



1001

DARK
NIGHTS

THE FIRST NIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

LEXI BLAKE
AND M.J. ROSE

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By Lexi Blake and M. J. Rose

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EVIL EYE
CONCEPTS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or establishments is solely coincidental.

Join NYT Bestselling Authors Lexi Blake and MJ Rose as they take you to ancient Persia—a land of magic, erotic delights and exotic danger.

Discover the beginnings of 1001 Dark Nights....

Trapped in the body of the legendary Scheherazade, a young woman named Camille, finds herself in a land of harems, wizards, and ruthless rulers. A student of time travel, a descendant of a witch, and a curious and sensitive soul, Camille is trapped by the king's order. Night after night she's forced to tell stories of her travels across the planes in order to keep herself alive. Tales of the erotic, the romantic, the magical, and the sensual, she entertains the king in the hopes that he will spare her life. Desperate to get back to her own time, she turns to the one man who might be able to save her.

Khalid is a member of an ancient order of mages, his power granted to him by a Djinn. The most feared man in the kingdom, he is still forced to do the king's bidding and the king wants to know if Scheherazade is a witch. Khalid sees through the mask Camille wears and knows she's the one woman promised to him by fate. He'll do anything to have her, anything to love her. But to save her means losing her forever...

The First Night

Sometimes I wake and for just a moment, I can feel the cool wash of soft sheets over my flesh. I can hear the ocean rolling and my mind flashes on the day ahead of me, of studying the great secret books with my father, and a restless satisfaction settles over me. No matter how difficult my studies, I am becoming something more than I was, more complex and more infinite. In these brief moments before dawn, I am free and happy again.

“Awaken, miss. Awaken. We must prepare.”

And then I open my eyes and admit the truth.

I am trapped. Unable to find a way out. The same panic that threatens to overtake me every single morning rises in me again. I force bile down my throat as I realize there is no ocean here, no comfortable home. Time itself has become inflexible, and I am a prisoner to its inevitable march.

I force myself to sit up and acknowledge that voice that calls to me. Goli is a slave girl. Young and lovely but with amblyopia. In my time they would call it a lazy eye, but in hers, in this time, it's a sign of being cursed. She's allowed only the lowliest of tasks; cleaning chamber pots and making beds in the harem. That is how I came to know her.

I live in the harem but as one of the virgins, not one of the wives. All here know me as Scheherazade, but that is not who I am. Sometimes, I whisper my real name out loud. Just to hear it. *Camille*. When my mother says it, there's wind in the trees. *Camille*. My father always speaks it with the beginning of a laugh in his voice.

I have taught it to Goli. Moved my mouth slowly, instructing her how to pronounce it.

The wives call me Scheherazade. But lately they have begun calling me by another name.

Witch. They use other words, but it is all the same. Some have come to believe there is dark magic all around me.

I yawn and turn away from the morning light coming through the windows. It's early. Far too early. My job keeps me up late. When I'm finished I'm often too exhausted to go right to sleep. My burden weighs on me. If I can't keep the court entertained, I'll share in the fate of those who have not been able to amuse the king. I've seen the pits where they throw the bodies and am determined that I will not join them. Even if it means I need to tell better and better stories. Even if I must share with them my more amusing and risqué scenarios. I must leave the king always wondering what will happen next, how the tale is going to unfold, how the conflict will be resolved. I must keep the king never satiated, always wanting more.

“It's not yet noon, Goli. Go away. Let me sleep. Come back later.”

She's a quick girl and I'm the only one in the harem to see past her small disability. I made a patch for her to wear during the afternoons and give her exercises at this time every day, designed to help strengthen her eye. But we can work on her improvement later. Today I need my sleep. I need to dream of my world.

I lay back and hope I can find my way there again. I need to relive my adventures. Today I'll replay my time with Azagoth, the Grim Reaper. I found myself on his unearthly plane once, and after an unfortunate misunderstanding was corrected, discovered him to be an interesting host. Yes, I will close my eyes and remember that moment so I can tell the story of Azagoth to the king tonight.

But Goli will not be dismissed. “No, no, mistress. You must come. The magician is here.”

I sigh. She can be quite stubborn when she chooses to be. “All right, I’ll bite. Who is this magician?”

Goli backs away. “Please don’t bite, mistress.”

I need to watch my language. I’m usually better at blending in, but then I don’t often stay on one plane and in one time for as long as I’ve been here. “Apologies, Goli. I was teasing you. Who is the magician?”

She smiles and I can’t help but forgive her. When she reaches for my hand, I squeeze hers back. “He works miracles. I thought perhaps he could help with your problem.”

Only Goli knows my tale. She has been my invaluable aide. She tells me what I should do and how to behave. She knew the real Scheherazade, and even though she can’t understand what has happened, she does believe I’ve somehow taken her place.

“I thank you, Goli, but I doubt this magician would even understand my problem.”

She frowns and her naïveté shows in her eyes. “Why? He is known as the greatest of our mages. It is said he can make potions that heal the body and the mind. It is whispered he can even speak with the dead.”

Speak with the dead? Those four words make me sit up. It is common knowledge in my time that some people are aware that the universe is not as linear and orderly as it might seem. They see through the veils that separate time and space. In my world, we have entire schools dedicated to the study of time walking. Here, they are suspect of it. How has this magician survived?

“Can I meet him? Will the king allow it?”

“That I do not know, but I found out where they will be and when.” Goli has an impish look on her face that tells me what I need.

“And you know where we can go so that we can overhear their conversation, don’t you?”

Goli nods. “I know how to listen to everyone. No one notices me. It’s how I get all the best gossip. So you will come with me, yes? They say the magician takes an elixir to make himself beautiful to all eyes and is the most attractive man in all the lands. I want to see that for myself.”

I laugh and smooth down her hair.

“Will you come with me? Should I draw your bath?”

As Goli fills the tub with oils and rose petals, I think about the magician. Maybe this man is learned in the dark arts. Maybe he can help me. Anxious now, I get out of bed and as I stand, catch a glimpse of my feet. *Scheherazade’s* feet. I long to see myself again, to look at my own hands and arms and breasts and legs and my own feet. Too see myself as I remember.

“Yes, hurry with my bath. Then help me get dressed. I’ll go with you.”

* * * *

We walk on quiet feet as we sneak along the stone floors of the palace. It is silent here in the king’s wing, and if we are caught, there will be punishment. The sentences in this world are harsh, violent. I do not wish to be caught, but at the same time it’s hard to go any more slowly. Something invisible pushes me on.

When I timewalk, I can feel the spots where tears exist in the fabric that divides the planes. There is a certain energy about such spaces that lets me know I can traverse them. It’s the same with some people. Those with the most energy glow with knowledge. They’re more than simply human. They are Adepts, people with a deep knowledge of how our world worked in the past and how it will work in the future.

I'm sure I am walking ever closer to an Adept, and my heart thrills at the prospect.

Goli guides me through the palace with the expert of a little mouse who has often had to find her way. She seems to know when to hide and when to be in motion, giggling as she evades the guards making their rounds and the advisors and courtiers strutting through the king's private wing like bejeweled and stuffed birds puffing themselves up.

We conceal ourselves in the shadows as one of the wives is escorted across the main hallway, being led from the king's bedroom back to the harem. She's a beautiful woman with skin the color of warm caramel and striking sky-blue eyes. Unfortunately, her hands strike the servants, too, and often she swipes at Goli, who now stands frozen and utterly silent as we wait until the wife has passed.

Apparently, she isn't welcome at the meeting with the magician, but then I'm sure I'm not as well. Still, I feel as if I have no choice. I must see him.

Resuming our journey, Goli brings me into a private garden where I'm surrounded by vibrant colors and exotic smells. Despite the fact that desert surrounds this city, I am awed by the rainbow of flowers and plants that create this oasis of beauty in the midst of desolation. The smell of jasmine tickles my nose. We are standing behind a wall of vines that curve around a fountain, a backdrop to the lovely dripping pool.

"This suite is where the king puts the most important of visitors," Goli explains, her voice low.

"So the king is interested in impressing this magician?"

Goli puts a finger to her mouth, but she doesn't need to. I go silent because I feel his presence. It floats over me like a warm caress. Motioning me forward, she shows me where to stand so that I might watch what is going on inside the palace through a tiny crack in the tall, stone wall.

My heart thuds in my chest as the king enters the suite. He's a large man who has enjoyed the raw fruits of his birth for far too long. There is a certain cruelty to his glance. He examines his surroundings as if he expects to find something wrong.

It doesn't take him long. "I told them no incense. I'll have someone's head."

He means that. I've come to believe he has a collection.

"No, please, my king. Not on my account," the voice drips of honey, slow and rich. "I merely said I preferred no scents, not that death must occur if I happen to smell one."

I catch my breath as the man who is speaking comes into view. If his beauty is due to a glamour, then he is the most powerful mage in the world, for he is truly magnificent.

"I do not wish to begin my sojourn here with a beheading. It is not good luck, you know. A feast is better luck." His teeth show, even and white. His lips are the most sensual I've ever seen on a man. He glows with health. Tall and lean with broad shoulders, he could easily have come from my time. He's dressed in sumptuous greens and golds that contrast beautifully with his skin. A strong jaw sits below the most sensual lips I've ever seen on a man.

"Then a feast you shall have, Khalid. I cannot express how much I appreciate you helping me in this matter. I thank you for agreeing to come here. I know you prefer the desert."

"I had a choice?" Khalid smiles as he makes his way around the room, his fingers brushing the furniture as he inspects his new quarters.

The king chuckles. It is one of the only times I've seen him laugh outside of listening to my stories, and I know that he likes Khalid. "I suppose not, but you answered my call with grace, my friend. I didn't merely request your visit in order to discuss my problems, though. I enjoy your company."

“As I do yours, my king.” Suddenly, Khalid turns toward the garden, a curious look in his eyes.

Fearing discovery, I shrink back and then remind myself I need not worry. Without coming right up to the wall himself and putting his eye up to the same crack, he cannot see me. And yet, staring out into the courtyard, those beautiful lips curl slightly and when he speaks he does not turn back to look at the king but keeps his eyes right on the spot in the wall where he, if he could see through stone and mortar, would be able to see me.

“Let us talk about this business that is troubling you,” Khalid says. “Tell me about the witch.”

Goli begins to shake. “He has seen us.”

“He can’t,” I hiss.

“Yes, he can. Look at his eyes. They see more than ordinary mortals do.” Her words are little desperate puffs of air. “We have to go.”

I can’t take my eyes off him. “You go. I have to stay.”

Leaving me behind, she scurries away to safety.

“Yes, the witch,” the king says and begins to speak of me and explain about my nightly tales while Khalid sits and listens, his gaze never returning to the spot where I’m hiding.

Tea is brought in and Khalid’s focus remains on his king as he recounts how he first came to bring Scheherazade to the palace.

“I’d meant to marry the vizier’s daughter and then cast her aside like so many others, but that first night, she told me a marvelous tale. I was transfixed right up to the very end. I couldn’t wait for the denouement. I had to know what was going to happen to the characters. And then she just stopped. She withheld the ending. The little vixen said that she was tired and if I wanted to know what was happening, she would tell me the next night. And true to her word, the following night she began with the resolution of the first story and then began another. Again withholding the climax. Khalid, night after night she ensnares me with her spellbinding tales and keeps me on tenterhooks until the following eve. But lately,” he said, “the stories have become so strange. I fear my Scheherazade might indeed be the witch my wives claim her to be.”

“And you wish me to discover if she is possessed of dark magic and help you decide if she should live or die?”

I begin to shake. My very fate is to be decided by this mage? In this manner? Based on rumors and the extent of my imagination?

The very stories that have kept me alive are going to doom me?

I know I should flee, but I continue to wait, to watch, and to listen.

Done with the tea, the king leaves Khalid to rest and refresh himself. The magician escorts his ruler to the door and then shuts it behind him. He stretches his magnificent body.

Then, pulling his white linen shirt over his head, he tosses it onto a cushion and bends over the basin of rosewater that awaits him. With a yawn, he rinses his face. My eyes follow the curve of his spine, take in the way his white pants contrast with his gorgeously tanned skin. When he stands again, he runs a towel over his face. Once he has dried his skin, he lets the towel drop and turns.

“Are you going to hide in the garden all day, little one? Or shall we have a chat? I should warn you though, I am very vain. I will allow you to watch me all day if that is your wish. Just please remember to gasp a little when I undress more fully later. It does much for a man’s pride.”

I step back, deeper into the shadows of a fig tree. He speaks directly to me, but there is no possibility he can see me. There is a wall between us. I'm only able to gaze at him through the one small crack.

"Yes, you," he says with a satisfied smirk on his face. "Come along. Show yourself. I take it you're this Scheherazade the king is so concerned about. A pretty name. Let's get a good look at you."

I think about fleeing, but my feet hold firm. I'm no coward and I have never run from a man. Well, not one who wasn't actively attempting to kill me. A girl does what she has to, after all. Gathering my courage, I walk around the decorative wall, making myself visible for the first time.

A smile of pure pleasure lights his face. "Ah, I knew there was a reason I was drawn here. You are stunning, little one."

I'm not about to let him know how his words warm me. I tell myself he's not really looking at me. He sees Scheherazade with *her* exotic looks. Sees *her* dark hair and eyes. I lift my chin.

"I thought you were ordered to come to the palace," I say.

He winks and my heart flutters. Perhaps I should have fled after all. "Ah, but I am quite good at evading orders. You see, if the king can't find me, he can't command me. I learned that long ago. I allowed it this time because I dreamed of you for three nights in a row. And so when the king's man rode through the desert, I knew it was fated that I oblige him."

"You dreamed of Scheherazade?"

He steps too close, taking up all the space, making my breath hitch in my chest. I want to step back, but pride forces me to hold my ground. His hand reaches out and lifts up my chin so I face him. His eyes are dark, so dark that for a moment, I think they're black. Then they flash and I see the deep blue of a star-filled night.

"No. I dreamed of *you*, Camille."

For the longest moment I am trapped, looking up at him. I expect him to lower his head and brush my lips with his, but after a second, he steps back with a low chuckle.

"How did you know my name?" It has taken everything I have not to reach my fingers to my lips and make sure they are not on fire. I can feel his touch though he never kissed me.

Khalid opens a woven reed suitcase and pulls out a fresh shirt. "I know many things, little one, but not every thing. Where *do* you come from? It's obvious you're not from here."

"How can it be obvious?" I look exactly like a woman of the region. My own true self is hidden inside of Scheherazade's body.

"Your pale skin and red hair are dead giveaways." He stares at me like I'm the lunatic.

"You see *me*?"

"Of course." He comes close again, his fingers brushing across the bridge of my nose. "I like these. They're enchanting."

I loathe the dusting of light freckles. In my own time I cover them with makeup, but here they're invisible. I don't look like myself to anyone but this wizard.

"You're trapped, aren't you?" His eyes soften. "A traveler. Are you one of La Lune's daughters?"

"La Lune?" He has confused me, confounded me. And definitely aroused me. I pray he hasn't noticed how my nipples hardened when he moved close. Or rather Scheherazade's, I think, trying to convince myself that my reaction to him is really hers. It is a lie, of course, but a comforting one.

“There is a way to tell if you belong to La Lune.” His eyes heat as he stares. “Take off your clothes, Camille. Show me your lovely body and I’ll show you the proof, if indeed it’s there.”

The impulse to strip for this man nearly overwhelms me, and I know that the time has come to leave. I need to think. He’s a variable in the pattern I never considered. I step back into the garden, watching him like an antelope watches a hungry tiger.

“Camille, I’m no threat to you.” He holds out his hand as if to coax me back in.

The way he says my name brings the blood to my cheeks. I’ve longed to hear someone speak it, but now it frightens me. This man has enough power over me already. I shouldn’t give him more.

Turning, I practically run back to the comfort of the harem. No matter what he says, I know a threat when I see one. This mage could be my undoing. For the rest of the afternoon I sit in my room, watching the shadows grow long on the wall.

* * * *

Three days have passed. Each night Khalid sits beside the king in the throne room and listens to me spin my tales. The first night I finished one about a cowboy and began another about the astral plane where the Midnight Breed live. The second night I finished that one and began another about a bounty hunter named Naya Blade. When I ended that one, I began a tale about a magic candle whose flame makes fantasies come true.

Through every twist and turn of each story, Khalid never took his eyes off me. Even when I didn’t glance his way, I felt him. I felt his very mind holding me.

Waking up this morning, all I can think about is how hard it is becoming to stop myself from going to him. I wonder if I should just give in. The questions he’s raised repeat over and over in my mind. Could he really know how to help me travel back to my own time? How did he know my name? And who *is* La Lune? Who are her daughters?

Sitting in my own little garden on the afternoon of this fourth day since he arrived, I watch as the sun begins to set. What should I do? I ache to find out what he knows. How can I trust myself around him?

“Camille?” The decision has been taken from me. I hear the magician’s voice.

I close my eyes.

“Camille, let me help. I can feel how troubled you are. It keeps me from sleeping and then when I finally drift off to sleep, your anxiety and confusion invade my dreams. Khalid’s voice soothes me just as it inflames me.

“Go away.”

“I cannot.”

I don’t turn around. “If you’re caught in the harem, the king will have your head.”

“I think you’ll find the king has different rules for someone like me. Don’t you know what they say about Khalid the Wizard?”

I shake my head.

“Look at me. Talk to me. I can help you.”

I don’t want to but I can’t help myself. I open my eyes. He stands right in front of me. Tall, impossibly handsome. Glowing with a curious nimbus.

“They say I am a man beyond death, outside of it. That every attempt to kill me has only made me stronger.” He shrugs a little. “And angrier. And that it’s unwise to downplay my irritation.”

He sits down beside me, right beside me on the bed I sleep in every night, and his body causes the rushes to sink, forcing me closer to him. I make a desperate attempt to move away, but his arm catches me around my shoulders, drawing me closer.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I whisper. I am getting lost in his midnight eyes, in his tempting lips. I can’t allow this. I have to save him. “Even *you* shouldn’t be here.”

He waves off my concern with a flick of his wrist. “Tell me what happens with the candlemaker. Where was he from?”

“Bastian?”

Khalid nods. “Yes, tell me about Bastian, Camille.”

“I met him when he was living in a city called New Orleans.” I’d watched the man for weeks before realizing what he was.

Khalid smiles, his eyes closing in memory. “Yes, you called it the French Quarter when you told the tale and as you described it, I could feel the rain on my face and smell the candle Bastian made for the lovers. Do they move past their fears? Are they together?”

“It’s just a story.”

It wasn’t though. I’d watched the three lovers struggle and fight their desires, but I don’t want to tell Khalid. Not here in the intimacy of my bedroom. He’s far too close to me, and I am afraid if I describe how those lovers felt it will spill over onto me. They were longing for something forbidden. Just as I am now.

“I don’t believe you. It wasn’t just a story. You saw it, experienced it in some way. As I said before you so rudely fled my quarters on the day I arrived, you’re a traveler. I know it. You can’t hide it from me.”

I don’t like his description of me at all. “I wasn’t rude. I simply left.”

“There was definite rudeness involved, little one, because I was promised an ogling and I didn’t get one. I told you about my masculine pride. It requires much upkeep.”

His charm isn’t lost on me, but somehow I find the will to stand and move away from him. I need answers and must concentrate on getting them, not thinking about the fact we’re here and alone.

“Who is La Lune?” I ask.

He stares at me with open curiosity. “How can you not know her name? If I’m right, she’s your ancestor. Another woman who could walk through time. Many called her a witch, too. She was as beautiful as you are and a brilliant artist. Almost as talented a painter as she was an alchemist. I believe you to be one of her many children, all of whom are marked.”

“My mother was a very nice woman. She never picked up a paintbrush as far as I know. No one ever called her a witch, and she certainly didn’t have a French nickname. Is this all a ruse to get me to take my clothes off?”

“Being a daughter of La Lune does not mean that she gave birth to you.”

From the set of his jaw and the flare of stars in the midnight eyes, I sense that I can only push this man so far. He’s been charming, polite, flirtatious, but now I see he has a temper.

“And as for me wanting you to take your clothes off, the reason for my request has nothing to do with my personal desires. All daughters of La Lune bear a crescent birthmark on their lower back, where the waist curves into hips.”

I manage to not gasp. I was born with such a stain. My mother had one too. A small lunar symbol right at the base of our spines.

He stares through me as though he can read my mind. “As I said, you’re a daughter of La Lune, though you do not seem to have her courage.” Khalid stands. “I wish you the very best of

luck, Camille. I shall tell the king he has nothing to fear from you and be on my way.” He bows and turns.

Will I ever see him again? The idea settles on me like a dark cloud. He’s the only one who sees who I really am. I can’t let him leave. Not this soon. If he walks out now, I will never see him again. He will disappear into his desert, evading the commands of the king for all of his days.

Giving up my pride, I entreat him, “No, please, don’t go.”

He stops at the door, opening it. “I only came to help you, Camille.” How straight his shoulders are, how perfect his posture has become. “But my help seems too difficult for you to accept. Your heritage is too frightening for you to contemplate. I understand that. So I think perhaps it would be best if I left.”

He seems to be staring at the vine of fuchsia flowers growing on my garden wall. That he won’t face me is infinitely frustrating. There’s something between us, I know it and I know that he is aware of it too. A spark I shouldn’t deny, that I’ve fought so hard against. I’m sure—even though I don’t now how—that for these three long days and nights, every time I avoided a shadow, he was lurking there, waiting for me to say the word, speak his name, allow him to come to me.

Even though I am breaking protocol in approaching a mage, I walk over to where he stands and when I reach him, place my hand on his arm.

He sighs and something inside him relaxes. I can feel it. It’s as though my touch has calmed him and sucked the anger out of him.

“Please look at me,” I whisper.

“I can’t. If I look at you, I’ll be tempted to kiss you, Camille.”

I smile even though I know he can’t see me.

He doesn’t turn. I don’t remove my fingers from his flesh. We take a moment. Our first. This is the first moment my skin has brushed his, felt his warmth, shared my own. This is the first night I let my breath time to his, breathing in when he does, letting go in the same second, synchronizing with an ease I’ve never known before. This is the first time I can smell his sandalwood scent wash over me. And perhaps the first time he can smell the roses and jasmine with which I bathe.

“Tell me about your dreams of me,” I plead. Even if he does go, before he leaves, I need to know how he sees me, why he came here, how he thought he could help.

Finally he turns and I forget to breathe.

“You want to know what I dreamed of? I dreamed of you. I dreamed of Camille and not Scheherazade. I dreamed of a woman with red hair and skin the color of cream. She was warm and when she smiled, I lit up inside. I could *feel* my soul in my dreams. Too often we are only aware of physical bodies, but when you smiled at me, I could actually feel my essence.”

“But why would *you* dream of *me*?” I ask to stop from doing the one thing I want to do—press myself up to him, let our lips touch, surrender to him. I can’t take that step. It would be irrevocable because this is not my body. This is not my time. I can’t make ties here. It’s wrong. I was taught to travel in order to watch, to visit other planes in order to gather information and stories and learn from them. If I allow this contact with Khalid, I’ll lose myself further in this era and this place and perhaps lose all chances of getting out. I must get out. I can’t remain trapped here forever because I know the day is coming when the king will tire of my stories. One night he will force me to say *the end*, and then he will end my life.

“I dream of many things that come to pass, little one, and of things I desire. And I have desired you since I learned what the word meant.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Because I haven’t finished. Impatient aren’t you?” His eyes light up with a smile as he teases me.

I feel a blush flush my cheeks.

He touches the spot where the heat burns. “I’ve dreamed of you since I was a child and known since then that one day my fate would entwine with a daughter of La Lune. It is part of my destiny. Part of the joy that is mine to claim.”

I step away, breaking the enchanted moment because I find his words too hard to believe. “You’re telling me you saw me in your dreams when you were a boy? I hardly can fathom such a thing.”

His eyes harden slightly and I wish I’d kept silent.

“You can hardly fathom it? You who walks through time? That’s a bit hypocritical, but I’ll ignore it for now. Even the most studied of learners can prove ignorant when it comes to things they are afraid of.”

“I’m hardly ignorant.” My arrogance rises like a snake sticking its head out of a reed basket. I resent having my intellect questioned. Even in my own time women are still sometimes condescended to, especially if they’re deemed attractive, and it always rankles. “I’ve seen more in my brief life than you’ll see in all of your years.”

He laughs, the sound rich and deep. “Is that what you think? Let me show you something.”

“What can you show me?” I argue as he draws me over to the mirror. Even as I try to resist, I give in. I’m too attracted to him and it’s not all about his stunning face and figure. There is a radiance that glows inside and around Khalid that draws me. When he smiles it’s like the sun has come from behind the clouds. I fear how mesmerizing that light is, how seductive it’s shine. That very morning when I should have been dreaming of a story for the king, my thoughts were stolen by a vision of Khalid, smiling down at me as he joined our bodies and souls into one under the warmth of that very light.

“You don’t believe my magic is infinite and far reaching? You don’t believe I can see more than just this time. You require proof? Do you need me to show you just a fragment of what I can see? Come and have it, Camille.” He leads me over to the mirror that adorns the corner of Scheherazade’s bedroom.

I hang back, inexplicably afraid. Khalid gently pushes me toward the mirror. I hold my breath and look but I see only what I’ve seen every day since I became trapped here. I see Scheherazade. I see her long, dark hair and wide eyes. She is lovely, but it’s wrong to see her image in the mirror instead of my own. As always happens when I catch a glimpse of the stranger I’ve become, a deep well of sorrow opens inside me.

“Don’t cry.”

In the mirror, I see a tear slip down her cheek as Scheherazade weeps.

I turn away. “I don’t like looking at her.”

He cups my shoulders. “There is something I need you to see. Watch, little one.” He gently shifts me so I am facing the mirror again. I close my eyes because seeing Khalid’s hands on skin that is not my own makes my sadness deepen.

“I said you need to look, Camille.” His breath is warm against my ear. He holds me to his body and his heat caresses my skin.

I twist my head around again and shut my eyes once more. “No! I don’t want to see her.”

I don't hate the woman I've switched bodies with. It's simply that seeing her reminds me of all I have lost.

"Open your eyes. I promise you will like what you see." His voice cajoles, tempts.

Obedying him, now out of curiosity more than acquiescence, I look in the mirror and see myself. The *me* I have always been. Rounder than Scheherazade. More bust, less height. Too many freckles. So much hair, I can never tame it. Pure wonder overcomes me.

I step out of his hold and reach out to touch the mirror, but the image wavers.

"You have to be in contact with me to see what I see." He steps forward, his arms coming around me again, fully surrounding my body, and the image in the mirror solidifies once more.

This time when I reach out, I can touch my own visage. In the mirror I search out his face above my own, his magic glowing around him.

"This is a wonderful gift, Khalid!"

He lets his head rest against mine. Looking right at me in the mirror, he speaks slowly, making sure I take in every word. "You're beautiful, Camille. Just as beautiful as I dreamed."

In the silvered glass, I look at how our bodies fit together, two halves making a whole.

"But in my dreams," he whispers into my hair, "you were like a ghost haunting me. A copper shimmer. Indistinct. Not in sharp focus. I could feel your presence better than I could see your face. Once when I took very ill, it was your presence that comforted me."

He's so certain. "But Khalid, I never knew you before now. I never had any of those same experiences. I'm so sorry, but I couldn't have been there."

"Ah, but you were. A part of you was. A part of you has been with me since the moment of your birth, and longer, since in every life we have ever lived our souls have found each other."

"I never felt that."

"Because you have a very thick skull," he jokes. "I can't help that I'm more blessed by the universe than you." He chuckles and I feel it all along my spine. "Must you have to believe something for it to be true? You have seen it yourself just now, there in the mirror. I showed you the truth under the lie. My magic connects me to something greater that I have faith in. For all those years I believed that you would come to be with me and you have."

His arms tighten and I feel the exquisite pressure of his lips on my neck, his pressing need for me in the small of my back where the crescent mark sits.

He wants me. And I want him. And his magic.

I know there are astral planes where all who live there contain magic. All through time, there have been magnificent beasts and humans with powers beyond comprehension. Living here in the king's palace on this particular plane has been so mundane, I've forgotten about how powerful enchantments, conjuring, and the unexplained can be.

Now that I am in the arms of a man who embodies pure magic, things could change for me here. Perhaps I truly am no longer lost forever from my own time.

"Kiss me, Camille. Let me finally know what it's like to make love to the one woman who was made for me."

I shake my head no and force myself to speak when all I want is to let him kiss me and take me to my bed so we can lose ourselves in each other. But this is not the moment for that. I have lost too much of myself. It will only be possible for us to be together if I am Camille wholly and completely.

I utter the words that I know will change the texture and the meaning of this moment.

"Khalid, can your magic send me back?"

As I feared he would, he stops the slow seduction of this body I'm in. His hands cease moving in tight sensuous circles on this skin. His eyes lose their languorous luster.

"Send you back?"

"To my body. To my time."

In the mirror I see his face fall. He believed I never would ask. He never guessed this was what I would want from him

"You're making too much of something that is superficial. You are the real you regardless of what shell you wear. I care about you. I will always care about you no matter what mantle is covering your soul. I've waited all my life. I'm not going to spit in the face of fate simply because you're not exactly how I thought you would be. Tell me you don't feel our connection."

I can't tell him that. Of course I feel it. But no matter how strong it is, I'm afraid. My life has been dedicated to learning how to navigate astral planes, to studying the secrets of all universes in their glorious variety. How can I spend my life relegated to just one time?

"I want to go home and I want you to help me. If we belong together we will figure out a way once I have returned."

In the mirror, his eyes meet mine. He drops his hands. Horrified, I watch as my own body fades and I am again Scheherazade.

"I will study and see what I can do. And if I find a way, I will return. For now, I must say good-bye, Camille."

And without giving me a single moment to rethink my request or to soften the blow or deflect the pain, he turns and walks out of my room, never bothering to look back.

Once he is gone from my sight I start to shake. What have I done? I erected an impenetrable wall between us with my thoughtlessness. He told me how he felt and I ignored it and went after what I wanted. Why wasn't I gentler? Why didn't I ask him to come with me?

I know the answer. I am afraid of the mage they call Khalid. I am terrified of how he makes me feel, of that tiny piece of me that wonders if I stayed with him here, would I be able to find happiness?

I fall to my knees and weep.

* * * *

It has been seven days and seven nights, seven beginnings and seven endings to seven stories since I was alone with Khalid. Every evening I look to the king's left and the magician is sitting there but there is never joy on his face. He refuses to look at me. Instead of that wondrous light, a visible sadness surrounds him. The rest of human kind doesn't seem to notice. The king still laughs and jokes and slaps Khalid on the back when there is something humorous in one of my tales.

The distance between Khalid and I is palpable. He can be not ten feet from me but is miles away.

Everything I attempted to avoid by pushing him away has come true. I was afraid to let him in my dreams but he invades every one. Even my waking thoughts are filled with him. Before I met him, I might not have been aware of him lurking in my subconscious, but I am now. Every time I close my eyes or let my mind drift, it takes me straight to him. I remember his warmth, the strength of his hands on my body. Now I feel alone in a way I didn't before I'd met him, as if when he left he took something of my core with him.

It is midday and the king's wives and their servants are laughing and chatting. I sit apart, in shadows, unwelcome in their circle. Every once in a while I hear them whisper the dreaded word *witch* when they look my way. Their eyes are suspicious as they appraise me.

A child runs through the courtyard. It's not until she's almost on top of me does she realize how close she's come. Her eyes widen in terror and she runs back to her mother, hiding behind her skirts as though they will protect her from whatever evil I possess.

And Khalid wonders why I want to leave this place.

"Mistress? I thought you might be hungry." Goli approaches, a wooden bowl in hand.

She walks past the fountain and the children move away from her as well. By waiting on me, she too has become an outcast. She doesn't seem to notice that the path is suddenly clear, or perhaps she has been treated so badly so much of her life that insults no longer register.

I offer her a smile though I fear it is a weak one.

"How are you today, Goli?" I move over on the bench, giving her a place to sit beside me. Technically she is a servant and should stand, prepared to do my bidding, but I don't care what the wives think. Goli is the only kind soul I have found in this place.

She sinks down. I can see that she's brought me candied figs nestled in a bowl, little sweet treats. "Very good, thank you, Mistress. Would you like one?"

I sigh. "What did you have to trade for those?"

She grins. "Nothing. The cook made them to celebrate the birth of another heir and he gave them to me with hearty wishes for your well being."

The king has many wives and someone in the harem is always pregnant. It must have been a boy or there would have been no celebration. Since I know Goli didn't sacrifice for the figs, I don't feel bad turning them down. I'm too preoccupied and disturbed to eat.

"You have them. I will wait for the evening meal."

She grins and immediately starts in on one. Goli has never met a sweet she didn't like. "Do you want to hear the latest court gossip?"

"Not particularly." I'm too marred in my own misery to hear about someone else's.

"Even if it's about the wizard?" she teases.

She has mentioned the one person sure to get my attention. Any hint of Khalid turns my head. Whenever I hear the other women talking about how attractive he is, jealousy threatens to overtake me. I know I shouldn't, but I feel Khalid is mine. Irrational. Insane. Very silly.

"What are they saying about Khalid?"

Goli giggles and selects another fig. "That he is the most beautiful of all men."

"He says that himself, Goli." Remembering his arrogance makes me smile. "Tell me something I don't know."

"All right, he's working in secret in his room. He's been asking for all sorts of odd plants and herbs. Some say he is working on a love potion. They all pray he's going to give it to them."

"The women in this harem better pray that his love potion comes with some kind of protection spell against the beheading that will occur once the king finds them in another's bed."

Often I question the intelligence of these women. They giggle over men, including the pretty eunuchs who have no interest in them at all. The harem's isolation breeds drama and gossip, and I don't like the thought of Khalid being dragged into it. "I hope they understand they could hurt Khalid's standing with the king with their thoughtless words."

"Don't fear that, mistress. The king is a practical man. He knows he can find another wife, but he would have trouble finding another man with the magician's skills." She leans in close and whispers my direction. "It is said that the king fears the magician."

“Goli! Never let our ruler hear you repeat that.”

Men in power don't like to have their flaws or fears pointed out to them. It's a truth I've learned in my travels. Kings, presidents, emperors, none of them like to acknowledge that they possess a single weakness.

Goli sits back. “I am careful.”

Not careful enough, I think, but I let it slide.

Clouds move over the sun. The temperature drops. I feel a rare breeze on my skin that makes me think about how Khalid's hands felt as they slid across my skin when our eyes met in the mirror.

“What do you know about him, Goli?”

“Who, the king?” Another fig slips into her mouth.

Such a silly girl and yet I am so fond of her. “No, you know who I mean. Khalid. Tell me what you know of him. And don't sigh and tell me how lovely he is. Is it true that he lives in the desert?”

She nods. “Yes. The rumor is he's one of a small tribe that lives where few ever venture. It's said they survive in the bareness where others die, that they can call water to their feet and create an oasis from their thoughts. I don't know about that though. If they could create an oasis, why would they roam so much?”

“So he's like a Bedouin?” Even in my time there are still a few nomadic tribes who cleave to the ancient ways.

“Yes, though I doubt the Bedouins would claim him. It's said his tribe is magical, touched by Djinn.”

My people would call them genies. Many claim the Djinn are magical creatures, but I've been to places where they were not mythical. “Touched how?”

“It is said that his tribe was created by the Djinn and that one fathered the magician's ancestor and his magic was passed down through every son. Unfortunately the Djinn didn't bless them with much fertility since the magician is one of the last of his line.”

“How many others are there?”

“No one knows. They have become very private since their numbers have dwindled, but they used to come to market every now and again to sell their wares. Mostly medicines and baskets. It was considered good luck to keep one of their baskets in your home to ward off vengeful demons. A Djinn glow was woven into each basket. Our eyes can't detect it, of course, but the Djinn and the demons can, and it keeps evil away.”

Or more likely Khalid's tribe were savvy businessmen and good at weaving tales. Unless... I wondered at that radiance I saw emanating from Khalid.

“Do you think he would make me a basket if you asked?” Goli coughs a bit and runs a hand over her brow. “I would love to keep evil from my doorstep. And snakes. I don't like them, mistress.”

Goli is frightened by many things, but she perseveres and I admire her for that.

“I would ask him but he hasn't spoken to me in a week.”

She takes a deep, shaky breath. “I think he's working on that potion for you, mistress. I think you're his one true love. Maybe he'll even risk the king's wrath for you. Wouldn't that be romantic?”

I turn to her, ready to quell her growing excitement, but stop because she has gone pale. Her hands shake. “What's wrong, Goli?”

She tries to stand. The bowl on her lap falls and hits the stone under her feet with a crash. Her legs buckle and I rush to catch her. She's a light weight in my arms.

"I feel so odd, mistress." Her voice is a mere whisper.

I look down at the figs, the ones meant for me. My heart races. *Poison*. She has been poisoned. As I lift her, one thought repeats over and over in my mind—those figs were meant for me.

Carrying Goli, I struggle to cross the courtyard. I know where I need to take her. There is only one man who can help me now.

The longer I walk, the heavier Goli becomes. I leave the walled enclosure and make my way into the palace. I have to get my servant to Khalid. He will help me, I am sure of it. Anyone else would tell me it is the will of Allah, but I don't care about the great being's will. I care that my friend, my sweet companion, is dying. I care that she is dying because someone hates and fears me.

A guard looks up from his post. "Stop."

He expects me to obey so he's slow to react when I don't stop but just keep going, moving as fast as I can with Goli in my arms. I cannot allow this man or anyone to stop me. My lungs burn. My heart feels like it will explode. I keep running, willing Goli to live.

Finally, I reach the hallway that will take me to Khalid's room.

"No! Halt!"

I hear the guard behind me, grunting as he runs to catch me and prevent me from infiltrating the inner sanctum. Only royals and their guests are welcome here and I am none of those, but I have desperation on my side. I feel him closing in on me, but refuse to allow him to catch me. The universe would not be so cruel. Not when my mission is righteous. A burst of fresh effort allows me the energy to speed away. He shouts out, screaming for others to join the hunt.

Then, ahead of me I see the door.

"Khalid!" I yell out his name, praying he is close and can hear me. And can help me. Can help Goli. Can save her.

Then, just as I feel the guard's arm reach for me, the door opens.

"Camille? What is it? Come, come." Khalid pulls me into his room and then steps in front of me, blocking the guard. "Stand down."

The beastly man halts. "You know this wench?"

Khalid nods. "Yes, leave us be. I asked her to bring the servant girl here. She is ill and in need of my services."

Reluctantly the guard turns away from the door. Khalid spins around toward me. The world seems to make more sense now that I am in his presence.

"What is wrong?"

"Please help me. Please, she's dying."

He bends down and takes Goli in his arms.

Looking at him now, I believe that the world might just be fair after all.

* * * *

Two hours later, I am pacing in the courtyard and praying that Goli will be all right. Khalid has been working over her all this time. The king has made an appearance, but stayed only moments. When he left, the crowd that had gathered left with him.

The same guard who had tried to chase me down was clever enough to go to the harem and capture the eunuch who had picked up the bowl Goli had dropped and bring him to Khalid.

“Yes, I watched her fall,” I heard the eunuch explaining. “I knew something was wrong. Once I got ahold of the bowl, I was approached by three of the wives. They didn’t want me to have this. But I fought them off.” His shrill voice was proud.

“You did well, Yammet. If I can ascertain the poison from its residue on the wood, I might be able to prepare the antidote in time. You will be rewarded for your efforts.”

I want to know the names of those women.

Three more hours have passed. It is sundown and I am still waiting.

Until today, I did not know that it was forty paces from one side of these guest quarters to the other. Thirty paces from the door to the garden. I have walked miles while I’ve waited.

Finally, as the moon begins to rise, the door opens and Khalid walks out, his face weary.

“Is she?” I am afraid to say the words.

“Goli isn’t well yet but she will survive. In a few days, she’ll be back to normal. She’s sleeping now. I ordered the guards to take her back to the harem and to stay and watch over her. I will visit her when I can.” He runs a hand over his hair. “But now you and I need to talk.”

He motions to a chaise and I sit. I expect him to join me but he paces, taking the same route I’ve been treading for hours.

“You do know that what happened to Goli was not an accident, don’t you?”

I step toward him as though my feet can’t stand to be still. “Yes. I was the target, wasn’t I?”

His face is grim as he looks at me. “Correct. She came around for a little while and managed to tell me the bowl was meant for you. Do you have any idea who might have wanted to harm you?”

“Not the cook. He has no reason to fear me.”

“Fear is often irrational.”

“True, but not in this case. He isn’t superstitious like the wives are. He doesn’t look at me from under lowered lashes. They call me *witch*, Khalid. They think I am a sorceress.”

“Who does? Can you name the woman? The wives?”

“There are so many of them.” I wouldn’t know where to start.

“Who has access to the kitchen?”

“All of them are in and out of the kitchen along with servants and householders alike.”

“When the king was here I explained what occurred and he wants to begin an investigation. He’s offering to behead the cook and his staff if you like. Just name the women and he will have them all arrested.”

I try to keep the horror off my face. I know what will come after the arrest and this is not the kind of justice I can accept. I shake my head. “Even if I knew I couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t send any of those women to their certain death.”

Khalid grabs me by my shoulders and shakes me gently. “Even though they were willing to send you to yours? You must. Tell me who hates you the most? Who wants you dead? Who does Scheherazade threaten the most?”

“Many of the wives resent me because the king enjoys my stories too much.”

Khalid takes a visible breath and steps back. “Never mind. I am going to send you home tonight before the king can call for you again.”

I gasp at the implications. “What?”

“I believe I’ve found the way to transport your soul back to its proper vessel. I was preparing the mixture of herbs when you arrived with Goli. I’m sure I can use the mirror to contact your true self. I’ve seen members of my tribe do it. Your soul will depart Scheherazade’s body, and her’s will return.”

A thrill runs through my body. Through *her* body. Finally, I can leave this place and return home. And then I realize the dark side of this light—going back, becoming myself again, means I will have to leave Khalid. How can I when I do not yet know what it means to lie in his arms?

I step forward, moving closer. “I have one request, Khalid.” I put my hand on his arm.

His jaw tightens. His muscles harden, his skin heating up. “Now you’re willing to touch me? You’re a cruel goddess, Camille.”

“I want to be with you for just one night before I return. Since we’ve met, I dream of you when I am sleeping and when I’m awake. Even when I try not to. You’re in my head all of the time now. I believe I will think of you always and I want to be able to know you before I leave.”

“You want a memory? Why? So you can make me one of your stories?”

“Not to share in stories, no. I want it to hold close to my heart.” I have to make him understand. “I need the memory. I’ll never find anyone who moves me the way you do. Somehow, I don’t know how, but I’m sure of it.”

He frowns and walks away from me, over to the fountain. He dips his hand in it and then splashes the water on his face.

“Do you hate me for wanting to go home, Khalid? I couldn’t stand the thought of you hating me.”

Khalid comes back to me, takes my hand and places my palm against his chest. “Feel it, Camille.”

His heart thuds against my hand—a strong and living thing.

“No matter where you are, no matter what time you exist in, this beats for you and only you. My heart was yours before I knew who you were. My soul entwined with yours before we were born into these current incarnations. No matter what happens to us in this lifetime, I will find you again.”

He leans forward to kiss me and this time I do nothing to stop him. Tonight, we will be together. Even if it is, as I fear, the only time we ever will know each other fully.

My arms wind around his broad shoulders as our lips finally, finally meet.

As sensation overtakes me, a vision flashes through my mind of Khalid as a younger man. The sun is high in the sky and he’s standing in front of a cave, afraid to enter. An older man stands behind him, one hand resting on Khalid’s shoulder. I cannot hear what the elder says, but Khalid nods and takes a first step forward. And then he takes another and then disappears inside the cave. Everything about the vision is foreign and yet it also feels familiar.

It’s impossible. I pull away.

“What is wrong, little one?”

“I just saw you as a boy. In front of a cave. Why this vision? Why now?”

“I told you, we’ve known each other before. Your awareness simply has not yet caught up to mine. Do you remember when I told you I dreamed of you?”

I nod.

“In those dreams, I discovered things about you I shouldn’t be able to know. You had a doll named Belle when you were a little girl. When you were six, you lost her and cried the whole night. I wanted to reach out to you and hold you. I wanted to comfort you so much.”

My mind travels back to my still vivid memory of that day. We were living in New York that year. My father was a professor at Columbia University. My mother had taken me to the park and I was playing on the jungle gym. When my mother came to tell me that it was time to go home, I couldn't find Belle. We looked everywhere but she was gone. Had she even made it into the playground? I wasn't sure. All I knew was that somewhere between our brownstone off Madison Avenue and 80th street, and the Mother Goose playground on the East drive off 72nd street, I'd lost Belle.

The whole way back home my mother and I searched for her along the path we'd taken through Central Park, but we never found her. That night, I cried so hard I couldn't fall asleep for hours. I thought my heart would break. And then it was morning. Oddly, I hadn't felt as alone without Belle as I'd thought I would.

Had Khalid reached across time, across space, to comfort a weeping child? Was what he said true? Was this man my soul's mate?

"What was in the cave?" I ask.

"You might not believe me."

"A Djinn?"

"Ah, you've heard the rumors. Yes, when a child of my tribe turns ten, he or she is taken to the Djinn's cave, and if he is deemed worthy, the Djinn imparts a bit of its magic and he becomes a magi. I was deemed worthy."

"And those who aren't?"

"They don't return from the cave. You can see why I was a bit nervous."

"Just a bit?"

He smiles but it's tinged with sadness. "This ritual is why my tribe is dying. There are so few the Djinn deems worthy anymore." Khalid's hand strokes my hair. "But we don't want to talk about my childhood if we only have this night. And we do only have this night. Even if you wanted to stay, I have to get you out of here. I didn't like how the king talked about you tonight."

"What did he say?"

"Up until now, he's treated you as a guest, has he not?"

"You mean has he kept his hands off me? Yes. I wondered about that in the beginning. Scheherazade was supposed to be his bride."

"Yes, but he can find other women to keep him occupied in bed. What he can't find is someone whose stories entertain him. Today he told me a few months ago, on a night with a blood moon, he sensed a change in you and it made him afraid. Did you switch bodies with Scheherazade on a night with a blood moon?"

I nod, afraid to even whisper yes.

"Well, he's losing his fear and becoming enamored of you. I know our ruler, Camille. Once he decides to have you, no one will be able to stop him. It's only because of our very long-term friendship he agreed not to have you brought to his rooms tonight."

"What did you tell him?" My voice is tremulous as I absorb the horror of his words.

"I told him you were too shaken by what had happened with Goli and that you wouldn't be any good to him." Strong fingers trace the line of my neck, moving down, down, lightly brushing the swell of my breasts. "When he was talking I heard possessiveness in his voice. I don't think you will be able to keep him out of your bed if you remain here."

The thought sickens me.

Khalid takes my hands in his and brings them to his chest. "You aren't allowed to think about him now. Not now. As long as I am here, I promise I will protect you."

He kisses me again. His touch is a drug, rushing through my system, tranquilizing me, relaxing me and inciting me. Everything around me grows hazy. Only Khalid is real. Only his scent and his touch and his lips and his sex, hard against me, are real.

“Let go of all your concerns and be with *me* now, Camille. You’re not the only one who needs to make a memory.”

His mouth presses against mine and I let go of everything but the feel of him, the heat of his body, the silk of his skin under his shirt, the sensation of his lips. My hands roam across his broad chest, gripping his shoulders. He is solid and real. Yes, somewhere in the back of my mind I know danger surrounds us, but here, now, I believe him. I know I am safe in his arms. Nothing can touch me while he holds me close.

“I need to see all of you.” He whispers as he unties the ribbons that keep my caftan closed. When his work is only half done and the heavy robe is barely off my shoulders, he suddenly stops.

Even though his body is taut and ready, he steps back, creating distance between us. And then he waits. Not taking his hot eyes off of me.

In a flash I understand. He doesn’t want to take me. He wants me—Camille—to present myself to him. Me, not Scheherazade. I find both comfort and excitement in this.

I drop the silk I wear and bare my body.

Cool air caresses my skin. My nipples tighten. I shiver and feel a clench between my thighs, inside me, in my center, at my core. It’s his eyes alone that do this to me. As if his very glance is touching me, stroking me, entering me, exciting me.

“You’re more beautiful than I imagined,” he says.

The longer he watches the more wound up I become, like a top being held back, just before it’s allowed to spin. I am ready, begging to be set free, but his stare holds me, stops me. His steady gaze informs me he’s going to be the one to set the rules, to control what happens between us.

Finally, he gestures me forward. “Now, please, undress me.”

Eagerly I reach out. I draw off his shirt and run my palms over his chest. Soft skin covers steel. My lover is a study in contrasts, a mystery I fear I will never solve.

My hands travel to his waist, my eyes glued to his hips as I lower his pants. As they slip down, he leans forward, presses up against me, blocking my view, kissing me, distracting me. His tongue begs entry. For a moment I tease him, refuse him. Insistent, he pushes. His determination wins me over. I want to feel him in my mouth, to taste that much more of him, and so I relent. His tongue slips between my lips in a silky glide. As his hands find my breasts, my body turns liquid with desire.

Breaking the kiss, he finds other spots to press with his lips. My eyelids, my cheeks, my nose, my neck. His lips are gentle even as he pinches my nipples, giving me desire and affection in equal dizzying doses.

“Touch me,” he commands. I could pretend to misunderstand and prolong the pleasure but I’m as anxious as he is to make the most of the moment, the hour, the night. I don’t want to play games when we have so little time and so much to learn about each other, so much to explore.

He steps back. My breasts instantly ache at the loss of his touch. But I do as he asks and look down. His cock is as long and strong and beautiful as the rest of him. Touching him, I wrap my hand around its base, my fingers not quite meeting. I shudder when I feel him pulse in my hand.

“Harder. I won’t break.” His hand covers mine and he guides me. Forces me to tighten my grip, to find the rhythm that satisfies him.

I gaze up at him as we stroke, together, in tandem, building the pressure, exaggerating the craving. He’s so lovely, so handsome, so exotic looking, so much a part of my soul already. I fear there will never be another man who moves me as Khalid does. Who makes me feel as free as I do in this moment, even as my body is enslaved to his.

“It’s too much, too good,” Khalid says, stopping me. Then leaning over, he lifts me up. I am suddenly in his arms, cradled, and he is carrying me toward his bed. Even in the moonlight, his skin glows bronze. My desert god, I think, as he lowers me down and I sink into the silk and pillows. He might be able to survive in the harshest of climates, but for now he’s surrounded by the decadence of the palace, and he seems at home in this luxuriously decorated room. The riches become him.

He stares down at me, his eyes taking in everything. I take deep pleasure in knowing what he sees is me—every freckle and imperfection, each scar I earned. When he smiles in satisfaction, I know it is me and only me he is pleased with. He reaches out and cups a breast. My whole body seems to swell at the sensation.

“This is more than I dreamed of, Camille.”

I can’t help but smile at him, my magical lover. “You never dreamed of this? Never dreamed of making love to me?”

His lips tug up and I swear he blushes. “A million times and more.” His fingers brush down the length of my body. “And this is better than any fantasy.”

This was real and I never wanted it to end.

“Spread your legs for me.” His voice is low and almost gruff, as if it takes him a great effort to say these words.

I hesitate.

“I said spread your legs.” He encircles my ankles with his hands and waits for me to open to him. “I am the king in this room and you will obey me. Here, I’m in control.”

My heart aches for him because I understand his need. A powerful man in his own world, here in the palace he is but a guest. The king has all the power. He brought Khalid here and he can send him away. The king can allow me to live or end my life.

The king can take what belongs to Khalid. He can take me.

If I do nothing else, I will give Khalid what he needs. I will be his to command at the very least in the intimacy of his bedchamber.

I let my legs fall open with only a hint of self-consciousness. There’s no place for it here. It’s right to be naked with Khalid, to offer myself to his every desire.

“Can you even guess how long I’ve waited to make a meal of you, my love?” He drops to his knees, and my body clenches in anticipation. He inhales, his eyes closing as he takes in the scent that is evidence of my desire. His long fingers part the petals between my legs and dip just inside to see how ready I am. “How luscious you are, how quickly you respond.”

“Only to you.” There has never been another who has made me feel as I do now and I want him to know it, to have this gift, one of the few things I can give him.

“Then allow me to show how grateful I can be.” He lowers his mouth onto me and his tongue moves to where his fingers just were, opening me up to a heaven here on this earth.

With long, slow strokes he makes me squirm and twist with pleasure, and then he commands me to be still and to allow him this decadent exploration of my body. Whispering words of desire against my flesh, he makes me wait before spearing me with his tongue again and again.

It feels so good and so perfect to be devoured like the sweetest fruit he's ever tasted. His fingers explore me again, finding the nub that is the most sensitive part of me. Then he flicks it with his tongue. Then rubs it with his fingers. Then his tongue. I can't breathe. Can't think. I am being tortured with pleasure. His fingers rub circles on that tender flesh. His tongue slides. Rubs. Slides. I am throbbing with feelings that can't last much longer. I can't last much longer. My heart races as the pressure builds.

My hands sink into his wavy hair as I try to hold on to consciousness. It's useless. One more slither of his tongue, another press of his thumb and I wash away. The wave hits me and I cry out his name. Khalid is the only thing real in this world. All else is liquid fire burning away the façade. Leaving me more utterly myself than I have ever been. Even as I lie in another woman's body, I am Camille because he is Khalid.

"I can't wait. I can't. I'm sorry, my love... I...know I should make it last...but I can't..." He pushes me up on the bed and covers me with his whole body. "Need you...always needed you...need you now..."

I feel his cock press against me. He looms over me until all the world seems swallowed up in him. He is everything to me in that moment. I love the way his weight presses me down, how his hips hold my legs wide for him. He invades in the sweetest way. Pressure. A tiny pain. And then...then he is marvelously and miraculously inside me. He fills me. He's almost too big, but I welcome that, too. I will feel the soreness in the morning and it will remind me that we were together, that briefly we shared perfection and can do it again. As long as I'm here, we can be together.

As long as I'm here...do I even want to leave? Does home mean anything without this man?

I sigh and wrap my legs around his waist and after all this time, after no time, after minutes and lifetimes, we are finally connected. His masculinity is buried deep in that part of me that is most feminine. We are halves of a whole, and the pleasure I feel is almost familiar. As though we felt it before, on the day our souls were married and only now reclaim it.

I feel Khalid give up trying to hold on. I feel him inside of me surrender to the inevitability of this—our first night.

Our only night.

"I love you," he whispers as he thrusts inside of me and leaves me speechless and feeling what I have never felt before.

Connected.

"I love you. I do. I love you too," I tell him, surprising myself but knowing that it's true. And has been for a long, long time. I might not have seen him in my dreams the way he saw me, but I longed for him. For a man who could understand me, help me to become this version of myself, the most loving, the bravest. It's not that he completes me, I was wholly myself before, but he complements me. And I him.

Without him I can survive, but I cannot soar.

He pulls back, almost severing our connection, but at the last moment he pushes back in. I can feel him move inside me, caressing places I've never felt before. Somehow he finds my every trigger and primes them. I'm on the edge of such ecstasy.

Over and over he presses in and retreats. I clench around him. This is our beautiful battle. One where we are both the victors.

I feel Khalid move inside me and a deeper more intense sensation of pleasure begins to build. It starts low, a vibration in my womb, and then it sparks through my body. Khalid presses his lips back on mine, kissing me hard as he finds a fast and steady rhythm. My soul flows into

his and his into mine, the two becoming a new, co-mingled soul that never existed before this moment. Even as our excitement builds, even as I begin to burst open for him, a sense of peace I've never known before surges through me.

Straining, slowing, cursing, Khalid attempts to extend the moment that's too good to last. I can't hold back and let go, and like a glissade on a harp, glide blissfully over the edge, feeling every sound, hearing every color. On the edge of what is left of my consciousness, I'm aware of Khalid's body stiffening and I feel the hot wash of his pleasure fill my womb.

I want to stay with him. I realize in that moment that I am trapped. I love him. Life will be less without him.

Moments later, breathing hard, he looks down at me. "No matter what may come, no matter how many years pass before we can be together again, no matter what planes divide us, you, Camille, you will always be my wife."

And he would be my husband. Even if only in my dreams.

* * * *

When I finally wake, I see Khalid is already up. He sits with his back to me, his head down. I can feel the misery in his pose and it depletes me. As I watch him, I know what I need to do. What I want to do.

"I'm going to stay," I tell him. "I can't leave you. I love you more than I need my body back or my time back."

His head shakes. "You must go."

I get to my knees, lean up against him, my front pressed into his back. I place my hands on his shoulders. "Now that I've known the peace of being connected to you, I can't be apart from you. What would my life be like? I'll be fine here, I will. I'll make sure the women get used to me. I'll befriend them. I'll be careful."

"Of course you can charm them. They aren't why you're in danger. It's the king. If you stay any longer, he's going to call you to his bed. Even if you were willing to sleep with him in order to stay with me, I wouldn't be able to live with myself knowing what you were sacrificing."

My gut twists at the thought of being with the king. Now it's my turn to put my head in my hands. And that's when I notice the little stain on the sheets. Horror swamps me, and I realize what I have done.

"She was a virgin. Oh Khalid, Scheherazade was a virgin."

Khalid looks where I'm pointing. When he sees the blood, he frowns. "I knew you weren't a virgin so I didn't even think about whether or not she was. Of course Scheherazade was and her virginity belonged to the king. There will be hell to pay if he discovers she no longer possesses that gift."

"What can we do?" My mind races. I want to stay. Khalid says I have to leave. If I do leave and exchange places with Scheherazade, I will have left her vulnerable and I'll be responsible for her death. I can't go. I feel relief flood me. I have a solid reason why I can't go back to my time.

He reaches for his pants. "Don't worry, little one. It's simple enough to fix. The women of my tribe have been deceiving men about the state of their chastity for centuries. We don't believe women who take pleasure are any less valuable. By the time Scheherazade returns to her body, it will be intact once more."

"But if I stay, I can protect her."

He walks over to a side table and pours out a goblet of wine. “Drink this and then we’ll talk about you going back.”

“We’ll talk about me staying.”

“Drink.” He holds out the glass.

I take the wine. Alcohol is forbidden in the harem, though I know it flows freely in the palace. Slowly sipping the sweet, honeyed liquor, I postpone the inevitable conversation that I know we can’t avoid for long.

I can’t bear to leave him. But how *can* I stay? Somewhere Scheherazade longs to come home, to her own time. Just as I wanted to go home to mine before Khalid arrived at the palace. Who am I to make a decision that will affect her forever? But how can I go?

“It’s time, my love.” Khalid holds my clothes. “Let me help you.”

He dresses me, his hands slowly smoothing down the fabric. Once the ribbons are tied, he kisses my forehead, takes my hand and leads me over to the mirror.

The tall, freestanding reflecting glass, framed with gold carvings of exotic birds and flowers, dominates the room. Khalid reaches for it, his muscles flexing as he strains to move it closer to the door.

I can’t help myself. He’s so beautiful. Reaching out, I trace the muscles in his back. It will be dangerous to stay here, but my decision is made. I’m going to stay and make a life with this man in this time.

“Are you done? Did you drink it all?” Khalid asks.

“Yes.”

“How do you feel?”

“It didn’t go to my head the way I thought it would. If anything my thoughts seem more lucid.”

And then, suddenly my legs feel weak and buckle under me.

Khalid grabs me, holds me up. “Yes, you’ve had enough to do the job.”

“The job?” Suspicion seeps into my mind. “What did you give me? What are you doing?”

Still holding me, he positions me in front of the mirror but I don’t see either my reflection or Scherezade’s. The surface is cloudy, swirling. I turn and search out Khalid’s eyes.

He answers my question before I can even ask it. “I’m saving you, love. If you stay and the king calls for you, you’ll fight him and he’ll put you to death. Even though I wish it were not so, this isn’t the time for us. You must leave before disaster happens.”

In the mirror the shadows fade and I can see Scherezade sitting at my desk in my home. Scheherazade is reading one of my books. Her lips—my lips—turn up in a grin as if she’s getting pleasure from the story.

“I’ve been selfish,” Khalid explains. “And now it’s almost too late. If I don’t send you back soon, you’ll never be able to go home.”

In the mirror, Scheherazade looks up. From the direction of her gaze, I know she’s looking into the mirror on my bedroom wall. She cocks her head. Is she seeing me? Getting up, she crosses the room. It’s so peculiar to watch me walking toward me. Once she’s standing right in front of the mirror, she holds her hand out to me.

As if it has a will of its own, my hand reaches out for hers.

She places her palm flat on the mirrored surface and I do the same.

“I will always love you, Camille. Never doubt it,” Khalid whispers behind me.

My body feels lighter. I have trouble staying grounded. All of my cells form a live wire, ready to spark. My muscles and my bones hum. I can feel my soul rising up. Whatever magic Khalid has worked, it's too strong for me to resist.

I try to stay centered on Khalid and on this time and place, but all of my memories crowd out the present reality. I see myself as a child, so quiet and shy my parents think I will never have a friend. I hear myself telling them I do have a friend even if no one else can see him. The memory has escaped me until this moment.

I have dreamed of Khalid. He was the shadow playmate I spoke of. When no one else was around, he was there. He was the one who ran with me and played through my nightly dreams, giving me strength.

I'll be your friend, Camille. I'll be your friend forever.

A dark-haired boy with lovely brown eyes and bronze skin that almost glowed. How could I have forgotten him?

It's happening too fast. I'm unraveling. Too many images exploding too quickly. Any moment, I'll be back in my own time. Will I be able to remember Khalid once I'm there? Will I be able to find him once more?

And then I hear something. I try to focus. To listen. Is it someone crying? Am I crying? No, it's Khalid. My strong, smart man is weeping.

He needs me.

I see a bright blue flash and I jolt backward, hitting the floor. When I open my eyes, the mirror is merely a mirror again.

Khalid lifts me up, carrying me back to the bed. "It failed. My magic failed."

Relief floods my system. "It's all right. Everything will be all right."

"Why didn't it work?" He sits next to me. I can feel his frustration. "It should have worked. What did I do wrong?"

He's berating himself. Going over his spell again and again, listing what he used, trying to find his error.

I think I know, but I'm not sure I should tell him. He is anchoring me here. My love for him will not allow my soul to leave without him.

If I am to leave this place, he must come with me.

I sit and watch him, perfectly content to be here now.

* * * *

Much later, under a full moon that shines down on the palace, the king holds court. Looking over the crowd, I seek out my lover.

Khalid sits in a chair beside the throne. He pours the king a libation from a golden carafe. Liquid spills into a silver goblet studded with turquoise and rubies.

Suddenly Khalid looks up. His eyes meet mine. The magi's face is so grim and serious that I want to weep. I want to go to him and wrap him in my arms and promise him that everything will be all right, though I doubt he will believe me. But I believe it. We are meant to be together. And as long as we are careful, we will avoid danger and be fine.

I watch the king quaff the drink and then turn and speak to a nobleman on his right. I wander away from the crowd, to a quiet corner of the garden. I need to prepare for this evening's tale. Staring up into the heavens, the stars sparkle down on me. In their bright light I see hope. Promise. I see the future. I see a second night and a third.

“Ah, the lovely Scheherazade.” The king’s dark voice sends a chill up my spine.

I turn. He stands behind me and next to him is his chief advisor, Abdul. I didn’t even hear them approach.

“I’m so glad you survived the poisoning attempt my dear,” the king says. “I have no idea what I would do without your tales.”

“None of us do, my king,” says Abdul. The Grand Vizier is thin to the point of looking emaciated. His rich robes hang off his frame. Something about him reminds me of a ghoul. “Since you brought this delightful beauty into our midst, we’ve been entertained as no court has before. Isn’t it time to make her presence here official?”

My hands start to shake. “Official?”

“Of course. You were brought here to be the king’s bride.” The vizier looks at me and in his beady brown eyes, I sense menace. “It is long past the time to make good on the promise. I’m sure you’re good for more than just telling stories.”

“Don’t frighten the girl, Abdul. She’s an innocent.” He cups my chin in his hand. His touch is more gentle than I expect and in his eyes is a softness that I don’t recognize. “There is time enough for marriage, my lovely girl. For now, just tell me your stories, Scheherazade. I have been so looking forward to this evening’s tale.”

I watch them as they walk away to take their seats again. Khalid was right. The king will not allow me to remain chaste forever. This is only a temporary reprieve. I’m safe for now, but the king will claim me one day.

Until then, I will be with the husband of my soul. As often as I can. It will not be easy. We will have hundreds of eyes on us, watching our every move. If we’re caught, we’ll be executed. Danger will be waiting for us at the end of every corridor. The palace will be even more hazardous and treacherous than it has been up till now.

Except I have something on my side now that I didn’t have before. I have the magic of a man who is the last of his tribe. Who can take wine and turn it into a potion that could send me back to my own time...or into a potion that can tame a wild king at least for one night. At least for tonight. And hopefully for tomorrow night and the night after that.

Khalid smiles at me now. He knows I’ve figured it out. His eyes twinkle as I step forward to begin my tale.

There were times to drool over a sexy wolf.

Sitting in the middle of a war room disguised as a board meeting was not one of those times.

Gina Jamenson did her best not to stare at the dark-haired, dark-eyed man across the room. The hint of ink peeking out from under his shirt made her want to pant. She loved ink and this wolf clearly had a lot of it. Her own wolf within nudged at her, a soft brush beneath her skin, but she ignored her. When her wolf whimpered, Gina promised herself that she’d go on a long run in the forest later. She didn’t understand why her wolf was acting like this, but she’d deal with it when she was in a better place. She just couldn’t let her wolf have control right then—even for a man such as the gorgeous specimen a mere ten feet from her.

I continue on even as I look at my own gorgeous specimen. He sits back and smiles my way. I hold the audience in the palm of my hand, but he is the only one who really matters. I know now that he is why I tell stories. He is why I breathe, why I continue on.

I will tell these tales even as I write one of my own. I pray we shall have a happy ending...

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A woman on a mission

Phoebe Graham is a specialist in deep cover espionage, infiltrating the enemy, observing their practices, and when necessary eliminating the threat. Her latest assignment is McKay-Taggart Security Services, staffed with former military and intelligence operatives. They routinely perform clandestine operations all over the world but it isn't until Jesse Murdoch joins the team that her radar starts spinning. Unfortunately so does her head. He's gorgeous and sweet and her instincts tell her to trust him but she's been burned before, so he'll stay where he belongs—squarely in her sights.

A man on the run

Since the moment his Army unit was captured by jihadists, Jesse's life has been a nightmare. Forced to watch as those monsters tortured and killed his friends and the woman he loved, something inside him snapped. When he's finally rescued, everyone has the same question—why did he alone survive? Clouded in accusations and haunted by the faces of those he failed, Jesse struggles in civilian life until McKay-Taggart takes him in. Spending time with Phoebe, the shy and beautiful accountant, makes him feel human for the first time in forever. If someone so innocent and sweet could accept him, maybe he could truly be redeemed.

A love they never expected

When Phoebe receives the order to eliminate Jesse, she must choose between the job she's dedicated her life to and the man who's stolen her heart. Choosing Jesse would mean abandoning everything she believes in, and it might mean sharing his fate because a shadowy killer is dedicated to finishing the job started in Iraq.

* * * *

Jesse pushed through the double doors, his whole being surprisingly calm. This was what he needed. He'd been sitting in his office waiting for her to wake up, thinking about how he would handle this interrogation with some modicum of civility.

It was so good to know civility wasn't going to be required.

It wasn't so good to realize that the minute she'd opened that bratty mouth, he'd gotten hard as hell and he wanted to fuck her more than he wanted to figure her out. There was a little voice playing in his head that told him to just get inside her and all those secrets would open for him. All he had to do was thrust inside her tight body and the mysteries of the universe would reveal themselves.

Yeah, he wasn't going to do that. He was going to do his job and find out who she worked for and then he would walk away from her. He wasn't going to hold her tenderly or hope she could love him. No. It was time to grow the fuck up. How was it being through what he'd been through in Iraq hadn't managed to teach him what this one woman had? He needed to shut down and do his job.

But that didn't mean parts of his job couldn't be very pleasurable.

"Uhm, Jesse, don't you think you should handle this in the conference room? It's where Ian planned on keeping her." Adam Miles's voice was an unwelcome intrusion.

"No." He knew the old Jesse would have stopped, but this was between him and Phoebe.

"Adam, I can really explain. This is all one huge misunderstanding." Phoebe tried to bring her head up.

That was an easy move to counter. He brought his hand down on that sweet, sweet ass. Phoebe had the damn prettiest ass he'd ever watched for hours and drooled over, and now he had zero reason to not spank that gorgeous flesh. He heard that sound, that smack as his hand hit her, and he felt her shiver. She didn't scream. Nope. He'd thought if he smacked her good, she would call him a fucking pervert, but he'd been a dumbass idiot and this Phoebe just moaned a little as the slap went through her.

It wasn't the type of moan that would cause him to stop spanking a sub at Sanctum.

Motherfucker. He knew he hadn't been wrong about her. He'd thought there was a submissive streak buried under her "I'm a good girl so don't fuck my sweet little asshole" exterior.

"The only explanation is I'm a dirty little spy and I need to tell my captor everything in order to keep him from slapping my ass silly." He couldn't be professional with her. It wouldn't work. It would only serve to put distance between them, and now he could see that distance was what she'd worked for the whole time. She hadn't let him do more than hold her hand and give her an awkward peck. She'd had him convinced he just wasn't her type, but he could smell her now. Yeah, that wasn't sweet or gentlemanly, but then that obviously didn't work for her. "She likes me slapping her ass. Take a deep whiff, Adam, and you'll be able to tell she's aroused."

She gasped and her whole torso came up off his. "Jesse!"

Yeah, she sounded like a pissed off girlfriend, but she wasn't his girlfriend. She was the woman who had played him and then nearly painted her initials on his chest. And he was the idiot who had stood there and almost begged her to do it.

He cringed at the thought of how stupid he'd been about her. He knew he was ping-ponging, caught between wanting to understand her and wanting to throttle her, but most of all, he wanted to get his hands on her.

He wanted to see just how much she'd lied about.

"You might want to think this thing through, Jesse," Adam began.

He was just about to tell Adam where he could shove his thought process when Big Tag strode out of his office. A thunderous look clouded his boss's face, but Jesse was ready to throw down with whoever he needed to. This was his op and his...fuck, he didn't even know what to call her, but Phoebe was his.

Ian stopped in front of them. "Take her to your office. Do what you need to do but keep it down. Apparently we're still having a baby shower and I have to attend or risk having my balls ripped off my body. I like my balls, Murdoch. Keep her quiet. Charlie's serious about this party thing. When did I fucking lose control? She's not even an employee here."

“No. I’m part owner,” Charlotte said, her voice a sharp instrument. She was a beautiful woman with strawberry blonde hair. She rested her hand on the bump on her belly that seemed to get bigger every day. “Eve and I own half this company, you know. And we have all the boobs so try getting around us. Phoebe, I swear to god if I find out you’ve done one thing to put this company and our people in danger I will take you apart myself. Is that understood? You better hope you can prove you weren’t going to hurt Jesse. He’s one of my men and I will deal with you.”

Phoebe’s head came up again. “Your men? That’s a little presumptuous, isn’t it? You treat him like a puppy you can pat on his head and send away. He isn’t yours and if you think you can take me, you’re wrong.”

Charlotte’s lips curled up and Jesse realized Phoebe had just fallen into a trap. “She doesn’t like the fact that I said you’re mine, Jesse.”

Big Tag was frowning at her. “I didn’t either.”

She waved him off. “I meant as a friend and employee, but Phoebe’s brain goes straight for the sexual. I wonder why. Li’s right. You’re going to owe him a hundred bucks at the end of this thing. She’s all Stockholmed out. Who wants cake?”

About Lexi Blake

Lexi Blake lives in North Texas with her husband, three kids, and the laziest rescue dog in the world. She began writing at a young age, concentrating on plays and journalism. It wasn't until she started writing romance that she found success. She likes to find humor in the strangest places. Lexi believes in happy endings no matter how odd the couple, threesome or foursome may seem. She also writes contemporary Western ménage as Sophie Oak.

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Sandrine Salome flees New York for her grandmother's Paris mansion to escape her dangerous husband, but what she finds there is even more menacing. The house, famous for its lavish art collection and elegant salons, is mysteriously closed up. Although her grandmother insists it's dangerous for Sandrine to visit, she defies her and meets Julien Duplessi, a mesmerizing young architect. Together they explore the hidden night world of Paris, the forbidden occult underground and Sandrine's deepest desires.

Among the bohemians and the demi-monde, Sandrine discovers her erotic nature as a lover and painter. Then darker influences threaten—her cold and cruel husband is tracking her down and something sinister is taking hold, changing Sandrine, altering her. She's become possessed by *La Lune*: A witch, a legend, and a sixteenth-century courtesan, who opens up her life to a darkness that may become a gift or a curse.

This is Sandrine's "wild night of the soul," her odyssey in the magnificent city of Paris, of art, love, and witchery.

Paris, France April 1894

I did not cause the madness, the deaths, or the rest of the tragedies any more than I painted the paintings. I had help, her help. Or perhaps I should say she forced her help on me. And so this story—which began with me fleeing my home in order to escape my husband and might very well end tomorrow, in a duel, in the Bois de Boulogne at dawn—is as much hers as mine. Or in fact more hers than mine. For she is the fountainhead. The fascination. She is *La Lune*. Woman of moon dreams, of legends and of nightmares. Who took me from the light and into the darkness. Who imprisoned me and set me free.

Or is it the other way around?

"Your questions," my father always said to me, "will be your saving grace. A curious mind is the most important attribute any man or woman can possess. Now if you can just temper your impulsiveness . . ."

If I had a curious mind, I'd inherited it from him. And he'd nurtured it. Philippe Salome was on the board of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and helped found the American Museum of Natural History, whose cornerstone was laid on my fifth birthday.

I remember sitting atop my father's shoulders that day, watching the groundbreaking ceremony and thinking the whole celebration was for me. He called it "our museum," didn't he? And for much of my life I thought it actually did belong to us, along with our mansion on Fifth

Avenue and our summerhouse in Newport. Until it was gone, I understood so little about wealth and the price you pay for it. But isn't that always the way?

Our museum's vast halls and endless exhibit rooms fascinated me as much as they did my father—which pleased him, I could tell. We'd meander through exhibits, my small hand in his large one, and he'd keep me spellbound with stories about items on display. I'd ask for more, always *just one more*, and he'd laugh and tease: "My Sandrine, does your capacity for stories know no bounds?"

But it pleased him, and he'd always tell me another.

I especially loved the stories he told me about the gems and fate and destiny always ending them by saying: "You will make your own fate, Sandrine, I'm sure of it."

Was my father right? Do we make our own destiny? I think back now to the stepping-stones that I've walked to reach this moment in time.

Were the incidents of my making? Or were they my fate?

The most difficult steps I took were after certain people died. No deaths were caused by me, but at the same time, none would have occurred were it not for me.

So many deaths. The first was on the morning of my fifteenth birthday, when I saw a boy beaten and tragically die because of our harmless kisses. The next was the night almost ten years later, when I heard the prelude to my father's death and learned the truth about Benjamin, my husband. And then there were more. Each was an ending that, ironically, became a new beginning for me.

The one thing I am now sure of is that if there is such a thing as destiny, it is a result of our passion, be that for money, power, or love. Passion, for better or worse. It can keep a soul alive even if all that survives is a shimmering. I've even seen it. I've been bathed in it. I've been changed by it.

* * * *

Four months ago I snuck into Paris on a wet, chilly January night like a criminal, hiding my face in my shawl, taking extra care to be sure I wasn't followed.

I stood on the stoop of my grandmother's house and lifted the hand-shaped bronze door knocker and let it drop. The sound of the metal echoed inside. Her home was on a lane blocked off from rue des Saints-Pères by wide wooden double doors. Maison de la Lune, as it was called, was one of a half dozen four-story mid-eighteenth-century stone houses that shared a courtyard that backed up onto rue du Dragon. Hidden clusters like this were a common configuration in Paris. These small enclaves offered privacy and quiet from the busy city. Usually the porte cochère was locked and one had to ring for the concierge, but I'd found the heavy doors ajar and hadn't had to wait for service.

I let the door knocker fall again. Light from a street lamp glinted off the golden metal. It was a strange object. Usually on these things the bronze hand's palm faced the door. But this one was palm out, almost warning the visitor to reconsider requesting entrance.

I was anxious and impatient. I'd been cautious on my journey from New York to Southampton and kept to my cabin. I'd left a letter telling Benjamin I'd gone to visit friends in Virginia and assumed that once he returned and read it, it would be at least a week before he'd realize all was not what it seemed. One thing I had known for certain—he would never look for me in France. It would be inconceivable to Benjamin that any wife of his could cross the ocean alone.

Or so I assured myself until my husband's banking associate, William Lenox, spotted me on board. When he expressed surprise I was traveling by myself, I concocted a story but was worried he didn't believe me. My only consolation was that we had docked in England and I had since crossed the channel into France. So even if Benjamin did come looking, he wouldn't know where I'd gone.

That very first night in Paris, as I waited for my grandmother's maid to open the door, I knew I had to stop thinking of what I had run away from. So I refocused on the house I stood before and as I did, felt an overwhelming sense of belonging, of being welcome. Here I would be safe.

Once again I lifted the door knocker that had so obsessed me ten years before when I'd visited as a fifteen-year-old. The engravings on the finely modeled female palm included etched stars, phases of the moon, planets, and other archaic symbols. When I'd asked about it once, my grandmother had said it was older than the house, but she didn't know how old exactly or what the ciphers meant.

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After standing at the door for a few moments without gaining entry, I lifted the hand and let it drop again. Where was the maid? Grand-mère, one of Paris's celebrated courtesans, hosted lavish salons on Tuesday, Thursday, and many Saturday evenings, and at this time of day was usually upstairs, preparing her toilette: dusting *poudre de riz* on her face and *décolletage*, screwing in her *opale de feu* earrings, and wrapping her signature rope of the same blazing orange stones around her neck. The strand of opal beads was famous. It had belonged to a Russian empress and was known as *Les Incendies*. The stones were the same color as my grandmother's hair and the highlights in her topaz eyes. She was known by that name—*L'Incendie*, they called her, *The Fire*.

We had the same color eyes, but mine almost never flashed like hers. When I was growing up, I kept checking in the mirror, hoping the opal sparks that I only saw occasionally would intensify. I wanted to be just like her, but my father said it was just as well my eyes weren't on fire because it wasn't only her coloring that had inspired her name but also her temper, and that wasn't a thing to covet.

It wasn't until I was fifteen years old and witnessed it myself that I understood what he'd meant.

I let the hand of fate fall again. Even if Grand-mère was upstairs and couldn't hear the knocking, the maid would be downstairs, organizing the refreshments for the evening. I'd seen her so many nights, polishing away last smudges on the silver, holding the Baccarat glasses over a pot of steaming water and then wiping them clean to make sure they gleamed.

Certainly Bernadette, if it was still Bernadette, should have heard the knocker, but I had been waiting more than five minutes, and no one had arrived to let me in. Dusk had descended. The air had grown cold, and now it was beginning to rain. Fat, heavy drops dripped onto my hat and into my eyes. And I had no umbrella. That's when I did what I should have done from the start—I stepped back and looked up at the house.

The darkened windows set into the limestone facade indicated there were no fires burning and no lamps lit inside. My grandmother was not in residence. And neither, it appeared, was her staff. I almost wished the concierge had needed to open the *porte cochère* for me; he might have been able to tell me where my grandmother was.

For days now I had managed to keep my sanity only by thinking of this moment. All I had to do, I kept telling myself, was find my way here, and then together, my grandmother and I could mourn my father and her son, and she would help me figure out what I should do now that I had run away from New York City.

If she wasn't here, where was I to go? I had other family in Paris, but I had no idea where they lived. I'd only met them here, at my grandmother's house, when I'd visited ten years previously. I had no friends in the city.

The rain was soaking through my clothes. I needed to find shelter.

But where? A restaurant or café? Was there one nearby? Or should I try and find a hotel? Which way should I go to get a carriage? Was it even safe to walk alone here at night?

What choice did I have?

Picking up my suitcase, I turned, but before I could even step into the courtyard, I saw an advancing figure. A bedraggled-looking man, wearing torn and filthy brown pants and an overcoat that had huge, bulging pockets, staggered toward me. Every step he took rang out on the stones.

He's just a beggar who intends no harm, I told myself. He's just looking for scraps of food, for a treasure in the garbage he'd be able to sell.

But what if I was wrong? Alone with him in the darkening courtyard, where could I go? In my skirt and heeled boots, could I even outrun him?

About M. J. Rose

New York Times Bestseller, M.J. Rose grew up in New York City mostly in the labyrinthine galleries of the Metropolitan Museum, the dark tunnels and lush gardens of Central Park and reading her mother's favorite books before she was allowed. She believes mystery and magic are all around us but we are too often too busy to notice...books that exaggerate mystery and magic draw attention to it and remind us to look for it and revel in it.

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They had nothing in common but a desperate passion...

Billionaire Jason Denning lived life fast and hard in a world where anything could be bought and sold, even affection. But all that changed when he met “Greta,” a beautiful stranger ready to explore her hidden desires. From a blue collar family, Gia Angelotti wore a badge, fought for right—and opened herself utterly to love him. Blindsided and falling hard, Jason does the first impulsive thing of his life and hustles her to the altar.

Until a second chance proved that forever could be theirs.

Then tragedy ripped Jason’s new bride from his arms and out of his life. When he finds Gia again, he gives her a choice: spend the three weeks before their first anniversary with him or forfeit the money she receives from their marriage. Reluctantly, she agrees to once again put herself at his mercy and return to his bed. But having her right where he wants her is dangerous for Jason’s peace of mind. No matter how hard he tries, he finds himself falling for her again. Will he learn to trust that their love is real before Gia leaves again for good?

* * * *

“To what do I owe this displeasure?” Jason Denning leaned against the doorjamb and stared at the all-too-familiar face glowering back at him.

This close to Halloween, he wished his visitor was some kid he could hand a piece of candy then send away. Unfortunately, this wasn’t someone in a costume.

“Is that any way to talk to your mother?” Samantha Denning-Markham-Lloyd braced her hand against his chest and shoved him out of the way to enter his condo uninvited. The tap-tap-tap of her ever-present stilettos clattered against the hand-scraped hardwood floors and echoed off the high ceilings, resounding through his downtown Dallas loft.

As he followed her across the foyer and into the great room, she picked up his remote and turned off the football game with a dramatic sigh. The TV mounted on the exposed brick wall went dark—sort of like his mood.

“No, really, Mom. I wasn’t watching that or anything.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I haven’t seen you in three years, and you’d rather gawk at grown men chasing an oblong ball? Don’t you even have a hug for your mother?”

Samantha had barely allowed him to touch her, even when he’d been a little boy. Now, she only ever wanted something from him when her life had gone to hell and she wanted help fixing it. “You mean like we’re a warm, well-adjusted family? They usually spend Christmas together. But oh, you didn’t show up last year, like we’d planned. Thanks for not calling to let me know you weren’t coming. I had a fabulous holiday alone, thanks for asking.”

Samantha sighed. “You have your father’s sarcastic streak. I could live without it.”

“Too bad I can’t. Is there a reason you couldn’t return my messages? I haven’t moved or changed my number for the last few years, so I know you didn’t fail to call because you had trouble finding me. I assumed you were too busy with husband number three for your only son.”

“I didn’t come here for guilt.” She waved his words away, and he noticed that her ring finger was currently bare. “Lloyd is long gone. The poor bastard went bankrupt. I couldn’t possibly stay.”

Jason supposed that whole “for richer or for poorer” thing didn’t mean much to Mommy Dearest. “So you dumped him?”

“As it happened, I met another man about the same time. Robert swept me off my feet.”

Translation: He had a lot of money and spent a nice chunk on her. “So you left Lloyd for Robert. Beautiful.”

“It was,” she defended. “We had a fabulous wedding in Fiji. You would have loved it.”

Doubtful, but since he hadn’t been invited and it sounded like the union was over, his opinion was moot. “Is the divorce final yet?”

“No. He just filed last week.” She pursed her artificially plumped lips as much as the injections allowed, looking a bit like a three-year-old in the body of a woman on the downhill slide to sixty. “He met a girl making a music video, of all things.”

“A musician?”

“No.” She scoffed. “A model strutting around in a bikini and spreading her legs on the hoods of cars for the camera. She convinced him that he still had the libido of a man half his age. Now they’re engaged.” She gave him a dainty huff. “I kept up my end of our prenuptial, as I have with every husband. I remained a size four. I played the gracious hostess for all his boring business parties. I even gave him the requisite blow job once a week.”

Jason winced. “TMI, Mother...”

So Robert had left her—a first for Samantha. She was used to men of all ages falling at her feet and offering her the world. She was usually the trophy. Maybe those days were over.

Jason couldn’t tell much difference in his mother’s appearance since he’d seen her a few years ago. She stayed in impeccable shape with a personal trainer. A stylist dressed her. She religiously saw an esthetician *and* had a plastic surgeon on speed dial. Most people wouldn’t think her more than a day or two above forty.

She fluffed her artificial blonde hair and shot him an impatient stare. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

Not really. Though he sensed the incident had broken her ego more than her heart, she still hurt. “Is he refusing to honor the terms of your prenu?”

“No, but...” She paced, looking out over the Dallas skyline all lit up in its evening glory yet not really seeing.

“But?” he prompted. The sooner she said whatever she needed to get off her chest, the sooner she would leave.

“He’s thirty-five years older than her. It’s ridiculous!”

Jason refrained from pointing out that billionaire Charles Denning had been thirty-two years Samantha’s senior when she’d married him. She hadn’t believed the age gap ridiculous then. Since his mother had given birth to him six months after she and his father exchanged vows, Jason didn’t think his mother had wooed his father away from his first wife of twenty-seven years with her scintillating conversational skills. Pointing that out now would only make her snit worse.

“Do you want a glass of wine?” A few of those usually solved her problems.

She shook her head and unwound her cashmere wrap, then tossed it at him. “It doesn’t mix well with my Xanax, and I can’t afford the extra calories. I’m looking for another man, one younger than me. I’ll show Robert.”

His mother sounded bitter. He wasn’t surprised. She’d always acted as if the world owed her something.

It was going to be a long evening.

Jason paced to the fridge and grabbed a beer, then tossed himself onto the black leather sofa, peering at the cityscape. He should probably keep his mouth shut. After all, he knew damn well that she hadn’t come to him for advice, probably money and sympathy—in that order. But she was all the family he had left. Even if she hadn’t been much of a mother, she was his.

“Maybe you should take some time to be alone, consider what you really want in a marriage before you dive into number five. There’s a reason things never work out, Mom.”

“That’s not fair,” she shot back. “Your father died on me when you were barely thirteen. I was married to Daniel Markham for over a decade before he got stingy.” She sighed. “Lloyd and I had a good five years, then...like I said, he went broke.”

“And Robert couldn’t keep it in his pants. Got it. I’m just saying that maybe some soul searching wouldn’t be all bad before you get involved again,” Jason suggested.

She cut him a blue-eyed glare as she perched on the edge of a gray suede chair and crossed her ankles. “What would you know? You’ve never been married.”

Jason froze. He should probably shut up now, but he’d learned a thing or two lately. “Actually, I’m currently married. Have been for almost a year.”

With that admission, a familiar weight pressed into his chest, unbearable and suffocating. Anger charged his veins. The constant, nagging pain followed. He shoved it all down and blanked his face.

Samantha reared back, eyes wide with *shock*, as if he’d just said he kept Godzilla as a pet. “*You* married? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried. That’s what the invitation to spend some family time last Christmas was supposed to be about.”

“Oh, well. I didn’t know. You didn’t invite me to the wedding.”

“It was somewhat...impulsive.” Because at the time, he’d thought that if he didn’t own that woman in every way possible, he would go insane.

Well, he’d slipped a ring on her finger and taken her to bed. Sadly, none of that had kept him from losing his damn mind.

He’d been a stupid bastard.

Samantha’s surprise deepened. “You’re never impulsive. And you’ve always expressed utter contempt for marriage.”

For years, he had. The not-so-shining examples around him had convinced him that he should never attempt happily ever after. That no one should. But *she* had been different. He’d been right about that. But he’d been so fucking wrong, too. He’d taken a stab at marriage, and the blade had cut him deep.

“Who is she?” Samantha rose to her feet, looking all around. “Where is she?”

Jason dragged in a deep breath and gritted his teeth. “She isn’t here.”

And she was probably never coming back. The truth fucking hurt.

For once, his mother looked genuinely concerned about him. “So you’re separated? Have you started divorce proceedings yet?”

It had crossed his mind...but Jason couldn't make himself call his lawyer. Some senseless part of him kept hoping that if he gave her more time, she would return.

It's been three hundred forty-four days. What are the odds she'll come back to play happy wife?

About Shayla Black

Shayla Black (aka Shelley Bradley) is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over 40 sizzling contemporary, erotic, paranormal, and historical romances produced via traditional, small press, independent, and audio publishing. She lives in Texas with her husband, munchkin, and one very spoiled cat. In her “free” time, she enjoys reality TV, reading and listening to an eclectic blend of music.

Shayla’s books have been translated in about a dozen languages. RT Bookclub has nominated her for a Career Achievement award in erotic romance, twice nominated her for Best Erotic Romance of the year, as well as awarded her several Top Picks, and a KISS Hero Award. She has also received or been nominated for The Passionate Plume, The Holt Medallion, Colorado Romance Writers Award of Excellence, and the National Reader’s Choice Awards.

A writing risk-taker, Shayla enjoys tackling writing challenges with every new book.

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