



Prologue: Present



Amber sat staring out the window of the plane, watching the clouds move past. *They seem so solid from the air. Like you could walk on them. Yet if you tried, you'd plummet to your death.* She smiled as she thought of how deceptive some things could be. Like clouds, or mirages in the desert. *Life in general is deceptive. Just when you begin thinking your life is set...all settled, Fate deals you a completely new hand.* "Mektub", she whispered quietly. Mektub. Arabic for "Fate", something Anwar had believed in totally. She sighed as she thought of all the twists and turns Fate had taken in her life. It still amazed her when she thought back over the years. *Sometimes I feel as if my entire life has been a dream...preposterous and wonderful.*

Amber could still see herself at fifteen, when she realized she was in love with Anwar—thirty years her senior and as different from her as night is to day. *Perhaps our love was fated, despite the difference in our ages, our culture and religion. Nothing really mattered to us except our love. I've always thought the British are a completely different breed from most people...so staid and steeped in tradition, yet the Arabs are more different still...and bound by even more rigid and unyielding traditions.*

Despite their differences, despite the fact that he already had a wife from a youthful arranged marriage, their love had survived. The alarm on her watch startled Amber, a reminder that it was time to take her medication. Digging through her bag, she found the bottle and took her pill, remembering how vehement her physician had been about her not taking this trip back to Egypt.

"You're in no shape for such an expedition, Amber. Your

heart is getting weaker every day. You belong in hospital, frankly. This bloody obsession of yours about returning to Egypt to be with Anwar is...not rational.”

As she remembered Dr. Marston’s disbelief, Amber laughed aloud, stopping herself as other passengers looked at her curiously. *Nothing about our relationship was “rational”. Passionate, yes. Obsessive, definitely. But never anything as mundane as “rational”. When I became pregnant, though, we really thought our lives were complete.*

Closing her eyes, Amber leaned back and let her mind drift back to the time after she’d become pregnant with Anwar’s child. She’d been so worried that he wouldn’t be happy about the pregnancy...until she’d spoken to Bayiri, Anwar’s “First Wife”. Bayiri, always a friend, who had never wanted anything but Anwar’s happiness. Amber sighed again and let the precious memories wash over her, brilliant and indelible. *I was eighteen by then...and we’d been together for two years....*





Chapter One: May, 1963



Once Amber told Anwar she was pregnant, it was as if the constant fears he'd had of losing her evaporated. At first in their relationship he'd pushed her to marry him—wanting to put Bayiri aside so he could marry her as First Wife—but when she continued to refuse, rather than instigate arguments, he dropped the issue, though she knew eventually she'd have to make a decision. The issue of marriage and their continual arguments over it was the only thing marring their happiness.

“We must return to England so I may make arrangements for my extended absence...and *you*...” he added with tender smile, “will have to speak with your parents.”

“About what?” Amber queried, distracted with watching some children playing in the garden.

“What do you *mean*, ‘about *what*’? About the coming arrival of their grandchild, of course!”

Amber steeled herself for another argument: she simply couldn't make him understand that she had no intention of telling her parents about the baby...or about their relationship. They would never understand, or approve. She'd managed to keep it from them only because her job as a model had kept her away so much of the time. Desperately, she looked for a way to distract him, and fastened upon the children playing in the garden.

“Anwar...come here! Look at them! Aren't they adorable?”

Anwar wrapped his arms around her from behind, and she settled against him. Together, they watched the children chasing one another through Jameel's roses, and they laughed together as the gardener caught them and routed them before they did any

damage. “Children are children, no matter where they are, Kara.” Turning her toward him, he kissed her forehead and whispered, “You are very sly, my Love, but you shall have to face your parents eventually.”

“Anwar....”

“Oh, hush. I will not argue with you...for now.”



Before leaving for England, Amber stopped by to see Anwar’s wife. She could see Bayiri was unhappy to see them leave again, but Amber knew she was also pleased they’d be back soon.

“I told you, did I not, that he would be pleased with your news,” Bayiri told her smugly.

“I know. I’m glad I listened to you.” Amber considered talking to Bayiri about her fears over marrying Anwar. While sipping her lemonade, she surreptitiously glanced over at the older woman. Bayiri was so serene, so content with her lot in life...and so dear to Amber, herself. Crippled from bearing Anwar’s son, Daoud, in their first year of marriage, there was little left to Bayiri except the honor of being ‘First Wife’. The love she and Anwar bore one another had nothing to do with passion, but everything to do with love and loyalty. *I’d never do anything to hurt her. How could I ever allow Anwar to put her aside?* As Bayiri looked up and met her eyes, Amber smiled, but she wanted to ask her friend how she could stand knowing that, as *property*, if Anwar died she would belong to whoever inherited Anwar’s property. *Even if I didn’t mind his putting Bayiri aside, how could I live, knowing I could be passed like...like a horse...to someone else. Even Rashid.* She shuddered, thinking of Anwar’s brother and his cruelty, his hatred and jealousy.

Bayiri seemed to notice her distraction. “What is it, little sister?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Amber lied. “I’d better go, Bayiri. Anwar will be waiting for me at the car, and you know how

impatient he can be.”

“I know. Anwar believes the world should move at *his* speed and at his will, not Allah’s.”

Amber couldn’t help laughing as she responded, “Well, doesn’t it usually?”

As she rose, Bayiri took her hand. “Naam, fee ri’aayat Allah, Little Sister.”

“We’ll be back soon.” Amber bent to hug her friend.



“Surely she will marry you now,” Nazeer told his son hopefully.

Anwar sighed and shook his head. “Father, she will not, I assure you. At least not now. Perhaps after the child is born. Perhaps when she must explain it to her parents.” He shrugged. “But perhaps not. My Kara is a very stubborn woman.” Before Nazeer could protest again, Anwar reached out to embrace him. “No more, Father. I’m leaving Egypt for the first time with joy in my heart, knowing I shall be returning to stay...and that my heart and soul...my Kara...shall return with me. Please...no arguments today, of all days.”

“Very well,” Nazeer conceded. “Go now...the sooner you leave, the sooner you shall return. You named her rightly when you named her *Kara*...the light of your soul, for without her, the light goes out of you.”

By the time Anwar reached the limousine it was packed and the driver was waiting for them. He glanced at his watch and frowned. If they didn’t leave soon, it would throw his entire schedule off. At that moment he looked up to see Kara coming down the steps, escorted by one of his father’s servants. She looked lovely in the flowing robes and veils of his people. He wished she would always dress that way. *The light of my soul. The light of my life. She is, indeed*, he thought happily. “Did you see Bayiri?” he asked her.

Her smile was radiant as she came toward him. “She tells us to go with God and to hurry back.”

“Which we will, Kara.”

The slave opened the door for them and Anwar assisted her into the car.



Though the flight from Egypt to England was long and tiring, they drove straight to Anwar’s Tudor mansion, Hadleigh Hall, from the airport, and although surprised at their sudden and unexpected arrival, everyone at the Hall seemed pleased to see them.

During dinner, Anwar kept grinning at Amber like a schoolboy getting ready to play a prank, and Amber was having her own problems keeping from laughing...mostly at him. She thought how incongruous Anwar’s dancing blue eyes and beautiful smile looked set against his dark skin, hooked nose and shaven head. He was like a mischievous child trapped in the body of a huge Djinn. She smiled at the thought. Most things about Anwar were contradictory.

As soon as they were alone, he reached across the table to take her hand. “Anwar!” she teased as she pulled free. “I’m trying to eat!”

“How can you eat at a time like this? I certainly cannot!”

“If you don’t calm down, you’re going to burst,” she told him with a laugh. “You’re behaving like a five year old.”

“I *feel* like a five year old.”

Forcing herself to a stern calm she didn’t quite feel, she picked up her fork and told him primly, “Just eat your dinner, and stop messing about.”

“Yes, Mother.”

That was too much for her, and as her eyes met his they both burst out laughing, which drew a curious look from Murphy, Anwar’s Irish cook, as he peeked through the kitchen door.

After they had dined, Anwar asked all the resident staff to join them in the large lounge for coffee, and he informed them that he had something important he wanted to convey to them. The housekeeper, Mrs. Cryer, was the first to arrive, having come up from the village where she'd been visiting one of her friends. She was anxious to find out exactly what Anwar wanted to tell them. Robert and Geoff, Anwar's personal assistant and the gardener, came into the room together, and they all sat in silence, drinking coffee and waiting for Murphy to make an appearance. Murphy finally came in still wearing his apron, and just before he closed the door, Akhim, Anwar's personal slave, glided through it in his usual ghost-like way. Everyone found a comfortable seat except for Akhim, who settled on the floor in the corner near the door. Amber settled closer to Anwar on the settee, and he smiled at her as he began. "I asked all of you here because there is something we want you to know before the inevitable grapevine informs you of it before us."

"I *knew* something was wrong!" Murphy exclaimed, interrupting in his usual rough and careless manner. "When we knew you were comin' home early I told 'em.... 'This don't bode good,' I said."

Anwar laughed at Murphy's outburst, and Amber said, "Nothing is wrong, Murphy."

"Will *all* of you hold your tongues until I have finished, please?" Anwar admonished them both, with a glare that would've stopped a clock.

Murphy didn't look very repentant and Amber was tempted to laugh again. Glancing at the others, she suddenly became aware of Akhim's small, dark eyes staring at her, and when she met the slave's gaze she realized that somehow, he knew...and did not approve. *Of course, Akhim never has approved of me...why should he approve of me giving his master a child?* She didn't want the thought to disturb her, but it did.

Once silence was restored, Anwar continued. "We have returned home early as we must make arrangements for a more

permanent stay in Egypt.”

“I hope the old man’s all right,” Murphy interrupted again.

“My father is well enough, but I... *we* shall be making our home in Egypt.”

There were surprised gasps and anxious looks from everyone, and Anwar hurried to reassure them. “I want to quell any fears you may have about your position here at Hadleigh. Your work has always been more than satisfactory, and the family will be keeping the house on. I am assuming that you will all wish to continue working here.” He looked toward his assistant. “Robert will be returning home with me, if he wishes to, for I doubt I would find anyone prepared to accommodate my needs as he has. However, we shall be here for a short time, so we can discuss the finer details over the next few days.”

“You’re *both* going to live in Egypt?” Robert ventured, his expression confused.

“Yes.” Anwar paused, and a look of intense joy lit his face.

Robert, quiet and calm as always, asked, “Well...as you’ve already decided I’m going with you, might I ask why?”

Amber smiled as she watched Anwar. She could tell by the light dancing in his eyes that he could barely contain his excitement, but he nodded and announced quite calmly, “I believe my son should be born in my homeland.”

“YES!” Murphy yelled as he leaped up to hug Robert, whose face was frozen in a mask of surprise.

“Well now, that’s *wonderful* news,” Mrs. Cryer exclaimed, clasping her hands and smiling warmly at them.

“Aren’t you supposed to hand out cigars or some such?” Robert asked calmly.

“Will we get to see the sprog?” Murphy was still acting like a child on Christmas morning.

“We plan to come back here for our holidays,” Amber told them. “I’m still English, you know. I’ll want to come home to see my family and friends from time to time.”

Murphy was still beaming. “Well, who’d have thought it...the

patter of tiny feet! After all these years, I'm finally going to be an uncle."

"Uncle?" Amber questioned, feeling just a bit uneasy.

Murphy nodded enthusiastically. "The sprog can call me Uncle Murphy."

Glancing at Anwar, and seeing his amused expression, Amber relaxed. "All right. I suppose you can be an uncle, but only on one condition...."

"And what might that be?"

"That you stop using that *awful* expression! Our baby is a *baby*, not a...a *sprog*!"

Murphy laughed. "It's a deal! Baby it is."

"Then Uncle Murphy it is." Anwar conceded with a smile. Then, addressing all of the staff, he reminded them that this news was not to be shared indiscriminately, but was to be kept within the house.

Mrs. Cryer left after congratulating them so she could return to her friend's house in the village, but Robert, Murphy and Jeff remained to help them celebrate. Robert came to Amber, and kneeling on the floor in front of her, took her hands in his and told her softly, "I'm thrilled for both of you. I've been expecting this news for a long time."

Of course, Murphy was more jocular about the whole thing. "I know. So have I. So what's kept you two? They say practice makes perfect, and by now, you two must be bloody experts!"

Amber noticed that Murphy had opened a bottle of Scotch and was downing what probably wasn't his first glass. *Knowing Murphy, it's probably not even his first bottle!* she thought with tolerant amusement. "Murphy," she told him with practiced hauteur, "...perfection takes time to achieve, and a great deal of practice!"

"Boasting, now, are we?" the cook said with a chuckle.

"She meant the *child*, you nitwit," Robert commented as he snatched the bottle. "And exactly how much of that have you consumed in the last few minutes?"

Murphy was swaying already, but despite that, he smiled cheerfully. "Don't matter. Time to celebrate." He patted Amber on the shoulder and said earnestly, "Seriously, my dear, God bless you. Both of you. Ol' Murphy wishes you all the luck in the world."

Anwar hugged her and smiled benevolently at his cook. "He has already blessed us, Murphy."

Both Robert and Murphy then retired to the other side of the room, where Geoff had carried in another bottle, and they settled down to some serious 'celebration.' Akhim, who had remained silent until now, began to collect the cups and saucers, and Anwar addressed him softly, "You're very quiet, Akhim. Have you no comment?"

"What would you have me say, Master?" Akhim responded.

"Do you not rejoice with us? Such news is precious."

"She will give you a son. A son is always a blessing. You do not need mine."

"I would be pleased if the child she carries is male."

"It will be a boy," Akhim confirmed.

"You are sure of this?" Anwar asked, seeming unable to contain his enthusiasm.

"I am certain."

Amber listened to the exchange with interest, wondering what the two men would think of a girl child. The thought disturbed her a bit, thinking of the restrictive lives women in the Middle East lived. Nor did she much like the thought of Akhim's blessing being in any way necessary to Anwar. "You don't approve, do you?" she challenged the slave.

For the first time since she could remember, Akhim dared to look her in the eyes...something that was not at all proper for a slave. "If there is not a marriage, there will be no true heir," he stated flatly.

Anwar seemed anxious to win his slave's blessing. "My father has said he will recognize the child, so there should be no problem of acceptance."

Akhim's expression remained unreadable. "There are those who might challenge the acceptance of such a child into the family."

"And if that challenge is made when I am not present?"

Akhim bowed and said softly, "The child will be safe, as will his mother. I know where my duty lies, never doubt it...even if there *are* those who are blind to their duty." His black eyes swung in Amber's direction once more. The implication that she was failing in her duty to his master was very clear.

Feeling stifled and more than a bit guilty at the truth in his words, Amber responded, "I'm sorry you can't find it in your heart to be happy for us."

"I will rejoice with you when the child finally reaches manhood, for in his acceptance as an adult there is safety. As a child, there are many dangers."

Thinking that perhaps Akhim was referring to his own childhood, Amber tried to reassure him. "Times have changed, Akhim. Things are different now. No one will harm our child."

But Akhim shook his head. "Men of evil still walk this earth. The nature of the damned does not change—it never can." He turned to stare at Anwar, and told him, "We all know there are evil ones close at hand."

Amber watched the exchange between the two men with concern. She knew Anwar's brother, Rashid, hated him, but surely even Rashid wouldn't harm a child. *No*, she reassured herself, *Akhim is merely thinking of his own childhood.*

After Akhim finished collecting the dishes and left, she turned to Anwar. "His childhood has left him very bitter, hasn't it?"

"The wounds to his body healed years ago, but the scars on his soul are deep. They will not fade this side of death," Anwar told her, his expression thoughtful. "Yet, he has a great deal of insight into the evil men can do. He has some valid concerns."

"This is getting too morbid for me," she replied with a slight shudder. "I think I'll go join Murphy and Robert. I see Geoff has

left.”

“No. It would not be wise for you to drink.”

“Just one to celebrate.”

“One, but no more,” Anwar insisted. “There must be no risk to the child.”

Walking over to the small table in the corner, Amber inquired, “Is there anything left in that bottle?”

Robert grinned and responded, “I think we can squeeze one out.”

A slurred but still lilting Irish voice promised, “If not, then Uncle Murphy’ll go get another bottle!”

From behind her, Anwar insisted, “Only a small one, Murphy.”

With a wink, the cook poured her a glass, but before she could take it, Anwar reached from behind her, took the glass and poured most of the contents into his own. “We shall leave you to your celebration, now, but try not to get *too* drunk as I must leave early. I am due in London for lunch.”

Murphy couldn’t seem to resist the chance to tease, and he was just drunk enough not to care how his boss took it. He dug his elbow into Robert’s ribs. “They’re going up now for their own celebration. We’d better put the radio on so we won’t hear the bed springs groaning.” He turned his broad Irish face to Anwar, wagged his finger and slurred, “It’s no use practicin’ this late in the day! If you haven’t got it right by now, ain’t no use to keep tryin’!”

With a horrified look, Robert hushed him and added, as he steered the drunken cook away, “Why *must* you insist on poking your nose in other people’s private lives?”

Anwar merely laughed as he drew Amber toward the stairs. “Goodnight, Robert, Murphy.”

“*Uncle* Murphy,” the cook insisted with a slur.

“Good night, then, *Uncle* Murphy,” Anwar answered as he took the glass from Amber’s hand and placed it on the table for Akhim to collect.

“G’night Boss,” came the reply.
Anwar led her up the stairs, chuckling all the while.
“What’s so funny?” she asked.
“Uncle Murphy! What a concept!”
She laughed with him, but shook her head. “I know.
Terrifying, isn’t it?”

