

Chapter One

The shadow of Sheikh al-Kaatib's private jet raced over the desert sands, heading west into the blaze of the afternoon sun.

Inside the plane seven passengers sat in silence. They had exhausted their conversation days ago. Besides, there was much to think about. Three closed their eyes, deliberated and slept. Another three opened notebooks and tapped busily. The seventh passenger tilted back his seat and looked out the window.

A hundred years ago we crossed this desert on camels, Ilias Aboud mused. He could almost see the sway of a camel caravan. Its men would have measured time by the sun and stars and the distance to the next oasis. They would have lived by rules forced on them by the harsh landscape: hospitality to the stranger, loyalty to one's kin.

War had been brief. A raid, not a sustained campaign. The desert lacked the resources to sustain an army. Men tended their livestock and their trade. Violence flared and died in the face of the overwhelming task of surviving. You counted your wealth in camels and children, and thanked God.

But that was before the strangers and their discovery of oil. Suddenly there was money enough to indulge in the foolishness of war. Vehicles shrank the desert, and people let go of its ways to embrace city life.

And city life was pleasant.

Ilias smiled. His wife and two-year-old son awaited him in Istanbul. He would take a taxi from the airport and be home in time for the evening meal. He would kiss his son and answer his questions. Since little Yusef had learned the word *why* he used it continuously. Why must he eat carrot? Why didn't the cat have to eat carrot? Why didn't he have a tail like the cat?

It would be good to be home. After Yusef went to bed, he and Salwa would talk a little about the meeting and a lot about family news and local gossip. Then they too would retire and find comfort in reunion. Joy, peace, love. His family kept him sane.

"More fruit juice, sir? Or coffee? There is baklava."

Startled from his thoughts, Ilias glanced at the steward and the glistening jug of juice the man held. Ice cubes tinkled.

"No. Nothing, thank you."

The steward nodded and whisked away Ilias's empty glass. He walked on to the next passenger. "Sir, would you—"

The engines cut out. No warning, just an eerie silence with the impact of a bomb. The steward's eyes went wide and he ran for the cockpit. Fruit juice sloshed and spilled, falling sticky on the cream carpet.

Ilias clenched his hands, counting. One, two, three...the engines remained silent.

There was still a chance. They wouldn't make Istanbul but the plane would glide for a short while. Could the pilot land it in the desert without engines? Sheikh al-Kaatib would employ the best pilots.

"God, into your care I consign my family and myself."

Wind tore at the plane, a violent downdraft that shoved the nose down. A man screamed. Terror of imminent

death drained the blood from Ilias's plump face. He would return to the desert, after all. Violently.

Mischa dived from heaven, piercing through the golden colors of sunset with a warrior's purpose. Attuned to the rhythm of her humans' lives, she heard the moment when the engines of the plane carrying Ilias Aboud cut out. An instant later she landed in the cockpit.

The pilot and copilot were bent over their instruments in frozen dismay.

"Now, let's see." Mischa took a second and stretched it ruthlessly.

She placed her hands over the instrument panel and sent herself into the plane. Unlike many of her fellow guardian angels, she enjoyed human technologies. She'd studied them and had little doubt that whatever the problem with the engines, she could fix it. For the shaken crew and passengers it would be a little miracle.

"Cupid's darts." The angelic expletive escaped Mischa as she examined the engines. They hadn't simply broken. They had melted as if struck by lightning, and among the destruction were grains of sand. "Impossible."

Mischa flicked herself into the cabin and sank into a spare seat. She would use a second second to think.

Across the aisle sat Ilias Aboud. She was here because of the danger to him. The young man, plump with the soft living of conferences and formal dinners, was a key actor in the Middle Eastern intrigue. As a scholar and a natural linguist, his passion for peace and his determined pursuit of hope would save thousands of lives. His compassion would bridge cultural divides—if he lived.

"He will," vowed Mischa. "Yusef won't grow up an orphan."

If the engines couldn't be fixed, she would resort to crude tactics. She wouldn't be the first angel to physically hold an airplane in space and guide it to safety.

She stood, then frowned. Humans oughtn't to be able to see her, nor to function in the stretched time within a second. Yet a man in Bedu robes at the rear of the cabin stared straight at her.

He smiled. Dark hair curled back from a wide forehead, above a beak of a nose. High cheekbones balanced the strong jaw. White teeth gleamed beneath a pencil moustache that defined the firm line of thin masculine lips. His eyes were topaz green.

Mischa took a step toward him. "Who are you?"

He was beautiful, but mere beauty oughtn't to attract her. Angels were beautiful, yet she had no trouble resisting the wooing of those among them who'd be her lovers, nor in rejecting the hot demands of contesting demons. So why did she stand here, watching the stranger's smile widen? If the plane crashed, they'd all be lost.

Ilias. Concentrate on him.

The call of duty focused her. She sank through the floor of the cabin, shook through the skin of the plane and felt the cold, dry air envelop her. She raised her hands above her head and pressed them against the underbelly of the fuselage.

Its fall halted.

"You're interfering," the stranger said beside her. He stood on nothing, with the skill of an angel, keeping pace with the aircraft's glide. His robes stirred in a wind of his own choosing, revealing then veiling his face.

Mischa looked away, up to the plane she carried. "Interference is what I do."

If the stranger was no man, what was he?

Time flicked over to the third second.

“Are you a demon?”

“My father was.” He stretched out a hand and stroked her face.

His fingers played like flame against her skin, calling desire in a bewildering surge of feeling. She turned her head away.

“I give you my name.” He slid his fingers into her hair, twisted and gripped. He forced her to face him. “I am Rafe.”

“Let me go.” She glared into his green eyes, defying the force of his answering fierceness. He wanted her to know him.

“Your name.”

Her mouth firmed, sealing shut.

The plane was gliding steadily with her assistance, but she’d have to land it soon—even a stretched second had limits. It would be easier without distraction.

“Go away.”

“Give me your name.” He let go of her hair, but the slide of his hand down her face and throat and over her breasts was no release.

Her breasts were high and taut from her upraised arms. They swelled under the slow, exploratory touch. Mischa kicked out.

Rafe sidestepped. “Tell me,” he said on a breath of laughter.

She hadn’t intended to amuse him. Rage fed on the unwanted burn of desire. If he’d been a Scotsman, she’d have set fire to his kilt. As it was...a wicked smile curved her mouth. Why not? Justice meant fighting fire with fire.

A wave of her hand, and his robes went up in flames.

Now, there was a good distraction. Pleased with herself, Mischa turned her attention back to the plane. She'd land it while the stranger beat out the flames of his clothing.

"If you wanted me naked, you should have said," he purred by her ear.

Startled, she glanced at him. Her gaze traveled down from broad shoulders and muscular chest to the ridged stomach and lower. He was magnificent.

"I don't want you." But the lie stuck in her throat. She stared into eyes blazing with masculine triumph. He knew she wanted him.

"I need to land the plane."

It was the flicker in the eyes locked with hers that warned her. The hint of regret gave Mischa an instant of warning. It wasn't enough.

Rafe pulled her away from the plane at the moment he directed a storm of wind at it and thrust the nose downward.

"No!" She fought his hold.

He pinned her arms and wrapped his legs around hers. Surprise had given him the advantage and now she couldn't break his hold. Her nose was squashed against his throat, and her every breath inhaled sandalwood and pheromones. The situation was desperate.

She dematerialized and plunged after the plane. As a stream of energy, she wove around the plane and dragged it out of its uncontrolled dive.

"It won't work." Rafe's energy prickled against hers, prizing her away from the plane. "The jet's fated to crash."

"It is not." Fate was not a god. The future was as you made it. But Rafe's power disrupted her own.

Mischa rematerialized, placed her hands once more against the plane's underbelly and pushed it up hundreds of meters before encountering a resisting force. She abandoned the last of the laws of physics and looked through the plane to see Rafe pushing down. He had gravity on his side.

In this battle over the plane, she feared she wouldn't win.

"Time for a change of strategy." She surrendered the plane to the skills of the pilot and copilot and dove through it to attack Rafe directly.

She hit him in the chest.

He tumbled backward and the lightning bolts zinging from his fingers broke against empty air rather than the plane itself. The air split in shrieking agony, but the plane was already gliding away.

Mischa prayed the few hundred meters in height she'd gained it would be sufficient for the pilots to land—if she kept Rafe from interfering.

He came out of his tumble in a fighter's crouch. He looked for the plane, but Mischa kicked at his head. He jerked back. She spun, arm raised. Serpent-swift, he seized her arm and tugged her close. There was no space between their bodies.

Her hand flexed and closed on empty air. Damn. "If I had my sword," she said through her teeth. But unaccountably, the Sword of Good and Evil hadn't answered her summons.

"Then what, nameless lady?"

They pitted their strength against one another. The struggle was silent but intense, flickering between body and free energy form, and always Mischa held him. She learned his body and strength as if it were her own.

He struck with increasing desperation, all but frenzied. Green eyes blazed at her as she stayed between him and the plane.

She absorbed the pain of his attack and dealt her own wounds. Neither combatant bled, but soul wounds went deeper.

“I’m sorry,” Mischa whispered. She no longer understood anything in this situation. When she looked at Rafe she saw grief, as if he suffered his hurts and hers.

“Give me your name,” he ground out.

“Mischa.”

The plane landed.

Ilias Aboud uncurled from his braced crash-landing pose. The pilots had performed a miracle. Somehow, without power, they had landed the stricken jet. He would live to see Salwa and Yusef.

“God is great. Thanks be to God.”

“I thought we’d die.”

“...crash.”

“Out, out.” The steward broke into the passengers’ relieved babble.

“The jet might yet explode.” The captain overrode everyone. “Get out.”

He hurried everyone out the safety exit and over a dune before he let them rest in the shade of a second dune. Then he slumped down himself, and Ilias saw that his hands shook.

“I’ve activated the emergency signal. Someone will come looking for us.”

The steward and copilot had brought water.

“We must wait.”

“Mischa, you defeated me.”

They stood on a sand dune, watching the crashed plane and the band of survivors.

Rafe had conjured new robes. In defeat he stood tall and powerful.

“Who are you, Rafe? What are you?” Mischa wore the mid-thigh white tunic of an angel warrior, with a girdle of gold. Too late for the battle, her sword had finally appeared. She rested its tip in the hot sand and took comfort from the familiar curve of its handle.

“I am of the djinn, one bound by Solomon.”

A djinni. Mischa closed her eyes. If the past few seconds hadn't been so fraught, she'd have guessed. A djinni was neither demon nor angel but commanded the powers of both. In the desert their whims were the fate of travelers. A benevolent djinni could summon water from beneath the sands to save a caravan. But a devious djinni would strand travelers in a sandstorm or lead them in circles. They had a sense of humor, but it was the harsh humor of the desert. When the winds blew through the skeletons of camels and humans, the desert tribes called the eerie sound the laughter of the djinn.

Solomon had feared them and had used his knowledge of every living creature to bind the djinn to the service of humans.

“Were you crashing the plane as a service to your master?” Mischa asked.

Rafe's lips thinned at the word *master*. “It was his second wish.”

“To kill so many.” The evil people could conceive still had the power to dismay her. “Will you try again?”

He shrugged. “A failed wish is still a wish. My defeat was honorable.”

“But the man has a third wish.”

“Yes.”

Mischa frowned across at the group of survivors. “I’m a guardian angel, Rafe. I’ll fight you again if I have to.”

“I know.”

She looked back at him. “Did I hurt you?”

“I’ll heal.”

“That is no answer.”

“It is enough. What of your hurts, Mischa?”

“They are my concern.”

“And if I want to make them mine?”

“No.”

He stared at the setting sun. The blaze of golden light tinted his skin. “Mischa, it has been forever since I touched someone, since I have wanted someone. Let me heal you.”

The longing in his voice shook her. She felt the cut over her ribs open and bleed. But it wasn’t sensible to become involved with a djinni.

“There are healers in heaven.”

“And I am djinn,” he finished heavily.

She flushed with shame but her chin tilted up. “Yes.” For Ilias About’s life she could not trust Rafe.

He looked at her, green eyes lit with gold. “Then I’ll behave as you believe.” He tossed her down onto the sand and tore her tunic.

Shock immobilized her for an instant. In her heart, she hadn’t believed he would attack her. “Don’t—”

His mouth touched the gash over her ribs. The deep hurt of it eased. Warmth and light replaced the pain,

and joy stitched new flesh, sealing the wound.

“Rafe.” Hands raised to push him away closed on his shoulders. She felt the hurt she’d done him and caressed the smooth skin.

He groaned and his tongue licked the fading scar line. “Mischa—”