

## BLURB

They had no idea how much their lives would change...forever.

Imani Karunzika is fiercely independent and refuses to be forced into a loveless marriage with the domineering man her parents want for her. When her friend Crown Prince Wasim al-Hassan of Barrakesch learns he'll be passed over for the throne because he has no wife, she suggests a plan where they enter into a fake engagement. He can then secure his birthright, and she can get her parents off her back.

But the marriage must proceed as planned. Wasim becomes the king, she becomes the queen and is now under the rule of a man whose power and authority is unmatched. But Imani's greatest struggle lies not within the walls of the palace, but inside herself as she fights to keep the ultimate secret—that she's madly in love with the king.

Queen of Barrakesch by Delaney Diamond

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## ARABIC WORDS/PHRASES

*Habibti* (said to a woman) – my love

*Habibi* (said to a man) – my love

*Hayati* – my life

*Rohi* – my soul

*Khali* – uncle, specifically mother's brother

*Baba* – daddy

*Ummi* – mommy

*Walidi* – a formal, respectful way to say Father

*Shukraan* – Thank you

*Nikah* – the marriage contract the couple signs

*Haram* – means that something is forbidden in Islam

*As-salamu alaikum* (a common greeting) – Peace be unto you

*Wa alaikum assalaam* – And peace be unto you, too

*Inshallah* – God willing

*Subhanallah* – various meanings, including “God is perfect” or “Glory to God,” said during times of personal trial or struggle to restore perspective

*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un* – We belong to God, and to him we shall return

## Chapter 1

Warm, arid wind tore across Wasim's face as he crouched over the white Arabian horse, riding without a saddle. He'd lost his *ghutra* half a mile back when the white headdress and the *agal* flew off his head and became a casualty of the speed of galloping hooves.

The air whipped erratically at his clothing as the heels of his bare feet pressed into the horse's ribs, encouraging her to go faster. She tore across the ground, kicking up dust and racing toward the finish line, past shrubs and bushes that whizzed by in a blur of green against the golden desert sands.

Though a competition, the race was one of the ways Wasim bonded with his large family, an ancient sport and form of entertainment that was part of their Arab heritage. His two half-brothers rode close behind him, one on either side, bearing down his neck. His other brothers were farther behind, younger and not as experienced and unable to match the speed of their older siblings. Nonetheless, the thundering hooves of his pursuers urged Wasim to maintain a fast and steady pace, victory almost within reach.

The group rushed onward with him leading the pack and finally, with a cry of victory, he crossed the finish line drawn in the sand, sailing past the group of friends and family gathered to watch—huddled in groups or seated atop the roofs of their vehicles—with cameras trained on the racers. With their fists raised, cheers went up from the spectators, and Wasim grinned in satisfaction, pulling back on the reins to reduce the horse's speed. The slowdown continued as he rubbed and gently patted her neck to show his appreciation for her hard work and bringing him yet another victory.

"I can't believe you won again!" Akmal, one of his brothers, yelled from behind him.

Wasim chuckled and steered the horse into a U-turn. "You should be used to it by now," he said arrogantly.

His brother shook his head in disgust, and Wasim laughed even harder.

Guiding the horse into a trot, he lifted onto his bare feet on her back, standing upright and holding the reins. He received more cheers and congratulations as he made a victory lap around his friends, cousins, and the ten of his sixteen siblings in attendance. When he finished showboating, he jumped off the horse and handed off the reins to an aide. He received a few pats on the back as he made his way to the food that had been set up for their evening meal.

Wasim rinsed his hands and joined the men congregated together. The women and children huddled at tables nearby, and the bodyguards ate finger foods and drank standing up, ever vigilant in the protection of the royal family.

The servants had prepared a feast of roasted goat, fragrant rice, and other fixings sure to satisfy after the tough race. Wasim sat cross-legged on one of the colorful pillows on the ground before a low table filled with food and drinks and picked up a piece of pita bread. He scooped up some hummus and popped the morsel into his mouth.

“You’re ruthless, Wasim. You could at least let one of your brothers win one time.” Farouk, his friend and the husband of his older sister, sat across from him and barely hid his amusement. He was a thin man with a narrow face and very tall, standing a full head above Wasim.

“And why would I do that?” Wasim lifted his cup, and a servant came over and filled it with water.

“Out of the kindness of your heart.”

Wasim took several large gulps and then had the servant refill the cup. “And let them think I’m soft? No way. I have to keep them humble.”

Akmal picked up a piece of goat meat with his fingers. “His arrogance knows no bounds,” he muttered.

They didn’t have the same mother, yet there was no doubt that they were related—with the same copper-brown eyes and strong features inherited from their father. But Akmal was clean-shaven and as their father often complained, wore his hair too long.

Wasim clapped his brother on the back. “I’m tired of all the flattery.”

The men all chuckled, and then the conversation turned to lighter topics as they caught up on each other’s lives. Farouk announced that Wasim’s sister was pregnant with their second child. One of their cousin’s sons was headed to the United States for college, but his mother was worried about all the reports of gun violence in the country.

They continued talking as the sun went down behind the dunes and the night air grew cooler. The servants set up torches around the encampment, and after some time, the conversation turned to more serious matters.

“How was your fact-finding trip?” one of Wasim’s younger brothers asked.

“Worth it. I learned a lot.”

He had spent the last two weeks in Dubai, Paris, and Cairo, talking to government officials and engineers about the rapid transit systems in their countries. Currently, Barrakesch only had public buses, but with traffic becoming a problem as the country's population grew rapidly and tourism increased, his father had expressed interest in a rail system to ease congestion.

"When are you going to give Father a full report?" Akmal asked.

"In a couple of days, when he gets back from his trip. In the meantime, I have some personal things to take care of," Wasim said vaguely. He didn't mention that included a visit to the woman who'd spent way too much time in his thoughts during the two weeks he'd been gone. Silence met his response, and to put off further questions, he added, "I'm waiting for a few of the figures regarding cost, but I'll have a full report soon."

"Makes sense," Farouk said.

Wasim glanced at his brother, who their father wanted to become more involved in the issues of transportation. "Akmal, will you be at the palace and able to attend?"

His younger brother nodded. "I'll be there, *Inshallah*. I'm interested to see what you learned and how it could help us."

"Good."

These periods with his family were extremely important to Wasim but became rarer as they all became more preoccupied with their own lives. He glanced up at the star-filled sky. One of his favorite times to be in the desert was at night, when the stars dotted the dark canvas that could be black one day or—depending on location and the time of year—shades of blue and rose another. The vastness of the universe never failed to amaze him, and he could almost believe that if he stretched out a hand he'd touch one of the tiny dots, though they were trillions of miles away.

Much as he loved the peaceful atmosphere, fatigue threatened to overtake him. He'd arrived back in the country only this morning, and after handling personal meetings, had attended the race. He hadn't had a chance to wind down yet and needed to rest.

Stifling a yawn, he rose from the pillow.

"Going to bed already, old man?" Farouk teased.

"I'm afraid so. The bed of this old man is calling."

Wasim said goodbye to everyone, stopping first to give his older sister a kiss and congratulate her on the new baby. Then he walked away from the large group to a Jeep on the edge of the encampment. Five bodyguards followed.

He climbed into the passenger seat and the driver took off. His security—two each in a vehicle—shadowed them toward the capital city of Kabatra. Once they left the desert, two motorcycles joined the procession by pulling in front of the vehicle Wasim rode in.

As the eldest son and heir to the throne, Wasim had been gifted his own palace at the age of twenty-five. It was located about twenty miles outside the capital and within full view of the Persian Gulf. The entire complex was an extravagant display of wealth, though it paled in comparison to The Grand White Palace where his family lived.

Wasim's home demonstrated his independence and ability to set up his own household. At thirty-one he was past the age when he was expected to marry, but he had no such inclinations. With his father as healthy as a purebred horse, he would not have to consider marriage and heirs for a long time to come. So he enjoyed himself and indulged in the luxuries that came from being a descendant of a centuries-old dynasty flush with immeasurable wealth, and outside of Barrakesch he discreetly enjoyed the women who allowed him to charm his way into their beds.

As they approached, large metal doors decorated in Islamic design connected to the walls that ran around the entire compound, opened and allowed them to roll through. Wasim was escorted to the door, and the security on the inside bowed briefly when he entered. The sound of trickling water filled the air from the fountain in the middle of the enormous foyer that boasted a three-story ceiling, arched doorways that led into other rooms and hallways, and marble tile floors trimmed in gold.

Once a day, an attendant placed fresh flowers inside the fountain. They floated in the gently moving water and perfumed the air with their floral scent.

An aide appeared, silently bowed, and then crouched before Wasim. He removed Wasim's sandals and replaced them with a pair of dark slippers before leaving as quietly as he came. Wasim was about to head upstairs when his personal secretary, Talibah, appeared.

He lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "*As-salamu alaikum,*" he greeted her. "What are you still doing up?"

Talibah was a few years younger than him, with golden-brown skin and sharp but friendly charcoal eyes. She wore hijab and a traditional black abaya. She'd been his personal secretary for over a year, after his previous secretary retired. There had been talk that she was too young and inexperienced to serve in such an important role, but her work ethic and loyalty had impressed him, and so far she had proven him right to give her the promotion.

“*Wa alaikum assalaam*, Prince Wasim,” Talibah replied, dipping her head in respect. “I received a call from the secretary of His Excellency King Khalid. Your father will return to Barrakesch tomorrow and requests your presence the day after at The Grand White Palace at one o'clock. He has asked for a confirmation before eight a.m. tomorrow.”

Wasim knew better than to ask why. When King Khalid requested your presence, you dropped everything and went to see him. If he needed anything specific, he would have included those instructions in the request.

“What if I had stayed out longer tonight?” Wasim asked.

“Then I would have waited up longer until you arrived, Prince.”

Wasim hid his smile of approval. Yes, she was a great addition to his inner circle.

“Inform my father's secretary that I will be there promptly at one.”

“Yes, Prince.”

“Now go to bed, Talibah.”

She allowed herself a faint smile and then bowed. “As you wish, Prince Wasim.”

She turned away toward one of the arched doorways, and Wasim took the elevator to his apartment on the fourth level. When the cabin came to a halt, he stepped onto white carpet that ran all the way to the bulletproof windows on the other side that overlooked the property and the Gulf beyond.

Wasim waved away the aide that took a step in his direction and went to stand in front of the window. Below, his personal zoo included two lions and their new cub, two tigers, and the recent addition of a family of chimpanzees. He frowned, his gaze settling on the lions sleeping next to each other on the grass under one of the trees. But he didn't have an issue with the lions. He was frowning because of what Talibah had said.

His father knew he'd come to visit soon to share his findings from his trip overseas. So why request his presence sooner?

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## **About the Author**

Delaney Diamond is the USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet, sensual, passionate romance novels. Originally from the U.S. Virgin Islands, she now lives in Atlanta, Georgia. She reads romance novels, mysteries, thrillers, and a fair amount of nonfiction. When she's not busy reading or writing, she's in the kitchen trying out new recipes, dining at one of her favorite restaurants, or traveling to an interesting locale.

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