."

"Anwar, I've seen you through too many affairs...and even if *you* don't recognize when you're in love, *I* do. This is more than simply wanting to bed her."

Anwar fell silent as a part of him recognized the truth of what she was saying. Picturing Amber's flashing green eyes, the lithe, young body, he hung his head. "It's impossible, Bayiri."

“Is it? You are not seeing clearly.” Her eyes were soft as she took his hand and forced him to look at her. “I would like to see you happy again, and no one else has ever done that for you. You need passion like you need air.”

“But Bayiri, she is a child. Westerners do not rear their women as we do...with a knowledge of a woman’s duties. She....”

“She is a woman, Anwar. And if it is not you, before long, it will be someone else. Is that what you want?” Bayiri shivered. “Come, Anwar...take me back inside. I’m getting cold.”

Anwar took her back to her room. “Goodnight, Bayiri.” He kissed her softly on the cheek as he tucked her back into her bed, hesitating as she took his hand again.

“Anwar,” she told him firmly, “...nothing is impossible. Don’t let her get away from you. She won’t be a child much longer.”

The words sent a chill through him, and he realized that subconsciously he’d thought of little else for the past year. It had only taken Bayiri’s wisdom to force him to face the reality of his feelings. He knew, too, that there was more between himself and this child-woman than merely his inappropriate lust. He felt a deep tie to her, as though he’d known her forever...and with a love that transcended time itself.

Soberly, Anwar left the women’s quarters and returned to his own, where, still thinking of what Bayiri had told him. *This is madness*, he told himself. *I am an old fool, and an ugly one at that.* There were so many issues of culture and morality involved they made his head spin. Logic told him he was quite insane, but his heart told him something quite different. *Nothing is impossible....* Bayiri’s words echoed in his mind.

When Amber woke the following morning she could remember very little of her dream, but the voice she'd heard in that dream had been very familiar. It had been Anwar's voice. She puzzled all day over the dream and over the comforting feeling Anwar's voice had given her.

There was no school that day, and she was scheduled to model at Davidsons', where she'd been working part-time for a long while. They were in the middle of a shoot when the manager of Davidsons' sent a note to her requesting she come to his office. Amber read the note with a bit of anxiety, afraid she'd somehow done something wrong.

"Wot is it, Luv?" the photographer asked. Paul was a good-hearted man and worked closely with the young models.

Amber tucked the note away and shook her head. "I'm not sure. Mr. Harris wants to see me after the shoot." She looked to the photographer for reassurance. "I haven't done anything wrong, have I?"

He laughed and adjusted the camera. "Not as I know, Luv. But I can see you're on about it. We've finished here for now, why'n't run down and see what he wants?"

Grateful that she needn't wait to see what the problem was, Amber thanked him and hurried to change clothes so she could go. When she reached Mr. Harris' office, though, she had a sudden attack of nerves. *What if he's going to fire me?* she thought in panic. Her parents needed the money she brought in, and she didn't know *what* she'd do if she couldn't model. There was nothing else she *could* do where she could make as much.

Finally, taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Amber poked her head in and asked tentatively, "You wanted to see me?"

He waved her in. "Yes. I did. Sit, please."

Sitting on the edge of the chair, Amber folded her hands in her lap and tried to look composed as she waited for the axe to fall.

“I wanted to see you to offer you a full time modeling position with Davidsons, including extensive training. We’ve been very pleased with you.”

Amber was so relieved, she thought she’d faint. But her mind was whirling. *What about school?* she thought. *What will Mum and Dad say?*

“You don’t have to decide immediately. Talk it over with your parents. Think about it yourself. I realize it’s a big decision. It’ll involve some travel, but that’s to be expected.”

Amber left the office in a daze. She’d come expecting to be fired and instead was offered what she’d dearly wanted. School was something she felt she could do without...or go back to later. But this...this was an opportunity she just couldn’t let pass.

\*\*\*

Anwar paced the balcony for at least an hour after returning to his apartments, his emotions teetering between elation and despair...and once more he doubted the truth of his feelings. The sweet, hashish-laced smoke from his sigarrah, instead of relaxing him, was merely making him even more aware of the fact that it had been a good two months since he’d been with a woman...*any* woman. And that was unlike him. He’d never been one to do without the comfort of a woman’s charms and had never had any need to. Any woman that couldn’t be charmed could generally be bought. *Perhaps that’s all it is....*he thought with a slight feeling of relief. Well, he was home now, and Western conventions needn’t hinder him, and he had no need to look further than his own harem.

Returning to his room, he rang for Akhim and gave him instructions. The little man smiled knowingly and bowed, then quickly left the room. Stretching tired muscles, Anwar smiled too, certain that this insane obsession would be put behind him very soon. His native customs differed from those in the West, and he knew any Westerner would be appalled at any man taking a woman of fourteen into his bed. It was foolishness for him to think this way.

By the time Akhim returned with both Anya and Tamra, Anwar was waiting for them in the bed. Akhim backed out of the room and left the two women with him, and Anya lowered herself to the bed beside him as Tamra did the same on the other side of the bed. No words were necessary. Both women were well trained and knew his tastes...as he knew theirs. Anya, small boned, honey-skinned and exotically Oriental was a delightful contrast to Tamra, a dark-skinned, dark-eyed Berber. He closed his eyes and wound his fingers in Tamra's thick, dark curls and let her do what she did best. His other hand caressed soft honey skin, his lips taking what was already his. And for the moment he was able to put aside the thought of ancient emerald eyes and the siren's song of long-lost love.

But later—*much* later—Anwar was at his desk. Again smoking. And watching the two exhausted women sleep. He—and they—had done their best to make up for the many months of separation, but despite that, despite being more completely sexually satisfied than he'd been in a good two years...it hadn't banished his thoughts of the one woman-child he wanted and couldn't have.

He lowered his face to his hands and thought what a fool he was. *But still*, a voice whispered in his mind. *She won't be a child much longer*. The thought was at once exciting—giving him hope—and terrifying.

Amber's father was quite happy with her decision. Her mother less so. She could hear them arguing downstairs—her father insisting that there was nothing wrong with her seeing what she wanted to do and doing it. That an honest day's work never hurt anyone. "A woman doesn't need to be over-educated. She's almost fifteen. She'll only settle down someday soon anyway, get married. Let her see a bit of the world before that."

Her mother answered with frustration that she'd wanted more for her daughter than she'd had. "Only education can get her that."

"So you're not happy, then, married to me?" her father asked, obviously hurt.

"I didn't say that. You know that's not true. I just want her to have other choices as well."

Amber sighed and went quietly back to her room. She sat in front of her mirror, brushing her hair, watching as the long, dark strands fell across her shoulders. She could still hear them arguing: she couldn't hear the words, but she didn't have to. Leaning on her elbows, chin in hand, she thought of her father, with his gypsy blood. She knew she took after him. There was a restlessness in her...a yearning to reach for the stars. Her mother just wanted her to reach in a different way. In the end, she knew that her decision would stand.

Abruptly, Amber remembered her dream. Remembered Anwar saying, *Take it in your hands. In your heart. Fill the emptiness with your passion. It is only what you make of it...no more, no less.* It occurred to her that life was like that and she wanted hers to be filled with passion and adventure.

\*\*\*

Anwar rose at dawn to greet Allah with his morning prayers, and soon after headed for the stables. His stallion,

Ferakh, was waiting for him, the slave holding him bowing as Anwar approached.

“Amir,” the man murmured deferentially.

With a critical eye, Anwar assessed his mount’s condition. The slave had been left with complete care of the horse while he’d been gone and Anwar wanted to be certain the care had been appropriate. Ferakh fidgeted, half rearing as Anwar approached, anxious to get to his master. With a touch as gentle with the horse as it had been with the women the night before, Anwar murmured softly to him in Arabic and the stallion quieted. There was a deep bond between the two...as there must be, for Anwar’s life could depend upon this creature’s love and loyalty.

Running his hand over the horse’s gleaming chestnut hide, Anwar found a new scar on Ferakh’s rear pastern. After ascertaining that the injury had caused no permanent harm, he turned to the groom, and the small man bent his head and fell to his knees. “I’m sorry, Amir.”

Anwar struggled with the fury building within him and lost. He backhanded the man and sent him flying several feet, causing Ferakh to rear and break free. Calling to the stallion, he caught the rope dangling from the halter. Once his horse was settled he turned back to the unfortunate groom, who had scrambled to his knees and was once more begging forgiveness. “If you ever allow him to injure himself again....” He didn’t need to complete the sentence. The slave paled.

“Never, Amir.”

Dismissing the groom, Anwar saddled Ferakh himself and headed out into the desert. He knew he couldn’t go far, as it was dangerous to venture into the desert alone, but he needed to be free of convention—both Eastern and Western—for a time.

Ferakh traveled at an easy hand gallop for a short time, then Anwar reined him in and settled to a walk to allow him to rest and cool down. The desert was quiet around them and

the stallion's breathing was loud in the still air. The sun was mercilessly hot and bright, yet Anwar gloried in it. It was *home* in a way that no place else on earth could ever be for him. He stroked the horse's slick, wet neck and spoke gently to him in Arabic. "Ah, Ferakh. If only the world were as simple as the desert."

Ferakh snorted and shook his head, causing Anwar to laugh in simple delight. Sometimes he wondered just how much his horse understood. Intellectually, he knew it was only that the horse knew he was being spoken to, yet at times his heart told him otherwise. They'd been together since Ferakh was foaled, and frequently the horse surprised him. "So that's your opinion on the whole thing, eh?" He nudged the stallion into a trot and headed back. "Well, you're probably right. But you're lucky, old man. You needn't worry about love, or custom. You merely take what you're given and are happy with it."

He wished at times he could do the same.

By the time they reached the stable, Anwar's anger against the hapless groom had abated, but he had no thought of apologizing. As Amir, he couldn't apologize to the slaves for disciplining them...if he did, he'd lose face. The groom was waiting for him when he rode in, and hurried out to take Ferakh from him. Anwar stood for a moment, bracing himself to let Ferakh rub his face against his chest, amused by the contented grunts the stallion gave. Only when the horse was finished did Anwar hand the reins to the slave. "Take care of him for me," he told the man gently.

\*\*\*

Amber learned quickly that modeling full-time was more tiring and demanding than she'd thought it would be. But despite this, she enjoyed the job and found that her parents treated her more as an adult than a child...something she also

enjoyed. Of course, it helped that Mr. Harris made certain the girls had suitable adult supervision on the trips out of town, but after the first few times, her parents hardly bothered asking where she was going, as long as it was assumed it was for Davidsons'. In addition, with her still spending weekends with Terri, she realized she was spending less and less time at home.

Despite her busy schedule, she continued working with the Operatic Society, and found she was missing Anwar more and more. The rehearsals seemed dull without him there and everyone's performances were off. But there *were* some advantages to his absence.

Terri kept her apprised as to what was happening where she worked, and it was obvious that it wasn't only the Operatic Society's performance that was suffering with Anwar gone.

"Thank goodness he'll be back soon," Terri told Amber with a relieved sigh after rehearsal one evening. "Things've gotten so tangled at the office, it's far worse than it is here, if you can imagine."

Amber felt her heart lurch. She didn't have to ask who it was Terri was referring to. "How do you know?" she asked.

"How do I know it's worse? You must be kidding!"

Amber laughed at Terri's expression. "No, silly!" she told her. "I mean, how do you know he's coming back?"

"I talked to him today. Apparently his father is doing quite well and is able to handle the business affairs in Egypt, so Anwar is returning to England. He should be here before the next rehearsal."

"I know you're glad," Amber told her gently. "You've been working very hard while he's been gone."

Terri laughed. "I'll work much harder once he's back! But at least then I'll know that things are done right! And *this* lot!" she said with a laugh, referring to the members of the

Society. "I'd forgotten how much easier you all were to handle when he was here!"

"Oh, come on...we're not *that* bad!" Amber teased.

"No? Well, let's see...Clive spent more time flirting with you than practicing his part, and you paid just about as much attention to the music. Sheila and Pamela..."

Amber giggled, then admitted Terri was right. "Okay...so we played around. But we don't get to do that when he's here."

"No, you don't, and your performance reflects it, too!" Terri answered with a bit of snap.

A bit surprised at Terri's irritation, Amber answered in a chastened tone, "I'm sorry."

"And while we're at it, I'd appreciate it if you'd try a little harder to get along with him when he *does* get back. You know you provoke him deliberately."

"Well...he provokes *me*!" Amber shot back. "He's worse than my father! He's never nice to me, and it's none of his business anyway, if I flirt!"

"It *is* his business when it relates to your performance, Amber!" Terri told her.

Amber's frustration simmered and she was unsure why she was so certain that Anwar's treatment of her had little to do with her performance. But, despite her frustration and anger, she knew that Terri was right: technically, her behavior *was* Anwar's business if it affected the play. "All right," she told her friend. "I'll try harder to get along, but you'll see. It won't help."

\*\*\*

As painful as it always was leaving Egypt, this time Anwar felt a growing anticipation in his return to England. While in Alexandria, he'd had several long talks with Bayiri, who had convinced him that his exposure to Western culture

had clouded his reason. Thinking of this, he couldn't help smiling a bit. Bayiri herself had not been much older than Amber was now when they'd married. According to Bayiri, the fact that fourteen was considered a child in the West shouldn't dissuade him.

However, despite Bayiri's encouragement, Anwar was not reassured. He still felt his own age acutely, and he was well aware that he was hardly handsome. *I'm thirty years older than she is. How can I expect her to love an old man?*

The legal aspects of the situation didn't bother him, despite the fact that if he were discovered to be involved with a legally underage girl, it could cause him awkward problems in business. Arrest was something that didn't even cross his mind, as it would never happen. No. All that concerned him was whether or not Amber could ever find him acceptable. If she could, then all else was unimportant.

All during the plane trip back to England and on the trip back to Hadleigh, Amber was foremost on his mind. He felt time to be trickling away like sand in an hourglass... bringing her closer and closer to the fulfillment he saw in her eyes, and taking him further and further from his heart's desire. *If I show her my heart, lay it at her feet...will it be spurned? And if she chooses another? Allah give me the grace and wisdom...the strength to accept her choice.*

He and Robert carried on a desultory conversation as they returned to Hadleigh from the airport, but fortunately Robert was obviously as tired as he was—since he'd had to make the trip in the middle of the night—and Anwar wasn't required to pay close attention. As they traveled up the long drive to Hadleigh, Anwar was already thinking of the fact that he'd be seeing Amber very soon. *How will she greet me? Has she missed me at all?* He couldn't wait until rehearsal.

Amber watched and waited for Anwar to arrive for the rehearsal. She'd ridden the coach in today and hadn't seen Terri, so she hadn't even been certain he was coming at all until Terri arrived and announced that he'd be here. Twisting her hair nervously into a rolled strand, she swatted at Clive as he leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Leave off, Clive! Go pester Sheila! She fancies you."

Clive laughed and teased, "You do, too. You know it."

"In your dreams! Go *away!*"

As the young man walked away, Amber cast an amused glance in his direction and sighed. *Why is it, she wondered, that every boy I know seems so immature? They're all such...infants.*

She heard the door open and turned in time to see Anwar come in. Tonight, he wasn't dressed in his robes, but instead in his business suit from the office, though he still wore his headdress. He gazed around the room, his expression solemn...and for a moment, Amber decided he must actually have missed her, because when their eyes met a brilliant smile lit his face, making him look almost handsome.

Anwar started toward her, but stopped and turned away as Terri called out to him. Amber released the breath she'd been holding. *Why is it, she thought, that when he looks at me like that, I forget to breathe?*

Terri and Anwar moved away to stand beside the stage: they seemed to be having a serious discussion. Curious, Amber walked over to where Clive and Samantha were flirting with one another so she could be close enough to hear what Terri was so concerned about. Anwar didn't seem happy about what she was saying. Edging closer, knowing the curtains hid her from view, Amber mentally chided herself for eavesdropping, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

"I'd really like you to spend a little time with her tonight, working on her song," Terri was telling him. "She complains

that you'll work with anyone else, but you have no patience with her."

With a heavy sigh, Anwar finally agreed. "Very well, Terri. Perhaps you're right. I'll see what I can do."

As she listened to them discussing her, Amber could tell that he wasn't particularly fond of the idea of spending extra time with her. She bit her lip and held back tears. The thought made her angry and hurt her because she worked so hard and he still didn't notice. Wandering back over to Clive and Samantha, she waited forlornly for the rehearsal to begin.

All evening, Amber could feel him watching her. The rehearsal went well, and Terri seemed excited and pleased by the way things were going. One by one, the soloists, the chorus and stage staff left to go home, until the only ones left were Anwar, Terri and herself. "Come," Anwar told Amber gently, "We'll work on your song some while we have time."

She went with him and sat nervously beside him on the piano bench, where he began working with her on her timing, which he said had been off.

Terri picked up an armful of costumes and announced, "I'm just nipping 'round to see Madge with these last minute alterations. I'll be about half an hour, okay?" She then breezed out of the building before either of them could reply.

A silence fell over them for a few moments, and Amber felt awkward. Eventually, Anwar cleared his throat and had her begin the song again. They worked diligently on the song, and within a remarkably short time Amber grasped the elusive timing.

Anwar seemed pleased. "You're doing very well," he told her, gifting her with some rare praise. "Now...go up on stage and run through it again."

The thought of getting up on stage—alone in front of him—terrified her. Then, once up there, she wondered if she'd be able to sing at all, but as the introduction rang out she settled into the solo, wanting very badly to please him.

He stopped her halfway through the song. Rising from the piano, he stalked over to stand in front of the stage. The fury in his eyes was daunting. "Allah preserve me! Sing it as if you *mean* it! You sound as if you're singing a shopping list! You're supposed to be a woman in love, singing about the future you see with a man you love, who loves and desires you. Put some *heart* into it!"

Amber's eyes stung as they filled suddenly with hot and angry tears at his outburst. She'd hoped that he was beginning to like her just a little, but now they seemed right back where they'd started.

She jumped off the stage to leave, but Anwar grabbed her arm as she passed by him and pulled her around to face him.

He may have been angry, but *she* was furious. Yet all she could do, was cry. Feeling the tears streaming down her face made her feel helpless. Her words were laced with venom as she snapped at him, "I'm trying as hard as I can, but you never notice, do you? One minute you tell me I'm a child, then the next you expect me to behave like an adult. Well, I'm sorry, 'Mister High and Mighty', you can't have it both ways! I'm not even fifteen! What do you want from me? Do *you* even know?"

He released her arm, and suddenly gentle, the fire in his eyes gone soft and warm, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and bent to dry her flood of tears. His huge hands stroked her hair with a tenderness that shook her, then almost in a whisper he said, "Oh, yes. Allah help me, I know *exactly* what I want."

This was a man she didn't know, and the look in his eyes made her feel anything but childlike. He continued in a husky, tender voice as he gazed into her eyes, "I want your love, and one day I shall make love to you."

As he drew himself to his full height, Amber swallowed the lump that had come to her throat and managed the same retort she always gave the boys, "You should be so lucky!"

He didn't look at all surprised, nor did he seem angry. He merely smiled softly at her. The noisy slamming of the double doors announcing Terri's return broke the silent tension which had electrified the air between them. They both stepped apart at the same time.

"Well?" Terri asked as she approached. "How'd everything go?"

Again, Anwar smiled at Amber and she felt herself blush, but Anwar merely answered calmly, "Everything went well. She's beginning to realize how important passion is...in music. And timing."

Terri, oblivious to the undercurrents, seemed pleased that they'd overcome the problems Amber had been having, and as she drove Amber home, she apologized for keeping her out so late. "You seem tired. Try and get some rest."

Amber barely answered her...in fact, scarcely heard her. Her head was filled with strange, unwanted emotions, her thoughts spinning.

After bidding her parents goodnight, she headed straight for her room and undressed. She tried to close her eyes and sleep, but her heart was pounding, and her mind kept returning to that evening and the look in Anwar's eyes. Among the emotions at war within her was a feeling that she could only describe as anticipation. There was fear, yes—because the surety in Anwar's words and in his eyes left no doubt of his intentions. But along with that fear was a breathtaking elation, and some emotion so unknown that she could put no name to it. *Surely he's only making fun of me. That's all it can be*, she told herself firmly. Still trying to decide what her response should be, how she should behave toward him, she finally fell asleep.

Terri laughed with obvious delight as Anwar recounted the latest office gossip. “It seems the latest rumor is that you and I are having an affair.” It amused him as well, and he was relieved that Terri found it equally funny. He’d been a bit worried that the rumors would scare her off. They’d taken to meeting for lunch two or three times a week to discuss the play, and everyone seemed determined to “make them a pair.”

Stifling her giggles in her napkin, Terri was trying very hard not to make a scene by laughing too hysterically, but Anwar couldn’t help making the matter worse. Just as she caught her breath, he handed her a glass of water, and with as solemn a face as he could manage, lifted a brow and asked, “Will this help?”

She started laughing helplessly again and excused herself to retreat to the ladies’ room. He grinned as she disappeared around the corner, then lit a cigarette and leaned lazily back in the chair. He liked Terri quite a lot and she was easy to be around...and in addition, being friends with her made it easier to stay involved in Amber’s life. But he had no desire to hurt Terri, either, so it was...much more convenient...that she felt as he did.

Terri returned from the ladies’ room, with a poker face that would have done her justice in any game. Until she met his eyes and started laughing again. People were staring and she was red with embarrassment, but couldn’t seem to stop. Anwar finally took pity on her, left money for the bill and led her from the restaurant.

As Anwar drove them back to the office in the Rover, Terri finally regained her composure—mostly because Anwar did nothing to encourage her. “You are *so* bad,” she told him with a smile. “You did that deliberately!”

He chuckled and glanced over at her. “Of course. It isn’t often I see you laugh like that. It’s good for you.”

“Well, it *is* funny, you have to admit,” she told him. “Why is it that two people can’t just be friends without people automatically putting them in bed together?”

He shrugged and gave her a small smile. “A little harmless gossip goes a long way to relieve their boredom, I suppose. One cannot take it seriously. If I did, I’d have a difficult time keeping up with the image they paint of me.” He sighed then, and added: “I suppose we should do something, though, to put an end to the gossip—for your sake.”

Terri shook her head, and told him jokingly, “Oh, don’t mind me. It does wonders for my ego to be the center of attention. But that reminds me! Amber was telling me the other day that the staff canteen at Davidsons’ has changed over to a cafeteria system, and the food’s terrible. She’s been bringing her lunch every day and is miserable. Perhaps we should ask her to join us for lunch. That might stifle some of the rumors, and it wouldn’t hurt a bit for you two to get on better terms!”

Anwar felt his heart leap to his throat. The thought of seeing Amber three times a week in addition to rehearsals was more than he’d ever hoped for! When he felt he could speak without betraying his excitement, he told Terri, “The ever-practical Terri! What a brilliant idea!”

In a tone that was only half-joking, she asked: “You *do* promise not to fight with her over lunch?”

\*\*\*

Amber was hesitant when she was first asked to join Terri and Anwar for lunch. “Are you certain it’s a good idea?” she asked Terri.

“Of course! Anwar wants you there as much as I do. It’ll be fun, you’ll see.”

Amber wasn’t sure how much *fun* it’d be if they started arguing, but she reserved her opinion. If Terri wanted her

there and thought it'd work, she'd certainly try. *At least I won't be eating cafeteria food*, she thought with relief. Terri was suggesting the Carlton Grill, which was only marginally more expensive than the cafeteria at Davidsons', and the food was much better.

They were to meet Anwar at the Carlton, since Terri had picked her up, so once they got there, they were seated and waited for him to arrive. Amber heard him as he spoke to the waiter. When she lifted her eyes to his, the gentle smile he gave her made the casual greeting she'd begun to utter lodge in her throat. Terri didn't seem to notice her reaction, but it was obvious to Amber that *he* did.

"Ah, Terri! I see our chaperone has agreed to join us! How delightful! I now have the pleasure of dining with *two* lovely ladies! My reputation shall soar!"

Terri laughed, but Amber felt herself blushing. She relaxed as the conversation continued and the meal was served, but she was acutely aware of Anwar's attention. He seemed a very different man here, very relaxed and friendly. His powerful personality was still overwhelming, but in a much more pleasant way, and Amber began to realize with astonishment that he actually enjoyed being in her company. Here, there was a warmth in his manner toward her that he'd never shown before.

As Amber sat wrapped in her thoughts, Anwar asked Terri, "Our little one here is very quiet today. Is anything amiss?"

Startled, Amber looked up, directly into his eyes, which were soft and gentle...not snapping with anger as they usually were. She stammered, "I...I'm fine."

His mouth curled a tiny bit at the corners and she could swear he winked at her as he asked, "Are you certain? The young woman I know is rarely this quiet."

She tore her eyes away from his and chased a pea on her plate with her fork. "Perhaps you don't know me as well as you believe you do," she managed.

Terri chuckled and rescued her. "Anwar, stop teasing! All the more reason for us all to lunch together. Amber can find out that you're not a bear *all* the time, and *you* can learn how delightful she can be."

Out of the corner of her eye, Amber could see Anwar pat Terri's hand. "I'm certain you're right, my friend. I would hate to think that such a lovely child was frightened of me."

Amber was confused by his change of attitude. With just the three of them there, the warmth and generosity of his personality drew her like a magnet. *Why is he so mean to me in rehearsal?* she wondered with frustration.

\*\*\*

Anwar returned home to Egypt once more over the Christmas holidays. In a country that virtually shut down over the holidays, he found it a good time leave the office in the hands of his associates and the exceptionally competent Terri. During this visit, he left England feeling far less angry and insecure about Amber than he had the last time, and Bayiri noticed his more relaxed manner immediately.

"So," she queried gently as they sat drinking their coffee on the terrace the first evening, "have you taken her to bed yet?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "You're incorrigible, Bayiri. No. Of course not. But she knows that I intend to, and she is very...aware...of the attraction between us."

His wife glanced up at him over her coffee, a soft smile on her face. "Good," she murmured.

"These things take time," he explained. "I will not rush her...and it must be *her* decision."

“Of course,” Bayiri answered, hiding her growing smile behind her cup. “Since when have you ever cared enough to allow a woman this much time, or for that matter, the choice?”

“You make me sound like a monster,” he muttered, avoiding her eyes. “I’ve never forced anyone.”

“No. And you’re not a monster. But you *are* Amir, and accustomed to getting what you want. Most women fall over themselves to go to bed with you.”

He drew in a lungful of the sweet hashish smoke and let it out slowly. “Not this one.” He stared out at the stars that graced his heavens and repeated gently, “Not this one.”

\*\*\*

### Chapter Three

#### 1961: Between Innocence and Knowledge

When Anwar returned from Egypt, Terri and Amber planned a “welcome home” party at the Carlton, and Amber was so anxious to see him again that she found herself there a half-hour early. To pass the time, she seated herself at the bar and ordered a glass of white wine.

Carlos, the waiter, had been in England for over five years, but his English was still poor. He smiled as he brought her wine, and told her, “I bring drink, I bring also message, yes?” He handed over first the glass, then the folded paper that Peter, the manager, had written in a clear, neat, hand:

*“Terri will be late. She says you are to start without her, and she will explain when she gets here.”*

Puzzled, Amber sipped her wine and glanced at her watch. She was just wondering what to do—whether she should call the office and try to cancel—when Anwar came down the stairs into the basement restaurant. After greeting him, she gave him the note, which he read in silence. Tucking it quickly into his pocket, he smiled—that totally engaging smile of his that made his entire face so attractive to her. “Since Terri will obviously be late, I suggest we order,” he told her, sounding somehow delighted. She had no idea why. They chose the steak with mushrooms, and picking up the wine list, he asked for the Burgundy. He must have noticed her surprise, as he said quickly, “I should have asked you before I ordered! Do forgive me. Do you like Burgundy?”

“I don’t know,” Amber blurted truthfully. “I’ve never tried it. In fact I’ve never tried anything except this!” She held up the glass of wine Carlos had brought.

Anwar’s look of distaste embarrassed her, making her feel like a child. But he shook his head and smiled again,

saying, "Then, my dear, it's time you tried something new!" Gazing directly at her in that same soft, gentle way she'd found so disturbing the *last* time they'd been alone together, he told her, "You should always drink red wines. They are warm, rich and filled with fire, just as you are." A sudden silence fell between them, making her feel awkward, and those deep, blue eyes held hers for what seemed an eternity.

Carlos came back with the wine and the moment dissolved as if it had never been. The Burgundy proved as popular as he'd promised, and time slipped away as they talked and laughed together.

The talk was totally innocent, though from time to time the smoldering glances he gave her made her flush with confusion and delight. She felt more alive than she ever had before, and she was amazed at how comfortable she was with him. *But there's so much I don't know about him*, she reminded herself firmly. She took the opportunity to ask him about his trip home. "How is your father?"

"My father is doing well, thank you," he responded, but he quickly changed the subject, and soon had her telling him about her holidays. All too soon Amber realized it was time to go, and he insisted on taking her home to be certain she got there safely.

"I must call at the office to collect some papers, but it won't take long," he assured her. Amber glanced at her watch, and he must have noticed. "I could call a taxi if you need to be home sooner...."

"Oh...no," she said quickly, not wanting the evening to end. "I'm not expected home before eleven. My parents assume I'm with Terri, so they won't be worried."

His heavy brows drew together in a frown, and he commented thoughtfully, "I can't imagine what happened to her. I hope nothing is amiss."

Amber realized she hadn't even thought about Terri for hours, but now that she was reminded of her friend's

absence, she was a little concerned as well. "It's not like her not to ring if she couldn't make it."

"I'll phone her from the office. Come." He took her arm and led her out of the building.

Anwar drove skillfully, weaving his way through the traffic with speeds she would've considered reckless with anyone else. The impression he gave of being fully in control was as evident in his driving as it was in everything else he did, and she felt vaguely disappointed when they stopped.

Parking the car outside his office block he turned to her to ask, "Would you care to come in? You can speak to Terri if I reach her."

Grateful for his consideration, Amber nodded and thanked him. "I'd like that. Thank you."

They traveled by lift up to the sixth floor where his office was. Once more Amber was surprised to realize that nothing was as she would have pictured. The furnishings were as unusual as he was, himself. There was a large teak desk with all the usual office trimmings and rich wooden filing cabinets, but this occupied only half the room. The other half held two huge, comfortable settees, facing each other across a long teak coffee table. The back wall held a well-stocked bar, and everything in the room spoke of immense wealth and power. She'd known from the beginning how wealthy Anwar was...how powerful. But this was really the first true indication she'd seen.

After gesturing to the settees and inviting her to sit, Anwar went to the desk and dialed Terri's number. Someone answered immediately, and after a moment of quiet conversation, he passed the phone to Amber. She was relieved to hear that Terri's car had broken down and the R.A.C. had only just gotten her sorted out and back home. Terri told her that she'd been just about to leave to try to catch them at the Carlton.

“I’m sorry you missed us, but we’re just glad you’re all right!” Amber told her. Terri asked then if they’d enjoyed themselves, and Amber lifted her eyes to Anwar’s and smiled before assuring her friend, “Yes, we had a wonderful time.”

Terri suggested they meet for lunch the following day, and Amber agreed readily. “That would be marvelous. We really missed you!” Terri then asked to speak to Anwar, so Amber passed the phone back to him. She obviously had some business to discuss.

Anwar pointed to the bar, indicating Amber should help herself to a drink, and pouring out a very small sherry, she sat to wait as he spoke softly into the phone. On the coffee table in front of her was a black leather briefcase, and once Anwar had finished his conversation, he brought a stack of papers from his desk to place them in the case. Once the case was closed and locked, an awkward silence once more fell over them, and Amber wondered what to say next.

During that long, silent pause, he’d seemed to avoid meeting her eyes, and when he did, the look in them made her mouth go dry and her heart pound erratically. She may not have understood the emotions stirring deep within her, but what she *did* know was how right it felt when he turned to her, gently taking her in his arms to hold her close.

Her arms, in turn, found their way around him, causing a sharp intake of breath as he whispered hoarsely, “Tell me what you’re feeling, little one. I must know....”

“I feel...confused,” she admitted as she leaned into him, burying her face in his robe. “Frightened. Unsure.”

“Of me?” he asked, immediately moving to release her, but she snuggled closer, refusing to let him go.

“No! Not of you,” she murmured, trying to reassure him so he wouldn’t release her. “Of myself, I suppose. I’m frightened of making a fool of myself,” she told him, admitting her most pressing fear.

“How could you do that?” he asked gently.

She lifted her face to look at him. "I'm afraid...that perhaps you're only teasing me!"

He looked shocked that she would believe such a thing. "Never! Believe me! I've never been more serious about anything in my life. I've dreamed for so long of holding you...of knowing you welcome my touch." He hesitated, then asked softly, "Do you?"

Unable to think clearly, Amber stuttered, "I don't know."

A look of pain crossed his face. "You must feel *something*, tell me please!" he begged.

All she could manage was the absolute truth. "I only know I don't want you to let me go."

He sighed deeply, his arms tightening briefly, then he released her. Her hands seemed small, engulfed in his as he stood, helping her to her feet. This time, it was her arms that encircled him first, just before he placed an arm about her waist. Taking her chin in his free hand he tilted her face up and brushed his lips softly across hers...a feather-light sensation that made her senses reel and finally gave names to the intense emotions stirring within her. The words *passion* and *desire* had merely been words to her before this moment. She needed him more than food, more than breath itself.

He released her then and stepped away. They smiled at one another, then the smiles became breathless, relieved laughter as they stood holding hands.

"I should tell you that I'm sorry," he told her with great tenderness as he stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, "but I can't, for it would be the most dire of lies...and I promise I shall always tell you the truth." Amber could only smile up at him in bemusement as he continued. "I've loved you for a very long time, though I've shut my love for you away—hiding it from myself and from you—because I feared it might drive you away. Now that you know the truth, the future is in your hands, for you to decide. But you can rest assured that whatever your decision is, I shall abide by it."

He was so solemn, so intense as he laid his heart at her feet. Inexperienced, unsure, Amber didn't know what to say...didn't know how to respond. All she knew for certain was that for her...now...love wore his face and body...spoke in his voice. But still she had no words to tell him how she felt. "I don't know what to say, Anwar. You kiss me like that, then expect me to think about the future. All I can think of is...now. When I'm with you, I feel things I've never felt before, and that frightens me. But when you held me, it just felt...right."

"And when we kissed?" he asked softly.

"There's no way I can tell you how I felt. I've never been kissed before. Not like that."

Closing his eyes he asked, hopefully...as though he almost didn't dare ask, "Will our first kiss be the last we share?"

"Oh, I hope not!" she breathed.

Cradling the back of her head with one huge hand, he gazed into her eyes and whispered, "Please...again?"

She closed her eyes and tilted her face up to his in invitation. This kiss was very different from the other. The gentleness had gone, and the heated desire spread from his mouth into her, leaving her weak...stunned. He held her tightly against him, and she could clearly feel his body's sudden response and again felt unsure and childish. Sensing her nervousness, he stepped away from her. He glanced at his watch as though suddenly realizing the time that had sped by without their noticing. "I'd best get you home or we shall find ourselves in trouble—in more ways than one."

All the way back to the car he held her hand. It felt so comfortable...and again, so right. He helped her into the car and took his seat by her side. He sat for a long moment just gazing at her in the moonlight, then lifted his fingers once to her face, tracing the line of her jaw with a feather-light touch. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?"

“Simply for being who you are,” he told her. “Allah could not have made you more perfect.”

Embarrassed by the intensity of his eyes...his words, Amber ducked her head, tearing her eyes away from his. He started the engine, and within a half-hour, he had her home. As he opened the car door for her to let her out, he ventured, “Next Tuesday?”

Amber placed her hand over his heart and with a surge of delight at his look of naked desire, asked, “Same time, same place?”

“Anywhere you wish, my love.”

She stood watching him as he walked back to the Rover, waiting for him to look back. When he did, she smiled at him. His teeth shone whitely as he flashed her a huge smile. Tuesday was *much* too far away.

\*\*\*

Much later Anwar sat at his desk late into the night...and into the morning, attempting to put his thoughts down to share with the woman he desired beyond all else. Though the words he wrote to her were from his heart, he could not help wondering if once he finally achieved his prize if he would lose interest in her, as he had in everyone else.

~~~~~

24th January 1961

Dearest,

I write this in the early hours of the morning because I cannot sleep and because I wanted to tell you how I feel. When I left my flat earlier this evening, I could not have imagined all the night would offer. Because I understand the

problems you have at home, I shall ask Terri to give you this letter, or I shall pass it on to you when we next lunch with her.

What can I say to you that will give you some understanding of all I hold in my heart? What words can I use to assure you? I would never force you into a relationship you could not embrace completely, without fear. How I have longed to show you my heart. Only the thought of your rejection has prevented me.

Tonight, I sat by your side, you looked at me with eyes which drew me. Almost against my will, I found my arms reaching out for you. As they encircled your body I waited for the rejection to manifest itself in some way. Without a second thought, your arms in turn held me. I wanted that moment to last forever. When you told me you felt confused and frightened, my soul plunged from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of despair. You thought I was playing some strange joke on you, and your fear was of seeming foolish. How wrong you were! Lifting you to your feet, I prepared to take you home, but those lovely arms wound themselves around my neck. My mind denied what my heart knew ...that you felt as drawn to me as I did to you. When I took your chin in my hand and gazed into your eyes, I was lost! Our first kiss robbed me of words, lifted me to an unknown place beyond my dreams. It was after that breathtaking exchange I told you I loved you, I tried to explain why I had hidden my love from you—from both of us. There was no hesitancy in your heart and only indescribable joy in mine. My love had not been rejected, ridiculed or devalued. No man on earth could be happier than I!

Later, when I took you home, all I could say was “Thank you.” How small and insignificant were those two words, when you had given me the greatest of treasures—the possibility of your love. Now, I feel unworthy, an unfitting suitor for such as you, yet you have agreed to see me again next Tuesday! The week ahead will pass too slowly and

although I shall lunch with you and Terri before then, my arms are empty and impatient for you. The path ahead is unknown and I pray we walk it together, but always on your terms. If I can be no more than a friend then I accept your friendship and hold it of great worth, though I doubt if either of us will be content with the limits that would impose.

Take care of yourself. You are doubly precious now, for you hold my future as well as your own. Take great care of my heart for I find I have left it with you.

Anwar

Two days later, while they were lunching with Terri, Anwar slipped his letter to Amber. She held the envelope in her lap under the table all during the meal, though she was as aware of it as she'd have been of a hot coal lying there, between her legs. It was so difficult to carry on a normal conversation with his soft gaze on her and the heat of his letter in her lap. Eventually, she excused herself and went to the ladies room to read it. His words of love brought tears to her eyes, and she wanted so badly to rush out and throw herself into his arms, but there were Terri, her parents, *everyone* to consider. Instinctively, she knew that no one must know of how they felt about one another. If they did, people would force them apart. With trembling hands, she carefully and lovingly tucked the missive into her purse and returned to the table where Anwar was talking with Terri.

"Ah..." he said softly as he rose and seated her, his hands a gentle, lingering caress. "Our little one has returned. I hope all is well."

When their eyes met, it was obvious he knew she'd read his letter. The questions in them and in his voice showed her

his vulnerability. She smiled at him, then at Terri, who seemed a bit curious. "Everything is marvelous. Thank you."

Time sped by. Two magical Tuesdays came and went where Amber joined him alone for supper, where they talked until the restaurant closed, getting to know one another's hearts. Each night he returned her directly home and left her with a soft, chaste kiss...as though he was afraid to ask for more...or perhaps afraid to allow himself anything else.

After dinner on the second Tuesday, when he was returning her home, Anwar stopped the car in a quiet dark lane not far from where she lived. "Let's walk," he suggested. Leaving the car, they strolled slowly along the lane to stop beneath the sheltering foliage of some trees. In the darkness he gently took her in his arms and captured her lips with a tender desperation that left her shaken. "What are we to do, little one?" he asked sadly. She shook her head, unable to answer. "I need to know what you're feeling," he told her. "I know what I want, but it is so unfair, for you are so innocent. I wish I could make you understand..."

Amber was frustrated that she couldn't express how she felt. Her words never seemed adequate. "When I'm not with you," she told him, "I can sort it all out. Everything is so clear. I know how I feel and what to say. But when I see you, when you touch me...I'm confused again. I don't know *what* it is I want!" With growing intensity and sureness, she told him fiercely, "But I do know I want more than *this!*" *At last!* she thought to herself. *At last I managed to get it out!* She felt a vast sense of relief.

"You want to take the next step? You are certain of this?" he asked with so much emotion he sounded near to tears.

"Yes, I do," she admitted, and with this confession she could feel the color rising swiftly to her cheeks once more, and bent her head to avoid his eyes.

He couldn't see her face in the darkness, but he guessed the reason she was hiding from him. "Why are you

embarrassed by such a simple statement? I've told you of my love. That you are attracted to me is undeniable, and this desire to explore our relationship is the most natural thing in the world." Once more, he took her in his arms, then added, "Just as this is." The passion in his kiss excited her, suffusing her with an indescribable heat. His hands moved across her back, drawing her closer, pressing her to him. She tensed as she felt him harden against her, momentarily afraid of the power of his body, and he immediately released her. "When the time is right for us, little one, there will be no fear within you. Only desire."

Placing an arm around her shoulders, he walked her slowly back to the car. He was silent as they walked, and Amber was grateful to him for that silence. Still in silence, he drove the short distance to her door and helped her out of the car. Instead of a kiss, a gentle caress was the only goodnight he gave, then he walked back to the car without looking back.

Still feeling a bit shaky, Amber wondered if she'd made a decision she'd live to regret.

Anwar sighed heavily as he waited for Amber at The Willow Garden. He sat alone, thoughtfully smoking and drinking a glass of Bordeaux. He and Amber had continued to meet both with Terri and alone, though they'd never again met at the Carlton without Terri. *Poor Terri*, he thought. His innocent secretary still had no real idea what was going on, though she seemed puzzled by their behavior at times. Anwar knew it couldn't continue for long. Either their friendly lunches would have to stop, or Terri would have to be told.

Sipping his Bordeaux with appreciation, Anwar smiled to himself. Amber was spending the weekend with Terri, and Terri was spending *hers* at Hadleigh. *I will have her with me all weekend*. He wanted so badly to show her his home here

in England, though if Terri was *not* told their secret this weekend, it was going to be very difficult to keep his distance. After what seemed an eternity, Anwar saw Amber enter the restaurant, saw her eyes search the room for him...and find him. When their eyes met, her face shown with the same delight he felt at the sight of her. He rose as she reached the table and reached to take her wrap and seat her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, then glanced around.
“Where’s Terri?”

“Terri is meeting us at Hadleigh. It was easier that way. I hope you don’t mind.”

She flushed prettily. “Oh. No...not at all.”

They both fell into a tense silence, which was only broken by his ordering their lunch. Once the food arrived, though, and they began to talk of inconsequential things, it was easier.

He found himself watching her when she wasn’t aware. She was so composed, so seemingly mature. Although his mind told him she was a child in the legal sense of the word, all his heart could see was the promise of the young woman—warm, sensual, passionate and desirable—who waited just beneath the surface for him to awaken. His own desire stirred, and it took every ounce of will power he possessed to keep his hands off her. He clenched his hands and murmured, *Allah, give me strength...patience and wisdom.*

As they traveled to Chorley, where Hadleigh Hall was located, Anwar told Amber about the house. “It’s a Tudor house standing on its own grounds. I fell in love with it and bought it three years ago.” He glanced over at her, smiling at her look of excitement. “You’ll love the woods and the gardens.”

Her delighted, dancing eyes and the occasional touch of her hand on his arm sent delicious shivers through him, and when he smiled at her, she would blush.

“You mustn’t look at me like that!” she teased.

Soberly, he promised not to do it again, only to break his word a few minutes later, making them both laugh. He felt like a child again.

As they turned the Rover into the long drive and approached the house, he stopped to watch her reaction. “Well? What do you think?”

“Oh!” she breathed, her eyes shining. “It’s beautiful! I love it!”

Continuing on, he parked in front of the house. The front door opened, and Akhim came down the steps to bow to him. After helping Amber from the car, he introduced them.

“Amber, this is Akhim. Anything you need, just ask him.”

Anwar noticed Akhim’s antagonistic look as he glanced at Amber, and her intimidation. Frowning at the small man, he told him sternly, leaving no question of his anger, “When this woman is present you will speak only English. As far as you are concerned her voice carries all my authority! Disobey her and you will anger me!”

Akhim bowed deeply, “I would never disobey you, Amir, you know that.”

“Very well. Remember that.”

Akhim immediately ran to collect the luggage from the car, and dismissing him from his mind, Anwar took Amber to show her the Hall and the grounds.

Leading her through the ground floor, they then moved into the gardens past the swimming pool. They took a walk in the woods, holding hands like children. When they returned to the house, he led her upstairs to show her the second floor. Walking to the end of the long corridor, he opened the door to her room and led her inside. He watched her carefully to see her response. The room was perfect for her...large, with lovely, dark antique furniture and decorated in a pastel green. There was a single bed.

After a single exclamation of delight, she turned and threw her arms around him. "It's gorgeous! I've never seen anything so lovely!"

Smiling at her enthusiasm, he gently removed her arms from his neck, kissed them, and told her, "This is your room." Leading her to the door joining their rooms, he told her, "Through here is my room...the master bedroom." Closing the door, he locked it and solemnly handed her the key.

With a puzzled look, she turned the heavy key over in her hand, then lifted her eyes to his. "What's this for?" she asked.

"This door will remain locked until you decide the time is right to open it and join me. But be certain...for when you eventually walk through, lock it behind you, for you will never return through that door to be apart from me...not while you are beneath this roof." He kissed her then, very gently but with passion. When her shining eyes lifted to his, he repeated to her softly, "Be *very* certain it is what you want, my little love. For if you give yourself to me, I doubt I shall ever be able to let you go." And as he looked into those emerald eyes, he knew there was truth in that statement and that truth shook him.

Amber's senses were swimming. The surroundings, Anwar's presence...everything combined made for a richness of sensation and experience that was almost more than she could bear. She couldn't think. Anwar put his arm around her shoulders and led her from the room to continue the tour, but she couldn't concentrate on his words. When he'd promised that the decision would be hers, she knew he meant it: his words, other than when he gave her the key, were only about the house. He would *not* break his promise to her. She knew that. She glanced up at him and thought for a moment that

perhaps he, too, felt overwhelmed by what was between them, and that talking about his home focused his mind elsewhere.

By the time they'd finished the tour it was after three, and Anwar led her to the front of the house. He showed her the dining room. "This was the chapel when the Hall was built," he explained. "It's far too formal for the two of us to take tea here. I've had a table set up for us in the lounge."

Throughout the meal Amber was uncomfortable. Anwar seemed cold and distant and Akhim hovered in the corner of the room, watching her with cold, black, predatory eyes. She finished her tea as quickly as possible, made excuses and hurried away to unpack.

Within minutes, Anwar followed her into her bedroom, slamming the heavy oak door behind him. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Unpacking! Why?"

"I can *see* that!" he growled. "Why did you leave so abruptly? This is *not* the way things are done in my house! *No* one leaves until I have finished! Your actions were rude, to say the least!"

Amber was on the verge of tears. "I'm sorry!" she managed. "It's that *man*. He reminds me of something that's crawled out from under a stone. I just had to get away." She shuddered in revulsion.

"What man?" he asked in confusion, his abrupt anger seeming to drain away. "You mean Akhim?"

Nodding, she admitted, "Yes. He...makes me... uncomfortable. He just hangs around all the time, watching me with those vicious little eyes. I don't *like* him."

Anwar shrugged, obviously not understanding her revulsion. "There's no need to fear him. Akhim would never harm you, believe me. He would die before he allowed one hair on your lovely head to be harmed in any way."

She still wasn't convinced she would be safe. How could she trust a man who looked at her with such hatred in his

eyes? “I’m sorry, Anwar, but I just don’t see how you could employ anyone as...unpleasant as he is.”

Anwar almost exploded with laughter, which embarrassed her and made her a little angry. “Oh my dear girl, you have much to learn. We come from such different worlds you and me. Akhim is not employed by me, he *belongs* to me.”

Now, shocked as well as angry, sure she’d misunderstood, she asked, “You mean...like a slave?”

“That is *exactly* what I mean. Akhim is a slave, bought and paid for by my grandfather. He now belongs to me. *Believe* me, little one...he will *not* harm you. He is merely very protective of me.”

Amber was speechless. She was finding this very hard to believe. For one human being to own another in 1961 seemed impossible. She realized suddenly just how much there was about this man—about the world he came from—that she neither knew nor understood.

In the silence between them the sound of a car horn loudly announced Terri’s arrival. Anwar seemed as relieved as she that they needn’t continue the conversation.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a second tour of the house and grounds, this time for Terri’s benefit, and it gave Amber time to distance herself from all she’d discovered. Anwar began introducing her to his staff, beginning with the man who had driven Terri there. “This is Robert. He has been with me for several years as my personal assistant.”

Robert smiled and winked and Amber liked him immediately.

“Do you...do you have a lot of people working for you here?” she asked.

“Murphy is my cook. You’ll meet him. He’s quite a character. Mrs. Cryer is housekeeper, and Geoff takes care of the grounds.”

Terri laughed. “Oh, I see. You’re a despot here, just like in Egypt.”