Layla bolted upright, gasping for air. The nightmare of being drugged and abducted had vividly replayed in her dream. Her face and ribs ached. She looked around the unfamiliar room. *How did I get here?* Her last memory was of driving in the Range Rover with Superman. Panic filled her. *Zamir? Where is Zamir? I wonder if his father has started negotiating for our release. Have they notified my father? Does Zamir even know I’ve left the prison? I need to get a message to him; maybe the man with the green eyes will help me?* Her mind spun with a million questions.

Determined, she rose from the bed. She would ask Superman for help. She crept out of the bedroom suite and tiptoed down the stairs. The fragrance of cooking meat and spices awakened pangs of hunger. She was starving. She followed the aroma to the kitchen. Superman, in an apron, stood over a stove stirring a pot. He dipped a wooden spoon into the pot and tasted the stew. “Hmm*…*” Seemingly satisfied, he placed the lid on the pot.

“It smells delicious. What is it?”

He whirled around in surprise, his hand instinctively reaching for his holstered gun. “You scared the hell out of me.” He relaxed, smiling at her. “It’s called *Fesenjan*. It’s a traditional Persian stew made with pomegranate, chicken, walnuts, onions, saffron, cinnamon and a pinch of sugar. Are you hungry?”

“Starved. Who taught you to cook?”

“My mother. This should be ready soon. Why don’t you sit down?”

“My mother’s dead.”

“So is mine.”

They stared at each other, taken aback by each other’s candid answer.

Layla swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “I have a million questions. I hardly know where to start.”

Cyrus pulled out a chair for her at the kitchen table. “Start at the beginning.”

She sat, folding her hands in front of her. “What’s your name? I can’t very well call you Superman.”

“Superman?” He shook his head, perplexed.

“In my mind, I’ve been calling you Superman—the way you rescued me from that guard. You swooped in like a superhero.”

The dimple in his chin hollowed out with his smile. She dropped her eyes in embarrassment, thinking, *He’s way too good looking. Every time he smiles, my heart does somersaults.*

“I like that.” The dimple in his chin grew even deeper with his broadening grin, and his green eyes gleamed with amusement.

“What?” *Be still my heart. A smile like his could bring a woman to her knees. Not good, Layla. Don’t fall for the bait. He’s the enemy.* “Oh, for God’s sake, please tell me your name.”

“Cyrus Hassani at your service. I am thirty-two.” He bowed his head. “What would you like to know about me? Unlike you Americans, I don’t have a Social Security card.”

She found his amusement annoying. She didn’t like being toyed with. “Mr. Hassani, I seem to be beholden to you. You might consider telling me a little about yourself so that I might have an idea of who I’m dealing with.”

Cyrus rubbed the shadow of beard on his face. “I hold a degree in nuclear physics from the University of Paris and a law degree from the Imam Mohammad Bagher University here in Tehran. I was conscripted by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security when I graduated university, and since then I have risen to the rank of attaché to an important man. My assignment is to keep you safe from all harm until your release. How am I doing?”

“Good, you’re doing well. That wasn’t so hard, was it? Although, I must say it sounded like the kind of recitation you’d give if you were captured by the enemy.”

His laughter filled the room. “I suppose the presentation might have seemed a bit canned. Now tell me, have I passed the first hurdle with you? May I call you Layla? Have I gained your trust enough for us to be on a first name basis?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Cyrus. I appreciate your candor, and I’m grateful for your rescue. I guess you are a superman of sorts. I still have a lot more questions. I think first names will make this easier for both of us. Please, call me Layla.”

“Layla,” he repeated her name melodically as if it were the lyric to a song. “That’s a very pretty name.”

Again, she felt the butt of his amusement. “It’s my name Cyrus, not a song. I’d appreciate it if you stuck to answering my questions.”

“Shoot, Layla.” He composed his face into a serious mask.

“My boyfriend, Zamir, and I were abducted from Dubai. His father, Omar Kamel, is a wealthy Saudi businessman. I’m sure he’s begun negotiating for our release. I want to know how Zamir is, and can you tell me how much longer we’ll have to be here?”

Cyrus looked at his watch. “Zamir is fine. In fact, he should be getting on a private jet right about now on his way to Saudi Arabia and his family.”

Layla felt the blood drain from her face. Tears welled in her eyes, tracing a path down her cheek. “I don’t understand. I’m supposed to be on that jet with him. He would never leave without me*…*”

Cyrus’s voice remained even, if not a little compassionate. “I’m sorry, Layla, but he did. Don’t think too poorly of him. He had no choice. His father made no effort to include you in the negotiation. You could not possibly believe an Arab family would open their arms to you, an American Jew. He’s a boy. None of this is in his control.” As an afterthought, he added, “If it’s any comfort, I’m sure he’s as devastated as you.”

Layla stared at Cyrus, trying to process what he said. Taking a breath, she wiped her tears away. *I should have known better. I’ve been a fool, a child.* She stared at her folded hands, trying to catch up with her thoughts. The realization she’d been left to fend for herself dawned on her. *You come from a long line of fighters,* she told herself. *Your grandparents are Holocaust survivors. It’s time to become who you really are.* Facing the truth strengthened her resolve. *Looks like you’re going to have to find your own way out of this*.

She tried to fathom her situation, thoughts racing. Cyrus stared at her, his sexy eyes filled with compassion. She returned his stare as if seeing him for the first time. *Is he a friend or a foe?* It occurred to her that the flipping gorgeous hunk of a man who sat across from her might be her only chance out of Iran. It was not in her DNA to use people, but under the circumstances, this man might be her only way out. She looked down at her hands as she tried to devise a plan.

When she looked up, she found Cyrus studying her. She blushed. “I guess that’s all the questions I have for now. I really am hungry, though.”

“Good. Then let’s eat.”

She found herself unable to resist. “I hope Superman can cook as well as he comes to the rescue of damsels in distress.”

“Be sure to let me know what career I’m better suited to, cooking or taking down bad guys.”

“Right now, I’m hoping it’s cooking you excel at.”

“Actually, my greatest skill set is in the bedroom.” His piercing green eyes dared her to look away.

Layla’s cheeks burned, and he doubled over in laughter.

“I… I beg your pardon?”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist, Layla.” Again he made love to her name. “You’re quite pretty when you blush.”