

GODDESS
OF
VENGEANCE

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Collins

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CHAPTER ONE

It was early evening and the garden restaurant was only half full. The patrons were trying to play it cool, because after all, this was L.A. and stars abounded. However, most of them couldn't resist an occasional surreptitious glance over at Venus, the platinum-blond, world-famous superstar, as she picked at a chopped vegetable salad.

Sitting at the table with her was Lucky Santangelo, a dark-haired beauty who'd experienced her own share of controversial headlines and scandals over the years. Lucky, the former owner and head of Panther Studios, was a businesswoman supreme who currently owned the luxurious hotel, casino, and apartment complex The Keys in Las Vegas.

The two of them made a formidable couple. In Hollywood, where looks were everything, Venus and Lucky ruled. Venus with her in-your-face blondness, startling blue eyes, and toned and muscled shape. And Lucky—a dangerously seductive woman

with blacker-than-night eyes, deep olive skin, sensuous full lips, a tangle of long jet hair, and a lithe body.

"I'm beginning to think you're a sex addict," Lucky said lightly, smiling at her close friend.

"*Excuse me,*" Venus retorted, raising a perfectly arched and penciled eyebrow. "Last week you called me a cougar, and *now* I'm a sex addict. *Seriously,* Lucky?"

Pushing back her mane of unruly black curls, Lucky grinned. "Yeah. I'm so wrong," she drawled sarcastically. "It wasn't *you* who slept with your twenty-two-year-old costar last week, and it wasn't *you* who screwed your sixty-year-old director two days later."

"Oh *please,*" Venus said, dismissively waving her hand in the air. "I'm getting a divorce. What do you expect me to do, join a convent?"

"That might be a touch extreme," Lucky said, smiling as she thought about Venus wreaking havoc in a convent. "But anyway, I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"You bet your fine ass I do," Venus answered vehemently. "Billy is all over the Internet and the magazines with that juvenile skank he's supposedly hooked up with. Just like Cooper before him." She paused for a long thoughtful moment. "Another cheating rat. I sure know how to pick 'em."

"You certainly do," Lucky agreed, thinking that Cooper Turner, Venus's husband before Billy Melina, was a whole different ball game. Cooper was a much older movie star with a Warren Beatty-style track record, and everyone had known that Cooper would eventually cheat. Billy—not so much. Even though Billy was thirteen years younger than Venus, he'd seemed thrilled to be with her. And why not? Like Madonna, Venus was a true original with legions of fans worldwide.

"I cannot believe Billy turned out to be such a loser," Venus said, determined to verbally trash her soon-to-be ex.

"Hardly a loser," Lucky couldn't help pointing out. "His current movie has grossed over a hundred million. Not too shabby."

"Yeah, yeah, rub it in," Venus snapped irritably. "Billy's career is on fire, but I can assure you that as a man he turned out to be a big waste of space." She narrowed her eyes. "And what's up with *you* today? Shouldn't you be agreeing with me, not regaling me with his box office?"

"Hey—don't say I didn't warn you about marrying a much younger man," Lucky responded.

"Billy isn't *that* much younger," Venus insisted. "Anyway, it's sure working for Demi and Ashton. Besides, I thought you liked him."

"I did," Lucky said carefully. "I mean I still do. Only, marrying a younger guy . . . it's kind of a given that they're bound to cheat."

"Oh thanks!" Venus said, frowning. "When did *you* turn into Ms. Cynical and a Half?"

"Not cynical, merely practical."

"Says you," Venus snorted.

"You know I tell it like it is," Lucky said, picking up her wine-glass and taking a sip.

"Oh yes, we all know that about you. Nothing's off-limits."

"I believe in the truth."

"And I guess it works for you."

Lucky regarded her brilliant friend, and wondered why any man who was fortunate enough to be with Venus would ever *want* to stray. Venus had it all—beauty, brains, and talent.

"Exactly why *are* you divorcing Billy?" she asked.

"'Cause he—"

“Cheated!” They finished the sentence together, then broke up laughing.

“Well,” Venus said sagely, “it was fun while it lasted. Eighteen months together and six months married. Now I’m almost free again, and believe me, it’s not such a bad thing. I enjoy being on my own. Living with Billy was like doing time in a frat house. It’s such a pleasure that I don’t have to pick up dirty socks and underwear from the floor, there are no endless midnight snacks everywhere, *and* I get full control of the remote.”

“Surely you always had that.”

“Actually, I didn’t. You know me—when I wasn’t working, I was busy playing wifey to the hilt, and you can see where it got me.”

“Free to fuck your costar, *and* your director,” Lucky pointed out. “Not so bad.”

Venus gave a wicked smile. “I know. Shame we just finished shooting.”

“You should fly to Vegas this weekend,” Lucky suggested. “It’ll take your mind off all things Billy.”

“What’s going on in Vegas—apart from your fantastic hotel?”

“A board meeting of all my investors. And since you were one of the first, it would be great if you showed your face. Everyone would really love it. And—even better—I’ve decided to throw an eighteenth birthday party for Max, although the brat is driving me crazy. She’s still carrying on about moving to New York.”

“I cannot believe that Max is about to be eighteen. Little Maria, all grown up.”

“Tell me about it.” Lucky sighed. “Time goes too fast.”

“You do realize that now there’s no way you can stop her from doing anything she wants?”

"Unfortunately, I understand that," Lucky said, nodding. "And if I know my Max, she'll take full advantage."

"Hey—you were married at sixteen," Venus said brightly. "So maybe she'll turn out to be street-smart like you."

"Married *off* you mean, by dear daddy Gino," Lucky said, shaking her head as if she still couldn't quite believe that Gino had forced her into a marriage she didn't want. "Can you imagine that Gino thought he was protecting me from my wild ways? What a joke *that* turned out to be!"

"How come you didn't fight it?"

"I was sixteen," Lucky said, remembering the overwhelming rush of helplessness and dread she'd felt on her wedding day. "I guess I considered myself powerless to say no."

"C'mon, Lucky, it didn't do you any harm," Venus said. "Just look at everything you've accomplished. You've built hotels, run a movie studio, had three kids, *and* you're married to Mister Amazing. Admit it, you're a goddamn superwoman!"

"No," Lucky answered after a thoughtful pause. "I'm a woman who took chances every inch of the way. I had to fight for my independence. Believe me, it wasn't easy."

"Right," Venus said. "And that's exactly why you and I understand each other so well. We both know that being a strong, successful woman in this town can be a lonely and difficult path."

"Agreed," Lucky said. "You gotta kick ass like a guy, *and* get called a bitch for your trouble."

"Ain't *that* the truth," Venus said, nodding vigorously.

"But you know something?" Lucky added. "I know who I am—and I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Me too!"

"I think we should drink to invincible women," Lucky said, raising her glass.

"You got it, sister," Venus murmured.

They clinked glasses and smiled at each other.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Lucky said. "Who's getting the apartment at The Keys, you or Billy?"

"Me, of course," Venus answered firmly. "I've already told my lawyer there's no way I'm giving it up. It's mine. Billy can go piss in the wind to get his hands on *that* piece of real estate."

"Glad to hear it. In this world you gotta claim what's yours."

"Hell, yes. The apartment is in *your* hotel, and you're *my* friend, so screw Billy."

"Right on!" Lucky said, nodding her agreement.

After coffee and more conversation—mostly about what an asshole Billy was—Lucky signaled for the check.

A young waiter who'd been watching them all night edged toward their table and presented it to her. Lucky threw down her black American Express card.

"I guess that means it's your turn," Venus said, removing a small gold compact from her oversized Chanel tote and inspecting her flawless image. She knew there'd be a pack of paparazzi waiting for her exit, and there was nothing they liked better than catching a celebrity looking like crap. She wasn't about to give them that pleasure.

The waiter hovered and cleared his throat. Although he was nervous, he saw an opportunity and he was seizing it—even if it meant getting fired should the manager catch him bothering a guest.

"Excuse me, Miz uh . . . Venus?" he ventured, stammering slightly. "I've, uh, written a script that is *so* right for you. I was, uh, hoping you might find time to read it."

Venus threw him a look—the famous cool-as-an-iced-martini look—her blue eyes raking him over.

Oh no, Lucky thought. *Here we go. The diva is on the loose.*

Venus didn't disappoint. "Do I *look* like an agent?" she purred. "Really?"

The waiter blanched, quickly picked up Lucky's credit card and the check, and slunk off.

"Poor guy," Lucky said sympathetically. "He was merely taking a shot."

"Well, let him take a shot elsewhere," Venus said grandly. "I can't stand being harassed when I'm trying to relax."

"Oh my God—you can be such a queen bitch!" Lucky admonished. "Wouldn't want to get on *your* wrong side."

"So be it," Venus said with a wry smile. "Shall we go?"

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Seventeen-year-old Max Santangelo Golden could somehow or other wrangle her way into any club she wanted. Fake ID? No problem. Lavish tips to the doormen? No problem. Cultivating a friendship with one of the promoters? No problem.

"When it comes to getting in anywhere, I rule!" Max often boasted.

Her two closest friends, Cookie, the chocolate-skinned daughter of soul icon Gerald M., and Harry, the gay son of a TV network honcho, agreed with her. Ace, her on-again, off-again boyfriend, was not so pleased. The L.A. club scene failed to enthrall him. He wasn't into drinking, drugging, and spotting out-of-control celebrities. But Max loved every minute. Not that she drank much or did drugs, but she did get off on people-watching and dancing on tables. Music was her special thrill—especially rap and unknown British groups with wasted-looking lead singers. Oh yes, she was totally into lean and mean. Ace was way hot and

sexy, but sometimes Max considered him too nice a dude, and she often craved a more edgy relationship. Besides, Ace didn't live in L.A., so he wasn't always around when she wanted to do something with him.

"Where're we goin' tonight?" Cookie asked as she sat cross-legged on her messy bed, picking at her green nail polish.

"There's a rave for some old rock group at the House of Blues," Harry said, speaking up. "S'pose we could crash if you're up for it."

Harry was the palest boy known to man, pallid-faced and skinny, with gelled and spiked hair dyed a ruthless black. It was only recently that he'd emerged from the closet, although Max and Cookie had always known and totally accepted that he was gay. He had yet to come out to his controlling father, who would probably disown him.

"No can stand the House of Blues," Max opined, her brilliant green eyes flashing disapproval. "It's always full of major wannabes. Besides, we'll never make it into the Foundation Room."

"Why not?" Cookie inquired, leaning over and reaching for a can of 7-UP balanced precariously on the edge of a table.

"Yeah, why not?" Harry repeated. "Thought you could get in anywhere."

"Anywhere I *want* to," Max answered pointedly, tossing back clouds of wavy black hair. "Who needs the freaking Foundation Room? It's always full of ancient rockers gulping down handfuls of Viagra. *So* not cool."

Cookie let forth a manic giggle. "I bet my dad takes Viagra," she said, swigging 7-UP from the can. "Bet he pops those little blue pills by the dozen."

"All old guys do," Harry said with a knowing smirk. "They can't get it up without 'em."

“Gross-out!” Cookie squealed. “Don’t wanna think of my dad with a boner!”

Max decided that sometimes Cookie and Harry could be too much of a good thing. The three of them had grown up together, attended the same school, and shared some interesting, sometimes frightening, experiences, but in a way she felt she’d outgrown them. As soon as she was eighteen, she planned on making a break for New York and freedom. Not that her parents weren’t great, but the two of them were a lot to live up to. Lucky, who’d achieved absolutely everything she’d ever wanted. And Lennie, a multitalented writer/director who helmed all his own independent movies. Max was tired of being referred to as their daughter. Fed up with the pressure it put on her to do something spectacular with her life.

Her big brother, Bobby, was her role model. Bobby had escaped and made his own way. He was definitely her inspiration—she adored him. Although now he had a permanent girlfriend, Denver Jones, and as much as she reluctantly admired Denver, a Deputy DA, she missed having Bobby all to herself when he was in L.A.

“Got it,” Max said at last. “Whyn’t we hit the Chateau for dinner? There’s always something going on there.”

“’S long as I don’t bump into my old man,” Cookie said, wrinkling her nose. “He’s got himself another dumbass girlfriend, an’ I think she stays at the Chateau when she’s in town.”

“What’s the deal with this one?” Max asked.

“English, complete with uptight accent and a bug up her ever-so-tight British ass,” Cookie said, making a disgusted face. “She thinks she’s like the second coming of Keira Knightley. *As if.*”

“Your old man sure covers the waterfront,” Harry remarked, pulling up the collar of his long, Goth-like coat.

"Tell me about it," Cookie said with a weary sigh. "I've had more almost-stepmoms than you've had filthy thoughts about Chace Crawford!"

"Okay, okay," Max said, interrupting them. She was into making fast decisions, not screwing around and vacillating about what to do. "We could check out a new club that opened a couple of weeks ago. River. I'm sure we can get in."

"Let's do it," Cookie said, fiddling with the chocolate-brown dreadlocks that framed her exceptionally pretty face.

"D'you think Chace Crawford'll be there?" Harry asked hopefully.

Max threw him a look. "Calm down," she said. "Surely you know Chace Crawford is *so* into girls."

"That's what they all say," Harry muttered. "But I know better."

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"Lucky has invited us to Vegas next weekend," Bobby Santangelo Stanislopoulos said, stretching his six-foot-three frame on Denver Jones's shabby-chic couch. "She's planning a party for my sister Max's eighteenth birthday, one of her big family events."

Denver regarded her boyfriend of several months with slight trepidation. Oh, man, the longish black hair, dark eyes, Greek nose, and strong jawline got her every time. If only he weren't so damn handsome. If only she hadn't harbored a crush on him since high school. If only he weren't such a fantastic lover, with all the right moves.

"Your mom intimidates me," she said at last, stroking the belly of her dog, Amy Winehouse, who lay on her back making happy sounds. Amy was a mixed breed that Denver and her ex, Josh, had found wandering on Venice Beach. They'd named the dog

Amy Winehouse because of her low, throaty growl. Plus, the fabulous Miz Winehouse was one of Denver's favorite singers.

Bobby laughed. He had a fantastic laugh. Naturally. "C'mon," he chided. "I'm sure Lucky thinks you're the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

Denver raised an eyebrow. "'Thing'?" she said coolly.

"Y'know what I mean."

"The problem is," Denver said, desperately searching for a suitable excuse, "I'm moving over to the drug unit next week, so there's a ton of stuff I feel I should research."

"You'll bring your laptop; that way you can do all the research you want. It's a forty-eight-hour trip, sweetheart. I'm calling for the plane."

She hated it when Bobby said things like "I'm calling for the plane." It was so elitist, so exactly who she wasn't. Some girls might get off on all the luxury, but private planes, lavish parties, and hanging with Bobby's illustrious family was not for her. Plus, she wasn't that fond of Vegas, and she hadn't told Bobby, but she hated spending time at his ultra-happening club, Mood. She especially hated the way women fawned all over him and flirted outrageously, ignoring her as if she didn't even exist.

The truth was, she loved Bobby. But she didn't love the trap-pings that came with him.

Bobby stretched again and yawned. "Whaddya say?"

"I say I'll think about it."

"Sounds good," he said, reaching up to pull her down on the couch beside him.

She acquiesced. It was early evening and they had no plans, so what was wrong with relaxing for the moment?

They'd been seeing each other on and off for the past three months. The on was when Bobby was in L.A. The off was when

he had to spend time at his two clubs: Mood in Vegas, and Mood in New York. The on was the best of times. The off was missing him and wondering what he was doing, and trying to have some decent phone sex, which left them both in a hysterical state of laughter.

Neither of them had uttered the L word. Although they *had* conducted the talk about being exclusive.

Both of them were wary about getting too involved. Secretly they couldn't wait. But playing it semicool seemed to be the name of the game they were currently into.

Bobby began stroking her hair. Denver felt good about her hair; it was long and thick, chestnut brown with natural golden highlights. She knew that her hair was one of her best features, along with her widely spaced hazel eyes and full lips. If she lived in any other big city, she'd be considered a ten. In L.A. she felt she barely made it as a seven.

She was wrong.

Bobby's hands moved down to her breasts, and with a quick move under her T-shirt, he released her bra and began playing with her nipples. Oh yes, unusual for a woman in L.A., her breasts were actually real.

Sighing with anticipation, she leaned into him. It made no difference that they'd already made love in the morning. Desire was desire, and they were both in the mood.

Sometimes she couldn't help wondering how long it would last. Her previous serious boyfriend, Josh, had been a pretty decent lover for the first six months of their three-year relationship, then after that it was a total slump.

"What're you thinking?" Bobby whispered in her ear, giving her a little tongue action at the same time.

"That's such a girly question," she murmured, fiddling with the zipper on his jeans.

"You calling me a girl?" he asked, mock serious.

"You do have *some* female tendencies," she teased.

"Like *what*?" he responded, challenging her to come up with something.

"Oh," she said vaguely, dragging his jeans down, delighted to find that he wasn't wearing underwear. "You have soft lips . . ."

"All the better to kiss you with." And with one swift movement, he flipped her so she was trapped beneath him. "Soft lips and a hard cock," he joked. "How female is *that*?"

"Bobby!" she exclaimed.

Then the banter stopped and the passion began. He had a way of making love to her that forced her to lose every inhibition she'd ever possessed. One moment he was slowly caressing her, the next he was all hard-driving action. The combination drove her nuts. She wanted more and more and more . . .

When it was over, they were spent, wrapped up in each other's arms, sleepy and content.

Denver often wished that those precious times would last forever. Just the two of them. No outside world to interfere.

But the outside world was a big presence, and they both lived in it. Tomorrow Bobby was driving to Vegas before flying to New York for a few meetings. And she had her job, which right now was especially exciting and challenging since she was transferring to the drug unit. Once more they would be separated.

The good news was that she loved her job. It was grueling work, but the end results were incredibly rewarding. She was so glad she'd changed tracks. From working at a high-powered law firm as a defense attorney, she'd scored a job as a Deputy DA,

prosecuting people, and she was thrilled with the switch. Why defend the probably guilty (one of her high-profile cases was a movie star who'd arranged his wife's murder, then walked; he was the catalyst for her change of plan) when she could be doing meaningful work—such as putting the bad guys behind bars? How rewarding to go after the dregs who distributed drugs and got kids hooked at an early age. Talk about job satisfaction!

“Hey,” Bobby said, “wanna catch a movie and grab a pizza?”

Yes, that's exactly what she wanted to do. Normal activities with her man.

If only things could stay that way.

CHAPTER TWO

Prince Armand Mohamed Jordan rarely used his full title, only when he visited the country of his birth, Akramshar, a small but wealthy Middle Eastern country located somewhere between Syria and Lebanon.

As a naturalized American, and a mega-successful businessman, he felt it more prudent to keep his title to himself, deciding it wasn't business-savvy to advertise his heritage.

Most of the people he dealt with knew him only as Armand Jordan, a sometimes ruthless and extremely powerful man who expected everything to go his way and usually got his wish. None of his business associates was aware that his father was King Emir Amin Mohamed Jordan, a man who ruled his small oil-rich country with a stern fist. A man with six current wives and sixteen children.

Armand was suspicious of friendship. The only person he trusted was Fouad Khan, the right-hand man whom he'd imported from Akramshar many years previously. Fouad knew

all of Armand's secrets and kept them to himself. He was Armand's sounding board and confidant, always there to do his bidding.

Fortunately or unfortunately for Armand, he was the king's ninth son, and therefore considered not at all important. So when his American mother—Peggy, a former Las Vegas dancer—had begged to take her son back to America when he was eight, the king had offered no objections. King Emir was bored with the leggy American redhead and her strident accent. Happy to see her go. And much as Peggy had enjoyed the adventure of living in a harem and being lavished with expensive gifts, enough was enough, and she knew it was time to return to civilization. At twenty-six, she had the rest of her life ahead of her, and she planned to live it. The king's only request was that the boy be returned every September to Akramshar so that young Armand could celebrate the king's birthday—the most important day of the year in Akramshar.

Peggy complied. The cash payoff she received was compensation enough for her to do anything the king required.

So Peggy and her son relocated to New York, and Armand soon adapted to the American way of life. It didn't take him long to love everything about America. The endless TV shows full of fun and adventure, the violent action-packed movies, the loud, vibrant music, and the girls. Ah yes, especially the girls; they were far more forward than the girls in Akramshar.

Every September his mother dutifully put him on a plane back to Akramshar, and for several weeks he played the role of a young prince, mingling with the half brothers and sisters he barely knew anymore. They failed to get along.

The juxtaposition of his two lives was exciting. It made him feel special, different from the other kids who attended his pri-

vate school in Manhattan. He was a prince, and they were nothing. He felt superior to all of them.

When he was thirteen, on one of his yearly visits to Akramshar, his father had taken him aside and informed him it was time he became a man. Immediately, one of the king's minions had ushered him into a room where two prostitutes lounged on a bed waiting for the young prince.

The following experience with the two older women left an indelible impression on Armand. Although he'd fooled around with girls at school, this encounter was quite different. The prostitutes—one Russian, one Dutch—were in their twenties and heavily made up. They wore sexy lingerie and high-heeled shoes, and they introduced him to a variety of sexual acts, some of which he enjoyed, some of which disgusted him. When they felt he was fully initiated, they informed him that all sexual acts should be paid for. Not that they were asking him for money—the king's people had already taken care of them—it was simply something they thought he should be aware of. "Women have to be paid for sex," they said, exchanging amused glances. They were words of wisdom he never forgot.

When he emerged several hours later, his older brothers jeered and laughed at him. He'd ended up fighting one of them, and had gotten a broken nose for his trouble. He hated his siblings. They were all jealous of him because he was different.

His mother remarried a month after his eighteenth birthday. This time Peggy chose wisely: she married Sidney Dunn, a very successful investment banker twenty-five years her senior.

Armand respected Sidney. He felt he could learn a lot from the old man, and learn he did. He chose to get a business degree, and Sidney was always there with his wise counsel.

On Armand's twenty-first birthday, the king summoned him

to Akramshar for a special visit. Armand went—reluctantly, for surely once a year was enough. However, it turned out to be a memorable trip, because the king's closest adviser informed Armand that in the future the king might—from time to time—need him to take care of various business transactions in America.

Armand, eager to please his father, agreed. And as a twenty-first birthday gift, the king presented him with a check for a million dollars, money he immediately put to good use. On Sidney's advice, he invested in a parcel of derelict buildings in Queens, which a year later he turned into several apartment complexes, eventually selling them and tripling his initial investment.

After that there was no stopping him. He formed Jordan Developments and began buying up properties, renovating them, and selling them for a large profit. He was also taking care of business for his father, who needed large sums of money legitimized. Apart from Jordan Developments, he formed several subsidiary companies, including an import/export business that he had nothing to do with except in name. By the time he reached the age of thirty, he was acquiring hotels and apartment houses up and down the East Coast.

On his yearly visit to Akramshar, his father looked on him kindly and beamed with pride. "You are the son I can be proud of," the king boasted. "You are smart, and clever, and trustworthy. You are the son who one day should be inheriting my kingdom."

These words did not sit well with his half brothers, who now regarded him with suspicion and, even more, hatred.

But one thing puzzled the king. "Why have you never married?"

he demanded. "At your age it is tradition that a man should have many wives and children."

Armand shrugged. To him, a relationship was a distraction he didn't need. His sexual desires were fully met by a series of call girls who serviced his every whim whenever he picked up the phone and summoned them. Women were inferior human beings, something his father had taught him at a very early age. "Females are merely vessels to be used for gratifying one's sexual urges and bearing children," the king had informed him. "Never trust them. And never give them your heart."

His father was right. Women would do anything for money—absolutely anything. And they were stupid creatures too.

A year after his father questioned his marital status, he'd arrived in Akramshar for the usual birthday celebrations, and the king had immediately whisked him off to one of his private palaces. Once there, the king had announced that Armand's birthday gift to him would be to marry the daughter of a close family friend with whom the king conducted business. "You'll have no responsibilities," the king had assured him. "Your wife will stay here and, God willing, bear your offspring. This is my desire for you, my dear son. This is my gift."

The girl was fifteen and a beauty. Her name was Soraya.

Later that day there was a lavish wedding ceremony, and that night Armand deflowered the innocent Soraya. She was trembling and scared, which didn't faze him because he had no intention of going against his father's wishes. Her nervousness was not his problem. She was there to do his bidding, and that was that. He rode her hard, ignoring her startled cries of pain. She was merely a vessel for him to fill, and that was the extent of her usefulness.

A week after his wedding ceremony he flew back to America.

Upon returning to Akramshar one year later, he was surprised to discover that he had a son. Eleven years later he had fathered three more children, all girls, which didn't particularly please him, but it made the king happy.

In his mind he regarded Soraya and her brood as his fantasy family. They lived in a place called Akramshar. A place where women were docile and obedient and did as they were told. A place where men ruled.

He lived in a Park Avenue penthouse in New York, where money was his aphrodisiac and women were his paid playthings. The two worlds only came together in September, when the king celebrated his birthday. And that was as it should be.

Now Armand was forty-two and becoming restless. He'd conquered the East Coast, and he desired more. His latest plans were to cement a firm position in Las Vegas, a city he'd spent some time in. He was an avid gambler, and the call girls in Vegas were raunchy and used to fulfilling any request, however decadent. Besides, he had family ties in Vegas. His mother had danced at Caesars Palace, and the king had spotted her there and whisked her back to Akramshar. Family ties had to mean something.

His people had done a financial analysis of most of the big hotels. While Steve Wynn's empire was intriguing and lucrative, and the Palms, the Four Seasons, and the Harrah's hotel groups were a possibility, the hotel complex he'd finally decided he had to have was The Keys.

Yes, The Keys was perfect. A magnificent structure built to extremely high standards less than two years previously. Not Vegas flashy, but incredibly luxurious and classy. A stunning casino. World-class restaurants and stores. Exquisite gardens,

and park-like grounds. A magnificent apartment complex. Multiple swimming pools. Two spas. A man-made lake. A lush golf course. And then there was the hotel itself.

The Keys was it for Armand.

He wanted it, and therefore he would have it.