

*Born of English and Greek parents, exquisitely beautiful Paris Alexander would become Crown Princess of the Sovereign State of Abu Halide. When the Governing Council of Elders rescinds their permission for her to marry the Crown Prince, her world begins to unravel around her. Destiny it seems has chosen a different path for Paris.*

## **Fire From The Ashes**

By Voula Antoine

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VOULA ANTOINE

# FIRE *from the* ASHES



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## CHAPTER ONE

The stewardess paused momentarily to straighten her skirt and push back a strand of hair that had escaped from her neat chignon before proceeding down the aisle of the First-Class cabin. As she did so, she felt a momentary rush of apprehension at the thought of attending to the male passenger seated in 1A. The sensation was an unfamiliar one and left her feeling slightly disconcerted. As a senior flight stewardess for a global airline, she often dealt with prominent dignitaries, celebrities and occasionally even royalty.

Why then should the thought of attending to the inflight needs of this man stir the slightest hint of nervousness to her otherwise calm and professional demeanour? She breathed in deeply, filling her lungs with air to settle her equilibrium. He was no different to all the other individuals of note who had crossed her path, she told herself. Except somehow she knew he wasn't. He was one of the most devastatingly attractive men she had ever met.

On reaching her destination, she found the doors to his private suite fully opened. She hesitated, discreetly perusing the subject of her thoughts. As he sat there in repose with his eyes closed, she could observe the man who held such a fascination for the media and public alike. Alastair Dalton. The powerful attraction of his extraordinary good looks had been apparent the moment she had welcomed him on board the aircraft.

He was a tall man and well proportioned. Lean, toned muscles were evident beneath the designer shirt he wore and the slim-fitting jeans, which hugged his thighs. The combination of his aristocratic nose and finely crafted jaw, and the light blue shirt he

wore, only accentuated the startling blue colour of his eyes. Black hair, slightly longer than most men favoured and greying at the temples, lent a distinguished edge to his features. The day-old growth of stubble on his chin highlighted a sensuously shapely mouth, adding to the aura of potent masculinity. That explained why women were instantly drawn to him, and from the articles she read in the British tabloids, there was no shortage of beautiful women vying for the opportunity to grace his arm.

She addressed him by name to engage his attention. Alerted by her presence, he opened his eyes and turned in her direction. For a brief moment, his face remained impassive, and then, as if collecting his thoughts, the corner of his mouth kicked up into a hint of a smile that reached his astonishingly blue eyes. It thoroughly transformed his expression from aloofness to one that positively took a woman's breath away.

"Your scotch, Mr Dalton," she announced with a simple smile, offering him his glass of fine aged amber liquid from the silver serving tray, together with a selection of assorted canapés. She was thankful her hands remained steady, despite the onslaught this man was delivering to her usually rigid composure.

"Thank you," Alastair returned with a polite smile. He accepted the drink she offered and promptly returned his attention to the amber liquid in his glass, a clear sign he had no desire to engage in polite conversation. Her professionalism required her to be respectful of his privacy, and she subsequently departed without further comment.

Alastair was thankful that the flight attendant was perceptive enough to interpret his body language. His reticence to engage her in a polite exchange was not typically part of his demeanour. Today, however, he craved solitude. He took a small sip of his drink, savouring every drop of the exquisite well-aged amber liquid as it filled his mouth, igniting his palette with hints of floral

notes and honey, and he welcomed its pleasant burn as it slid down his throat. He stared unseeing out of the aircraft window, his mind momentarily veering off to a subject he rarely cared to reminisce about. Tomorrow would mark the anniversary of his late wife's death.

Seven long years, he mused, and every year at this time, he would sequester himself away at some private retreat for some quiet contemplation. Inevitably, however, it proved to be a futile exercise because what he sought eluded him. He was plagued with panic attacks. Following his wife's tragic death, the episodes had been so debilitating, they had ripped into his sanity, reducing him to someone he barely recognised. Time they said would heal his scars. It hadn't. In fact, time had done little to erase those very bitter and painful memories. His attacks had not entirely abated, although their regularity had diminished.

He knew he was taking a risky gamble, deviating from his usual routine. He prayed that come this time tomorrow, he would not be unreservedly regretting his impulsive decision to do so. When would his psyche ever fully recover? He'd been left fractured, mired in overwhelming guilt and regret and incapable of ever trusting another woman.

"Will you be having lunch, Mr Dalton?" he heard someone ask. It suddenly brought him out of his reverie, and for a moment, he felt mildly disorientated. Quickly he gathered his thoughts and turned in the voice's direction.

"Mr Dalton?" the stewardess repeated, thinking perhaps he had not heard her.

He offered her a smile but shook his head dismissively. She nodded in acknowledgement, extended him a smile in return, before departing. Food was the furthest thing from his mind. His hand tightened around his glass and by sheer force of will, he

endeavoured to stay his thoughts. He had no desire to allow his mind to travel down that same road again. Lord knows he had done little else after that horrendous night. How many times had he willed the images to remain exactly where he had consigned them, there in the deep recesses of oblivion, in the fervent desire they would never again rear their ugly heads to taunt him. But as time had proven repeatedly, it had been a futile exercise. They returned despite his frantic pleas and efforts.

Sarah.

*God!* Even now, how he loathed saying her name. He'd been thirty-three years of age when he met his late wife at a dinner party hosted by her father. Lord Fenwick was a distinguished peer of the realm and one of the country's most successful bankers. Fenwick Banking Group was a renowned financial institution established in the United Kingdom in the late eighteen hundreds. Lord Fenwick boasted that in Alastair, he recognised and admired the same ruthless drive to succeed that he himself had possessed as a young man. What neither he nor Sarah had known at the time was that his health was deteriorating rapidly and his search was on in earnest to find a worthy successor.

Lord Fenwick seized the opportunity to sequester him from another prominent and well-respected financial institution, offering him a controlling share in his firm, with the ultimate aim of grooming him to become the next Chairman. Alastair had made no secret of the fact that he was both flattered and delighted in the offer. This proposal had come at a point in his career when he was being driven by both ambition and a ruthless drive to demonstrate to his peers his ability to become a world-renowned financier. It, therefore, had proven too tempting an offer to refuse. However, amidst his euphoria, when the finer details of the proposal were drawn up, presented and subsequently meticulously scrutinised, Alastair was shocked and

appalled to discover Lord Fenwick's generous proposal came with several conditions, one he found deeply disturbing.

The first required him to inject a substantial amount of cash to acquire a controlling share in Fenwick Banking Group. That presented no problem; he had sufficient equity to meet that requirement. After all, he was a wealthy man in his own right, having gained an extensive and lucrative investment portfolio throughout his successful career. He had also inherited the family residence, Dalton Manor, after the untimely death of his beloved parents through illness when he was twenty-five years of age. Situated in Belgravia, one of London's most elegant and sought after locations, it was an exquisite example of Georgian architecture, surrounded by half an acre of lush formal gardens.

It was the second proviso that had left him incredulous at the audacity of the man, and he had immediately balked at the idea. It required him to marry Lord Fenwick's only child, his daughter Sarah. At twenty-three years of age, the ten-year age difference did not impede her ardent pursuit of him. Although he had genuinely liked Sarah, she had failed to ignite the spark of passion required to enter a marriage. She had, nonetheless, shown a firm determination to make their relationship a permanent one, her efforts aided and encouraged by her father.

His intuition was something he rarely ignored in matters relating to his professional career. Ambition had made him brutally blind to the apprehensions, which had continued to plague him. He had sought to appease his fears by convincing himself that he had a genuine fondness for Sarah and that surely, with time, he would come to love her. Many rock-solid marriages had been entered into without the intense spark of passion. He fervently prayed it would be so in his case. Otherwise, he was consigning himself into a loveless marriage, and the consequences of that did not bear thinking about.



Sarah might not have been a ravishing beauty, but she had been pleasing to the eye. She had been slight of frame, and considering he was well over six feet tall, her head only came to his shoulder. With her mane of silky ebony hair, coffee coloured eyes and pale complexion; she was not unattractive. However, in the period prior to their marriage, an air of aristocratic arrogance had appeared in her demeanour, instantly triggering his ire. He was not about to allow her to control him in the same manner she had done with her father. He had acted swiftly, recognising the importance of standing firm on the matter, if their relationship was to proceed on a stable foundation.

Once he had joined Fenwick Banking Group and married Sarah, much to his dismay, it quickly became apparent that he had erred spectacularly. The financial state of affairs of Fenwick Banking Group did not equate with the information provided and the documents he had thoroughly scrutinised. The illustrious banking empire, which he had invested so heavily in, was heading for insolvency. A series of poor investments, coupled with the stock market crash; a consequence of the worldwide global recession and collapsed economic markets had left the organisation floundering and struggling to survive.

His own father-in-law had duped him, and the thought sat like a lead weight in his gut. However, he was powerless to instigate any recourse. With only weeks to live, it would have been reprehensible of him to mire Lord Fenwick's name and that of the Board of Directors with scandalous accusations.

Lord Fenwick had subsequently succumbed to his illness. He had then embarked on a desperate course of action, his entire focus centred on the need to turn the bank's fortunes around and uphold the reputation Fenwick Banking Group had held from its inception - one of the most respected financial institutions in Britain. His business acumen, determination and cold-blooded ruthlessness had brought him the success he had hungered for

and had earned him the grudging respect of the very same people who had initially branded him a fortune hunter. He sneered to himself as he recalled those early and challenging years when he had worked tirelessly. If only those same pompous arses had been privy to how close to collapse the bank had come.

Success in his professional life did not equate to the disaster that was his personal life. His marriage had quickly deteriorated and only highlighted to him, just how spectacularly he had erred. He had given Sarah his all during the first twelve months of their marriage to ensure she was well provided for and secure in the knowledge of his affections. However, he could no longer ignore the evidence before him. His marriage was disintegrating and on the verge of collapse.

Sarah refused to undertake any form of employment. Her days were filled with exorbitant shopping expeditions, an endless array of parties and dinners, and engaging in adultery with a host of young male lovers. Restraint was utterly foreign to her, a consequence of being pampered excessively by her indulgent father. She sought to live life to its fullest, even if it meant she was living well beyond their means. His attempts to curb her excesses, which included her consumption of alcohol and her use of recreational drugs, merely exacerbated the situation between them. She was resentful and constantly rebelled against his restrictions. As much as he despised his wife, divorcing her would only consign Sarah to a path of self-destruction.

To avoid the ugly confrontations that invariably ensued, he spent most of his time at his office. He would never forget the bitter sense of betrayal he had felt when he had unexpectedly caught her in a compromising position with one of her lovers in their very own home. A sickening, vitriolic outburst had ensued in the presence of her lover. He could endure it no longer. For the sake of his sanity, it was now time to consign his wife to her fate.

When Sarah's emotions had calmed and she had been hit with the swift realisation that she was financially dependant upon him, she had begged his forgiveness. In an anguished declaration, she had sworn it would never happen again. However, his trust in her had been destroyed forever. It would be foolishly naïve of him to delude himself into thinking they could salvage their marriage. Inevitably, he had been proven correct.

Affair after affair followed. He suffered his humiliation in private, all too aware of the rumours that ran rife regarding the estrangement from his wife and her adultery. As a result, he erected an impenetrable shield around his heart. He had foolishly relinquished the opportunity to have a marriage based on mutual respect, passion and, of unwavering love. Since that ill-fated union, the institution of marriage had been tarnished forever.

Unravelling the complex financial issues between them to reach a divorce settlement would always be fraught with difficulties. The lure of Lord Fenwick's offer had seen him lose his head in the heady euphoria. As a result, he had foolishly abandoned the strict guidelines he usually set himself and had signed a prenuptial agreement. This would see him exit the marriage with only his initial capital investment, plus the agreed percentage of interest.

Yes, it had been a long and arduous task to claw Fenwick's back from the brink. He had also sacrificed his personal happiness and was reaping the repercussions of his folly. Divorce was his only solution. It would ultimately free him from the nightmare he was enduring. If it meant resigning his position as Chairman of Fenwick Banking Group, then so be it. His professional record spoke for itself. He was confident that there would be no shortage of financial institutions vying for his skills and expertise.

Circumstances had tragically conspired against him. The divorce he sought had never eventuated. Instead, his wife had been

killed in a tragic road accident, and her premature death had been profoundly devastating. It had ripped him apart, leaving him unable to function on a day-to-day basis. The nightmares, combined with bouts of depression and panic attacks, had slowly torn away at the remnants of his sanity, and the fragile state of his mental health had brought him to the brink of collapse.

PTSD, his psychiatrist had called it. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He had become something of a recluse in the months that followed, rarely venturing out into the public. The accident had received a vast amount of media coverage. He had been inundated with an outpouring of support and condolences. All he sought was to grieve in private and to come to terms with the tragedy.

Alastair took another mouthful of his drink, closed his eyes and endeavoured to relax. Regret, guilt and anger still rolled like a never-ending tidal wave through his psyche. He exhaled, willing the images he had suppressed to remain in their dark oblivion. He knew it was futile, no matter how strongly he desired it. They never did, and perhaps they never would. It was difficult to repress the image of Sarah's coffin being lowered into that bone-chillingly deep plot of black earth. He shuddered momentarily.

*Retrospection.* What was the point of it, he thought as he finished the last of the amber liquid in his glass? It would not change the tragic outcome of what had transpired, nor alter the way he now viewed the institution of marriage and the word love. It was a word he never spoke and an emotion he no longer felt nor sought.

He was a formidable force in the world of finance and Chairman of one of Britain's most respected banking and financial institutions. His net worth was a subject often speculated about, although few had accurately determined how rich he was. That, combined with his rugged good looks, were a heady combination

that very few women could resist. They were drawn like bees to the potent sexuality he oozed, and as a result, he had dated a string of high profile women, some exquisitely beautiful. He had indulged his sexual appetite once he had moved out of his self-imposed exile. However, he was careful to fully apprise his sexual partners on how he conducted his affairs, to preclude any misunderstanding on their part when the affair palled.

One woman had described him as having a heart of stone, and he could not dispute that. Yes, he had been emotionally dead for many years. He had learnt one very important lesson. It been infinitely wrong to enter a union where mutual love, shared passion and respect did not exist. The consequences had been catastrophic. It had resulted in the untimely death of his wife. Insurmountable grief had replaced the anger and sting of her betrayal. He no longer sat alone in the dark examining everything in minute detail, but he had been left little more than an empty shell.

He gazed idly out of the aircraft window, admiring the dazzling sunshine, the deep blue of the cloudless sky, and the snow-capped rugged mountain peaks of the Swiss Alps stretched out below. Thankfully, his thoughts shifted to other matters. Business. In the ordinary course of events, his Head of Foreign Investments and second in command, Richard Westmoreland, would be sitting in his place. His decision to attend in Richard's stead meant that it would be he and his legal team overseeing the signing of the documents pertaining to the latest venture with His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Al Rasheed bin Hamdan, of the oil-rich Middle Eastern Sovereignty of Abu Halide.

His organisation was only too keenly aware of the vast quantities of gas and oil reserves found in the Middle East, and that a percentage of the world's wealthiest billionaires hailed from that region. Sheikh Abdullah's personal fortune was reputed in the vicinity of forty billion dollars. His Highness had officially held

the position of Sovereign leader of Abu Halide for the past eight years when his father had abdicated due to ill health. He was also head of the Abu Halide Investment Authority, which held assets estimated at six hundred billion dollars. Alastair and His Highness had frequently spoken by video conferencing. They enjoyed a good rapport both professionally and privately on his many visits to London. As a great admirer of horseflesh and in particular, racing thoroughbreds, His Highness often frequented the bloodstock auctions at Tattersalls. A recent acquisition had seen him outlay close to two million pounds for a colt by the legendary racehorse, Diamond of the First Water.

It had been Richard and his team who had presided over the collaboration on this new and exciting venture in Athens, Greece. After years in the economic wilderness, Greece had finally begun to claw its way back from the brink of bankruptcy and the possibility of a forced exit by the European Union. Years of austerity and harsh economic reforms had eroded business and investor confidence and severely tested the endurance of its citizens together with their patience and trust in their political leaders.

The signs of recovery were now very encouraging, after private funding and a programme of recapitalisation had injected close to forty-two billion euros into the banking system, thereby staving off a collapse of the country's major banks. Many government funded services and infrastructures had suffered markedly from a severe lack of financing. They desperately needed a massive injection of cash to restore them to what was deemed as acceptable standards when comparisons were made with other Eurozone countries.

The Greek state was quietly confident of a slow but steady recovery in the economy. Optimism was high, if somewhat cautious. In an endeavour to stimulate the country's economy and create more jobs to ease the record-high levels of

unemployment, foreign investors were being persuaded to invest in infrastructure and other projects.

Fenwick Banking Group, in association with Sheikh Abdullah, had taken the initial step to become the forerunners in such investment. In conjunction with a German construction firm, they would fund a world-class Cancer Facility and Hospice in the suburb of Kifissia. Its aim was to provide a high level of care to patients receiving treatment and to offer support and respite for their families. This significant development would also include apartments, restaurants and a small shopping mall, all housed within the same precinct. Work on the project was scheduled to commence immediately after the formal signing of contract and legal documentation in Athens tomorrow afternoon. It would certainly provide a much-welcomed boost to alleviating the record level of unemployment.

The incidences of cancer amongst the Greek population had risen alarmingly during the economic crisis. Many notable medical experts had directly attributed the high prevalence of the disease, and the increased levels of male suicide, to the years of enforced hardship the population had endured under the country's harsh austerity measures. While the International Monetary Fund had deemed the austerity measure as essential if Greece was to avoid the collapse of its economy and plunge them into bankruptcy, they had also ravaged its citizens both personally and economically.

Alastair was looking forward to renewing his acquaintance with His Highness. He held a great admiration and respect for Sheikh Abdullah. He embodied and defined the characteristics of what constituted an outstanding leader, one whose foresight and vision had ensured the successful development and emergence of Abu Halide into something which other nations from around the world were now eager to emulate. He was a charismatic individual and regarded as a man of his word. He insisted on

excellence and sought nothing less from both himself and his business associates.

Once the business formalities of his trip were completed, Alastair had planned to spend several days sightseeing. Anxiety had already begun to permeate through his body, and he fervently hoped that nothing untoward would prevent him from successfully executing his business obligations. It was a risky gamble he was taking in deviating from his usual routine. Remaining in a positive mindset was crucial if he had any hope of keeping the demons from his past from infiltrating the present.

He steeled his mind to focus on another matter - Paris Alexander, Executive Assistant to His Highness Sheikh Abdullah. He had always dealt personally with Abdullah, or with his two senior aides, Malik and Kareem, and had not, therefore, made her acquaintance. It had been Richard and his team who had visited Abu Halide and laid the groundwork for this joint venture. It was during his first visit that Richard had met Ms Alexander. Upon his return to London, it was apparent that his close friend was utterly besotted with the woman. He would often joke that his visits to Abu Halide left him seriously '*challenged*' where his libido was concerned, especially when the opportunity arose to be close to the exquisite Paris.

Alastair laughed lightly to himself as he remembered how Richard had behaved like a love-struck dolt on his return. He had launched into an eloquent dialogue on the many attributes of Ms Alexander. She was extraordinarily beautiful, highly intelligent, and quick-witted and possessed a gentle and compassionate nature. The woman had become an integral part of their private conversations. Alastair had reserved his opinion of her, but had teased Richard mercilessly when he had called her his '*Greek Goddess*', for heaven's sake!



He had always held Richard in high esteem and deemed him as his closest friend and confidant. Not only was he a well-respected financier, but Alastair also trusted him implicitly, which explained why he held an important role within the Fenwick Banking Group. Richard's marriage had ended acrimoniously, resulting in a very bitter and painful divorce. Unlike him, Richard had been keen to heal his emotional scars and move on quickly. He had, therefore, set his sights on Ms Alexander. However, she had initially been very wary of his motives, and his initial attempts to break through her icy reserve had required some perseverance on his part.

Alastair's curiosity had been piqued. He was eager to discover what it was about the woman that had drawn his friend in so completely. It was only after reading an article written about her that he understood why Richard had become so infatuated. She was far more exquisite than he had imagined, indisputably so, in fact, she had the power to slay a man with just her beauty alone. She was tall and statuesque, with a flawless complexion and a cascade of silver-blond hair. Large Delft blue eyes under finely arched brows were fringed with thick, dark lashes. And that mouth! It was sensuous and tempted with its lusciousness.

In the photograph he had perused, she was dressed in a traditional white *Kurta*, which featured a striking jewelled neckline, worn over white trousers. She looked positively delectable, and there was little doubt in his mind that men would crave the opportunity to drink deeply from that luscious and sensuous mouth. Inexplicably, his cock had stirred, and his reaction had both shocked and appalled him. He had not met the woman personally, and besides, she was someone with whom his close friend was involved. She might be exquisite, but his ethics dictated he never stooped to the lowest depths of encroaching or coveting a woman who belonged to another man. That was anathema to him.

Subsequent articles he had perused revealed some interesting facts. While studying at Oxford University, she had met Sheikh Abdullah, who at the time was the Crown Prince of Abu Halide. He had been enrolled at the same University to read politics, philosophy and economics. When discreet photos of the couple had emerged, showing the Prince's arm in a protective gesture at the small of her back, it immediately fuelled the rumours and speculation already circulating, suggesting a possible royal romance.

For several months, the world's press had been sent into a virtual frenzy, and the public's imagination and hearts had been stirred. A royal betrothal was imminent, the headlines had read. The English press had proudly claimed her as their own, irrespective that one side of her parentage was Greek, namely from her father. Paris Alexander, they declared, had English aristocratic blood flowing through her veins from her mother's side. It was now almost a certainty that she would become Crown Princess of Abu Halide.

Then she had mysteriously disappeared. Three months later, His Highness had entered into an arranged marriage with a woman from a highly influential and respected Abu Halide family in a lavish ceremony. Both the press and public had been shocked and appalled. No explanation had been forthcoming from either the Palace or from Ms Alexander. The veil of secrecy only heightened the public's curiosity and fuelled the press's obsession to unravel the perplexing mystery. The media and tabloids had roused the public's sympathy in articles reminiscent of a fairy-tale. The exquisitely beautiful girl, who had almost become a princess, had been left heart broken and had gone into hiding to recover from the devastating blow of losing her beloved Crown Prince.

Eighteen months later, the press and the public had entirely forgotten the ill-fated romance. The public's fickle attention had

become diverted to devouring the latest gossip splashed across the front-page headlines. It was then that she had returned from a self-imposed exile. Alastair had baulked at the obscene amount of money reportedly offered for her to tell her story exclusively, however, she had remained stoically silent. No doubt, he mused, she had been handsomely compensated in a strict confidentiality agreement. Such contracts were tight and binding, and breaking any aspect of it would have seen the wrath of the Palace in Abu Halide brought down heavily upon her head. Alastair smirked to himself.

Yes, both her silence and loyalty had been rewarded. She had been quietly installed as His Highness's Executive Assistant. He could not help his smirk of cynicism at the thought. Was the position a mere ruse? Was her heart still engaged to His Highness? Were they involved, irrespective of the fact that he had married a woman from within his own principality? That would explain why she chose to remain unattached and seemingly devoted to her career. It would also clarify why, after eight months, she had called an abrupt end to her relationship with Richard, leaving him reeling at her rejection.

Alastair was very cynical of women who possessed such extraordinary beauty. They were very much aware of the power they wielded over men. Her callous rejection of Richard had seen him become incensed. It appeared the extraordinarily beautiful Paris Alexander now intended to punish all men for her very public humiliation and the sting of betrayal. She had earned the unflattering sobriquet of *'Ice Princess'*. The thought that his good friend may have been a victim of her heartless machinations did not sit easily with him. He was not a believer in exacting revenge, but if that proved to be the case, and she had merely been toying with Richard's affections, then she would feel the wrath of his anger.

## CHAPTER TWO

"I can't just *'get over it'* damn you," Richard had blurted out, scowling at Alastair. "They are not the wisest choice of words to fling at me at this moment."

It had been the night before his departure for Athens. Both he and Richard had sequestered themselves in his office. They were both enjoying a drink after having completed the painstaking task of meticulously checking all the legal documentation relating to their joint property venture with Sheikh Abdullah. Alastair had instantly jerked his head around to stare at his friend, skewering him with a look that left little doubt what he thought of Richard's outburst and his obstinate refusal to relinquish this damn obsession he had with *that woman*.

"Oh, for goodness sake," he had responded indignantly, almost choking as he downed the last of the smooth, aged amber liquid in his glass. "I understand your devastation, but why are you being such a stubborn prick about it? Admit it man, she played you for a damn fool!" he admonished.

Richard did not immediately respond. He merely arched an eyebrow in query, a wry smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "Oh, you can bloody well talk, Dalton. Bit rich of you to be spewing forth with such diatribe considering how your late wife traumatised the hell out of you and you're still struggling to move on with your own life," he returned, his dark blue eyes scrutinising him closely for a moment. He reached for his glass and took a sip before continuing. "Why do I have this unsettling notion that that brain of yours is mulling over how to obtain

revenge on my behalf? If that is the case, might I strongly advise you to desist with that insane idea?"

Yes, his close friend knew him well. "While my professional colleagues might accuse me of possessing a ruthless streak, I have always acted as a gentleman in my dealings with the fairer sex."

Richard snorted. "Well, if that is the case, isn't it rather hypocritical of you to be speculating on how to avenge my wounded pride?"

Alastair remained silent. Yes, admittedly his brain had mulled over different scenarios. He had toyed with the idea of seduction, but if he was successful in carrying that out, what then? What would be the repercussions to his long-standing friendship, considering the warning he had just been issued? No. He needed to be prudent in determining how to proceed in this delicate matter.

Alastair rose to his feet and raked a hand through his dark hair, making it stand up on end. He stretched languidly to ease the stiffness in his muscles before making his way to a lacquered wooden cabinet that stood against one wall of his spacious office. He reached for and opened the lid of the *Elie Bleu Medaille* humidor and removed two of his favourite Cuban cigars. The Monte Cristo No.2 was often classed as one of the finest cigars in the world, a Cuban cigar with a perfect balance of spice and a smooth, creamy taste. He fingered the silk wrapping and brought it to his nose and closed his eyes in appreciation as he inhaled the aroma of the fine tobacco.

"Answer me this. If I was successful in discrediting *that woman*, would it be enough to spur you into setting aside this damnable obsession?" he asked, shaking his head disapprovingly as his thoughts returned to the subject at hand.

Richard glared at him in response. "If I may remind you again, Alastair, *that woman* has a name. It is Paris."

Alastair merely laughed at his friend's indignation. He walked back to where Richard sat and hesitated, frowning as he studied him. His legs were outstretched and crossed at the ankles, his expression downcast as he nursed his drink.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Richard," he began letting out a frustrated sigh. "After eight months of blind devotion, she calls an end to your liaison. Is that any reason for you to sink into depression? Hell no! You survived a disastrous marriage and an acrimonious divorce and now here you sit like a little forlorn lamb who has lost its mother!"

Richard merely looked at him over the rim of his whisky glass. "Baaa, baaa!" he uttered in a forlorn tone of voice.

Alastair snorted in disgust, but a smile played at the corner of his mouth. "Very funny, my friend," he replied, shaking his head slightly. "You're a handsome bastard and a prime catch, and there are other women who are equally stunning and eager to snare you for their own."

Richard merely frowned in response. "I have little desire to partake of your suggestion."

Damn that stupid woman! Richard was indeed a prime catch. He was a handsome man with his crop of blonde hair, and eyes of azure blue. Although not as tall as Alastair, his height emphasised the solid, taut lines of his body. His friend was respectful, his manner warm and intense, and he made a woman feel as if they were the absolute focus of his intent. And they responded enthusiastically to that. Why then was he still bemoaning his fate? A faint smile passed over his lips. Ah yes, the unattainable was always a powerful inducement!

“Okay, my friend. So you failed to entice her into your bed and have your wicked way with her. I understand how that would chafe at your manly pride, not to mention your cock. You were incredibly patient with her, and in my opinion, she didn’t deserve it.”

Richard’s expression was grim, and his gaze darkened. “Damn you, Alastair. Merely assuaging my cock was not my motivating factor. Once I gained her trust, and allowed into her private world, I fell quickly and hard, and I’ll be damned if I can understand why.” His outburst was almost angry as he vigorously shook his head.

Alastair came to stand before Richard’s dejected form, handing him his cigar before settling his frame into the subtle maroon leather armchair opposite him. “May I offer the following to assuage that wounded pride of yours? Is it possible that her heart is engaged elsewhere? Has the thought not crossed your mind that perhaps she is still hopelessly pining over Abdullah? I mean, we could applaud her devotion to her ex-lover, but personally, I would call it the height of stupidity.”

He frowned and his mouth narrowed a little as he went on. “Does she consider herself a woman callously abandoned by her lover?” he added, shrugging his shoulders. “Why hasn’t she allowed herself to move on from the trauma of being jilted? Does she now intend to seek retribution against the entire male species for the perceived injustice she suffered? And who could blame her? Barely months after ending their betrothal, her fiancé entered an arranged marriage. Consider how heart-wrenching and humiliating it would have been for her, not to mention the solid blow to her pride.”

He stopped, and his mouth twitched with unconcealed amusement. “She almost became the Crown Princess of one of the most prosperous sovereignties in the Middle East, let’s not

forget that. Heartbroken and humiliated as she was, her love for the prince was so deep and intense that she swore to forgo all others and to continue loving him until she took her last dying breath."

Richard frowned in disgust as he looked at Alastair over the rim of his whisky glass. "Since when did you begin spouting off such bullshit, Dalton?" he asked, his tone vibrating with sarcastic humour. "No, irrespective of what you believe, Paris is an intelligent woman. Why would she allow herself to continue mourning her fate, wasting her life wallowing in unrequited love for a man who is, presumably, lost to her," he asked incredulously. He drew in his lower lip, catching it between his teeth. "Is she commitment-phobic? Perhaps that would offer a more plausible explanation rather than that soap opera twaddle you just offered."

"And yet you stubbornly refuse to communicate with her and obtain the answers you seek? So it is I who have suffered since listening to you bemoan your fate," Alastair replied, grinning broadly at his friend as he continued. "My theory makes some sense, wouldn't you agree?" he offered, lighting the edges of his cigar before bringing it to his lips and drawing in deeply. He closed his eyes and held the smoke in his mouth to savour the aroma and flavour, before exhaling slowly.

Richard gave a lengthy sigh before continuing. "I'm not convinced. There are no plausible signs that anything untoward exists between Paris and Abdullah," Richard offered, taking the lighter to light his own cigar. "Still, we are not privy to what goes on behind closed doors, are we? I'm thankful that she was honest with me. However, it has done little to ease the pain of losing her."

Alastair didn't answer immediately. He drew in deep of his cigar and then exhaled, frowning in concentration. "You're right. We



are merely indulging ourselves with idle speculation as to the true nature of her relationship with Abdullah.” He hesitated again before adding, “Bottom line here my friend is, *you* need to move on. I’m glad that your visits to Abu Halide will be less frequent.”

Richard merely shrugged indifferently, focusing rather too intently on the glass of whisky he was nursing. Alastair blew out an exasperated breath to ease the sudden rush of annoyance. “High time you set this damnable preoccupation with *that woman* aside. This behaviour is out of character, even when you were besotted with your ex-wife,” he said impatiently.

Richard eyed him as if his protests were merely amusing comments before leaning forward to brace his forearms on his knees. He bent his head and let out a cynical laugh before returning his gaze to Alastair.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Alastair continued. “Nothing spikes my annoyance more than watching my normally intelligent, level-headed friend pining over some pathetic female who after eight months refused to allow him to fuck her and then sent him on his way.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Alastair,” Richard blurted out in disgust, “merely fucking her, as you so crudely put it, had nothing to do with it. Unlike you, I don’t merely fuck them until I have sated my libido and then send them on their way because I have this unnatural aversion to forming any relationship of substance, a direct consequence of having an ex wife who fucked with my head.”

Alastair shivered involuntarily. He felt that familiar chill coursing down his spine. Yes, Richard had the right of it. “Hell would freeze over before I would ever contemplate engaging in such lunacy. However, I can provide several excellent reasons why you

should consider the state of marital bliss and a great many more why I never will."

Richard gave him an exasperated look, and then burst into laughter. "I cannot comprehend why you still maintain such a vehement aversion to moving on with your life. Why don't you find yourself a loving partner and produce a brood of little Daltons?"

Alastair shot an amused glance in his direction. "You, my friend, can fuck off! I have no desire to produce a brood of snotty-nosed brats."

Richard once again burst into laughter and then fell silent. He studied the contents of his whisky glass as if giving further thought to the subject at hand. Finally, he spoke. "Perhaps you're right," he began, "she was merely toying with my affections, and besotted fool that I was, I failed to pick up the warning signs."

Alastair returned with a scowl and shot him an ominous look. "Granted, she's enough to tempt any man, Richard. However, may I remind you once again, there are other equally stunning women, who would not baulk at allowing you to fuck them with that randy cock of yours," he told him, reaching for his glass and downing the remaining whisky in one gulp.

Richard snorted and shook his head with disgust. "You're besmirching my character. I am not so shallow an individual that my attraction to Paris was based solely on her beauty and the need to fuck her," he replied, frowning in Alastair's direction. "I learnt a painful lesson in that respect when I married Lillian. She too was beautiful, but she proved herself to be a horrid viper with a fatal sting," he returned. "Paris was altogether different in temperament, and I fell instantly and hard against my better judgement. I would have married her in a heartbeat. It made no

difference to me that we hadn't shared a bed. I grew impatient for a commitment, and I now suffer the consequences."

Alastair could only stare at his friend in bewilderment. Perhaps if he indulged in another glass of whisky, it would deaden his brain cells adequately enough for him to endure Richard's drivel and obstinacy. However, his efforts to maintain a strict hold on his temper deserted him when he heard Richard compare her to one of the Greek goddesses. Was it Aphrodite, for God's sake?

"Good God, Richard!" Alastair snapped in exasperation, irked by his friend's stubborn refusal to see what was so clearly evident. It was also doing little for Alastair's disposition. For Richard, his unwillingness to accept his fate would not gain him the one thing he wanted above all else. His scowl deepened, and he let out another lengthy sigh.

"What is this blasted rot you're prattling on about? A goddess? Unrequited passion it seems has addled your brain," he reminded his friend. He exhaled deeply. "You deserve a fucking medal for putting up with her for so long without some reward for all your besotted devotion," he told him with a sardonic smile. "Do you want to heed my advice? If so, I strongly suggest that you find yourself some willing flesh and bury your cock into it!"

Richard merely laughed at his friend's blustering and lifted his palms to stay any further dialogue from Alastair. "I already have," he answered, arching his eyebrows. "A quick, mindless fuck did little to ease my pain and my feelings of disillusionment."

"Then why don't you just swallow that damn pride of yours and pick up the bloody phone and call her?" Alastair asked, exasperation evident in his tone.

"Because I wanted to see whether she was genuine in her affection towards me. I reasoned that if our relationship had

substance, and she held a genuine regard for me, it would spur her into breaking the silence between us. I misjudged her again. Her silence is very telling, wouldn't you say? Now, well, my feelings of shock and numbness have been replaced by anger and hurt," he offered, and his features hardened perceptibly.

Alastair swore softly and damned that bloody woman all over again. He scrubbed a hand over his face before bringing his gaze back to scowl at his friend. He took a long drag of his cigar, closed his eyes momentarily to calm the annoyance he was feeling, before opening them again and exhaling slowly.

"Damn!" he breathed the word softly, trying to settle the irritation he felt at the way a woman could bring an ordinarily intelligent man to his knees. "Are you still pinning your hopes on a reconciliation?"

Richard chuckled, the shake of his head sending a lock of his blond hair tumbling over his forehead. He took a long drag of his cigar before shifting his gaze to glance surreptitiously at his friend, his fingers drumming in a constant rhythm against the armrest of his chair.

"I've always believed that a willingness to live in a positive mindset is to be commended," Richard added, before nodding his acceptance for Alastair to refill his empty glass. "However, in this case, there is little to be gained in acting liked a delusional fucker."

"Amen to that!" Alastair said, sending up a silent prayer of thanks that this friend was belatedly coming to his senses. "Was she worth the torment that she put you through?"

Richard's mouth twitched and amused eyes showed that he was not offended by Alastair's remonstrations. "Paris might have been graced with that cruel soubriquet, but the woman I came to

know was the one I wanted to make my wife. If patience is what it took to win her over, then I was prepared to wait.”

Alastair snorted at his friend’s remarks. “Looks like you seriously misjudged her willingness to indulge your fantasy. She abandoned the gentle and compassionate side of her nature and callously dumped you, my friend!”

“Perhaps you might refrain from sullyng her character until you are in a better position to offer an opinion,” Richard protested, fixing him with a cool stare.

Alastair sighed heavily but was instantly sympathetic. “Look at you, my friend, you’re heartbroken, your confidence is shot to pieces, but I will comply with your request. I will reserve my opinion on what lies beneath that exquisite façade. However, I give you fair warning. I will be most displeased should I discover that my close friend has needlessly wasted his time mooning like a lovesick calf over a woman who possesses not an ounce of integrity,” Alastair told him as he reached for the whisky bottle and poured two fingers worth of the aged amber liquid into Richard’s glass. “I can fully sympathise that it is vexing to be forced to admit that there is little more you can do to change the woman’s mind, irrespective of how much you might wish it to be otherwise. Can’t you still be friends?”

Richard surveyed his glass, his gaze pensive before redirecting it back to Alastair. “No, it’s not possible and inappropriate considering what has passed between us. I have to move on for the sake of my sanity,” he added with a heavy sigh, a slight frown marring his forehead, before raising his glass to his mouth to take another sip. He then looked askance at Alastair. “Am I to assume you might be interested?”

Alastair sat up rigidly and shot him a very direct look. “Is that a warning? If so, I suggest you save your breath. I will not

jeopardise our long-standing association and close friendship," he admonished with good-natured reproach. "Besides, what about if I'm right and there is still some romantic involvement between her and His Highness? I have little desire to incur his wrath either."

Alastair permitted himself a brief smile. His gut instincts were veering in that direction, and he was confident there was more to that unusual arrangement than they were privy to. He brought his hand up to stroke the stubble on his chin.

Richard gave him a derisive snort. "Am I supposed to find your reply gratifying? Admit it, man, you would be interested!" he shot back.

Alastair drew in a deep breath, unwilling to let Richard's melancholy mood to continue to irritate him. "I shall be brutally honest with you, Richard. When have you ever known me to pick up on another man's leavings? Besides, I have no desire to entangle myself with the likes of *that woman*," he added while shuddering at the thought. "What's the title they have graced her with?" He stopped momentarily and shuddered again. "Oh yes, now I remember. *'Ice Princess'*. Considering she never let you near her bed, I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't have a passionate bone in her body. If she's still pining away for her Prince Charming, then let her wallow in her misery is what I say." He snorted lightly before drawing in deeply on his cigar and releasing the blue smoke into the air. "God help her though if I discover that she is one of those females who lures men in, plays with their affections and then callously discards them."

Richard sent him an exasperated look. "You're such a heartless prick at times, Dalton. Not every woman acts as dishonourably as your late wife."

Alastair studied his cigar momentarily before turning to his friend, his lips pressed together, signifying his disapproval. "Love is blind, Richard, and very applicable in your case," Alastair snorted in response. "Let's not go over old ground and you will pardon my bluntness. After eight months of undying devotion, your cock must have been straining the fabric of your trousers at every encounter. You endured eight months without so much as a good fuck and that is bloody unnatural if you ask me. But then you were utterly besotted. How many callouses formed on your right hand?"

Richard held Alastair's gaze for a long, searching moment before quirking an eyebrow. "You, my cocky friend, can be crass and vulgar. I fully intend to laugh until my sides ache if you return home from Athens thoroughly and irrevocably smitten with *that woman*."

Alastair threw his head back and roared with laughter. "Not a chance in hell of me succumbing, Richard. I am not interested in a woman purely for the qualities you mention. I need to slake my lust," he retorted with a lack of sympathy. "Besides, when have you known me to be enamoured of one woman for any considerable length of time?"

"You're a cynical prick," Richard smirked. "Still even the likes of Alastair Dalton are not invincible. I look forward to the day when a woman captures your heart, and finally brings you to your knees," he goaded with a wide smug smile as he settled his frame further into the soft leather of his chair.

"That my friend is merely fanciful thinking on your part. I have absolutely no desire to revisit hell," Alastair responded, scoffing. "I like my relationships uncomplicated, my lovers to be fully apprised that my emotions remain thoroughly detached and if they play by my rules, they will be compensated rather nicely when I eventually end the relationship."

His lips twisted into a cynical smile as he briefly recalled the misery that was his marriage. In his early adult years, he had envisaged himself as a husband, with a loving wife, a home and a child, reminiscent of what his parents had shared. Not any longer.

“If I’ve learnt one thing from my disastrous marriage, my friend, it is the importance of protecting one’s emotions. I no longer wish to endure vitriolic outbursts which made my entire body vibrate with unbelievable rage, the likes of which I had never experienced before marrying.”

How many times over the past years had he seen friends and acquaintances enter the marital state only to discover that in later years, the flame of love and passion had been extinguished? Suddenly the day-to-day stresses, disappointments and monetary worries had eroded the very foundations of the relationship. The masks of civility had inevitably dropped, and spirits broken. Bitterness had replaced love and with it came feelings of resentfulness towards their respective spouses until ultimately the relationship had disintegrated into something resembling a battlefield.

“You might view the way I conduct my liaisons with abject cynicism, but it’s not me sitting there bemoaning my fate and crying into my whisky glass,” he said. “Cold-hearted bastard is just fine by me.”

Instead of taking offence, Richard merely chuckled, evidently taking some perverse enjoyment out of Alastair goading his friend. “I’m sure your legion of discarded paramours view you as a magnanimous fellow when they receive the expensive piece of bling you send them to ease the pain of parting, and then I expect they promptly begin stabbing pins into your photo,” Richard responded, his blue eyes a study of insolence, a sardonic smile playing at the edge of his mouth. “I think it might be prudent to



warn you that Paris can live up to that ubiquitous sobriquet. I'd advise you to give serious consideration against going into battle with her to avenge my wounded pride. You might just live to regret it."

Alastair raised his whisky glass to eye level. The glass was one of a set, which had belonged to his beloved father, a whisky connoisseur himself and who had introduced Alastair to the subtle pleasure of indulging in a glass or two of the beautiful aged amber liquid. Turning the Nova Scotia crystal in his hand, he marvelled at the array of brilliant colours reflected in the glass, as the light hit the crystal. He replaced it carefully on the side table next to his chair and then returned his gaze to Richard and lifted an eyebrow as if to ask, really?

He rose from his seat and crossed the room to stand before the wall of floor to ceiling windows, which graced his office. As he glanced to the street below, he noted that the traffic was now moving freely after the chaos that had ensued earlier in the evening, the consequences of an unseasonal thunderstorm. The rain had ceased temporarily, but in the distance, new storm clouds were brewing, ominous and foreboding as they encroached. Ultimately, they would smother the few brilliant stars in the night sky, now evident through a break in the clouds. He continued to stare into the blackness and pensively fingered his chin.

His mind wandered briefly to the woman who had been the focus of their discussion. His lips twisted in self-derisiveness. Beautiful and highly desirable she might be, and he couldn't deny that. He fully sympathised with Richard's predicament, irrespective of the way he had teased him mercilessly tonight. His friend had been deeply smitten. Beneath the icy disdain he voiced for the holy state of matrimony, regret lurked solid and real. He sighed, banishing his morose thoughts, and turned to face his friend, sending him an assessing glance.

"Me live to regret it?" Alastair replied, scoffing at his friend. "Since when have I been bested by a woman, other than by my duplicitous late wife, that is?"

"You can't be serious?" Richard asked, eyeing him incredulously.

Alastair paused as if considering how to respond as he took in the stupefied expression on Richard's face.

"Why not?" he returned. "I shall ignore the look of utter distaste on your handsome visage and ask that you indulge me in looking at this hypothetically. Were I to shatter that perfect persona and orchestrate her spectacular fall off that high pedestal you have graced her with, it might just be the catalyst needed to ultimately bring you to your senses."

Richard slanted him a black look, which indicated he was not amused and unequivocally against what Alastair was proposing.

"Have you lost your fucking mind, Alastair?" he asked, his tone a clear sign that he was genuinely scandalised. "I can fight my own battles. How can you even consider engaging in such despicable behaviour?" Richard retorted, his lips tightening to maintain his temper.

"You wound me, my friend," Alastair returned, looking positively horrified at his friend's suggestion, but there was a hit of wickedness in his eyes. "I would merely be exposing her little ruse."

Richard merely snorted in response. "Bullshit, Dalton. You'd seduce her in a heartbeat if I gave you my blessing. I'll break you bloody neck if you dare or hurt her in any way."

Alastair laughed easily as he shook his head and walked back to where Richard sat. He stubbed out his cigar in an ashtray and redirected his gaze back to his friend. "I give you my word that I

will behave like the gentleman I am. Besides, I like my bloody neck the way it is. I will, however, endeavour to unravel the perplexing mystery of the true nature of the relationship between her and Abdullah. That, my friend, will be more beneficial in assisting you to understand why she acted as she did and allow you to heal that battered and bruised heart of yours.” He heaved a heavy sigh. “Come now, let’s finish up and I’ll give you a lift home.”

## CHAPTER THREE

For the second time, Paris checked her watch, a white gold and diamond Rolex watch, which had been a Christmas gift from Abdullah. It was something she both admired for its simplicity and treasured. However, glancing at it continuously had become an annoying habit of late, one she was highly conscious of and which, in periods of stress, became more pronounced. It annoyed the hell out of her.

Experience had taught her the futility of worrying over the unexpected occurring and over the years, she had become exceedingly adept in dealing with potential disasters. She snorted to herself. Yes, her rational mind might agree that it was pointless to worry, she only wished the logical part of her brain would follow suit.

She stole another glance at her watch and cursed herself. It was now seven-thirty. The limousines, which were arranged to convey His Highness Sheikh Abdullah, Malik and Kareem, his two senior aides, the Abu Halide Finance Minister, bodyguards and herself to this evening's important reception, were scheduled to arrive in fifteen minutes. As she waited in the hotel's foyer, she stole a quick glance towards the entrance where the Hotel Manager, Mr Stavropoulos, his Duty Manager, Mr Aslanidou and the hotel's own security personnel, were waiting patiently for His Highness's imminent arrival.

Letting out a brief sigh, she turned her focus back to the sheer grandeur of the hotel's lobby and the magnificent and priceless hand-blown glass sculpture, which had taken her breath away with its sheer exquisiteness when she had first glimpsed it. She

had stood there transfixed in thorough appreciation of the genius of the artist who had created it.

The sculpture was called '*Thalassa*' - translated from the Greek word, The Sea. It brought the essence of the sea and its inhabitants to life and was a fitting tribute to the gregarious Greek people who shared such an affinity and passion for it. At over ten metres in height, it stood in a reflection pool of light blue. It was sculptured with over three thousand pieces of hand-blown glass in intense shades of colour, from fiery oranges and reds to tranquil blues and greens with an assortment of sea creatures fashioned in gold intricately woven into the base.

His Highness Sheikh Abdullah and his entourage, including herself, were guests at this brand new and magnificent hotel commissioned by Mr Nicholas Yiacoumi, a highly respected and successful Greek businessman, in collaboration with Fenwick Banking Group, a well-known and prominent English banking institution. Paris had been eagerly looking forward to residing here as a guest, mindful of the accolades the hotel had received for both its stunning décor and exceptional standards of service. After viewing her own room and that of the Royal Suite, she had been highly impressed. In her opinion, the hotel had deservedly earned the glowing accolades lauded upon it. The sheer magnificence of the hotel rivalled some of the best in Abu Halide.

The Royal Suite was both private and unique. It had its own secure entrance by a private elevator, along with a dedicated team of butlers and chefs to make sure it catered to every need of its guests. It boasted unrivalled panoramic views of some of the most important archaeological sights in the world. The majestic Parthenon and the Temple of Zeus, and the National Gardens and the impressive Lycabettus, the Cretaceous limestone hill, which rose some three hundred metres above sea level, with its grove of thick pine trees covering its base and the Chapel of St. George at its peak.

The décor reflected the sheer opulence and stature of the suite itself. The palate of colours used in the interior decoration comprised royal blue, sand and gold, the same colours that featured throughout the Royal Palace in Abu Halide. The walls were a light sand colour, and heavy brocade curtains in royal blue edged with the Greek motif which symbolised infinity, hung from the tall floor to ceiling French doors.

The furnishings were stately. A three-seater sofa upholstered in dark blue, featuring the traditional rolled arms graced the lounge room, together with two armchairs and two ottomans that offered unrivalled comfort and timeless elegance. A Persian rug graced the travertine marble floor, woven in colours of cream and gold. The coffee table was Grecian marble, as was the six-seater dining table. The spectacular and spacious marble bathroom featured a full-sized bath and double glass shower alcove. Grecian busts of several philosophers were positioned throughout the suite and Paris recognised them as Aristotle, Thales and Pythagoras.

She had been immensely excited when construction had begun on this hotel. It was gratifying to note that other new and exciting developments were planned and would soon feature across the landscape of the city she both loved and hated. Her most fervent desire was that these new developments would be enough to spur the resurrection of the city from the gloom and stagnation it had suffered, wrought by the financial crisis and the austerity measures that had plagued it for so many years.

Paris had arrived into Athens yesterday, always a day ahead of the man she worked for to make sure that everything would be in readiness for his arrival into the Greek capital aboard his private jet. It was no less than what he expected of her. She was responsible for meticulously checking every detail to ensure that her employer's stay would be comfortable and that the important

functions he would attend in his official capacity as Supreme Ruler of Abu Halide went off smoothly.

His favourite flowers were sitting in a large Waterford Crystal vase in his suite, and his beverage of choice chilled to the right temperature. Arabic coffee had been brewed and served to him after his arrival in the traditional Arabic metal pot called the *Delah* and poured into the tiny sized *Finjal*. She had also provided the gourmet chef with his preferences for meals.

Paris sighed, endeavouring to ease the tension in her body, and closed her eyes momentarily to take in several deep, calming breaths. She was on edge, mindful of how meticulous her employer was and also his aversion to tardiness concerning punctuality. The traffic in Athens could be heavily congested at his hour. Although His Highness's limousine would have a police escort to their destination, she was fearful they would be delayed in attending tonight's dinner, which was being hosted by Mr Yiacoumi, at his luxury mansion in the exclusive suburb of Ekali. The Prime Minister of Greece, together with the Mayor of Athens and other dignitaries, would also be in attendance.

"That's the third time you have checked your watch since standing there."

Those words spoken with a distinct English accent startled Paris out of her thoughts. Instantly, broad male shoulders filled her vision. She had no idea who this man was except that he was standing close, so close that a single step forward would bring her in direct contact with him. Instinctively, she wanted to step back. However, she held her ground, refusing to allow this stranger to intimidate her with his brazenness. No doubt he was just another arrogant male with a stunning smile and exceptional good looks, anxious to secure himself an introduction.

Yes, his voice was distinctly English, deep and beautifully toned, and it sent a sudden heated rush of awareness down her spine. He was tall, and she lifted her head slowly and met the searing heat in the depth of his eyes. The first thing that struck her was the intense blue colour, the colour of her beloved Aegean, she thought. They were framed with disgustingly long silky black eyelashes that looked possibly indecent on this man. Thick black hair tinged with touches of grey at his temples, gave him a rather distinguished look, and one she had always been partial too. Dressed formally in a black dinner suit, the exquisitely cut and expensive quality of the fabric used implied it was the very best in Italian tailoring. One hand was casually tucked into the pocket of his trousers.

Head held high, she met his gaze fully. Paris sensed his body stiffen, as though a searing flash of some emotion flashed through him, but his gaze remained both steady and unwavering. Much to her shock and annoyance, it then travelled downwards, resting momentarily on her mouth. It then continued to rest appraisingly on her décolletage, which this evening was covered in rosy silk and organza, before retracing its sensual path, to again mesh with her own.

He offered nothing further by way of conversation, and Paris felt the familiar prickle of irritation down her spine. This man had self-control made of steel, she thought. So did she, for that matter. She maintained a cool, dispassionate front in the face of his insulting and provocative behaviour. Taking a deep, steadying breath she prepared herself to deliver a cutting retort, only to fill her nostrils with the heady scent of his aftershave, an exotic blend, redolent of black patchouli, the fragrance one she recognised and enjoyed.

He might be a guest staying at the hotel, she mused, or perhaps he was attending some formal function here? She brought her speculation to an abrupt halt. Her senses were very aware not



only of his close proximity but of the potent sexuality he oozed. Annoyance made her stand her ground firmly and she delivered her cutting retort.

“What’s it to you?” she responded sharply, glaring up at him.

For a moment, she wondered if that was a glimmer of amusement that flashed in his eyes, but if it was, it quickly disappeared. He challenged her in return with an almost bored shrug.

“Merely making an observation,” he drawled with a wry smile, one eyebrow rising, ignoring her snide remark.

Paris waited in anticipation for him to introduce himself, but other than subjecting her to another thoroughly provocative perusal of her person with those intense blue eyes, they stood at an impasse, each eyeing the other in silence. Her body might have been vibrating with irritation at this man’s blatant audacity, but she had to concede that he radiated an aura of presence. However, his arrogance was a clear sign that he was fully aware of the potent sexuality and charisma he exuded. Over the years, she had met many men with the same expectations. As a result, she had become thoroughly immune to their charms and exceedingly adept at rebuking them.

Then he shocked her even further when he pivoted on his heel and walked away. Paris turned to watch him stride purposefully towards the entrance of the hotel. Her gaze followed him, noting the broad width of his shoulders, the smooth line of his back, which tapered down over buttocks she presumed were tight. Once he reached the entrance, the same group of hotel executives that would shortly greet His Highness greeted him enthusiastically. Then he exited the hotel and climbed into the back seat of the waiting black limousine to convey him to wherever his destination was for the evening.

Whoever this man was, he had irked her with his audacity and his blatant and thorough perusal of her person. Paris had never considered herself to be vain. She had often been described as beautiful, a term she vehemently loathed because she did not define herself by her looks alone. She possessed far more worthy attributes, which defined her character and the person she was. Growing up as an adolescent girl, she had been lanky and awkward. The sudden death of her mother when she was just ten years-of-age had devastated her. Losing the support and love of her mother at such a tender age had been profoundly traumatic. She had become painfully shy, lacking in self-esteem and acutely self-conscious.

On first acquaintance, people assumed she was of English origin. She had inherited her late mother's genes - her creamy skin, brilliant blue eyes, and a mane of thick silvery blonde hair. Yes, her late mother's genes dominated in her physical features, but the passionate nature of her temperament was inherited from her beloved father's Greek heritage, something she was fiercely proud of.

She was quickly brought out of her reverie by the arrival of His Highness and his accompanying entourage. Within minutes she was comfortably settled inside a black limousine together with her employer and, under a police escort, were speeding towards their destination. Paris let out a sigh and distracted herself by staring blankly out of the window of the limousine while her employer answered an incoming call. Suddenly, she was brought out of her idle reverie when it became apparent to whom her employer was conversing. It was Richard Westmoreland, and instantly, she felt the poignant stab to her heart.



Alastair settled his long frame into the soft leather seat of the luxurious black limousine, as it sped along the streets of Athens,

passing some well-known sights of this ancient and remarkable city. The Houses of Parliament with the Monument to the Unknown Soldier guarded by the *Evzones* - the Presidential Guard, in their traditional uniform, past the impressive marble Panathenaic Stadium - the sight of the first modern Olympic games held in eighteen ninety-six and the beautiful neo-classical Zappeion Hall, with its remaining columns of the Temple of Zeus and Hadrian's Arch. The sight of such ancient treasures should have stirred a measure of excitement.

*Goddamn it all!* That unexpected encounter in the hotel's foyer just moments ago had left him reeling. He'd been in a heightened state of anticipation since his departure from London, expecting to make the acquaintance of Paris Alexander at the official ceremony and luncheon he had attended at the Prime Minister's official residence this afternoon. He had been left quietly disappointed at her non-attendance. Now, it seems, he had seriously underestimated the sheer physical beauty of the woman. Richard had been right. She was exquisite, indisputably so, a divine example of womanhood, and he had met and bedded some strikingly beautiful women. Was it any wonder then that she had caught the eye of a Middle Eastern Crown Prince?

He had studied her surreptitiously while she waited in the foyer. She looked both delectable and temptation personified, clad in an evening gown of soft rose organza. He had initially thought to engage her in conversation. Much to his utter shock and chagrin, words had eluded him the moment she had skewered him with a steady gaze of annoyance from those beautiful Delft blue eyes.

It was then that the full force of her beauty had struck him. Logical thought had instantly disappeared, leaving him struggling to comprehend the instant and visceral reaction he was experiencing in her presence. It had unnerved him with the strength of its intensity. Her skin was like the most delicate porcelain, her eyes the colour of a bright blue summer's sky. If

the rumour of her aristocratic lineage was true, then it was apparent in the way she conducted herself, standing proud and tall in the face of his thorough and brazen perusal of her. Her eyes had stared back at him, their depths alive with annoyance, and without flinching, she had delivered the terse one-liner.

*What's it to you!*

He had struggled to bring himself under composure. Hadn't Richard warned him? And what had he done? Sodden, insensitive and arrogant bastard that he was, he had berated Richard and teased him mercilessly for behaving like some lovesick dolt! Then he had further stirred Richard's ire with his contemptuous regard of her character. Well, their unexpected encounter had just proven one point. Richard's words now echoed in his brain.

*'I think it might be prudent to warn you that Paris can live up to that ubiquitous sobriquet – Ice Princess.'*

Yes, undoubtedly, she had. Even if he were to pursue her, she would not be an easy conquest. Richard knew that all too well, he mused, smiling to himself. As for him, his ego had received quite an unexpected bruising from her curt rebuttal and the severe lack of interest she had exhibited. He snorted to himself. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had shown such blatant indifference towards him. Usually, the women he approached were never reticent in flaunting their overt eagerness to becoming intimately acquainted with him.

He consoled himself with the notion that she may well prove to be a capricious and self-centred female, one who wielded that exquisite beauty to her own advantage. It would then be the perfect antidote to instantly cool his ardour, irrespective of Richard's blatantly biased dribble! *Goddess, my arse!* The image of his close friend filled his brain, a forlorn and dejected figure

sitting in his office, a consequence of that blasted woman's rejection, and he silently admonished Richard all over again.

Soon Ms Alexander and he would be formally introduced at the dinner this evening. He was now looking forward to relishing her reaction, considering he had the element of surprise on his side. The '*Ice Princess*' might have dealt him a blow to his ego, but a little mischief might just be what was needed for him to gain the upper hand.

Closing his eyes, he let out a deep sigh of relief. Thankfully, the formal signing of documents between the relevant parties had been successfully completed that afternoon. A simple ceremony had been held before a contingency of the press and media, followed by an informal luncheon in the opulent dining room of the Maximos Mansion, the Prime Minister's official residence. The building was impressive and a stunning example of neo-classical architecture with its grand portico of white marble columns, white and black marble geometrical floor and the dramatic cut crystal ceiling, the single magnificent feature of the main reception room.

He quickly glanced at his clock. Seven forty-five. So far, he'd been fortunate. The faint stirrings of anxiety had plagued him this morning; the light-headedness, the nausea and the weakness in his arms and legs. Thankfully, his medication had prevented it from gaining a thorough hold. He was not, however, foolish enough to count his blessings prematurely. The day was not over yet. He was on his way to attend the formal dinner. May God be merciful, he thought.



"That was Richard offering his congratulations. He asked me to convey his regards to you," Abdullah informed her, turning smiling chocolate brown eyes in her direction while giving her a

cautious smile. "He called me late yesterday evening with the news of his non-attendance. From your expression, I gather that this news comes as something of a shock?" Paris raised her eyebrows and blinked as she took in his words, which added to the burden of her misery. "Yes, I was genuinely looking forward to seeing him."

So it was to be like this. He was still punishing her for the acrimonious way they had parted. As things stood between them, they couldn't even remain friends. It had been entirely her fault that things had ended acrimoniously between them and excruciatingly difficult grappling with the fallout of what she had been forced to do. Since then, he had rebuked her quite thoroughly over the past eight weeks, and his non-attendance this evening made it clear just how disillusioned and hurt he was. Personal emails and daily telephone calls had ceased altogether. Even his manner towards her since their parting had become curt and businesslike when professional obligations had forced them to interact.

"Paris?"

Abdullah broke into her thoughts, and she blinked several times and returned to the present, noticing how his intense gaze was firmly fixed on her. "I know the two of you had become very close, and I genuinely believed you returned his affection and that the relationship was progressing. Something has gone wrong, hasn't it?"

Concern was apparent in the depths of his dark eyes as he continued to look at her expectantly, waiting for her response. Paris hesitated. He was much too perceptive at reading her, and she knew beyond any reasonable doubt that he sensed what emotions his words had elicited. She schooled her expression, cleared her throat and nodded in the affirmative.

Predictably, his eyebrows shot up. He levelled her with a curious look, but when her emotions made it impossible for her to respond, he merely reached out and patted her hand sympathetically. She turned her head away for a moment to look sightlessly out of the window to steady her equilibrium. Expelling a shaky breath, she turned to face him and instantly noticed the warm and concerned expression in his eyes.

"It genuinely pains me to hear that, *balladi jawhara*. Richard was keen and determined, and I genuinely held high hopes that the relationship would continue to blossom."

He had called her my jewel. Paris remained silent. She drew in a breath, and something inside of her tightened. For a few disquieting seconds, he surveyed her thoughtfully. Eventually, he crossed his arms and rested his chin on his thumb and index finger. "I made very discreet enquiries, my dear, if that has any bearing in allying your fears," he told her, the words slipping smoothly from his mouth as if they were discussing the acquisition of one of his champion thoroughbreds.

His matter-of-fact statement did not surprise her. Abdullah tenaciously safeguarded the welfare of those closest to him. He would instruct his security department to comprehensively investigate any individual who sought to ingratiate themselves with those under his protection. Richard's name would have been added to that list from the first moment he had shown more than an overt interest in her.

In amongst her misery, she laughed lightly at his remarks. "Abdullah, I naturally presumed you would. However, it had nothing to do with the character or suitability of the man. Richard was genuine in his regard for me, otherwise I wouldn't have allowed him into my private sanctuary."

His face suddenly tensed, and his mouth set into a tight line and he held up his hand to stave off any protest she might make before asking, "You ended the relationship. Am I correct, my jewel?"

Paris managed a stilted smile and nodded in the affirmative before turning away, emotion clogging her throat. She heard his deep sigh and when she felt him reach out to take her hand and hold it between his own, she instantly turned back to face him. He wore a sombre expression as he shook his head lightly from side to side.

"You know I suffer great angst over the decision you made regarding your future. When will you stop living in fear? When will you allow yourself to live life to the fullest? I won't continue my admonishment of you because I sense you are emotionally vulnerable at this moment and it would be highly insensitive of me to do so."

He paused, and she caught his easy smile, deepening the faint lines that fanned out at the side of his eyes. He carried on, his tone warm, and his manner relaxed. "It pleases me you will take a week to rest after this evening. Malik and Kareem will competently handle matters when I return to Abu Halide."

Abdullah surprised her by raising her hand to his mouth and kissing it lightly. His brief gestures of affection, offered only in private, were enough to reawaken those painful memories of the time he was cruelly wrenched from her life. Ten years, she thought. Overwhelming despair had penetrated her soul and left her battling with depression and her illness. Fate might have ripped her heart apart when she realised that Abdullah, the man she adored and loved passionately, would never be her husband, but few people knew that she owed him her life and for that she would be forever indebted to him.



"Alastair Dalton, Fenwick's Chairman, is attending in Richard's stead and I was delighted to reacquaint myself with the man this afternoon. I admire and respect him," he added cheerfully with a wide smile.

"Yes, Richard often spoke highly of him," she replied with a simple smile, trying to pull herself out of her misery. "I believe they also enjoy a very close friendship."

"Alastair has mentioned they have been friends for many years." Abdullah's gaze held hers and amused eyes danced with devilish mischief. "Might I hope you will not discourage too much eager male attention this evening, as you are so inclined to do? I believe the Greeks have a keen eye for beauty," he teased, turning amused dark eyes of mock censure on her.

She laughed and raised both palms in resignation. "I will see if I can summon enough enthusiasm to adhere to your request, Abdullah."

Paris was exceedingly familiar with her professional role. It demanded that she display keen interest and be attentive and complementary when required. Be articulate and possess the ability to converse on a wide range of topics, when guests engaged her in conversation, but refrain from discussions deemed as too controversial. Yes, she played that role to perfection. Encourage male attention this evening? Good Lord, no! She was most definitely in no mood for that. She was aware of the derogatory term she had been graced with. *Ice Princess*. Oh, how it had stung when someone who thought it was his right to grope her person had first hurled it at her. She had stoically hidden the hurt behind her mask of indifference ever since.

Richard. She sighed as she remembered how he had spent weeks patiently attempting to break through her icy reserve. She hadn't

initially made it easy for him, having stood stoic in her resolve to remain firmly detached from involving herself emotionally with any man. With his quiet, searching, vivid blue eyes, his patience with her stubbornness and the tenderness of his embrace, she had released the shackles, allowing him to enter her private world, one that had been closed off for almost a decade. However, she had been filled with a sense of foreboding, fearing he might force her to douse the flames of their burgeoning relationship.

What was it about men and this insane desire to own a woman? Suddenly, he had begun to intimate that he wanted a firm commitment, with a view to marriage and eventually, a family. Unbeknownst to him, she couldn't give him what he sought, not because she didn't want to, because deep in her heart she ached to have both. Fate had dealt her a cruel blow. He had also expressed he could no longer abide by his forced celibacy in her company. Few men could.

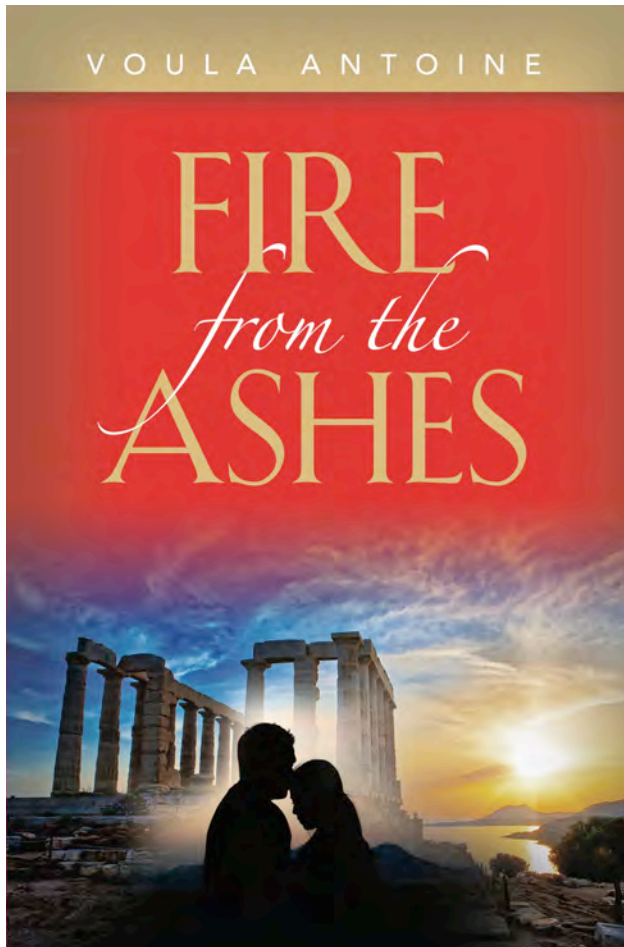
Paris straightened her back and ran the tip of her tongue over her suddenly dry lips. It was still too painful to even recall the conversation that had ensued with Richard. Her voice had trembled as she had choked out the words she needed to say, while her heart was being ripped apart at the pain she was inflicting on a man who had held a measure of affection in her heart. How could she forget the lost and wounded look, the despair visible in the depths of his eyes, as they had searched her face, seeking clarity? He had stared at her wordlessly, while she had struggled with her composure, hating herself for the pain and confusion that shadowed his expression. That he had questioned the depth of her sincerity throughout their time together, telling her she had played him for a fool, had only twisted the knife further into her heart.

Couldn't he understand how agonisingly difficult it had been for her to let him go? The bitter reality was that it would have been

cruel and despicable of her to continue to allow him to languish in false hope and unrealistic expectations of a future together.

She had made an absolute mess of everything. Why hadn't she trusted Richard enough to confess all and to allow him to help her break the stranglehold her fears held over her? She knew the answer to both of those questions. He was a beautiful and sensitive individual, and she cared for him dearly. Why should he be forced to forgo his dreams out of a sense of pity for her? No, she couldn't allow that to happen. In the end, cold-hearted logic had overridden all else and now she was suffering from the fallout of her stupidity.

What was the point of retrospection? It achieved nothing. With time, she told herself, the raw anguish she felt would diminish. Now, she needed to pull herself out of her maudlin thoughts before she found herself languishing in that all too familiar dark depression.



*Born of English and Greek parents, exquisitely beautiful Paris Alexander would become Crown Princess of the Sovereign State of Abu Halide. When the Governing Council of Elders rescinds their permission for her to marry the Crown Prince, her world begins to unravel around her. Destiny it seems has chosen a different path for Paris.*

## **Fire From The Ashes**

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