

Chapter 1

THE TWENTIETH YEAR OF KING ARTAXERXES' REIGN* WINTER, PERSEPOLIS

Sarah's head snapped up as the door to her chamber burst open with uncharacteristic force. Her friend and handmaiden, Pari, rushed in, tunic askew, strands of usually pristine brown hair hanging around her face in a haphazard tangle.

"The baby's here!" she said, her voice high as she waved a long arm for emphasis.

Sarah jumped to her feet. "And Apama? How is she?" Apama, the wife of the second assistant gardener, had gone into labor with her first baby three days ago. The baby had proven reluctant to come. By the end of the second day everyone had started to fear the worst.

Pari's lips flattened into a straight line. "Bardia says she is too weak. They allowed me a glimpse of her before I came over. She's whiter than a bowl of yogurt, and lies shaking in spite of

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the fire burning in the brazier next to her pallet."

A shiver ran through Sarah. Bardia, the head gardener and practically a member of Darius's family, was not in the habit of careless pronouncements. "That doesn't sound encouraging. Perhaps we can do something to help."

She strode to the bank of shelves built into a niche in one corner of her bedchamber. Neat piles of soft sheets, wool blankets, and cotton-filled quilts stacked on top of each other. Sarah chose an exquisite linen quilt made of various shades of blue and green fabric, embroidered with silver thread. "This should help keep her warm."

Pari's eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. "Didn't the queen give you that coverlet?"

"She has stunning taste, hasn't she?"

"Indeed, my lady. More to the point, won't she mind your giving away the gift she chose for *you* with her own stunning taste?"

"Not if she doesn't find out," Sarah said, unable to keep the smile from her voice. "Besides, having suffered through a difficult birth herself, she is likely to approve. We should send a few things for the baby as well. Is it a boy or a girl?"

Pari slapped a hand over her mouth. "In all the excitement, I forgot to ask. I only know it is healthy."

Sarah tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "That's the important thing. I saw some linens in the storehouse that should suit a new baby. Let's fetch them." She and Pari paid a brief visit to the storehouse and retrieved a few appropriate articles for the newborn.

"His lordship has already sent over a lamb," Pari said as they walked back to Sarah's apartments. "He had instructed Bardia to bring it over as soon as Apama gave birth."

Sarah was not surprised by Darius's thoughtfulness.

Children were highly cherished by the Persians. The whole household rejoiced at the birth of a baby, even one belonging to a lesser servant.

She frowned at the thought of Darius. It had been five long days since he had sent for her. His lack of interest ate at her with a sharpness that robbed her of sleep at night and of rest during the day. Was he losing interest in her already? The thought made her want to weep.

She had not always been desperate for his company. When her marriage had first been arranged by the queen, it had felt like a blight that ruined her life. She had chosen neither her husband nor the state of matrimony.

Everyone assumed that a simple Jewish girl should be overjoyed at the prospect of marrying the king's cousin. But at the time Sarah had wanted nothing more than to continue serving as the queen's senior scribe, the only woman in the empire to have ever been honored with such a post. The first four months of her marriage had been a nightmare of mutual resentment. But in time, she and Darius had learned to accept each other and settled into a happy companionship. She gave a wry twist of her mouth as she sat on a purple linen couch. Her feelings for Darius were far more complex than companionship.

The problem was that she loved him.

She loved him.

Much good it did her, for he did not return her feelings. She knew he cared for her. He had set his concubines free, and settled them in their own independent establishments, and made Sarah the only woman in his life. By his own admission, he enjoyed her company and admired her. But he never confessed love for her.

Her puppy, Anousya, tired of being ignored, interrupted her

reverie by jumping up and putting his head on her lap, gazing at her with adoring eyes. At six months, he was already large, and beginning to develop the massive structure that had marked his cousin Caspian, Darius's favorite dog. Sarah still missed Caspian, who had been the most astounding dog she had ever met.

She leaned over and caressed Anousya behind his ears, drawing comfort from the warmth of his solid body. He gave her a puppy smile full of pleasure.

He had been a present from Darius. Her mouth softened as she remembered the night she had named him. Her first suggestion that they call him Silk—because he was so soft—had met with undisguised disapproval.

"Silk!" Darius had exclaimed, sounding offended. "He's not a little girl's toy dog. He is from a noble bloodline, worthy of kings and princes."

Sarah had smoothed the lines of her flowing skirt over her thigh. "How about *Honey*? He is so sweet; that would be a perfect name."

Darius's dark brows lowered with displeasure.

"You don't like *Honey* either?" She pretended to pout. "You said I could name him anything I liked."

"Ah. I did say that. I beg your pardon. *Honey* . . . *Honey*, it is." He spoke the name as if he was chewing on a mouthful of salted sour cherries.

"Thank you, my lord! How perfect. I can imagine it vividly. Having a house full of your mighty friends, and you calling out in front of them: *Here, Honey. Fetch, Honey*. They will be delighted by such a spectacle."

"Wench." The grooves in his cheeks deepened. "I'd be looking at you the whole time I said it. *Here, Honey*," he said, patting his lap.

She burst into laughter and threw herself into his arms.

"I have a better idea. What if we call him *Anousya*?" She suggested the name, knowing that her husband would approve of the allusion to the king's elite royal guard, better known as the Immortals.

"Now that's a fitting name," he said. "He shall be a warrior dog."

She poked him in the side where she knew him to be ticklish. "He shall be a *companion* dog," she said, reminding him of the original meaning of the Persian word.

Sarah sighed. She could not understand her husband. Sometimes, it seemed to her, he battled his own heart, wanting her with half and rejecting her with the other. Then again, he had never gone five whole days without sending for her, not since they had committed to living as true husband and wife.

"Apama and her husband will be thrilled with your gifts, my lady," Pari said, interrupting Sarah's thoughts. She lifted her arms, now piled with the linens they had fetched from the storehouse sitting precariously on top of the queen's coverlet. "Would you like to come with me as I deliver them?"

"I think not. They always seem flustered when I visit, though I do my best to put them at ease. What they need is peace and quiet. You take those with my compliments. And I will pray for Apama."

Pari wasn't absent for long. She returned, carrying a tray loaded with food. "Shushan has sent you thick herb soup with wheat noodles and hot bread from the ovens," she said as she set the table.

"She read my mind!" Sarah exclaimed as the fragrance of mint and fried onions filled her room. "I've been craving one of her hearty soups all day." Sarah bent over the bowl and inhaled the complex aroma of herbs and spices with pleasure.

Darius's one-eyed, skinny cook could transform simple vegetables and meat into an unforgettable feast for the senses.

"Bardia says Apama shows improvement. She smiled when I covered her with your quilt. She is too weak to speak, but her eyes filled with tears when I told her the coverlet had once belonged to the queen. Her husband more than made up for her silence. He bid me to thank you and his lordship so many times that I had to escape while he was midsentence. He'll probably fall at your feet or something equally embarrassing when next he sees you." She lifted the tray on which she had carried the food and turned as if to leave before coming to a sudden halt. "I almost forgot. A messenger just arrived from Susa. He has a missive from Her Majesty for you."

Damaspia, the queen of Persia, was kind enough to consider Sarah a friend—a privilege that sometimes exacted a terrible price, as Sarah well knew. The queen had entered into the habit of writing Sarah, sharing the latest news since she and Darius had moved to his lavish estate near Persepolis six months ago, while the rest of the court resided in Susa for the winter months.

Sarah looked from the steaming bowl to the roll of papyrus in Pari's hand. In a low voice, she spoke a prayer of thanksgiving over her food. As soon as she finished, she held out one hand for the missive while grasping a spoon to start eating. She was too hungry to wait on the soup and too curious to wait on the letter. Pari gave her a disapproving look, but surrendered the missive. Sarah knew she did not have the most graceful table manners even when she was focused on the task. Reading and eating at the same time spelled disaster for either the upholstery or her delicate clothing. Or, most likely, both. She offered Pari her best conciliatory expression before tearing into Damaspia's seal.

She had the skills of a fast and accurate reader, but she read the letter twice to ensure she had understood the queen's command. She looked at the date of its composition with a frown. It had been written two months ago. With a swift motion that almost upended her soup bowl, she rose from the couch.

"Artaxerxes and Damaspia have asked us to visit them at Susa. But they want us to be there in eighteen days!"

"Under three weeks? You would have to fly to arrive in time," Pari said with a gasp.

"I know. Would you please fetch the courier who brought this letter? At once."

A few moments later a young man, still in riding gear, stood at her door next to Pari. Sarah thanked him for his prompt presence. "Can you tell me when this missive was first given to the royal courier service?"

He searched through his leather satchel and retrieved a papyrus scroll. After a few moments of study, he nodded. "Here it is. It was part of a larger batch from the queen's offices. The whole packet was given to us three weeks ago."

Sarah dismissed him with her thanks. His answer confirmed what she had suspected. Damaspia's scribe must have missed the fact that this letter was time sensitive and delayed sending it until a larger packet became ready for dispatch. Deferments of mail were common practice, which saved money and resources. But the scribe was supposed to know when a letter should not be delayed. Sarah quashed an complimentary thought about the inattention of Damaspia's new senior scribe.

"Is his lordship at home?" she asked Pari.

"Yes, my lady."

"Then take this letter to him. Tell him it's from the queen, and that it's urgent."

Sarah wondered if Darius would come to her in response to the queen's letter, or if he would make arrangements without consulting her. It had become his habit to speak to her about most of his affairs of business in the past few months. Given his recent distance, however, he might choose to attend the matter without involving her.

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Darius returned from the palace at Persepolis nursing the start of a pesky headache. Hours of dealing with one of Artaxerxes' foreign officials had proven exceptionally dreary. Halfway through the meeting he'd thought of Sarah. An intense longing for her company overcame him, tempting him to cut the meeting short.

He controlled the urge, not out of concern that the official might take offense, but because this disconcerting yearning for Sarah was exactly what he had been trying to battle against for weeks. He felt as if he was losing control and did not enjoy that feeling. Staying away from her seemed the safest course.

But keeping his distance failed to curb his hunger for his wife. He had spent the whole hour since his return from Persepolis staring at new maps from the cartographer while thinking of the outline of Sarah's curves.

The last time she had visited his apartments, she had accidentally left a sheer scarf behind. Instead of returning it to her, he had held on to it, draping the turquoise silk over the back of a sofa. He leaned against the folds of fabric now, and pulled one corner against his lips. The faint smell of roses still clung to the delicate shawl. He inhaled the scent before shoving the fabric away.

She had sent him into convulsions of laughter the night she left the scarf behind, pulling it low over her forehead and scrunching her lips, mimicking with astonishing accuracy the

voice of Artaxerxes' dreaded mother, Amestris. "Eat your spinach or it will be the dungeons for you, my boy. I'll chop off your nose, don't think I won't. Your handsome features don't impress *me*."

"You keep that up and you'll be the one in the dungeons. Amestris has spies everywhere. For all you know, I'm one of them."

Sarah gave a nonchalant shrug of one shoulder. "Or I might be one of her spies, setting a trap for *you*."

"Hasn't worked."

"You haven't eaten your spinach, have you? Shows a distinct lack of obedience. Even the vague likeness of the queen mother should motivate you into submission."

Darius laughed. "Submission and I don't get along. You should have learned that by now."

She leaned over. For a breathless moment he thought she would kiss him. Instead, she stretched a hand and pulled a tiny piece of flint from his hair. She blew on the fragile thread and watched it fly into the air. "One can always hope."

He felt the tug of challenge in her voice. Something ancient and intensely male rose up in him, filled with excitement at the thought of that challenge.

And that was the trouble with the woman. She managed to hold his interest in a thousand ways. Peace as well as entertainment seemed to follow in her wake, though she offered both without conscious effort.

Her intelligence impressed him, and that was not an easy accomplishment with a man who spent his days around the most brilliant minds of the world. And yet, instead of giving herself airs, she got on her hands and knees and scrubbed the head gardener's floor when his cottage became infested from the damp.

When Pari came to tell him that an urgent summons had arrived from the queen, he leapt to his feet with the alacrity of a hungry lion. He no longer had to fight against his own urges. He had no choice, after all. It was his duty to go to his wife. As he made his way to Sarah's apartments, he realized with sheepish relief that his headache had disappeared.



A brief knock on Sarah's door heralded a visitor. The knock proved a polite formality, as her husband let himself in before she could respond. Darius appeared every inch the courtier today, dressed in a tunic of soft, midnight blue wool that clung to his tall figure, emphasizing long, toned muscles. As if he needed sartorial enhancement to improve his looks. Darius turned heads even when wearing old hunting gear. Deep green eyes narrowed as Sarah bowed before him.

"How formal," he said, when she rose.

"It seemed appropriate." She gestured toward his elegant outfit. Earlier that morning she had been for a walk with Anousya and had found, discarded, a few alluring tail feathers from the priceless peacocks that roamed the grounds. She picked the most colorful one and tucked it into his belt. "Here. I think you must have dropped this earlier."

He pulled out the feather, intending to stroke Sarah's cheek with its soft plume. She sidestepped the caress. Darius frowned. "Such audacity," he said with mock rage. "Are you implying I am a peacock? I've been closeted with one of the king's officials most of the morning. Had to dress the part, that's all."

He waved the queen's letter. "What's this about, do you know? Why the great rush? We have to be on the road in two days and ride the back roads light and fast to arrive in time."

"I don't know why Damaspia and the king have requested our presence in Susa. It might be a routine visit."

Darius arched a dark brow, speaking volumes without needing to use words. Artaxerxes and his queen rarely wasted time with routine anything. The fact that they had summoned Darius and Sarah meant they had a purpose to the visit.

Sarah raised her chin. "I'm afraid I have no idea what is behind this royal invitation. But I can explain the inconvenient timing. That would be the fault of Damaspia's new senior scribe. If you look at the date, you will find that she dictated this message two months ago, in good time for us to make arrangements and arrive at Susa with utmost convenience. So whatever her reason for summoning us, it could not have been an emergency. Unfortunately, her new scribe must have overlooked the date the queen has mentioned. I checked with the courier. The letter was not sent until three weeks ago, which places us in an awkward position."

"I see." Darius took a few steps toward Sarah. "I cannot complain then, since it was my fault she lost her brilliant scribe and now has to bear with inferior service."

He stood so close that she could feel his breath on her face. But he refrained from touching her.

Longing, confusion, frustration, and hurt roiled inside Sarah until she felt like a tangled skein of wool. What ailed the man? Why did he have to blow so hot and cold? She backed away from him. "I could write Damaspia a letter to explain. She would understand if we arrived late, under the circumstances."

"No. I think it best that we try to arrive at the requested date. The king might have need of us. The fact that Damaspia's servant is incompetent does not alter the original reason for this request. Neither Damaspia nor Artaxerxes makes requests lightly."

Sarah nodded. "Shall Pari and I begin to pack? If you wish to be on the road in two days, there is much to do."

Darius took another step forward, which brought him too close again. This time he reached a hand to play with a fat curl on her shoulder. Pari had spent a whole hour yesterday turning Sarah's straight hair into a profusion of curls. Darius seemed fascinated by the change.

"Pari will have to come later with the baggage train. They can travel on the royal highway, which will be more comfortable for her. She would never keep up with us on the mountain passes. It won't be a pleasant ride for you either. I doubt we'll even take time to set up tents in the evenings if we are to make the trip faster than a royal courier. But you have become very competent on a horse. One would never know you didn't spend your childhood on the back of one." He pulled on the curl to draw her nearer, but there was something reluctant about the way he touched her, as if he drew her to him against his own will.

A bubble of resentment rose to the surface of Sarah's mind. First he avoided her, and now he came to her half willing. Offended, she pulled her hair out of his fingers and walked to the other side of the room. The wall stopped her retreat and she leaned against it. "I will make the arrangements," she said, her face stony.

Darius spied a flagon of pressed apple juice on a side table and poured himself a cup. He took a deep swallow, his movements lazy. Why was he lingering here? Annoyed with his perplexing moods, Sarah wished he would take himself back to his private world now that he had given his orders.

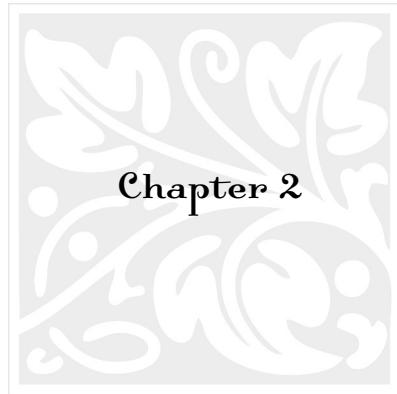
Looking thoughtful, Darius swirled the juice in its silver cup before placing it back on the table. He sauntered toward her, silent as a cat. Her eyes widened when he raised one hand and placed it on the wall so close to her waist that she felt the heat of it through her wool dress and linen shift. Sarah swiveled

to the other side, intent on slithering away. With a sudden move, he placed his other hand close to her head, trapping her against the wall.

"Why are you running from me?" he asked, bringing his fingers to rest on her back, drawing her close to him.

She stiffened in his arms. "Why are you?"

He half laughed, half groaned. "I can't seem to get my fill of you." Then he kissed her, and whatever part of him had been trying so hard to resist her, to reject her even, gave way. She felt his defenses crashing as he drew her tighter still. Her own resistance melted as she sensed that for a while, at least, he would be hers.



Sarah looked from the heap of clothes that had begun to gather on her bed to the pile of scrolls and clay tablets that were mounting on her cedar desk and sighed. Ignoring both, she decided to write a letter to her cousin Nehemiah, informing him of her imminent arrival. As cup-bearer to the king, her Jewish relative held a position of high authority. In spite of his being a Jew, Artaxerxes had bestowed on him considerable influence, which allowed him regular proximity to the person of the king.

If secret trouble were brewing, Nehemiah would see to it that Darius and she were armed with the right information before entering the king's presence. Artaxerxes was a kind and generous king, as Sarah had reason to know. But he was also dedicated to his empire with a single-minded passion that could at times make extreme demands. A little preparation for Artaxerxes never went amiss.

"You'll be riding on horseback the whole way with only two or three pack horses," Pari said, interrupting her train of thought. "I hope Lord Darius has plenty of clothes in his store-houses in Susa, for I cannot fit but two outfits in the space he

has allotted me. *It's all about speed, Pari*, he says to me. But once my lord arrives, I wager he won't care a snap for speed. He'll want you as elegant as a princess; he wouldn't want you to feel embarrassed before the court again."

Sarah rested her head in her hands for a moment. She had not slept well the night before, remaining awake and fretting about the mountain of tasks she had to accomplish before leaving for Susa. Sleeplessness had not helped her accomplish a single chore, of course. But she had not been able to make herself rest by logical arguments. After over an hour of anxiety-ridden thoughts, she had finally remembered to pray. In her worry, even her prayers had kept turning into a list of things she had to accomplish, for she had focused more on her burdens than on God. She had fallen asleep close to dawn and had awokened bleary-eyed.

"Do your best," she mumbled through her fingers. "I only need to fend for myself the first two weeks, and then you will arrive with the baggage train." Thanks to Pari's gentle instructions, she had learned how to navigate the rigid formalities of court life as the wife of an aristocrat. She would never walk into another royal feast looking like a demon from the outer darkness, the way she had on her wedding day.

She finished the letter for Nehemiah and had it delivered to the royal courier who was leaving that day for Susa. Abandoning the packing to Pari, Sarah focused on the estate accounts. For many hours, she lost herself in the work. Darius's new steward in Persepolis, Vidarna, had turned out to be a gem. He had the sense of humor of a goose, and still blanched every time he had to give an accounting to Sarah. He could not grow accustomed to the fact that he had to report to a woman, and an aristocratic one at that, even if only by marriage. But he had proven honest and competent, two qualities that no

shortcoming could diminish.

Late that evening, having arrived at a semblance of order, Sarah surrendered the accounts to Vidarna. “I’ve left some gaps, I’m afraid. But I know you’ll manage, Vidarna. Your work is always exemplary.”

The scribe’s bald head bent low in a respectful bow. “I am certain you’ve taken the most difficult matters upon yourself, my lady. As always.”

Exhaustion mingled with relief as she handed the accounts over. She liked knowing that she left the estate in good order before departing for what might turn out to be a lengthy trip. One could never guess how long a royal audience might last, especially with the New Year only four weeks away.

Sarah then sent for Bardia, who arrived bearing a scarlet pomegranate. “The last of the autumn fruit, to put a smile on your face on these final days of winter,” he said, his wide smile revealing five solitary teeth.

“How thoughtful, Bardia. It looks perfect. Tell me, how is Apama?”

“She has turned a corner, my lady. I believe she will recover completely. And that daughter of hers never stops eating. She will no doubt grow strong and plump before the month is out.”

“I am relieved to hear it. Now you must go to bed, my friend. You’ve been working too hard this week.”

Bardia nodded. At the door, he turned back to her. “It shall be your turn soon, my lady. You’ll see.”

Coming from anyone else, such a comment would have been intrusive. But Bardia had a unique gift of saying intimate things without appearing impertinent. Sarah gazed into space for a moment, a hand resting against her flat belly. The truth was that the incessant talk about childbearing over the past few

days had made her more conscious than ever of how desperate she was to have a babe of her own. After over eleven months of marriage, she showed no signs of fecundity. Of course the first five months of her marriage did not count on that score. She gave Bardia a sad smile and turned away.

Pari held up two outfits for her inspection. "Which one for the great feast: the blue or the red?"

Sarah nibbled on her lower lip. "Do you think Darius will like the red?"

"He'd have to be blind not to. My advice is not to breathe deeply while you are wearing it. The latest fashions are very tight on top."

Sarah groaned. "Pack the blue, then. I didn't realize you had made the red so formfitting. No wonder you didn't let me try it on when you were finished."

"I've already packed the red," Pari said, her soft mouth pulled into a stubborn line. "I wished I could see Lord Darius's expression when he sees you in it."

Well. If wearing tight, scarlet garments was going to grab her husband's attention, perhaps she should stop arguing and allow Pari to choose her wardrobe. "You will land me in a heap of trouble one of these days," she said.

"You don't need *me* for that." Pari sat down on a couch and picked up Sarah's winter riding tunic, which needed minor mending. "Why are the New Year celebrations in Susa? I thought they were always held in Persepolis."

"This year, the king decided to change the venue and remain in the old palace. I think he wished to avoid the aggravation of travel."

Foreign officials from around the empire had been notified of the change; in a matter of weeks they would be descending

into Susa's ancient halls, bringing gifts for Artaxerxes as a sign of their continued fealty to the empire. There would be special ceremonies and endless feasts.

"You will attend at least ten separate events in the first week of the year alone, regardless of the location," Pari said, her head bent to her task. "A separate outfit for each occasion, with matching jewels. This is your first New Year as a lady of rank. There will be many demands on your time."

Sarah groaned at the thought of the ceaseless gatherings and the constant social activity. "I abhor the fuss. Give me the company of close friends over a large, formal affair any day."

Having grown up as the daughter of a Jewish scribe, she still found the requirements of life for an aristocratic woman trying. It was easy to forget Darius's privileged background when they were alone together. He offered amenable company and never pointed out her ignorance. But in public, the differences became uncomfortably obvious. His speech, manner, and every gesture marked him as a highborn lord, while she struggled to fit into a world that always felt foreign.

If only she weren't so tired. She forced herself to her feet. Pari continued to apply her ivory needle into the padded, moss-green garment of her winter riding tunic with careful expertise. Although they were at the tail end of the season, it would be cold through the mountainous trails. Sarah made a face. She wasn't looking forward to freezing on horseback for twelve days straight.

"Would you please organize a bath for me?" Sarah asked. A hot soak might ease her muscles, cramped from hours of sitting and squinting over detailed documents.

"Of course, my lady." Pari set aside her needle and left to arrange Sarah's late-night wash.

Hot steam and the scent of roses filled the bathhouse

when Sarah arrived. Pari handed her a pumice stone and a perfumed scrub, and, sensing Sarah's need for quiet, retreated to a far corner of the bathhouse. Sarah stepped into the small sunken pool, sighing with pleasure as the hot water lapped about her. Slowly, the knots of tension began to melt. It would be many days before she could enjoy this luxury again. Traveling on the back roads, far from the royal stage houses, meant hurried washing with freezing water drawn from rivers and streams—if a river was available.

Even in the summer months when bathing in a stream might prove a delightful distraction from the heat, tradition forbade it. Persians believed washing dirty linen or even the human body in a river brought pollution into creation. One was permitted to draw water for the purpose of ablution, but the Persians considered outdoor bathing an act of irreverence. Sarah closed her eyes and sank deeper, determined to derive as much enjoyment out of *this* bath as she could.

She finished rinsing her hair, and for a few moments allowed herself to float in the water, enjoying the sensation of doing nothing. A hand began to wash her back with a cloth. "That feels so good, Pari. Thank you." The touch became soft. Sensual. Sarah's eyes snapped open and she twisted her head to find her husband squatting on one knee on the tiles surrounding the sunken pool, a wicked grin making his eyes sparkle.

Sputtering, Sarah pulled away into the middle of the bath, keeping her back to him, her arms wrapped securely about her body. "What are you doing?" She sounded like one of his peacocks sporting a head cold. In all her months of marriage, he had never visited the bathhouse while she occupied it. She felt ridiculously shy about his presence. There was something vulnerable about sitting in a bath while Darius crouched above

her, fully clothed, not a wave of his long hair out of place.

He shrugged as he twirled the wet washcloth. "I needed to speak with you."

Sarah tried to regain her composure, and said with as much aplomb as she could muster, "Would you please wait until I return to my chamber?"

"It's late already. I would prefer to speak now. Besides, this is more fun. I've never visited you here. An oversight on my part."

Sarah gaped. "Where is Pari? I saw her a few moments ago."

"I dismissed her. That poor girl appeared beyond fatigued; she was half asleep on the wet tiles."

Caught between guilt for not noticing Pari's need for slumber and pique at her husband's high-handed manner, she said, "How thoughtful."

Darius nodded, his smile widening. "Would you like to come out?"

"Yes." Her towel, folded neatly, lay on a marble bench out of her reach. Sarah pointed to it. "May I have my towel?"

He seemed to think for a moment. "Certainly." He made no move to fetch it. Instead, he lifted a courteous hand. "Please. Help yourself."

Sarah lowered her lashes. He wished to play games, did he? An abrupt determination to beat her husband at his own antics brought new vigor to her sluggish mind. She knew that if Darius had noted the steely glint of resolve in the cast of her face, he would have been more prepared for a challenge. As it was, he perched behind her on the tiled floor, as innocent as an infant, thinking himself in complete control. Which suited her well.

"Upon reflection, perhaps *you* should come *in*?" Over her shoulder, she gave him an inviting smile. It was impossible to

miss the sudden blaze in the forest green eyes. She lifted her own arm in a parody of his movements from a moment before. With her back to him, the gesture lost some of its blithe hilarity. But it would have to do. "Please. Help yourself." She motioned to the water.

Darius shot up and began to take off one leather shoe, then the other, hopping in his haste.

"I think your men will appreciate the scent of roses on your hair tomorrow as we set out for Susa," Sarah said sweetly, hiding behind her hair.

Darius went still mid-hop, one foot in the grasp of his hands. With slow movements, he straightened. Then he burst into laughter. "I concede the victory to you, my lady. I do not wish to smell like roses." He fetched the linen towels that Pari had left behind and offered them to her.

"What did you want to discuss?" Sarah asked as she towed her hair dry.

"Vidarna came to see me. He said you had worn yourself out working on the estate records since yesterday before dawn, and you looked exhausted. I'm sorry about that. When I asked you to help me with the management of my estates, I didn't mean that you should work like a slave."

Sarah experienced a pang of fond appreciation for Vidarna. She found it hard to believe that the taciturn scribe had looked at her long enough to notice how tired she was. "Please don't concern yourself, my lord. I wanted to finish before leaving. I made my own decision."

"Nonetheless, I can see you are weary. I came to tell you that I have delayed our departure by one day. Tomorrow, I wish you to rest."

"There is no need! We cannot afford the extra day, Darius. It could make us late."

"That's not as important as you." He reached out and grasped her hand. With a slow, deliberate pull, he drew her into his arms and cradled her. His touch was comforting, void of demand. He didn't even seem to mind that her damp towel was leaving a wet smudge over the front of his tunic. "Not nearly as important as you," he said again, his lips close to her ear.

His words, spoken with solemn sincerity, melted her heart. She felt protected in the folds of his embrace. Her body relaxed and she felt enveloped by a sense of peace. It occurred to her that in spite of his inward struggles, in spite of the fact that he did not fully trust her, in spite of his divided heart, her husband cherished her. He wanted to keep her safe. He wanted her happy. Because of his neglect over the past several days, she had allowed herself to sink into insecurity, and then into resentment. She had focused on his shortcomings and forgotten that he was a true gift to her.

She turned with a slight motion and kissed his neck. He went still. Sarah kissed him again, more boldly. He tangled his hand in her wet hair and turned her face toward his so that he could see her more clearly.

"You aren't too tired?"

She shook her head and, standing on tiptoe, kissed him on the mouth, her lips shy. "I love you," she said. It was the first time she had said the words without his prompting. The fact that he never made a similar declaration made her want to keep her own feelings hidden inside. But Darius coaxed and cajoled them out of her. Tonight, she offered up the words as a free gift. Her pride could not compare with his joy.

He drew a sharp breath at her words. "Say it again."

"I love you."

With an inarticulate sound, he dragged her tighter against

him. For the span of a moment he studied her, his dark lashes lowered, his expression unreadable. Then he kissed her with an explosive tenderness that dissolved the last of her reserve.