

Dakota Star



A CHARMED LIFE

Mia is lucky and knows it. She has a great teaching job and the chance to attend a prestigious writer's workshop during the summer. She's not expecting to meet the love of her life or the little inconvenience that he lives thousands of miles away in Morocco.

But there is something about Zak that leaves her always wanting more even if it means flying half-way around the world to get it. When she arrives in Marrakech and things go awry, Mia wonders if her luck's run out. Three thousand miles, two people in love, and one charmed bracelet lead to the romantic adventure of a lifetime.

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Prologue

Sitting on the balcony of her Marrakech apartment, drinking mint tea as she watched stars in the sky break from beneath clouds, Mia had a fleeting out of body experience. Could she really be here, living in Morocco?

A calico cat strolled out and twined around her ankles. It uttered a loud mewl to get her attention before jumping on the table, nearly spilling the tea.

“Come here,” she said as the cat quickly settled on her lap. The charms on her bracelet jingled as she stroked his soft fur. Mia closed her eyes to the quiet and relived every moment of how she made it to her new life.

Chapter 1

Mia hurried along the quad, barely noticing the manicured grass, trees in bloom, or the stately brick and stone structures around her. When she found the building she'd been hunting for, she pulled open the heavy door. Air conditioning swept the chestnut hair off her face as she rushed to find classroom A-27.

At the entrance, she peeked inside, biting down on her bottom lip. Tables, arranged in a horseshoe, were already crowded. She couldn't believe she'd run late to the first day of the writer's workshop at a prestigious university in New Jersey, but traffic had been a bitch, and she'd had a hard time saying goodbye to her two rescue cats, returning to them for repeated last snuggles. Even though her mother had promised to devote time and effort to their care, Mush and Miss demanded lots of love and attention. Mia was unsure how she'd do without their constant purr for the week.

Issuing a silent prayer of thanks the instructor hadn't arrived, she searched the available empty spaces. She first saw a seat in between two older women. Her other option at the end of the horseshoe next to a tall, dark-haired man with an angular face and intense eyes would mean crossing the entire room. Mia scooted into the chair in between the ponytailed, jean-clad, cowboy booted lady with gray cat glasses and a bird-like woman. The focus this week was writing. No distractions. She greeted them both before reaching into her backpack to pull out her computer, charm bracelet clinking against the desk as she set up.

A sigh of relief escaped as she settled, but the feeling fled as quickly as it arrived, skin buzzing with the impression that someone stared. Glancing up, their eyes locked. The man she'd decided not to sit near smirked before his gaze returned to the tablet in front of him. *What was that?* she wondered at the same time something fluttered in her belly. *Nerves? Nausea? Must be out of sorts from all the morning's stress.*

She whistled, logged into her computer, and watched as the petite blonde workshop leader entered. The elfin woman was ethereal, and Mia envied her instantly, thinking about how at five nine, she stood eye-to-eye with many men. She wasn't that tall and had nothing against the instructor, but Mia had a hard time suppressing a surge of jealousy as she stared at the talented woman who had her dream job, was highly successful at it, and didn't appear one bit nervous entering a classroom full of wanna-be-writers foaming at the mouth.

"I'm Sloane Milestone, the author of six novels." Sloane shared her hundred-watt smile with everyone. "We're here for the next week to get your work in progress ready for publication. From dialogue to pacing, to character development, we'll go over it all. And we'll critique each other so be prepared to talk and take constructive criticism. Then we'll rewrite and critique some more. Today we'll hit the road running with some basics before you attend opening ceremonies tonight."

The instructor's intense gaze scrutinized the class. Mia thought it lingered appreciatively on the man next to the empty seat. When it came to her, Sloane's eyes slid to the next person before she said, "Let's start at the beginning with introductions."

A rigid backed, crew-cut man went first. "I'm Frank, in my former role, a Naval Captain. I served for 30 years before retirement. I have many stories to tell about my experiences in the Navy, and now have the time to do it."

"My name is Deloris. I'm all the way from Texas," The woman next to her began. "Been working on my novel more years than most of you been raising heck. I've been a bartender, truck driver, and for at least the last twenty years, a rancher. That's since I married my husband. Now I'd like to add published author to the equation. Sam, my husband, says go for it. I'm writing a murder mystery." Silver bangs bobbed.

Mia went next. "I'm a middle school teacher. I started this story when my students were working on a writing project and felt compelled to complete it along with them. I kept writing long after the school assignment was complete. People told me the story has potential so here I am." She shrugged her shoulders, ignoring the eyes on her. People tended to stare because of her untamable, long chestnut tresses that often appeared bright red and highlighted her pale freckled skin. Of Irish and English descent, she reddened easily with emotion. People found it cute, but it embarrassed her, and she hated being defined by appearance rather than creativity and intelligence. "It's nice I have the summer off so I'm able to attend the workshop."

The group welcomed her and when introductions continued, she could understand why Sloane's gaze steadied on the last person to introduce himself. The man, whose coffee-colored eyes drank in the room, bowed his head before he spoke. "I'm Zakaria. But call me Zak. I am a journalist in Morocco but want to transition into writing novels so I traveled here to learn. This is my vacation for the year, but not my first trip to America."

His smile had Mia wondering if it was meant for her alone. She lost focus, unable to concentrate as Sloane resumed speaking. Instead of listening to the lecture, she thought about Zak, how interesting his life sounded, and hoped they'd have the chance to converse about it. Regret infiltrated. Maybe she should have sat next to him.

When a slide presentation on outlines popped up on the screen at the front of the room, she pulled herself back into reality. Sloane was off and running, discussing how outlining was one of the best resources for new authors. For the next thirty minutes, Mia took copious notes. She focused, or at least tried her dangest to copy every word, but her thoughts failed to follow along with the flurry of her typing fingers. It was like they were working remotely while her brain focused on daydreams about getting to know Zak. Peering over, she found him staring back. Again. Was he a mind reader? When he aimed a devilish smirk her way, she dropped her head, angry for wasting this amazing opportunity by focusing on a man instead.

"You have opening ceremonies tonight and then we reconvene in the morning at nine," Sloane said. "I'll let you go to lunch after we share a favorite line from the work in progress you came with. This will give everyone a glimpse of writing styles and how the critiquing sessions will work. Take a few minutes, find a line that speaks to you, and one you want to share."

Silence turned loud as people concentrated on finding the perfect words, but before long Sloane pointed to Mia. "Lead the way..." She waited for Mia to fill in her name.

"Okay, Mia. Give us your favorite line so far," the instructor said.

"Darkness pirouetted like a ballerina before her," Mia replied, color staining her cheeks. Sharing her writing was hard.

There were murmurs of appreciation, but then a voice of dissent.

"I love the use of imagery but not sure I get it." Zak's voice filled the classroom.

Flustered, she explained. "Darkness is dancing around her."

"Darkness can dance? It must be the journalist in me. We stick to the facts. Write tight and all."

"You can still make it appealing. Plus, this is a children's book. Students in the middle grades. It needs to hold their attention."

“All I’m saying is that there might be a different way to describe it. Is it a girl book? It sounds like a girl book.”

“No. It’s fantasy.”

Sloane interrupted. "This is an excellent start, but for the sake of time, we must move on. Mia, a good exercise for you would be to try rewriting the sentence with other images and think about gender roles. If you are aiming for a young adult, female readership, the image might be perfect. If not, consider other options." With that, she moved on to Deloris, who shared, not one sentence, but a vividly written paragraph about a beheading. With her last words, applause erupted.

After everyone shared, Sloane dismissed the group for lunch. Zak approached. “I am sorry if I embarrassed you with my comment.”

She took a second to let his sexy accent sink below the skin. “No, it’s fine. That’s the point of this workshop. To make my writing stronger.”

His near black, almond-shaped eyes lit with humor. “Perhaps you will let me buy you lunch as a way of apology.”

“Lunch is included in our conference fees.”

“Exactly,” his smile was highlighted by the beard that framed his strong jaw. “You can tell me more about your story. I’m interested.”

Who was she to say no? She did want to learn more about his life in Morocco. “I guess.” She took out her phone to glance at the time.

“You sound hesitant, but there’s plenty of time. I’ve checked the schedule and we have a few hours after lunch to get settled into our rooms before the opening speaker. There is time to eat lunch and tell me about your writing.”

“Only if you will share your story with me so I can critique it harshly.”

He laughed. "Done."

She hadn't been joking.

They headed off to the cafeteria, walking along the cobbled pathways that wound through campus. The conversation came easy, discussion centering on some of their favorite authors, Faulkner for him and Laurie Halse Anderson for her.

“I have not heard of her,” he said.

“She is a young adult author. She captures the lives of teens so well. My students can relate to what she writes.”

“Do you like being a teacher?” he asked.

“It has its challenges these days. But I love my students. Every day is an adventure. I would assume as a journalist, you cover many interesting stories. Where are you from in Morocco?”

“Marrakech. It is an amazing city, but it’s a strange time to be a journalist. Not long ago, reporters were being imprisoned. Some remain jailed today, including street journalists, one who happens to be a close friend. He was detained after writing about protests happening in the country.”

“What were they protesting?”

“Over the past few years, many Moroccans have experienced a gap between the promised freedoms and the reality of oppression. Being a journalist can be dangerous. A single tweet can land you in jail.”

“I would have never guessed. I always thought Morocco was progressive.”

He ran his hand through his short-cropped, raven hair. "For the most part it is, but there's been a slow erosion of liberties, especially for the press."

“That’s scary.”

“I must be one of the people willing to tell the truth. I don’t want to stop reporting. That’s not my reason for wanting to write fiction.” He shrugged self-consciously. “I have a worthwhile story to tell. My father’s. He died of cancer recently but spent his life making real change for the country as a lawyer.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Their discussion was interrupted upon entering the cafeteria where they fell into line. Standing behind Zak, she gazed at the robin-blue shirt that clung to his broad back. She was inspired by his passion, a little entranced by his charisma, but wondered about the oddity of the day. It was not going as expected.

She continued to speculate as they broke apart in line after picking up a tray, napkin, and silverware. Pizza was her preferred lunch while Zak beelined for the hamburgers and other meats. They found each other again in the crowded dining room, where they joined Deloris and the other students from the fiction class. Conversations drifted like a leaf on a lazy river. People introduced themselves, discussed where they had arrived from, and meandered into life stories and works in progress.

After fellow workshoppers left, the two remained, talking and joking like old friends until a buzz from Mia's phone startled her back into reality. Her mother had texted a picture of Mush and Miss, who seemed fine without her as they sunned on a window ledge. She showed Zak the picture. "My two babies."

He appeared momentarily startled until he realized she'd been discussing the cats. He took his cell phone from his pocket and brought up a picture of a calico feline. "He used to come into my office building when it rained to get off the streets. One day I decided to take him home. That was four years ago."

Mia's heart melted a little, but then her alarm buzzed. At home, she'd be starting her afternoon fitness run. "I didn't realize it was so late." Surprise lingered in her honey brown eyes.

Zak rose and she followed. At the rear of the cafeteria, they dumped their garbage and put their trays and utensils on the conveyor belt.

"Can we do this again tomorrow?" he asked as they merged into the humid air. "I really enjoyed talking with you."

Mia squinted into the bright sunlight, a precipice before her. This was one of those moments when a decision was much more than what it appeared. She was here to write and work on her book, but wanted, without a doubt, to leap with Zak into something that might be defined as "more."

Chapter 2

“Yes,” she said as they walked together toward the check-in center. “I’d love to talk more tomorrow.” The charms on her bracelet jingled as her wrists fluttered like moths.

“I knew you couldn’t say no.”

“Why not?”

“We’d both regret it.”

Mia eyed him up and down, and drank in his six-foot frame, olive skin, and broad shoulders. She blinked twice to make sure he was real and wondered if she’d been put under a spell because every word that left his mouth rang true. As a teacher, Mia might be an optimist, but she usually wasn’t gullible. Had that changed?

They hiked to reception and after getting keys and welcome packets, parted ways. Mia traipsed to her car in the parking garage and then rolled her suitcase to the suite she was sharing with another participant. She’d have her own bedroom, a definite plus, but would share a common area. She’d be grateful for the company, if they got along. Mia considered herself easygoing. Teaching demanded a lot more than content knowledge. She’d gone so far to stow a couple of bottles of wine in her luggage with the hope her suitemate would be the kind of person who’d like to bond over a glass or two that evening. If not, it was going to be a very long week.

By the time she’d trekked once again across the quad, perspiration soaked her thin white t-shirt. Upon opening the heavy wood doors to the dorm, the blast of air conditioning was most appreciated. It was early July in New Jersey and hot as the make-believe hellfire from her work in progress.

Finding the suite, she swiped the key to gain entrance into her home away from home. Inside, she was confronted with a common area that included a small couch and chair in gray surrounded by walls painted the same drab color. She turned toward the kitchenette, noticing someone had already lined the garbage can with a bag and left out an open container of potato chips. A roommate had settled in and made herself comfortable.

When the bathroom door shot opened, wiry, gray-haired Deloris revealed herself.

“Mia! This is a delight. Such a nice surprise.” She moved in close for a hug. “I’m so glad it’s you. Some of those other participants seemed like such fuddy-duddies.” She

grabbed the bag of chips and steered Mia to the couch. "I saw you two at lunch," she squealed like a teen. "You waste no time. If I wasn't married..." The words trailed off.

"It was lunch. We all sat together."

"Don't give me that. These eyes might be old, but they don't miss much." Her smile turned devilish. "I'll let you get settled. I'm going to sit here with my chips. Want some?" She offered the open bag to Mia.

"No. I'd better unpack."

"You'd better come back and tell me everything."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter. Beer's in the fridge if you want one. We'll walk down to the opening lecture at five together after our chat."

"Sounds good. I brought wine too."

"You're my kind of girl. I can't wait to get all the details."

"There are no details. Plus, we have homework, remember?"

"Don't you worry. Plenty of time for both." She shooed her away. "Go get settled."

Unpacking and organizing took more time than expected, and their chat had to be postponed to Mia's relief. A few minutes before five, they raced across campus to the opening commencement.

Zak had found a spot in the front, while they took two seats in the back. Disappointment coursed through her as she stared at the back of Zak's head. After the lecture and dinner, which she remembered little, Deloris joined her in the common area where the struggle to work on her story was real. Her glass of wine sat untouched as frustration mounted. The assignment, rewrite the first page in different ways, was not proceeding well.

Deloris plopped on the couch, beer in hand. "How's the story going?"

"Horribly," Mia grumped. "Why aren't you working on yours?"

"I'm a night owl. I'll do it later. Get to the good stuff. You in love yet?"

She'd never been asked such a personal and rather ridiculous question point-blank by a practical stranger. For a moment, her stare was as empty as her mind. Back home her mother might casually inquire if she was seeing anyone; even her classes of middle schoolers always joked about the lack of a boyfriend every Valentine's day, but this seemed more than a little invasive.

Deloris prodded. "Do you have a boyfriend back home who's competition? A gorgeous, talented woman like yourself must have the men flocking."

"I think you are overestimating my talents." She laughed uneasily. "No one at home. And no I'm not in love. I just met the man."

"Not in love... yet." Deloris took a sip of beer, staring the other woman down. "Where is home, dear?"

"Acton, Massachusetts."

"That's nice. You didn't have to travel too far. No one worth seeing there?"

Staring at the screen, words blurred before her eyes. "Not really."

"Why not?"

Mia's head popped up, but an answer eluded her. The silence built between them before she caved and spoke. "It's not a priority. I have my job as a teacher, a great family, a lovely condo. I'm writing a book. My life is full."

Deloris gave her a sideways glance. "You need to make it a priority with that one from lunch."

"I don't even really know him. Are you a matchmaker or something in Texas?"

The older woman's laugh turned deep and hearty. "No, but he seems very sweet. Plus, I'm sure your parents want grandkids."

"I'm not that old." The charms on her bracelet chimed as she raked her hand through chestnut curls. "Plenty of time for that. There's also the little fact that he's from another country."

"It's only a plane ride away. You'd be surprised how quick it all goes. This I know personally. Don't let the important stuff get away from you."

"I don't even know if I want kids. I think I might want to go for my administrator's certificate or even a Ph.D."

"You could do both. No laws saying you can't have a boyfriend and go to school."

"I love my life as it is. I have cats for company."

Her smile was pure smut. "A cat doesn't fill the nights the way a good man can."

"Do we have to talk about this? My story isn't rewriting itself." She hoped the frustration she was feeling didn't leak into her words.

Deloris stood and stretched, cracking her back before giving Mia a shrewd look. She took a last swig from her beer bottle. "You have to have kids. Your parents had you,

so you have to have grandkids for them. That's how it works." She eyed the empty bottle in her hand. "I need a refill. The fridge is full if you want one."

"Thanks, but I'm good with the wine. I'll just work on this a little more before I call it a night."

"I'm calling the husband before I start work on my story. I doubt I'll sleep much anyway on the flimsy mattresses. See you in the morning. Think about what I said."

Mia nodded before turning back to the story, working later into the night than expected.

"Damn, revision is tough." She slapped the laptop closed and went to knock on Deloris' door but resisted when she heard the hearty snores from inside. With a chuckle, she returned to her room. She slipped into pajamas, brushed teeth, and got into bed. Deloris was right about one thing, the mattress was truly uncomfortable. Still, she couldn't be sure if that kept her up or if replaying the conversation with Zak over and over in her mind caused the sleep deprivation.

Chapter 3

Class was the least interesting part of the days that followed. Conversations with Zak became personal, often meandered beyond dinner and dessert, through never-ending refills of coffee, and sometimes, like this evening, staying out late.

They walked down the main thoroughfare before Zak pulled her towards a restaurant. "Want to go inside?"

"Can you? I assumed you were Muslim and would want to stay away from places serving alcohol."

He appeared slightly abashed. "I'm not practicing but don't tell my mother. As a reporter, I have traveled too far and experienced too much to believe that one religion is better than another. Consider me agnostic. I hope that is acceptable to you?"

"Your beliefs are just that, yours."

They walked inside and sat in a booth by the bar. "And you?"

"I was raised Catholic, but similar to you, religion fell to the wayside. I try to be a good person every day. That's the best I can do."

The conversation paused when the waitress came by to take their order. His fingers played with the charm bracelet on her wrist. "What are these?"

Mia couldn't stop the tingling that ran up her arm as his fingers caressed her wrist. There was a really good connection between them. A lot of connection.

His hands were large, with long pianist fingers and manicured nails. They were incredibly graceful as he touched each charm, and she was mesmerized. When she gazed up, he smiled.

Flushing, heat built under her skin before she answered. "The charms represent different events in my life. My mother started giving them to me when I was young, and I kept buying more to commemorate life events." She showed him the charm that read 'dreams are the seeds of the future.' "I got this when I started teaching." She pulled out an apple charm. "A mother of one of my students got me this one."

"Number one teacher," he read off the charm. "You must be good at your job."

"I really like it. I think it's been my calling since I was a child, but writing is a close second. I never thought I'd be able to make a living as a writer." She leaned in over the table. "Did you always want to be a journalist?"

"Not always, but now I could never give it up. My father died of cancer six years ago, and it made me realize how important it is to live a good and meaningful life as he did. I want to share his story and all he did."

"I am so sorry for your loss. I can't imagine not having my parents around."

"I miss him every day, but my mother has decided to be doubly involved in my life to make up for it."

"Would she like me?" Mia picked at her dinner.

"Who could not like you."

Her gaze lifted from the table, and she found him waiting. There was an unspoken question lighting his eyes. She pushed closer to him and that was all he needed. He kissed her, and she kissed him back until his taste became part of her soul. His fingers caressed her cheek, heating her spirit and her skin. She drank him in, knowing she'd never get enough. His kiss, urgent and demanding, challenged her to give him more.

Mia pulled back, dizzy and out of breath. "We should stop."

"We should, but I don't want to."

"Do you always get what you want?"

"Usually, but for tonight I have to say you are right."

A groan escaped her lips. She wasn't sure if it was from disappointment or desire, yet she said the most rational words she could muster. "We need to get back to the dorms and make the most out of this opportunity. I haven't even started the homework due tomorrow."

He laughed as the erotic tension building between them melted away like snow on a warm morning. Mia pushed away dinner. Food was no longer the focus of her appetite.

"Can I join you?" she asked the next morning when she found Zak in the theater lecture with dusty chalkboards and dark wood. A literary agent was coming to speak with the entire group, but Deloris had decided sleep was more important and planned to skip the early morning presentation.

"Like you ever need to ask," he said with an inclination of his head. "How'd you sleep?"

She held up the large latte and smiled. “Guess.”

“I hope you were kept awake for all the right reasons.”

Before she could respond and tell him how he was the main reason she’d been unable to fall asleep, the agent arrived with his slicked-back hair and expensive suit.

Mia heard little of his advice, more focused on the heat building between her and Zak. She could blame it on the rather outdated air conditioning system but knew better as she studied him with a sideways glance. He was tall, legs and arms spilling over the small desk. He reminded her of a ferocious grizzly bear on the exterior but a big-hearted teddy bear on the interior. When he caught her glance, he smiled. Mia felt the blush bloom on her cheeks as she peered away, but she liked the smile and held on to it for the rest of the session.

As the week rolled towards finality, the couple made time to be together, whether quietly writing or staying awake late debating and drinking coffee. At the start of the last day, amid tour groups, maintenance workers with raucous lawnmowers that left the smell of fresh-cut grass in the air, he pulled her off the path, against the tree and kissed her with so much passion and longing, she collapsed into him.

Writing was the farthest thing from Mia’s mind as she sat next to him in their final session. Amid every writing prompt or activity, her thoughts turned to Zak. His image entered into everything she penned, and she accomplished little. Those last hours together were some of the saddest in her life. After saying goodbye to Deloris and promising to stay in touch, Zak and Mia skipped the closing ceremonies to stroll down Main Street and eat lunch in an out of the way cafe. After, they made their way back to campus, walking aimlessly, not willing to part.

“I don’t want to go home, but my coworker has been in contact. There’s been a huge break in a story I’ve been working on, and I need to expand my initial coverage. I have to leave tomorrow. Believe me, I’d stay longer if I could.”

“I don’t want you to leave either. This has been the most amazing week of my life, but a little surreal if you want the truth, something out of the fantasy novel I’m writing. I can’t get my head around the fact it’s been only a week. It’s like you’ve been part of my life forever. Nothing turned out the way expected. Worse, I can’t imagine not having you around every day when I go home.”

“I’m not a believer in love at first sight, but then I met you and everything changed.” He brought a box out of his pocket.

Mia was suddenly jittery as he handed her the gift. She pulled away the ribbon before opening it. Inside lay a heart charm.

“I found this charm the day we met. I went exploring and saw it in a jewelry store window. An impulse made me go in and buy it. From that moment, I knew something special was going to happen. I want to be with you here or in Morocco. I want us to be together forever, but I also don’t want to rush you. Still, thinking about how we met, I’m positive that fate brought us together.”

She attempted to be rational about the situation. “One week is not a long time to get to know someone.”

“Everything has been so natural and perfect between us.” He took her hand in his.

“This can’t be real,” she said as much to herself as to him, “but I’ve never felt this way before.

His smile was genuine. “We have such an extraordinary relationship. That is not the right word, but words fail me now when I need them most. I’ve never had anything like this in my life.”

“Relationship? Long-term?” She wondered if it could be a forever one when she met his brown eyes. The sincerity and love she saw stunned her. “I want to be with you.”

“Forever?” he asked.

“Forever,” she echoed.

“Good.” He pulled out a second box and snapped it open in front of her. “I hoped you would say that.”

Inside a diamond engagement ring perched on velvet. “Will you marry me?” he asked as he bent on one knee in the middle of the campus quad.

She hesitated as reality exploded around her. “I don’t know anything about your past. It’s only been a week.”

“You’re beautiful inside and out. The past doesn’t matter. I only want to think about our future together.”

“This is crazy or stupid or both.”

“The risk is worth it. We have a genuine, beautiful unexplainable connection I’ve never felt before. Have you?”

She pulled him up from the ground. “No, but still.”

“Say yes to me.”

Her hesitation melted away. “Yes.”

He put the ring on her finger and kissed her. Clapping from people who had stopped to watch them filled the air.

“What a way to end the workshop,” she said when she could finally catch her breath.

Chapter 4

She couldn't stop staring at the ring. Either could her mom and dad, but not with the same joy. They questioned Zak's motives, wondering if he was using Mia to get to America. She was annoyed and irritated with them, but doubt crept into her thoughts.

While the couple texted often and video chatted even more, it wasn't the same. Their future stalled. She still had the rest of July and most of August before returning to school and decided to take a leap of faith, appease her doubts, and visit Morocco. She was on the plane in early August.

Zak met her at the Menara airport with flowers. "I missed you so much," he said.

"I've missed you too."

"Enough talk." Zak pulled Mia tight against him, but only for a moment. "I wish I could do more, but public affection is frowned on. Soon."

After his chaste hug, he whisked her away to Marrakech. She inhaled the sights and sounds from within the taxi. Once on foot, he helped herd her through the crowds, rolling Mia's single bag of luggage behind him.

As they walked through Marrakech's Jemaa El-Fna square, she said, "I realize what Marrakech reminds me of."

"What's that?"

"When you're in a mall, and you walk up to the perfume counter of one of those big department stores."

He laughed. "You are the perfume of my life, love."

When he said things like that she didn't know how to respond, wasn't even a hundred percent sure he meant them. Instead, she took in the orange juice stalls and water sellers. They stopped to admire the traditional leather water-bags and brass cups. Mia couldn't help but gawk at the children with Barbary apes clinging to their shoulders taking pictures with tourists.

"The monkeys are endangered," he said, "But no one stops them for the sake of tourism. Same with the snake charmers despite the protected status of the species under Moroccan law."

She stood and took it all in. "I can't believe I'm here." Steam rose from food stalls, making Mia's stomach growl.

“I have so much to show you but let’s get you settled first. It’s not far from where you will stay, but the square will only become more crowded with dancers, storytellers, magicians, and herbalists. I will bring you back at night when the square fills with food and entertainment.”

“I want to take it all in.” She pivoted in place.

“I promise to bring you back, but you must be tired from the flight.” He nudged her along.

Mia couldn’t believe how many people approached them as Zak hauled her suitcase through the crowded square. They were offered everything from tours of the city to souvenirs, to food items. Zak explained how one side of the square housed a Marrakech souk, a market that provided for the daily needs of the city’s residents and vendors who catered to the tourist trade. Hotels, gardens, and cafes sprang into view on the other side as the couple walked the narrow streets that led to the medina quarter.

“We cannot stay together at my house,” he said. “My mother would not approve. I moved back with her when my father died, but I booked traditional riad accommodations so you can get a better feeling for the city.”

“What are riad accommodations? Is that like a hotel? It doesn’t matter really. Anything sounds great right now. I feel the jet lag coming full force.”

“A riad is a traditional home with many rooms and a courtyard. It is in the old town. I hope the walk has not been too much for you but I wanted you to get a glimpse of my world.”

“No, I’m fine. It was just a long trip.”

“Can I ask one favor? Please do not leave your accommodations without me.”

“Why?”

“The older part of the city is hard to navigate. There are few posted street signs or numbers. There are a lot of dead ends, twists, and turns. I do not want you to get lost.”

“I’ve traveled often. I’ll be fine.” She was a little insulted he thought she wouldn’t be able to handle herself in another country. All the warning signs her parents had told her to watch for when she had sat them down and explained her plan to visit Zak flooded her mind. Worry and doubt began to infiltrate, but she shook the insecurity away, blaming it on jetlag.

“Do this for me,” he said. “Let me show you the city. There are some places, few and far between, where women should not walk alone or be. It’s not like America.”

“You were in a city for the writing workshop. We got the forty-five minute safety speech day one of the conference. I can handle myself.”

He stopped in front of an ornate building. “Do this for me.”

“Fine.” Irritation slipped into the answer.

The townhouse was unlike anything Mia had ever seen in the United States. Built around an inner courtyard that housed a garden lush with plants, it had a central fountain and a pool. Upon entering her hosts presented them with a platter of olives, bread, nuts, and mint tea to drink. Her room was fit for royalty, styled with traditional decor, using Tadelakt paint and Zellige mosaics.

“You couldn’t ask for a better location in Marrakech. You will find this a peaceful, beautiful haven in the middle of the bustling city.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“I must leave you for a while, but I’ll be back soon. I have been working on this story about the kidnapping of tourists nonstop since I left the writing conference and I am meeting with someone who has information for me.”

“Is it safe?”

“Do not worry yourself. I’m careful and have been writing stories like this for many years.”

“Many years. You’re not that old.”

“I will miss you every moment I am away. It’s getting late and you must be tired. How about I pick you up tomorrow at nine?”

“I’ll take a nap. How about you come back after you visit your informant.”

He laughed. “Don’t you want to sleep?”

“Not without you. I came all this way to be with you. I can sleep when I’m dead.”

“I’ll be back then.” He kissed her. “Nap well.”

And she did. She woke late that evening, showered, and readied for Zak’s return. Her hosts brought her a Moroccan salad and chicken, olives, and lemon tagine, all of which she devoured.

It was night when Zak returned, knocking gently on her door. She let him in, once again marveling at how powerful and self-possessed he appeared.

“Is everything to your liking?” He appraised the room.

“It’s been amazing, but I missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you too.” He dimmed the lights, throwing the room into shadows.

There was no way this moment would get away from Mia. She walked into Zak, pressing her arms around his back, raising her chin so that her lips could meet his and melted into their kiss. It was worlds apart from his reserved greeting in the airport.

She felt the wealth of muscles under his black shirt. He radiated heat as she had never known. When his tongue challenged hers, she melted. His hands worked her curves, teasing as they caressed her arms and then dropped to cup her heart-shaped buttocks.

She murmured with need, but he refused to relent, kissing her neck and unbuttoning her blouse in a deft movement. When he finally released her, it took a moment for the world to steady.

He smiled wickedly. “I really missed you.”

His fingers returned to her shoulders, gently massaging the tired muscles, until he pushed her shirt to the floor, undid her bra, warm hands cupping her breasts.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

He nibbled her ear lobe. “Exactly what we should have done more of in the states.”

“We both had rather intrusive roommates.” She giggled, remembering Deloris’ interruptions when she tried to find private time with Zak. For someone who had told her to seize the moment, the older woman made it hard to follow through.

“We are free to do whatever we want now.” His fingers found a nipple and gently pinched it, making her gasp in pleasure.

He pulled her yoga pants off, exposing her thong. “You’re so exquisite. How lucky was I to find you?”

Mia was ready for whatever he wanted. One part of her couldn’t believe she’d only met Zak months ago. She loved his every touch. Didn’t want his hands to ever stop caressing her. His finger traced the inside of her thigh and then pushed inside her. Whispered words kissed her ear, but she was lost in the sensation of his touch. They tumbled onto the bed. Once settled below him, his lips trailed up her arm and neck while his deft fingers pushed her towards climax.

Her lips released a pent-up moan. Every day without Zak had been sad and lonely, but now, as she was on the verge of release, she felt whole. She wrestled for control, wanting him to join her. She wiggled away and tore at his clothes. He removed them, came back to bed, and entered her with hard, untamed strokes. Unable to hold back, she blissfully went over the edge.

Chapter 5

Mia's fingers played against her chapped lips the next morning as she sat on the terrace, drinking mint tea and nibbling away at a light breakfast. She watched the people come and go below and waited for Zak to return. He'd had to leave her after an amazing few hours in bed or his mother would have worried but promised to return at nine and take her on an adventure. She questioned him about where they were headed, but he refused to divulge any details.

Nine came and went. Soon ten came and went as well. She called his phone. Nothing. She couldn't sit around. The best part of any vacation was exploring. Leaving him a message on his phone, she asked her hosts for information on what to do.

"You're a teacher, no?"

"That's correct."

"You must visit Ben Youssef Madrasa. It is a 14th century school. While students no longer attend there, it is a beautiful and fascinating place to spend the day."

"Sounds perfect. Can you give me directions?"

"Will you not wait for your gentleman friend?"

She wasn't sure if it was cultural or concern for a single woman traveling alone that caused them to suggest she wait for someone to go with her, but Mia didn't want to postpone her adventure. "I'm sure I can find it on my own. I'll be careful."

Once directions were dispersed, she set out for Ben Youssef Madrasa. Mia was supremely proud of herself when she made it and couldn't wait to tell Zak "told you so." Wandering through the building, the beautiful blue, green, and brown tile design fascinated her as she wove through the courtyard. She inspected the ornate architecture and climbed the stairs to view the bedrooms where, leaning out a window, she watched people swarm below.

It had been relatively early when she arrived, but as she headed out into the streets after she visited the school, the heat turned oppressive. As she attempted to return to the riad, motorcycles buzzed by, pushing her closer to the stalls where men sold wares. Some attempted to grab her arm or yelled at her to come close and buy something. She hurried away flustered, but in doing so made a wrong turn. Disoriented, she was lost in minutes, even as the GPS on her phone failed.

Walking aimlessly, she felt caught in a paradox of the modern and primeval. Exhaust fumes, frying oil, and cloistering heat had her swaying on her feet. She stepped into a shadowy alley and leaned against the wall. Above all, a cold drink was needed. When the dizziness passed, she forged forward intent on finding a restaurant. Behind, three young men followed closely with smiles on their faces but menace in their eyes.

A small sign for what appeared to be a restaurant beckoned, but once inside, dim lights had her straining to see. A few men sat smoking hookah at small tables. There was only one other woman in sight and she looked like she might be working. What her job was, she didn't want to guess. Mia pulled out her phone and dialed Zak. He answered on the first ring.

"Where are you?" Panic laced his voice. "I went to find you at Ben Youssef Madrasa but couldn't. You haven't picked up your phone."

She glanced at the device, realizing she forgot to take it off mute. "I'm lost. I left the school and couldn't find my way back." The men who'd been following her entered the bar.

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"I don't know. Hold on." She peered around for some indication and read the name of the establishment from a small sign on the wall.

"Stay there. I'm on my way."

She boldly ordered bottled water under the disapproving eye of the man working and found a place to sit. The three men who had followed her into the lounge ordered coffee and then lounged at the table next to her, continuously trying to engage in conversation. Mia just shook her head or shrugged in response.

When the door opened less than ten minutes later, she'd never seen Zak so handsome or so angry.

"I can't believe you did this." His voice was loud but the hug he pulled her in for soothed her frayed nerves. "I told you I'd take you out today."

"But you never showed up."

"I was delayed."

"You could have called."

“I couldn’t. A friend from the police station contacted me with a lead I had to follow. I couldn’t call, but I promise it will never happen again. I have learned my lesson. I never want to live this panic.”

She wasn’t sure she believed him but was thankful for his presence.

He put a finger under her chin so their eyes met. "Promise me you will not go out without telling me where you're headed. I'd prefer you to wait for me, but I see you will not." His laugh held relief. "At least let me know your destination. Leave me a message."

“I left a message I was going out.” Irritation hit again. He didn’t show up and now it seemed like he was blaming her for trying to sightsee and learn more about his culture.

“But not where to find you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.” She glanced at the three men at the next table. “But I’ll tell you where I’m going from now on.” Maybe this was happening too fast. Did she really know this man? Could she trust him? What was so important that took him away from her when she’d traveled all the way for the United States to see him?

“Damn modesty, woman. Never scare me again.” He planted a passionate kiss on her lips before shooting the men at the next table with a murderous look. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“That’s my surprise.” His smile turned cheeky.

“What is it?”

“You are going to meet my mother. We’ll have lunch at a nearby restaurant.”

She pulled back. “I’m not ready.”

“Of course you are. Come with me.”

Chapter 6

He herded her out of the lounge and signaled for a taxi to take them to the restaurant. As soon as they got in the car, he pulled her close and whispered in her ear. “Men like those at the next table are why I worry. I am writing about the kidnapping and sex trafficking that can happen in my country. I don’t want you caught up in that.”

“I promise to be careful.”

“Good.” He kissed the top of her head.

On the rest of the ride, Mia couldn’t stop her hands from fluttering. “I’m nervous. You haven’t told me how your mom feels about the situation. I want to make a good first impression. What does she think about the fact that I’m American? Be honest.”

“She’s unsure because she doesn’t know you. I’m her son and she thinks I should marry a nice Muslim girl from the city. When she meets you, all that will change.”

“I hope so. Will it bother her if I have a drink at the restaurant with lunch?”

"Do you want a drink?"

“Maybe. A glass of wine might take the edge off. I just don’t want to hide anything. I want to be authentic and honest, and I’m not planning to stop drinking wine any time in the near future. Will you support me?”

“I’ll always support you. Everything will work out.”

“What about the language barrier?”

“Don’t worry. It will be fine. I’ll translate if needed, but my mother is fluent in four languages.”

Located in the outskirts of Marrakech, they were led to a beautiful garden dining area of the restaurant where Zak’s mother sat waiting. The introductions were pleasant enough, but after they ordered food, the real interrogation began.

“Can you cook?” Zak’s mother Bisma asked in broken English.

There it was, Mia thought. The inevitable question she dreaded. It presented itself as seemingly innocent, but she saw right through the charade. The pointed question was filled with connotations, probing about things that shouldn’t matter in this day and age, but did. They always mattered.

His mom waited expectantly for Mia to answer.

“I can chop things.” Mia paused, “with supervision.” What Bisma wanted to ask was could she provide for Zak’s needs? Would she be able to cook her son his favorite meals if they married? Was she the normal, traditional girl Bisma wanted for Zak?

The answer: she was not. Mia felt the older woman's stare from across the table heavy with disapproval. Guilt, shame, and discomfort flooded, but she shook them away. Fine, she couldn’t cook, but only because she didn’t want to. They could learn together. It wasn’t like Mia was going to work and wait on Zak. This was a partnership.

“She can make chicken parmigiana,” Zak said. “It’s an Italian recipe. She told me when we were at the writing conference.”

“What is that?” Bisma asked.

“It’s chicken in a marinara sauce with cheese and pasta,” Mia said.

“Pasta?” Bisma scoffed. “You don’t even like Italian food.”

“I think it sounds wonderful,” Zak flashed Mia a smile and took her hand under the table. The next moment he sent his mother a pleading look.

Mia knew Bisma didn’t dare to say it aloud, but the older woman might as well have screamed to everyone in the restaurant that Mia was not good enough for her son. The truth hurt. She didn’t know the culture. She didn’t fit in. She wasn’t traditional and never wanted to be. All she wanted right now was to run!

“It is kind of concerning to me that you’ve only been together for a short time.” Bisma’s eyes drilled into Mia.

“When you know you know,” Zak responded.

His mother turned back to Mia after shooting her son a frown. “If this trip works out, what are your long-term expectations?”

“Expectations?” Mia was confused.

“With my son?”

“I guess one of us would have to move.”

“Who would that be?”

“I don’t know.” She stared.

“We’ll work it all out,” Zak said. “I promise.”

His mother huffed out her breath like a dragon. “I don’t feel good about it.” She spoke so quickly in Arabic there was no hope of Mia even trying to decipher a few words.

“You have concerns and they’re understandable Mother, but I love Mia. That I know. We’ll be together and make it work for sure.”

“It is not so easy,” Bisma said. She squinted her eyes, already lined from years of worry. A frown formed, narrowing her lips. “You’re being taken advantage of by this girl.” Her finger pointed at Mia’s chest. “He is a successful man. He needs to be here. There must be men in America, no? Why must you take him and steal him away from those he loves.”

“Steal him?” Mia’s brows drew together.

“You plan to steal him away from me and take all his money. You, who cannot even cook him a good meal to ensure he remains healthy.”

“I don’t need his money. I’m a successful and independent woman in America.”

A strangled sound emerged from Bisma’s mouth. “These modern women.” The words were spat like a curse. “If you are so independent, what do you want with him?”

“Nothing other than what he wants to give me.”

Zak’s voice was calm but firm. “We’re both trying to find our soul mates, and Mia is mine.”

“Do you love my son?” She wagged the same finger at Mia’s chest.

“Of course. I would not have accepted a ring from him if I didn’t. I wouldn’t have traveled all this way.”

“This will never work between the two of you,” Bisma said. “You’re too different. You must excuse me for a minute.” She stood and walked to the bathroom.

“Maybe she’s right,” Mia said after she left. “We’re very different.”

“You must trust me. Without trust, we can’t build anything good. My mother is very strict, but she is loving and kind. She’ll see how good this is.”

“What if your mom doesn’t?”

“That will not happen.”

“But if she refuses to give you her blessing?”

“Then we figure it out together, but it won’t come to that.”

When Bisma returned, they chatted about less intense topics and by the end of the night, Mia thought they were on friendly terms.

The three headed out into the street, the air having only cooled a few degrees. Zak hailed a taxi for his mother.

“I can walk,” she said. “Don’t waste your money.”

“I will feel better this way.” He helped her in the car.

“When will you be home?”

“I am too old for you to worry,” Zak said.

“A mother never stops worrying.” Before it roared off into traffic, she said through the open window. “I do not give my blessing to this union.”

Chapter 7

Even though Zak had reassured Mia everything would work out with his mother, insecurity and angst flooded her thoughts. The couple had spent much of the night debating the conundrum rather than doing other more pleasant things.

When the discussion came to a standstill, Zak put an end to the tension with a fiery kiss that fanned a different flame within Mia. The feel of his hands tracing her hips before they tickled her back and guided her closer to him, the warmth of his mouth on her neck, and the smell of his cologne all made her dizzy with need.

She guided him to sit on the edge of the bed, stripping him of his shirt before she straddled his legs. Her hands traced the dark hair on his stomach before moving to his belt. Pulling the end out of the loop, she made swift work of the button and zipper. Her hand traced the line of the open pants. She was just about to lean down and place a kiss on his chest when he flipped her onto the bed.

“No more,” he demanded. “I will not be able to take it. You ravage me.” He pushed her hair out of her eyes. “Let me have my way with you.”

Once liberated of his pants, he pulled her close against his warm chest. His kiss held the untamed wilds, but his tender touch stole her heart. The palm of one of his hands roamed across her in worship and then tickled her neck before tangling in her tresses.

She wanted him on top of her. She maneuvered so she was under him, enjoying his strength. His hand found her panties and he pulled them away, stoking the fire within her. A long, pent up sigh escaped her lips.

“Do you love me?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I love you more than life. You are my goddess. This will work itself out.”

She kissed his shoulder. “No more talk. I need you. I want you now.”

But for a second, he teased, letting his finger caress her most sensitive spot. Her nails replaced her lips, digging into his shoulder. “Now. Please.”

“At least you said please.” His voice was low and sexy in her ear.

He parted her legs with a knee and drove inside her. Her thighs locked around him as they careened in unison with each thrust. Her body took him in and never wanted to let him go.

“More!” She clung to him.

And 'more' lasted late into the night. But then he had to leave and return to his mother, and while sated, Mia could not sleep. Thoughts of dinner warred with the enjoyable experience after, but it took until the sun began to rise for her to doze.

Zak had promised Mia a different kind of fun the next day. They met at noon, wandering and shopping after a quick lunch. At a small stand, Zak leaned in and pulled a silver charm from where it lay on a table covered in purple velvet.

"It says 'love' in Arabic. You need to add this to your collection." His hand found hers. He examined the charm next to all the others on the bracelet. "It will be a nice fit."

"You don't need to buy me a present."

"It is not a present. It is a promise."

"But your mom," Mia contested.

"Let me deal with her."

Later in the day, a car picked them up and transported them to the palm oasis for a private sunset camel ride. Mia admired the view of the Atlas Mountain as the sun fell in the sky through leafy palms, realizing it was unlike anything she'd ever seen. Morocco was alluring and mysterious, but she still wasn't sure she could make a life there. When her camel swayed so violently that Mia pitched left, she felt anything but majestic and wondered if the rather bumpy camel was a sign of what it might be like if she moved to Marrakech.

After the ride, they returned to the riad.

"I want to shower away the camel," Mia joked.

"May I join you." He didn't wait for an answer but began to slip her shirt over her head.

Once relieved of her clothes, she eyed her wrist to remove the bracelet.

Her mouth fell open. "It's gone. My bracelet is gone." Tears welled as panic flooded. Mia grabbed a clean t-shirt and threw it on.

Zak dressed and joined in the search as they scoured every inch of the room to no avail. "It must be here or at least close by."

They searched again, but it was nowhere.

"I can't believe I lost it. I shouldn't have brought it. All my important moments. Gone just like that."

Zak called the expedition company where they had taken the camel ride. "Closed. I got a message. I can call back tomorrow."

They sat on the edge of the bed.

"I need a glass of wine." Mia pulled her hair into a high ponytail.

"I will open the bottle we bought yesterday."

"If I was in America, I could just call room service."

"True, but my city has much to offer as well."

The loss of her bracelet made Mia salty. "But not your mom's blessing."

"We still don't know that."

She pushed away the impending sadness, replacing it with anger. "What would I do if I moved here? I am not staying at home. Nothing against it, but I love teaching."

"We need teachers here too. You do not have to stop doing what you love. We have schools that cater to international students."

"Who knows if they'd even want me."

"They'd want you."

"We need journalists in the United States too," she countered.

"It is a hard decision, but my mother has no one."

"My family will miss me if I move here."

"They are much younger and seem to enjoy the adventures of travel. My mother not so much."

"What about my cats?" she demanded.

"They're allowed in the country too," he said with a laugh.

"That's not funny. I don't know if I can bring them here."

"We will find out the answers. I am a journalist. It is what I do."

"I have to sacrifice my life for your mother. The woman doesn't even like me."

"No. We sacrifice because we want to build a life together."

"My lost bracelet tells another story." A myriad of emotions rushed to the surface when she thought of what her bracelet represented. "I think it's time to call it a night."

"You do not want me to stay?"

"I need a little space."

He was reluctant to leave.

"Go!"

“I will be back early so we can find your bracelet.”

“It’s gone. We have to face facts.”

He kissed her cheek, his frown echoed in his concerned eyes. “You know I love you,” he said before leaving.

That night it felt like everything was falling apart as she cried long and hard into her pillow.

Chapter 8

The next day arrived with heat and angst. After Zak checked that no one found a bracelet at the tour company offering the camel rides, Mia resigned herself to its disappearance and vowed to enjoy the final days of the trip. But the loss of the bracelet felt like a talisman, and she couldn't stop obsessing about it.

Together they'd explored the city and the nightlife and spent long hours in bed. But Mia remained doubtful. The last day, they sat on the riad patio eating breakfast before her scheduled flight. "I will pick you up at two so that you arrive at the airport in plenty of time for your trip home. I am talking to my mother one more time today to win her approval. Do you want to join me?"

Mia shook her head. "Maybe not getting her approval and losing the bracelet are omens. They're signs that we need more time to figure it out. To know if this is real. We rushed it. We got caught up in the moment. This is a life-long commitment and need to make sure."

"I am sure."

"Maybe I'm not."

"You lack faith, but it will all work out. Wait and see. We will make an amazing story."

When he left her, Mia packed her luggage. She had a nagging suspicion she wouldn't be back to Morocco. At two o'clock, there was a rap on her door. When she opened it, Zak and his mother stood there.

"My mother has something she wants to tell you."

"Whatever makes my son happy is a joy for me. If he loves you and you love him. I embrace this union."

Mia stood, shocked into speechlessness.

"My mother wants what is best for us. She knows true love is a gift because she had it with my father."

"Thank you. I..."

Zak cut her off. "There is more. On my way home this morning, I walked by the vendor where I bought you the love charm." He held up his hand and from his fingers dangled her charm bracelet. "The man saw it fall but could not find us in the crowd

afterward. He was ecstatic when I returned to find you a going-away present. I assume this will do."

She threw herself into his arms. "You're perfect."

Zak's mother moved in, and for a long moment, they all enjoyed a group hug.

Epilogue

It took longer than expected but Mia returned to Marrakech. It was technically her summer break and a year after she met Zak, but she wasn't heading back to America. After securing a job at an international high school, she gave her notice at the school where she worked in the United States. It was a bittersweet goodbye, but she made the right choice. Better yet, today was her wedding. While hard to comprehend how Zak pulled it all together without her, it was perfect.

Her parents were here along with Zak's mother and many of his cousins and friends. Even some of her fellow teachers and Deloris from the writing conference joined them. Her cats and Zak's had stayed back at the apartment she and soon-to-be husband now rented. Most importantly, felines, friends, and parents all got along.

They'd merged wedding traditions. The couple had written their own vows, which they shared before the couple saying "I accept" in Arabic three times. She and Zak exchanged rings before she watched two of Zak's friends witness the contract. Then they ushered everyone into the banquet hall for the Walima and dancing. Many hours later as Mia leaned against Zak and said goodbye to guests, she realized that she really did lead a charmed life.