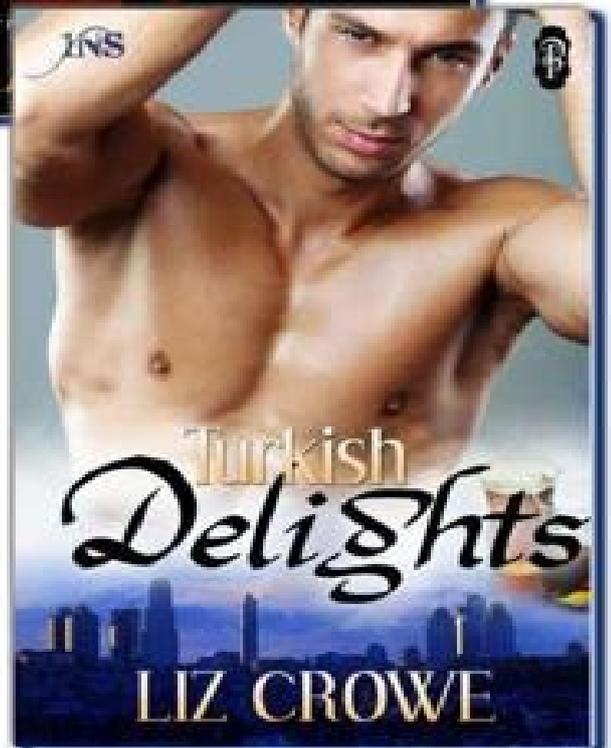
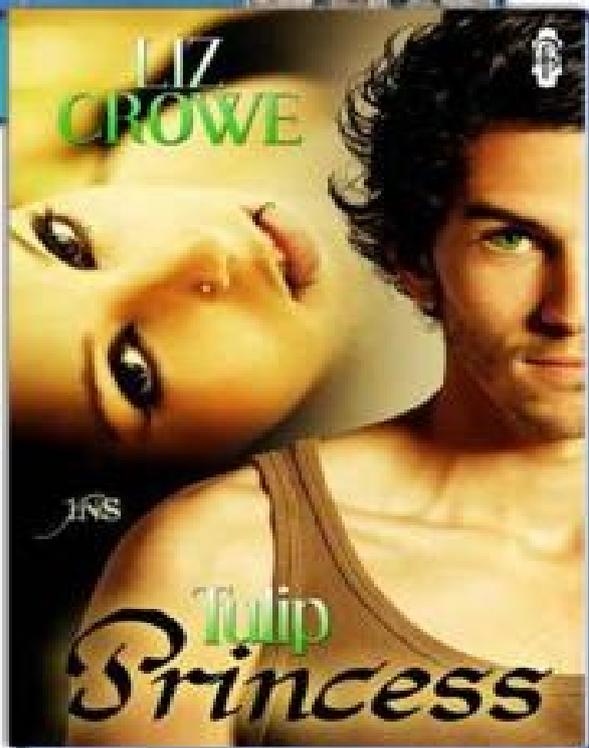
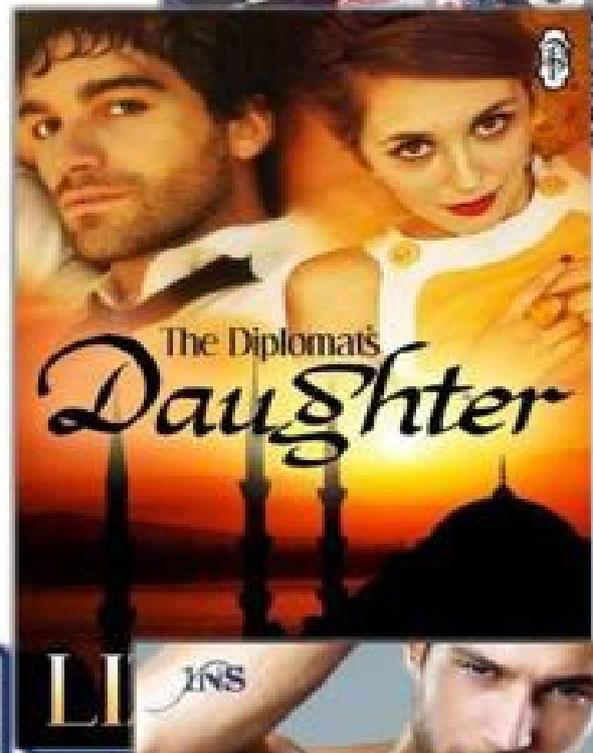
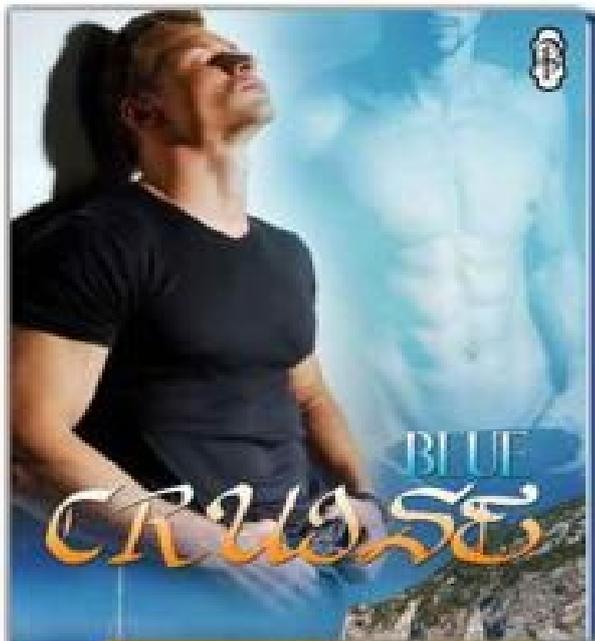
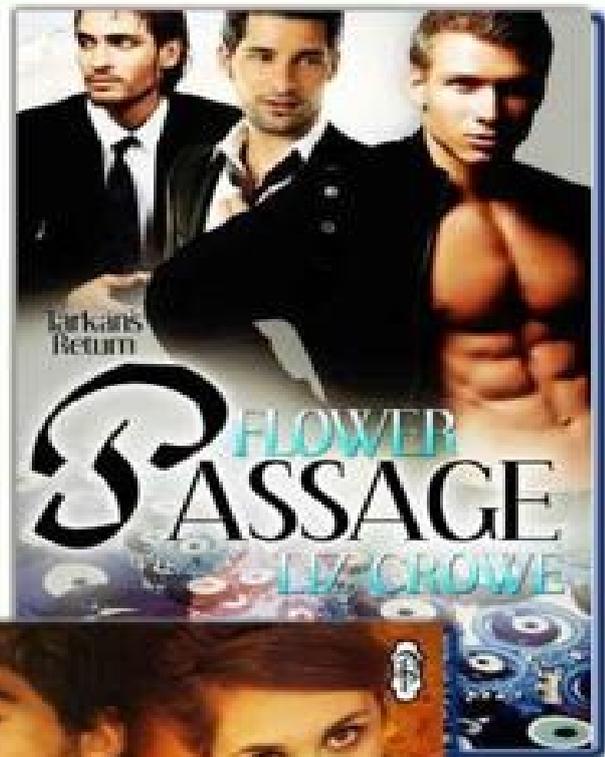


LIZ CROWE



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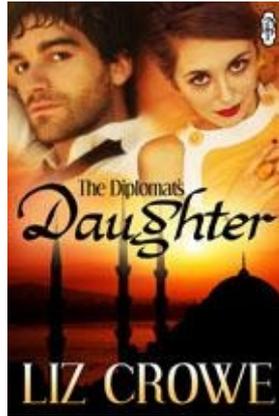
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The Diplomat's Daughter



Turkish Names (phonetic):

Levent: Brave, courageous, handsome

Burak: Lightning

Emre: Eldest brother, friend

Tarkan: Strong, bold

Lale (Lah-Lay): Beautiful Tulip. Tulips are indigenous to Turkey and only gained popularity in Europe when they were imported via the Silk Road trading routes.

Glossary

Anne (Ah-nay): Mother

Amına koduğumun piçi: (Ah-nuh-mah Ko-doo-uhm Pee-Chee): You fucking bastard

Babba: Father

Bok: Shit

Dur: Stop

Evet: Yes

Guzelim: Beautiful one

Hammam: traditional Turkish bath

Kucuk Olan (Kuh-chook O-lahn): small one (endearment)

Luften (Loot-fen): Please piçi: (peach) bastard

Raki (Rah-kuh): a traditional anise-based drink. It means “milk of the male lion.” It’s clear when poured over ice then turns a milky color when water is added.

Sikkafa: (Sick-ah-fah) Dickhead

Simit: (Sih-mit) a bagel-like “street bread” covered in sesame seeds.

Suleyman: reference to the tenth and longest reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Also known as “Suleyman the Magnificent”

Yabancı (ya-bun-jah) foreigner, (pejorative)

Chapter One

Vivian tore her gaze from the large windows, and tried to ignore the tedious professor. She tugged a lock of her dark hair over her eyes. The stupid, frumpy outfit her father made her wear at school chafed every inch of her skin. She glanced around, not finding anyone interesting to stare at in the stuffy economics classroom. Frowning she looked over her shoulder, bored, angry at her circumstances, and itching to get out of the confines of the room. It was stifling hot already. Her thoughts wandered to her plans for the evening with her friends.

They'd discovered an old Roman cistern that had been transformed into an illicit nightclub. Precisely the right amount of danger, served up with imported whiskey, local cigarettes, and attractive Turkish men plus a few daring tourists—the very thought of the place made Viv smile. Sneaking out of the consulate residence was a snap. Her father never paid attention to her anyway. Istanbul in the late 1960s was awash in tourist money and development. Plenty of trouble could be found if a girl knew where to search.

When her gaze met that of some hunky local staring at her like she was a water mirage in the desert, her skin prickled. His eyes were dark, his features sharp and striking. The dark tie and light blue shirt hugged his obviously strong torso. Her eyes narrowed. *Two can play the stare down game.* When he smiled, she gasped and her heart lurched into her throat. She whipped around and clutched her hands together on the desk.

Oh God. It was Levent Deniz. Her childhood friend. The boy who'd made her early years as the daughter of a busy diplomat in this teeming city bearable. They'd spent countless hours playing in the parks by the Bosphorus, daring each other through various mazes of dangerous boat docks, across rickety bridges through neighborhoods and streets where she had no business.

How could it be? She snuck a look back. Noted the unique color of his eyes—a soft, unusual midnight blue—and that scar at the corner of his mouth, when he'd fallen and gotten injured trying to protect her from the feral dog that had chased them the last day she ever saw him. Yep. It was Levent all right. She turned again to face front, her heart pounding.

That day, his poor mother had been apoplectic. So had hers once they'd returned to her house. Her father was the chief groundskeeper and his mother was the cook that came with the diplomat's residence where her family had lived. She'd technically been forbidden to play with him again. But it didn't matter, because after that day, he'd disappeared from her life. She remembered desperately looking through the kitchens and back halls where he usually lurked doing his schoolwork while his parents worked to serve hers.

Damn. He'd gone and gotten handsome. The years she'd spent back in the States after her parents' divorce she'd nearly forgotten about him. Now she was back, thanks to her mother's death and her father's insistence on having her nearby. Stuck going to Robert College, getting into as much trouble as she could behind her father's back, Viv hated every moment of her life since her return to Istanbul.

She snuck another look back over her shoulder at the young man. He had one dark eyebrow raised. His finger touched the scar at his full upper lip and he was staring right at her. Sweat break out under her stiff blouse. She crossed her legs. *This was an interesting turn of events. One for the diary, for certain.* She grinned to herself, picturing her father, the newly appointed Consul General for the United States of America, all fat and sassy with his new wife and baby, when he caught her making out with that lovely hunk of Turk under the consulate steps. *Just what he deserved really.*

Vivian gave her old friend one last quick glance, letting her eyes soften so he'd know she recognized him. Her skin pebbled again under his intense gaze. She studied his broad shoulders, his classical, almost Roman, features. Lovely. And about to get into a perfectly delightful amount of trouble with her if she had any control over it. And she knew she did.

He leaned back in his seat, stretched his long legs out in front of him, and ran a hand through his thick hair. *Was he actually blushing? Yes. Delightful trouble.* Vivian grinned at him. It was a life-changing moment that she would never, ever forget.

It never failed. Every time Viv felt even a little bit close to her father, that stupid simpleton of a wife would insert herself. She'd made a point to be on time for dinner in the lavish Consulate dining room for the express purpose of asking him about the family who that had served their former diplomatic home in Istanbul. But her stepmother was there, too, and their sniveling toddler, who always distracted him. It was as if he had short attention span problems with his kids. Could not focus on one and right now he loved that bratty little boy he'd spawned with his former secretary, the shiny new Mrs. Consulate General.

Vivian stared at the snot-nosed little kid who got all the attention. The spitting image of her father really: nearly hairless, red-faced, and complaining. She sighed and sipped her wine. After about twenty minutes of brainless baby-talk between the three of them she interjected. "Father, do you remember the Deniz family?"

Her father tore his gaze from the kid and frowned at her. "There are a million Deniz families. Which one are you referring to?" He took a bite of rich lamb stew.

"You know, from before. When we lived here." She shot a significant glance at her father's wife. "With *Mother*?"

He cleared his throat. "Oh, yes, right, well...." He made a show of remembering. "Ah, the boy who got cut, when you two were running around like a pack of wild dogs in the streets."

"Yeah." Viv let that one go. She needed the information worse than she needed to argue with him. "Him. What happened to them? Do they still...you know."

"I heard something about the boy. What was his name?" He waved a hand, deeming it unimportant. "He is co-owner of one of the construction companies here now. Don't know where he got the money."

"Levent." Vivian tried to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

"What? Oh yes, Levent. He was quite the trouble maker if I remember correctly." Her father shot Vivian a withering stare. She returned it in kind. "Why do you ask?"

"I thought I saw him today. In class."

"Hmm. That's odd. Perhaps he's getting an advanced degree."

"No, he probably never went to university at all and is only now getting one."

"Yes, one would suppose, wouldn't one."

Vivian rolled her eyes as her father returned his attention to his miniature, who'd dumped food on the floor. Vivian sighed. Her audience with the great man was obviously over. She tossed back the last of the one glass of wine allowed with a meal, stood and spoke. "I'm going out." Her father and his wife looked up as if surprised she was even still in the room.

Levent stared out the window of his car at the massive construction site that would someday be

the newest, fanciest hotel in the ancient city. He grabbed his hard hat and safety glasses and strode to the foreman's temporary offices. His head was not right. There was a disquiet in his gut, something he was wholly unfamiliar with, and he could trace it right back to the moment today when he'd locked eyes with her.

The controlled chaos of the site and especially the office did nothing to dispel his anxiety. As the subcontractor for the larger construction company in charge, Levent and his business partner spent a lot of time sucking up and placating, serving as go-between for the contractor and the actual workmen. He'd spent nearly ten years as a lowly tradesman, learning all he could about building, from the smallest homes to large apartment buildings, office towers, and now resorts. He felt most comfortable amongst the actual workers as opposed to behind some desk. Heaving a huge sigh, he clapped on his hard hat, and headed out to see what fires needed putting out today, his mind still foggy with memory.

"Levent! Wait! I can't. Ahh! Stupid skirt!" Vivian yanked her school uniform skirt up so she could dash across the rickety, Ottoman-era bridge where he stood. He laughed at her then turned away.

"Hurry up, girl, we will miss them." He was on a mission. Wanted to see the American Navy boat as it made its way up the Bosphorus on its journey to the Black Sea. The Cold War meant little to the boy other than it provided ample opportunity to watch military men, Turkish and American, making their way around his city and up and down the body of water that connected the warm southern seas with the chilly one bordering America's mortal enemy, the United Soviet Socialist Republic.

"I don't know why this is so important. We can go to the Marine base again if you want to see more soldiers." She picked her way onto the ancient bridge, still holding her skirt up around her knees to make room for maneuvering. Once she reached him he'd turned the corner and sat, feet dangling over the dirty grey water of the Bosphorus, eagerly scanning the horizon. She plopped down beside him, the wood creaking but holding up in the way things do when protecting children. She wiped a dirty hand over her eyes. He paid no attention to her. She tugged at his threadbare jacket. Loud male Turkish voices were all around them, mostly above, as there was a tea house attached to the other side of the bridge.

At one point he gripped her hand and pointed. "Look there." He'd taught her enough Turkish so she knew to follow his gaze. The undulating water held more secrets than anyone could imagine, and Levent loved watching it, imaging life in Ottoman times. She sighed.

He kept pointing, sensing when she looked up to see the airplane that must be casting a shadow over the water. But he knew better. The shadow was from below. As they watched, a massive black torpedo-shaped vessel emerged from the water. He heard the cheering of the men in the tea house. His heart sped up. It was magnificent. The water sluiced off it. The American flag on the side glittered in the sunlight. Without realizing it, he had the girl's hand clutched to his chest.

"Wow. Neat-o." She breathed, letting him keep her warm hand close to his body.

"Yes. Very." Levent watched the massive submarine as it travelled up the straight past shops and docks, and gaping, mostly male citizens. Unlike many young Turkish boys, Levent couldn't wait to serve his country. At the first opportunity he planned to join the navy. Spend the rest of his life on the seas, just like the soldiers who had emerged from the upper hold and waved to the cheering people lining the water's edge.

Vivian squirmed. "It's cold. Can we please go now?" He looked at her, let go of her hand, embarrassed at their contact, and ran his fingers through his hair. It was getting dark. He should go home. She should go home.

She gripped his arm as they picked their way back along the bridge, not letting go when the

reached the broken cement sidewalk. Levent stared down at her, surprised she still held onto him. Her dark brown hair and eyes shone in the twilight, already plotting the type of mischief he'd enabled for her in the last few months. He knew that look well and grinned at her next words.

"Race you!" He stumbled backward when she pushed the arm she'd been gripping to get a head start. "First one back gets the *simit*!" Levent smiled at her small body dodging through the masses of male figures crowding the streets since the release of the evening prayers. He bit his lip, gave her another few minutes then started weaving through the crowd, following her.

After about ten minutes headed in the general direction of her father's diplomatic residence, Levent still hadn't spotted her. But they knew cheater's shortcuts after an entire summer spent exploring the hidden area of the city. She'd be okay. The girl caught some grief from the men in the crowd. Istanbul streets teemed with all manner of dangers from pick pockets to uneven or non-existent sidewalks and packs of wild dogs that lived off garbage and the good will of citizens. It really was no place for a girl.

Levent caught sight of her maroon skirt twitching through a mass of dark trousers at the same moment he heard the growling. He picked up his pace. He had planned to let her win and get the prize—the morning's *simit*, a sort of bagel-like bread covered in sesame seeds, a staple of Turkish breakfast baskets. But he had another reason to lose. The smile she'd flash when she beat him made his whole body hum with happiness. The low growling came from ahead and to the right, in an alley nearby. But she stayed beyond his reach. His heart sped up again, and he shoved past the few remaining men between them.

"Better hurry," he yelled, as he lost all sight of her. He stopped, breathing heavy, trying to quell the rising panic.

"Boo!" She yanked his hat off as she passed, nearly making him leap out his skin. She turned around and faced him, walking backwards, and Levent felt his heart do the first of many slow flips in his chest at the sight of her. He put his hand on his chest once, started to call out, but she whipped around and took off, moving quickly through the crowd once again.

Vivian's lungs screamed with the effort of maintaining a breakneck pace through the busy streets. She'd learned to ignore the grumblings of men who disapproved of her presence among them. There was no way she could spend every waking moment cooped up either in school or at home. Her body craved activity. It wouldn't let her sit still. The first time she'd snuck out to follow the servant boy as he made his rounds of street markets for fresh fruits and vegetables, she'd stayed hidden in shadows and alleys. Fascinated by his ability to come and go as he pleased, she'd tracked him for nearly an hour before he turned and pointed at her. She'd stayed hidden, or so she thought, tucked near the underneath a street merchant's table and had been congratulating herself on her spy-worthy skills.

The boy's face had looked stern, but his dark blue eyes had twinkled, amused at her. "Go back, girl," he said in pure, sing-song English. "You do not belong here on street."

She'd stood, brushed the dirt off her proper school uniform, and crossed her arms, not moving. "No. And you can't make me."

He'd shrugged. "Then you have to catch me." And he'd taken off like a shot.

She'd made a point to join him nearly every day after that. He showed her how to steal bread and eat it while they sat along the mighty Bosphorus. On their forays she also learned how to really hide, to see while being unseen. A skill she treasured.

Her memories were snapped to present when he dashed by her, grabbed her hand and yanked her into a dirty narrow passageway between wooden buildings. His eyes were wild as he pushed her into a pile of wooden pallets. "Climb! As high as you can go!" A dog's bark drowned out her response. She

looked down at the sound of a loud yelp of pain and saw he'd whacked one of the feral animals on the nose. It kept coming at him though. Vivian was terrified but wasn't about to hide while he did all the fighting. She crested the top of the pile, found some chunks of concrete and started hurling them down behind the dogs to distract them. He glared up at her. "Hide!"

She backed up against the smooth side of the ancient building. Her heart pounded in her ears, but she couldn't stop smiling. As far as she was concerned, this was living. Sitting around and reading *Jane Eyre* and doing crochet like her mother expected was simply maddening.

He called out, yelling at the three dogs that had them cornered. Vivian leapt from her leaning pallet tower over to a balcony that jutted out into the dirty alleyway. There were some empty iron chairs up there, in a tangle of rusty metal. She heaved one over the side, distracting the dogs long enough so her friend could scramble up the wooden pile out of immediate danger. He stared at her, his chest heaving. She smiled, unable to stop herself, as he laughed at her. If she had a brother, she'd want one like him. But suddenly his blue gaze took on an intensity she didn't understand, although it made her tingle. She looked away.

By the time the dogs wandered away, she realized they had been sitting for nearly an hour as it got dangerously close to dark. They'd passed the time seeing who could hit the opposite wall with pebbles, talking in a mish mash of English and Turkish about what tomorrow might bring. She heaved herself over the side of the balcony and dropped down, surprised when he caught her. Vivian gulped. His strong arms felt so good, holding her close. She was late and could face all sorts of trouble, but his hands were so warm, his arms so strong. They made her feel safe.

He let her go and dashed away. Within minutes, the dogs were on their heels again but time was short, they couldn't hide anymore. Their feet pounded the cobblestones, she in front, so he could reach back every now and then and smack the lead dog's nose with a stick to delay them. As Vivian took the final long jump over the dirty canal that separated the diplomatic neighborhoods from the rest of Etiler, she heard a cry of anger and pain. She wheeled around and didn't see Levent. Breathless, she doubled back and found him, crouched against a rusting pipe that jutted out from the street, his hands on his face. Blood covered his neck and shirt.

"Oh no, Levent, did the dog bite you?" She tried to touch his hands, but he jerked out of her reach and walked away. "Let me see!"

He headed for her father's compound. Blood dripped on the cobblestones as she followed, pleading with him to let her help. He ignored her and moved toward the house.

Chapter Two

“Merciful Virgin child where have you been?” The girl’s mother stood at the kitchen door, her hands clasped together so tight Levent couldn’t make out where one ended and the other began. He watched Vivian try to smooth her hair, but the blatant dirt splotches on her once-white school shirt and maroon skirt were impossible to deny. So she simply stood, staring as he ducked behind the tall elegant woman and into the dim front hall.

He winced at the sight of his own mother, as she walked out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel. Her reaction came close to what he expected. Calling for the kitchen maid, she shoved him down onto a bench and pulled his hands away from his face. Blood ran down his neck, covered his shirt, made crimson puddles on the clean floor. She railed at him, smacked his head once or twice, yelled for his father. But went about the business of cleaning up the gash at the corner of his upper lip.

“This is your reward for stealing away with the little girl. You must stop now. Her parents know it is inappropriate for her. She must stay here. And you must go. We are sending you to academy. You can get started on that military career you want so badly.” Another clout to the back of the head signaled that his father had arrived. Levent felt his chest tighten. Never see her again? How could that be?

“No,” he claimed. “I...I want to work. The academy is too expensive. We can’t afford it.”

Whack. That one from his mother’s hand again. His head spun. “How do you know what you father can and cannot afford, you cur?” She shook her head and pressed yet another fresh towel to his dirty, bloodied face. “Insolent spawn.” She muttered all manner of Turkish curses on his hide as she cleaned his face and put a bandage over his upper lip. His father’s heavy hand fell onto his shoulder once his mother was finished.

“Son, I found you a job you can take for a couple of years, if you like. I know you love building things so an uncle has offered to take you on as a tradesman. Starting tomorrow.” His father’s voice was low. “I want you to learn, do you hear me? Get all the knowledge you can then spend your two years defending our beloved Republic, then I will have money for you to start your business. No son of mine will serve another like I have done.”

Levent frowned. “You are noble, father. I am proud to be your son.” His father stared hard at him. “But, I don’t want to leave...here.”

His parents exchanged a significant look. His mother moved into the kitchen presumably to fetch bandages, mumbling about “ungrateful sons” and “inappropriate friends.” A stone dropped in his gut when he looked back into his father’s dark eyes.

“You must, my son. It is for the best. For everyone.” For the first time in his nearly fifteen years Levent let his temper loose to a beloved parent. He stood, aware his shirt was stiffening with his own blood and his upper lip hurt like the devil had it in a vise. But he was not leaving. Not leaving her.

“No. I won’t. I don’t care what you think. She is my friend and I...” His shoulders sagged. He’d given away his position, betrayed how he truly felt about the daughter of the diplomat his parents served. The look in the older man’s eyes told him it wasn’t a huge news flash. His father stood, his six-foot six frame taking up most of the room in the small kitchen alcove.

“You will go, Levent. This girl is not your friend. She is your superior. Don’t ever forget it.” His father put a meaty hand on the boy’s shoulder. The weight of the world seemed to settle over him. His childhood—running the streets, laughing and joking, getting into and out of trouble, watching her lips curve into a smile, and listening to her voice as she spoke—was over. His father was right. He

swallowed, nodded his head, and moved into the kitchen to receive first aid. Bitter unshed tears made his throat ache. He sent a silent good bye to the girl, hoping she wouldn't be angry when she woke up tomorrow, and he was long gone.

The shouting, curses, and general craziness of a large construction site were familiar to Levent. Truthfully, it was his favorite place. He sighed and put his boot-clad feet up on the desk. The office was still bustling with workmen, but as the day came to a close, the place was emptying out. He placated an entire battalion of electricians today, and the general contractor was across the room singing his praises to a frazzled secretary so she could type a letter for his file. Levent smiled at her. He'd maneuvered her into a dark corner a few weeks ago, stolen a few kisses. As he recalled the fairly forgettable moment, his fingers gripped the folded paper Vivian had stuffed into his pocket earlier that day.

His heart pounded. He'd let the chaos of the afternoon's work push the images of Vivian out of his head. Which somehow forced it all back, nearly bowling him over. Memories of those deep brown eyes made him clench his jaw. He'd tried to sneak past her, writing a mental note to transfer out of that class. But she'd grabbed his arm. His entire body had zinged in pleasure at that one touch. She hadn't spoken. Had merely handed him a piece of paper. Because he wasn't able to trust his voice, and besides had no idea what he'd say to her anyway, he'd nodded and rushed out.

He caressed the paper between his hands. Then opened it, found a few simple words: 10 Cannakkale Place Dungeon ten p.m. He frowned. That was a bad part of town slowly being rehabilitated. He had no idea why she would be there at ten p.m., well past the time nice American diplomat daughters should be tucked up with hot chocolate and a book. His father's words filled his head. "She is your superior." He groaned. The almost fourteen years since he'd laid eyes on the girl felt like fourteen minutes right now. He'd missed her so much but had buried himself in work, then two years on the Syrian/Turkish border in the military. He never wanted for female company. But he was getting tired of the string of endless opportunity with women he felt nothing for beyond what their bodies provided.

"Deniz!" The electric foreman stomped into the temporary office. "Let me take you to tea, my son. You are a wise man beyond your tender years. I want to celebrate the deal you have made for us with the surly dog of a subcontractor."

Levent stood. He towered over most men, having reached his father's height of nearly six foot six inches. The older man clapped him on the shoulder. "Come, boy, I know a place where the tea is hot and the conversation hotter."

"I appreciate that, but I have a prior date to keep." He winced at the lie. But another moment with the gasbag's company would send him over the edge. The sight of Vivian, so amazingly beautiful as he remembered when she was a girl, but obviously all woman now had made him antsy, like he'd consumed too much caffeine. He felt a headache on his horizon, too, and the only way to avoid a monster migraine was to go home, get a hot shower and lie down. But his mind kept jumping around. He touched the scar on his lip, which stung at that moment as if he'd re-injured it.

"Ah, yes, youth. You enjoy that 'date,' young man. Big strapping lad like yourself, must have plenty of those, eh?" The older man elbowed Levent. He clenched his fists but pasted on a smile and smothered the impulse to punch the man's pudgy red face. He shook his head at himself. An even temperament had always been part of his makeup. Why in the world would simply seeing an old friend set him off like this?

He wiped a hand across his face. He must be tired. Between schoolwork and this job, he averaged five hours of sleep. Trying to complete a Master's level degree in business while running his own made for long exhausting days, but since he never had valued "down time," he had no real complaints.

Until now. He shook his head to dispel her. It didn't work. After giving his goodbyes, Levent stomped down the steps, anger at himself making the headache worse.

Vivian brushed out her hair and stared in the mirror. At nearly nine-thirty, her father had left for some function and his wife and kid were ensconced in the other wing of the residence. They generally avoided her, which worked. It left her free to roam around as she pleased. Her usual excitement sneaking around most every night had been wearing off lately. It seemed too easy. As if trying to prove her own badness was no fun because no one ever acknowledged it.

She sighed and reached for her journal. The pencil drawing she'd made of Levent stared back at her. His strong, stubbled jaw, deep blue eyes, crooked smile, and lean frame were as familiar to her today as if she hadn't spent the last fourteen years being angry with him for leaving. Vivian ran her finger across the picture, smudging the lines a little. The phone in her suite rang, startling her. The downstairs housekeeper's voice crackled through the receiver.

"Madam, there is a young man here to see you. It's Mister Harrison. From the office."

Vivian sighed. What was he doing here? She and Ron Harrison had been shoved together by her father the moment she'd touched down in Istanbul. The arranged nature of their dates did not lead to much fun, for either of them she didn't think. A former Marine and now a diplomatic flunkey of some sort bouncing between Istanbul and Ankara doing whatever it was diplomats did, Ron followed orders. And it seemed her father had ordered him to "escort her" around like some kind of juvenile.

"Okay, tell him I'll be down."

She swiped on some lipstick, buttoned up a few more buttons on her blouse, and made herself presentable. Hoping she didn't look like she planned on sneaking out to an illicit bar, she descended the steps. The young man stood, hands behind his back, parade-rest style, and watched her. His blue eyes shone. She let him take her hand and lead her into the formal sitting area of her father's enormous diplomatic home. Vivian studied his classically handsome face, framed by blond high-and-tight hair, and the span of his impressive shoulders currently cloaked in a dark brown suit. In other circumstances, she'd be interested. But this man had her father's mark of approval. Therefore he could take a long walk off a short dock as far as she was concerned.

"Vivian, I've come to have a serious talk with you." His low voice held the honeyed hint of an American southern accent. Her heart pounded but she leaned back on the couch and crossed her legs, accepting tea from the servant who brought it to them. "Your father and I agree that you should accompany me to Ankara next week and that we...well, I've asked his permission to—"

Vivian held up her hand as the tea seared her nasal passages. She coughed and sputtered and sat back up. Incredible. These two had effectively planned her marriage. To a man she barely knew and liked even less. Or had really not tried to like, might be a fairer assessment. He frowned at her, his eyes losing some of their sparkle.

"Stop right there, Ron." She took his hand, hoping the blunt edge of her harsh words. "You are a perfectly nice guy, but...." Her throat closed up with fury. Her father had divorced her mother, knocked up some secretary then married her, and demanded Vivian move back here after her own mother's death. He'd done a not-so-subtle takeover of her life with that move—but this took the cake. He was sorely mistaken if he thought he could hand her over like a horse from his stable. She stood. Ron kept a grip on her hand, but she yanked it back. "I'm sorry but my father has given you the wrong impression. I am not interested in joining you in Ankara or anywhere else." She crossed her arms, truly repentant at the way his handsome face fell. He stood and ran his hands down her arms. His touch made her want to scream and run away.

“I’m sorry, too. But I think you should talk to him. I’m not so bad, really.” He surprised her with a kiss, just a light one at first, lips barely ghosting across hers then deeper, his tongue invading her mouth, his grip on her arms tightening. She had a brief moment of regret, wondering what she’d be missing by rejecting this man. But as the “chosen one” he would never be an option. She broke the kiss, looked away, and took a step back. He put his hands in his pockets.

“I’ll call on you again tomorrow, if I may. We can...um...talk some more perhaps?” His tall muscular frame seemed somehow diminished by the massive room. Vivian gulped. If she had met him on her own, hadn’t had him shoved down her throat by her father, things might be different. But they could both take a flying leap right now.

“Do whatever you like. But I’m telling you I’m not...not marrying you.”

He smiled at her. “You say that now....”

In spite of herself, she grinned back. “And I will tomorrow and the next day and the next. I suggest you keep looking. Thanks for stopping by.” She kept herself from touching him, not wanting to give him the wrong idea. There was no way she was changing her mind. Her father and this man could find someone else’s life to arrange.

Vivian leaned against the large wooden front door after he left. She touched her cheek where he had grazed it with a knuckle. Yes, he could be quite the fine specimen, but he was not what she wanted. Nothing her father wanted for her would ever be acceptable. Ever. She checked her watch. Ten fifteen. Time to go. She hoped Levent would be there. They had a lot of catching up to do.

Levent resisted the temptation of Vivian’s invitation as long as he could. He ran for ten miles dodging through well-known streets and alleys in the in-between neighborhood where he lived in a two room apartment. The familiar sidewalk-less and cobblestoned streets pounded up through his legs, easing the headache but not the twitchiness in his nerve endings. Why should he even care to see her again? He’d shut the door on that friendship years ago when he didn’t say good-bye.

Sweat poured off his body by the time he circled back around to his nondescript building. His legs were on fire. He did an hour of sit ups and push-ups, the nervous energy in his soul pushing him further than he’d gone physically since he’d left the military. His body screamed at him to stop, but his brain made him continue, anything to exorcise those brown eyes from searing his brain like they had done since that morning.

Finally, he sat, leaned against the couch, his breath coming in short gasps, arms propped on his knees. The clock over the stove indicated he had twenty minutes if he were going to meet her. Suddenly freezing, Levent dragged a blanket down and covered himself, stretching his aching legs out. He groaned as the semi hard-on he had nursed all damn day got real, making him shift on the floor. He could reach in and handle it.

Dear God, how in the world had he come face to face with the girl again after all this time, in a city of nearly five million people? If he were the type, he’d call it pre-destined. But he wasn’t. He increased his rhythm, felt the orgasm gathering energy at the base of his spine. He laid his head back on the couch, gave into it. Temporary relief surged through him but he called her name at the last minute and imagined her in his arms.

Oh hell. I should not go there. I should transfer out of that class and avoid her. She is much superior. But he showered, dressed carefully and seemingly on autopilot, started walking the ten blocks to 101 Cannakale Street, to the Dungeon. To meet the woman who’d haunted his every waking moment for years.

Chapter Three

“Viv! Over here! Where have you been?” The pretty blonde woman waved at her from the other side of the dimly lit room. British rock music poured out of small speakers. The extremely thin young local, who owned the place and sported an amazing number of tattoos and horn rimmed glasses on his beakish nose, doubled as bartender and DJ. He nodded hello to her. Here she wasn't a diplomat's daughter, merely another young woman chafing at the boundaries of the culture where she lived. He learned how to make some lira out of types like her, and the occasional tourists who got wind of his place.

“Hiya.” Vivian flopped into a ratty overstuffed chair next to her friend. “Sorry. I had to turn down a marriage proposal.” She sighed and put a beer bottle to her lips. Vivian didn't really like to drink. The thrill here was more about being out. Out of her father's reach for a few hours doing what represented activity completely and utterly wrong for her. But boredom threatened as she scanned the familiar crowd. Same guys and girls, same music, same scene. The Roman artifact reeked of mold and mildew and age, but what else was new. Everything in this damn city must be a zillion years old, and everything in it stank.

Lillian kept talking. Vivian paid little attention to the words coming out of her mouth. “Ron. Wow! You turned him down? Why, Viv? He's dreamy.”

Vivian snorted and put the beer down. She looked at the door again, feeling edgy, nervous. “No chance. He's daddy's boy. They can forget about arranging my life.”

“Yeah, but he's so....”

Vivian cut the simpering girl's next words off with her sharp tone. “Spare me, Lil. I'll introduce you. He is a nice kisser. You two can move to Ankara and start spewing out children. Whatever.”

Lillian gasped and put her hand to her throat. “He kissed you?”

Vivian sighed. The girl was hopeless. She'd probably have kittens if she knew how many of the men in this very room she'd kissed. She patted her friend's denim clad knee. “Yes dear, but I don't think he even got hard.”

“Oh my God, Vivian, you are so bad!” Lillian's face turned beet red. Vivian resumed ignoring her. Kissing meant nothing to her. She'd done plenty of it and more back home at UCLA. But here she had the added extra bonus of making her a stone cold slut in the eyes of any Turk who locked lips with her. She loved it. She readjusted her skirt, the one she'd changed into after Ron left and positioned herself so she could see the ancient wooden door opening and closing. Would he come?

A commotion near the makeshift bar drew her attention. Some tourist kept griping about how much the beer cost. The owner, who was also a class-A kisser in Viv's book, glared at him. The coiled energy and tension ramped up as the locals gathered around in a loose circle behind the two men. He muttered curses, calling all the girls sluts, all the Turks dogs in the rough language she recognized as German. Vivian's heart pounded so hard it made her breathless. They hadn't seen a good fight in here in a while. This would be fun. She stood and walked around behind the bar. The tall, blond, boring European jerk had worked himself into quite a state. Demanding his money back, threatening to call the police down on the place. Her heart sped up as his obviously drunken stare landed on her.

“How much for her?” The group around him shuffled and murmured, moving closer.

“What did you say, Kraut?” The bartender replied in perfect German.

“I said very clearly you Turkish son-of-a-goat: how much for the whore?” He made the mistake of moving toward the bar and reaching across it. She didn't move.

“You could never afford me, you Nazi bastard.” She answered in his native tongue, crossing her arms. His eyes narrowed. Moving faster than she figured he could, he covered the two feet around the back of the bar and grabbed her hair, hard, bringing tears to her eyes.

“I’ll show you Nazi, you American slut.” He crushed his disgusting mouth on her, raping her with his tongue as she struggled. The man reeked of cologne covering a lack of bath, and God knows how much booze. She let him invade her mouth just enough.

“Holy mother of...Christ!” He leapt back, covering his mouth. “The bitch bit me!” He lunged at her again, and she sidestepped him. The place erupted in chaos as the regulars surged forward to grab him by his shoulders. The foreigner yelped in pain as one set of hands grabbed his wrist and jerked it up behind his back then shoved him to the floor. The crowd stepped back. Vivian looked down at the guy with the black boot pressed against his face.

“This floor is really really filthy, Kraut,” she whispered switching to Turkish. “Why don’t you kiss it? It’s more suited to your nasty mouth.” Unable to resist she spit at him, and the room erupted in laughter as her saliva rolled down his cheek. He yelled out a few more German curses, but Vivian stood to thank the savior that belonged to the huge boot planted on the jerk’s face. Her gaze travelled upward, taking in dark slacks, a trim waist, light blue shirt, long elegant, golden-hued throat. She put her hand over her mouth when she locked eyes with Levent. He wasn’t even breathing heavy after his little wrestling match. He lifted his upper lip in a smirk, the scar standing out on his otherwise perfect face. *Dear Lord, the man was gorgeous.* Her thighs tingled as she smiled at him. The purely physical response was something entirely new. No man had ever elicited anything like it from her. It terrified and exhilarated her all at once.

A few of the regulars jostled the German to the door, shoving him out with shouts of encouragement. Levent stood, hands in his pockets and stared at her. She moved first, wrapping her arms around his neck, going up on tiptoe to reach him, breathing in his scent, the very essence of man. He returned her embrace, a little reluctantly at first. She broke away, put both hands on the sides of his face and let a tear slip down her face. He put his large, dark hands over hers. The room shrank, reduced from a loud, illegal bar to a darkened space where only two were present. The surreal sensation made her dizzy. If he would kiss her, right now, she knew she’d be his forever.

But he took a breath, and a step back, keeping her hands clutched in his. “Darling, Vivian.” His voice was rough with emotion. “*Kucuk olan.* I can’t believe it’s you.” She was temporarily blinded by a vision—his hands, her body, his lips, her eagerness, candles, a bed, some wine.

“Yes, it’s, um, a surprise isn’t it?” *Lame.*

“The most pleasant one I have ever received.” He kissed one hand then the other. His lips were full, soft, and amazing. Vivian gulped, yanked her hands back before she did something really unsuitable, like fling herself into his arms.

“Let’s sit, shall we? We have so much to talk about.” The firm hand on her elbow felt perfect. Lillian gawked at him. “Hello.” He switched to beautifully accented English. “I am, Levent.” He held out a hand to her friend. Vivian regained her senses.

“Sorry, um, Lillian, this is my....” She was dumbstruck all over again as she looked at him. He pinned her with his dark gaze, until he raised an eyebrow, gave a small nod, reminding her she hadn’t finished her sentence. “M-m-my oldest friend, Levent. We knew each other years ago, the first time I lived here.” Lillian devoured the tall, striking man next to Vivian with a glance, and she felt a rush of utterly irrational jealousy at the girl’s stare. She glared at her friend, and Lillian stuck her tongue out.

“Very pleased to meet you.” She simpered and let Levent hover over her hand a tad too long for Vivian’s taste.

“Yes, well we’ll be over there.” She indicated a couple of chairs in the corner. “We have some catching up to do.” She looped her arm brazenly through Levent’s and pulled him away. Someone

brought them a couple more beers after they took their seats across a tiny table. He sipped his and sipped hers, watching her. She fiddled with her bottle.

“Go ahead, I don’t care.” He indicated the dark bottle. She frowned.

“I don’t care if you care.”

He burst out laughing. The sound flowed like a beautiful symphony across her brain. He leaned forward and touched her hand. “Exactly like I remembered. Any opportunity to break rules, no?” The tip of his tongue darted out, touched his upper lip, and Vivian nearly fainted at the fantasy loop in her head ramped up a notch. He stayed quiet, incredible eyes narrowed. She wanted to drown in them. How had she forgotten him? They’d gotten into so much trouble that last day his family had sent him away. She’d missed him and soon after her life had exploded when her mother had discovered Vivian’s father’s affair, packed the two of them up, and skedaddled back to California for the next fourteen years.

“I thought you had your own company or something.” She pressed her hands on her thighs, aware of the tremors in them both. “Why are you taking classes?”

“Finishing a Master’s level degree. How did you know I had a business?” He crossed his arms over his chest. Vivian resisted the urge to stare at how perfectly the soft cotton of his shirt stretched across his shoulders. Her hands itched to touch, feel, caress. She must really be a slut. But she didn’t care. She wanted this man. And sensed he wanted the same thing. She shifted back in her seat, mirroring his posture.

“I asked around.”

“Ah, well, yes I do. A small engineering subcontracting company. I am the go between on large construction jobs right now. It’s a living.” He shrugged. Vivian took a deep breath, sucking in the essence of the man across from her. Light cologne mixed with something elemental, something urgent and needy. She forced herself to smile and flirt when what she really, truly wanted was for him to kiss her, press her up against a wall and—she shook her head. As progressive and liberated as she liked to pretend to be, Vivian was a virgin. Kissing and groping were the extent of her repertoire. She’d never felt compelled by anyone to go any further in spite of a lot of spirited efforts to convince her otherwise.

“And you. What brought you back to my city, eh small one?” She realized they had eased into Turkish. The endearment struck her right in the heart. He used to call her that every time they went out, goading her to do more, take more chances, follow him into ever deeper trouble. She looked down to hide her overheated face.

“What else? My father.”

“But you left, not long after. Well, you know. I thought you would never return.”

“How did you know? Your mother told me you had moved to the military academy.” She blinked back tears at the memory. Her mother had yanked her hair so hard that day they’d shown up, late, filthy and in his case bleeding like a stuck pig. He shifted in his seat. She suppressed a gulp at the concept that he was as uncomfortable as she. Long forgotten memories tumbled in on each other.

Her parents had yelled at each other long and loud that day indeed. Over her. She’d been left to roam the streets like an urchin with a servant boy according to her father. She’d slammed the door and ignored them. But the next day Levent’s mother, the woman who babied her and coddled her in ways her parents never did, choked back tears as she told Vivian that her son had gone away. Would not be returning. “Forget him, my darling,” she’d crooned as Vivian’s tears soaked her dress. “I have to. We must. It’s for the best.”

He cleared his throat. “Earth to Vivian?” He cocked his head to one side and touched his scar. Her face got so hot she figured she’d likely glow in the dark.

“Sorry, I was just, remembering.” She choked out.

He nodded. She drank the too-warm beer in a rush, hoping it would calm her. It went down the wrong way, and she sputtered and coughed as he leapt up and pounded her back.

Keeping a hand on her upper back, he leaned into her ear. "You okay, small one?" His breath brushed her ear, sweet and soft against her flesh. She closed her eyes. He stood a moment longer at her shoulder then sat. She tried not to beg him to come back over, touch her some more.

Levent struggled to catch his breath, to remain calm, to seem unflustered by the closeness of her body. He kept a casual arm around her shoulders as they exited the smelly illicit Dungeon bar. The midnight hour was no time to be parading around with a foreign female, and he knew it. But he wanted to walk with her, hold her hand, relive and relearn her, inch by inch. His cock could cut diamonds, and the ache in his lower belly distracted him, but he didn't care. She was back. And he used any excuse he could find to touch her.

They laughed as they walked along the edge of the Bosphorus. Her smile and voice the balm his overwrought psyche craved. The thought of having to leave her somewhere, even at her father's house made him cringe inside. *Mine. She is meant to be mine.* "She is your superior. It is inappropriate" rang in his ears but he shoved it aside.

"Tell me more about your life now. I want to know everything." He used the excuse of cool night air and friendly "catching up" to pull her closer. She snuggled into his side.

"Oh you know, college, studying business. It's perfectly boring. I would love to study art. Father says that would be useless. But..." She stopped and pointed out over the dark water.

"Here. It was right here." He frowned at her. She slipped her arm around his waist. Levent used all his willpower not to kiss her. Because that would be entirely bad. They couldn't. Her father would never allow it.

"Here what?" He leaned in for an illicit sniff of her hair, and was rewarded with essences of the ocean, exotic flowers, and the sun.

"The submarine. Remember? You made us stand here and freeze until that stupid thing emerged. I thought you were gonna pee your pants you were so excited."

He laughed. But tried to disentangle himself from her arm. He might lose it in a minute if he didn't get some distance from her. To his utter surprise she turned to him, her eyes shimmering with tears. The kiss shocked him. He stood, frozen, unwilling to commit, afraid of what he might do for a few seconds. She broke away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't."

Levent put a hand on her face. "No, *I* shouldn't. But God help me, I must."

He possessed her with his mouth, forced her full lips open with his tongue. When she wrapped both arms around his neck and moaned, he deepened it, sweeping into her mouth, owning her, laying his mark on her. His head spun as he tried to keep some distance between their bodies, unwilling to press against her but she insisted. Without breaking their lip connection he walked her backward to the bridge's large railing, shoved a thigh between her legs and let her feel every inch of his desire for her.

"Oh God." He tried to break. He'd gone too far. But her eyes were wild and hungry, her face flushed and eager under the bridge lights. And she was, in a word, delicious. He trailed his lips along the curve of her jaw, to her ear, bit down, bringing a soft cry from her lips, making his cock even harder if that were physically possible.

"We cannot." He yanked out of her arms. "This is, wrong. You are..." He sensed her quickened breathing, caught the faintest edge of a black lace bra between the buttons of her silky blouse. He groaned as she grabbed his belt buckle and tugged him back to her, wrapping her entire body around him.

“Levent. I need you. I...” She gasped as he cupped her ass with one hand and a lace encased breast with the other. He was out of control. He was going to take her right here, right now if he didn't stop.

Her hand was on him, stroking his length beneath his zipper, making him thrust his hips as he captured her mouth again. God, he could kiss her forever. He had never felt so connected to another woman. But he would not do this here, not this way. He released her, gave her lower lip a small bite and looked into her eyes, cradling her face in his hands. “I left your house that day and my life ended. Now, you are returned to me, my darling, I—” He gazed up at the city-lit night sky. She buried her face in his shoulder.

“I have to go home,” she mumbled into his shirt then glanced up at him. He smiled and brushed away her tears. “I’m really late. I’m usually home by midnight. It’s what, two in the morning? Will you walk me there?”

“The American Consulate is too far to walk from here.” His protective nature flared up. “I’ll find a taxi we can trust.”

“Okay but won’t you get in trouble, out this late with a *yabancı* female?” He grinned and ran his finger down her face, ending at her lips. She took the tip between her lips and sucked. He shivered which made her grin. “I’m no angel, Levent. Never have been. You know that.”

“Yes, I do. It’s what I missed most. Well, until now.” He had to taste her once more. The sweetness of their kiss nearly made him cry like a girl. Dear Lord but this only meant trouble. There was no denying it. They could never be together. But his life would be over otherwise. He took her by the arm and led her up to the still busy street.

He tucked her behind him and whistled for a taxi, knowing no one who thought he had a woman with him out this late would stop. A small yellow cab screeched to a halt. He piled her in, finger to her lips. “Greetings, brother. Thank you ever so much for stopping. Would you mind terribly getting us back to the American Consulate? My sister is meeting her friend there. They are very good friends.”

The cabbie grumbled, but in the way of all Istanbul drivers, barely looked over his shoulder before peeling back out into traffic. Vivian kept trying to touch his leg and as much as he wanted it, he knew it would never fly inside the taxi. So he pushed her toward her door. She stuck her tongue out. But he merely nodded toward the driver, letting her know to cool it. They sat, weaving their way through the pre-dawn traffic his heart soaring as he took in her profile. Her exquisite, delicate features, long brown hair begging him to bury his hands in, full red lips swollen from his attention. Her hands were clasped in her lap, as she stared straight ahead. Levent glanced at the driver then snuck a hand over to hers, covering them both. The heat from her skin made him bite back a groan. He kept his hand there, wondering what in the hell he could do about the fact he was head over heels for the girl again—the one girl he couldn’t have.

Chapter Four

He walked her to the huge door, but Vivian pulled him around to the back. There was absolutely no way she could waltz into the front door this late. One of the kitchen doors had a key she kept hidden under a rock nearby. She felt his gaze on her as she swiftly got herself back inside. He stood with his hand on the door, keeping her from closing it. Any number of odd emotions roiled in her gut, making her short of breath. This impossibly handsome Turk, her dear friend from childhood, a man beyond her wildest dreams stood so close it made her goofy and weak all over again. Thoughts of using him to get into trouble flew from her head. In his arms tonight on the rickety bridge where they used to sit for hours as children, for the first time in her life, she had felt one hundred percent loved.

She put her hand on his rough cheek. He closed his eyes and put it to his lips. "We cannot, you know." His voice was barely a whisper. "It's not right. Not appropriate."

"I'll be the judge of that." Her voice sounded stronger than she felt. This would be quite the bombshell indeed. Locals and diplomats only mixed on a purely functional level, for day to day business and minor socializing. Besides, to her father this amazing man would always be "that servant boy" and she knew it. "Can we have tea? Tomorrow?"

He opened his eyes, shook his head. "No, I...I spend Sundays with my mother. But..." His eyes were bright. "Monday, after class. We must be careful, in public, you know. With our books and only on the campus."

Vivian sighed. Stupid backward country. He leaned in and brushed her lips once more. It took everything she had not to yank him inside and hold him hostage, forever. Besides his obvious physical attractiveness he made her feel protected, cared for, as he had when they were kids. Like his mother had for all those years when her own social climbing parents effectively ignored her.

"Farewell, small one. I will see you soon. I promise." He kissed the palm of her hand and placed it over his heart. Vivian loved the feel of him, warm, strong, masculine. Her knees were wobbly by the time he pulled the door shut, his finger to his lips to make sure she kept quiet. She shut the door and stood for a long time, looking up at the ceiling, wondering what had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours. *Who* had happened to her, perhaps the better question. And what the hell would she do about it now?

Levent sipped his tea and listened as his mother went on about the latest affront to Turkey and Turks in general. But he didn't really hear her. His head filled with Vivian's laughter, her near perfect use of his language, the taste of her lips, the feel of her body against his. He ran a hand down his face.

"*Anne*." He interrupted his mother. She set her tea glass down and looked at him. "Do you remember...Vivian?" He needed to talk about her. She frowned at him, which made his throat tighten. He should not have brought her up.

"Yes, my son, I do. She was a lovely girl. I understand she is back in town."

"Yes, *Anne*, she is."

"And you have seen her?" His mother always did read him like a book. He sighed and braced himself for the lecture. But she remained silent a while, sipping quietly. Levent decided to change the subject, hoping to deflect her.

"I'm on the short list for a major hotel renovation. I'll find out more end of this week, but I think

we might just get it. Means I'm the general, not merely the sub-contractor you know." His mother beamed at him a moment.

"You and this girl," his mother began. He groaned inwardly. "You are...connected somehow, know this. She is a good girl. Her mother never paid any attention to her back then. When her parents divorced and she left, I missed her. Truly a delightful child." His mother filled his tea glass. "Very headstrong, even then. But also very smart. She spent a lot of time in my kitchen, after...." She ducked her head.

Levent let the silence spool out between them. He still nurtured resentment over having to leave. Might as well get her real feelings about it now that his father wasn't around to inject his large personality into the conversation.

"Ah, my son, we had to send you away. It was not suitable for you to be running the streets with a girl who was not far from being a woman."

"Mother, she was only eleven, good Lord."

"In our society...."

He stood, unwilling to have this argument with her now. While his mother represented his touchstone and he loved her, wouldn't do anything on purpose to upset her, anger suffused his brain and knew he should leave before devolving into argument. She pinned him with a stare. He slowly sank back into his seat.

"I'm not finished," she continued. "You *will* listen to me. You were nearly a man, and I knew how you felt about her. We couldn't risk our position. We'd worked so hard, were saving money for you, for your future. The staff gossip had gotten loud, and it was only a matter of time before his father caught wind of it." She patted his hand as he nervously fiddled with the delicate lace napkin that matched her marital tea set. "But it didn't matter did it? *Allah* had other plans it seems." She raised her eyebrows and finished the bitter tea.

"So, if I said," Levent started but his mother held up a hand, gnarled and red-skinned from years of working in someone else's kitchen.

"No, I don't want to hear it. Not yet. My poor heart can't accept that my son is in love." She smiled at him. He leaned back in his chair. The late afternoon sun shone through the flawlessly clean windows of his parents' small flat with its perfect views of the Bosphorus. The call to prayer boomed into the air, sending birds scattering to the flat grey sky.

"I don't know about love, Mother." He finished his own bitter brew.

"I do." She nodded and patted his hand again. "It's in your eyes, my beloved son. It fairly oozes from your pores. And I am glad. I just ask...be careful. Don't do anything sudden or...."

Levent laughed at her loss for words. "I know, Mother. Nothing inappropriate. I promise. Besides, I still don't know that she will have me. Not yet. I want to make more of myself before I do anything...rash."

His mother stood next to him and put her rough hand on his face. "My son, she is not your superior. I'm sorry your father ever said that to you. Don't let that ruin your happiness."

A weight lifted from his heart. Maybe, very possibly, he could make this work. He straightened his chair and let the possibilities run through his head, and smiled.

Vivian lay in bed for several hours the following Sunday, drawing pictures of him, writing diary entries of memories as they crashed back in on her. She had her meals sent up, unwilling to face her father or any of his annoying new family. It would ruin the pure happiness that coursed through her every time she thought of him. The windows of her third floor suite were thrown open to the warm

grey-skied Istanbul afternoon. Birds were plentiful on the lawn of the historic residence building surrounded by trees and gardens carefully tended by a huge staff. A soft meow at the window side brought a smile to her face.

“Suleyman!” She cried and carried the large stray cat into her room. A scruffy thing with a missing eye, he’d been hanging around her bedroom window for over a year. The window ledges of the old building were large, perfect to accommodate his sleeping form. She kept food out there for him, and sometimes in the night, he’d even snuggle into her warm body but would always bound away the next morning, seeking adventure.

“You magnificent thing you.” He must have been in a mood to be cuddled. His loud, rusty purr was good company. He rolled over onto his back and batted at her hair that hung down from her face as she rubbed his matted fur. “I wish you would stay. I will clean you up, find you some girlfriends....” She laughed when he yowled at this as if he understood her. She rolled over onto her back, her mind fuzzy with remembered sensations of Levent—his hands, lips, tongue and body. The cat climbed up on her chest and sat, staring at her, as if willing her to talk.

She ran a hand over his head, scratched behind his ears as he leaned into her, his purr revving up again. “Oh my magnificent cat. I think I’m in love. And I think I may die if Monday doesn’t hurry up and get here.” She picked up her journal and stared at the latest drawing. She’d added the small scar on Levent’s beautiful face. The silly animal moved between her and the picture, rubbing his face against the edge of it, his purr drowning out the end of day birdsong and call to prayer from the mosque below the consulate hill. Vivian sat and doodled a quick picture of the cat, his magnificent huge head and war wounded eye as he curled up in a ball on her white bed cover and slept. No one had missed her around the huge residence, no one had inquired about her late entry last night. And she’d spent the entire day alone. If she showed up for dinner there’d be plenty of food, but why bother? No one would miss her there either. She drifted off to the sounds of the imam reminding the faithful that God was good.

Vivian freshened her lipstick and pulled her hair back with a new headband, mentally smacking herself for seeming so eager. She’d been the first in her seat for class. That never happened.

“You sure are making a big fuss over yourself,” one of her English friends commented, flicking at her hair as she passed by. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Vivian fiddled around, putting her hair back in place, and tried not to be too obvious as she watched the door. Something compelled her to see him. Had to have him in her space. It was a completely new sensation, slightly irritating, like an itch deep in your ear you couldn’t reach, but that demanded your attention constantly. As each student filed in in pairs or singly, she’d sit a little straighter then slump down when it wasn’t him. Finally the professor rapped on his desk to get their attention and the class commenced. Without him.

Her leg twitched and her nerves were a jangled mess by the end of the fifty-minute period. Before Lillian or any of her friends could comment or stop her, she leapt from her seat and dashed out, single minded and tunnel-visioned. She jumped into the back seat of her waiting car and barked at the driver to take her to the construction site where she knew damn good and well Levent would be. If he thought he could ignore her after their amazing connection, he had another thing coming. She barely recognized her own face in her compact mirror as she reddened her lips with a shaking hand. The incredible compulsion to see him, hear his voice, feel his hands on her skin—she had no frame of reference for it. Her driver kept staring at her.

“Why are we here, missus?” She could tell he was nervous. He took his role as driver slavishly.

bodyguard very seriously. "There is nothing here for young ladies. It's a place full of rough, peasant workmen."

"I'm getting out." She grabbed her silk scarf and opened her door before he could protest. He jumped out but she melted into the crowd around the tall construction fencing. The guy would wait for her, she knew. He'd never go home without her. She found a doorway and eased it open as she tied the scarf under her chin. The propriety for head covering was less about religion, more about simple vanity in this cosmopolitan city. But Vivian realized she had already pushed serious boundaries even coming here; showing up with her hair showing would make the whole place apoplectic.

The clamor of loud construction deafened her. The men brushed around her as if she weren't even there. Heart pounding, she tried to look natural—as a young foreign woman at a large Istanbul work site. What had she been thinking? An older man approached her, and she ducked behind a pile of dangerous looking metal, avoiding him.

She put her hand to her throat, close to bolting by the time she heard her name. Levent dashed over, gripped her arm, and pushed her to a makeshift building that served as some sort of office. His eyes were dark with anger, as he shoved her down in a chair and tossed his hard hat onto the table. He looked tired as he ran a hand over his face and knelt down in front of her. Vivian's heart stuttered. She'd messed up. She reached out for his hand, her natural tendency to react and meet anger for anger, losing out against her extreme need to hear his voice again.

"What were you thinking, Vivian? You are not supposed to...."

Vivian put a finger over his lips. "I missed you today. I'm sorry." He clutched her hand to his heart.

"You must go. Where is your driver?" He stood. She resisted, stayed in her seat. He frowned at her. The door opened, and he moved to stand in front of her. The man yelled at him, something about being late, not handling the plumbers, his face red and angry. Vivian bit her lip. She had gotten him in trouble. She waited it out, listened as Levent calmed him, soothed the situation like a pro, his voice low and even, not matching the other man's angry tone. He started toward the door, holding his hand out behind him indicating she should stay put and keep quiet.

She crossed her legs and tried not to let her temper get the best of her. She just wanted to see him for crying out loud. He didn't need to be so bossy. But she obeyed him as he put an arm around the other man's shoulder. When he shut the door, he hit the deadbolt lock, turned and glared at her. She stood. Forget this. Her chest tightened. The last thing she needed was another man bossing her around.

"Sorry. Never mind." She brushed past him, held down the urge to put her arms around him and apologize for being so difficult. She really should have known better than to come here. This was Istanbul in nineteen sixty-eight. Women didn't simply wander around alone on construction sites or anywhere else. She had put herself and him at risk.

He put a hand on hers as she struggled with the lock. "Stop. Vivian. Just, stop. Please."

But a familiar, comfortable and wholly unhappy anger settled over her psyche. He could take a long walk. She was done listening. She jerked her hand away, yanked the door open, and stomped down the rickety steps.

"*Dur!*" He switched to English. "Stop! Do not take another step without me beside you. Vivian, I am serious." She turned slowly and stared at him. His exotic beautiful face filled with emotion. But she couldn't bring herself to respond. "*Guzelim*. Please."

She heard him but she refused to acknowledge his command or the endearment. She shoved her way through the smelly crowd of workers, leaving him standing at the top of the steps. Tears stung her eyes, blurring her vision. She pushed the nearest metal door open onto the street and stumbled out into the teeming mass of mostly male Turkish citizens going about their business. The shocked noises and hands that reached out to grab her as she stumbled only made her angrier.

Chapter Five

Levent had never in his entire life felt so helpless as he watched her walk away. He lowered his head, took a deep breath, and looked around. The entire construction site stared at him without seeming to stare at him. The maddening bundle of contradiction that represented the essence of Vivian had his chest in a vise. She'd gone out of her way to find him, which made his heart sing with joy. But she'd showed up here, unescorted, which made his teeth ache with fury.

He grabbed her scarf from the floor and pushed through the men milling about who had surreptitiously watched the drama unfold. He hadn't meant to miss class today. But the opportunity to meet with the businessmen he'd been courting for a year had been too good to pass up. The deal had been sealed. He was now the part owner of an elite rug shop, catering to the diplomatic set, visiting celebrities and millionaires. When his friend and business partner had shown up last night, breathless and eager, he'd been daydreaming of her, absently rubbing himself, mooning around like a teenager.

"Levent, my brother, my brother, this is it! We've done it!" Burak had clapped him on the back and poured him a stiff shot of *Raki* from the small kitchen counter. "We have arrived! We have the money together. They are ready for us as partners."

Levent had grinned at his friend's excitement. This and the big general contract he was about to get on the new Hilton hotel project would seal his fate—fulfill the dream he'd worked so hard to achieve for so long. This would make him able to speak to Vivian's father. Until then, their future did not exist. Now, perhaps it did. He and Burak had met in the military, become fast friends, talking late into the night about their goals and dreams. But now, Vivian consumed him. His need to have her, be with her, gain her father's approval, nearly choked him.

He started to get frantic, realizing he'd lost sight of her. She'd probably escaped through one of the makeshift doorways in the fencing. "*Bok.*" He muttered under his breath. The day his life started to take shape, he had managed to infuriate the woman he'd been dreaming about for years. He caught a glimpse of her brown hair and dark skirt a few yards ahead and pressed between two men carrying piles of freshly baked bread on their heads. As she started to disappear into the next throng of men, he grabbed her arm and yanked her back to his side.

"Put this on and don't speak," he muttered between clenched teeth, handing her the silk scarf. She tied it under her chin but wouldn't look at him. "Come. My home is just around this corner. Keep your eyes down." She stared right at him, her eyes brimming with unshed tears of anger. Dear God but she was the most beautiful creature in the universe.

"*Pic.*" She whispered. He frowned and kept a tight grip on her upper arm, reminding himself that he had taught her how to say "bastard" in Turkish.

When they arrived at his shabby door, he pushed her inside, glancing around to make sure no one observed him taking a foreign woman into his bachelor's building. She resisted about a second, before he gave her a shove out of the line of sight of the street. She stayed silent, following him upstairs and to the door of his flat. This unbelievably inappropriate moment, her being here, had his head buzzing with possibility. He could get in real trouble. He ignored her and flipped on the kettle for tea.

"Who can we call to come and get you? From the Consulate?" He stood, trying not to get pulled into her amazing orbit. If he got too close, he'd be gone. The powerful need to sweep her up, plopping her on his couch and... He shook his head to clear it. "Well?"

She glared at him. The kettle whistled so he got busy making them tea so she wouldn't see how his hands shook. When he turned around, she had the scarf off and stood entirely too close. He sid-

stepped her, but her perfume invaded his nose, making him shut his eyes briefly to regain his composure opening them again to speak to her.

“Please, *Guzelim*, who can we call? We must get you home.”

She sighed and took the tea glass he offered then looked up when a loud pounding sounded at her door. Levent frowned.

“Levent! Brother! It’s me...let me in!” Burak rattled the doorknob and let himself in. Levent watched the other man’s smile freeze at the sight of the woman in his kitchen. He groaned. This was not good. “Well, hello, lovely lady.” Burak smiled. Vivian held out her hand, and he made a great show of kissing it. Levent rolled his eyes.

“Back off, brother.” He stepped between them. A strange possessiveness stole over him, making him want to punch his good friend right in the eye. “We’re calling her driver. It’s not what you think.”

Burak raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I’m quite sure that it’s not. My brother has a way with women you know. There’s always one up here, keeping him...company.”

“Shut up, you idiot.” Levent growled. Vivian stared at him then at his friend.

“Brother? I thought....”

“No, no, my beautiful one.” Burak put an arm around Vivian’s shoulders, effectively shutting Levent out. “Brothers in blood. Not name.” Levent shot him a murderous look. “And never fear, I may have his finger in many pies, but his true heart will only belong to one. Ow!” Burak rubbed his head where Levent cuffed him.

Vivian smiled over her shoulder at him, and his heart zinged. Then she turned back to Burak. “What is your name, handsome?”

Burak grinned at her and walked her to the phone. “My name is Burak Ozdemir, and I am ever at your service. Shall I dial? Who are we calling?” Levent watched as his friend flirted and laughed with his heart’s desire. Leave it to that scoundrel to get the number out of her. She spoke softly into the phone as Burak poured himself a glass of tea. He looked at Levent, eyebrows raised. Levent shrugged.

Vivian’s voice broke the quiet. “All right, Lillian’s driver is coming for me. He’s going to send someone to the construction site. My, um, driver is probably still there, waiting for me.”

Levent groaned. “Dear God, Vivian, you left him there? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because, Levent, you grabbed me and yanked me here, remember?”

Burak snorted into his tea glass. “Ever the knight in shining armor, our Levent.” They sat, the silence oozing awkwardly around the room. Levent wished that his friend would disappear. He watched Vivian stare out the window, worrying her lower lip with her teeth—a nervous gesture he’d come to know very well, once upon a time. Every nerve ending in his body twitched at her nearness. He had never in his life wanted anything so badly as he did her right at that moment.

Vivian let the tears she’d been holding back trickle down her cheeks and drop onto her hand, which she clutched tight together in her lap. The Istanbul night whooshed by her window as Lillian’s driver spirited her home and Lillian kept talking. She tried to shut the girl’s infernal yapping out. To concentrate on Levent’s dark, handsome face.

“Wow, that was one good looking guy.” Lillian kept insisting as she twirled her blonde curly hair around one finger. “That wasn’t the guy from the Dungeon though, was it Viv? Viv?” Vivian startled when Lillian snapped her fingers under her nose.

“Huh? Oh, no. He’s a friend of that guy. Of Levent’s.”

“You and your friends.” Lillian sighed and leaned her head back. “I’ll walk with you to the door so we can pretend we’ve been together all this time.”

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