The Sheikh's Impatient Virgin

Kim Lawrence

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The innocent’s awakening…Set up against her will as a potential Arabian queen for the notorious Sheikh Karim, unworldly Eva has a plan to deter the desert King. She will convince him she’s a modern, sexually experienced woman – and definitely not marriage material.However, the next thing she knows, Eva’s still a virgin – but she’s also become a bride! And her new husband is having a startling effect on her… She finds herself increasingly impatient; could it be that she wants the renowned playboy prince to bed her?

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When Karim finally lifted his head they were both breathing hard. 'Oh, God!' Eva sighed, unpeeling her arms from his neck as he placed her back on her feet.

Karim gave a thin-lipped smile. 'You want it so badly you can taste it…' His voice trailed off as he looked at her and felt need flood through his body. He had never needed a woman…*wanted,* but not *needed.*

It was suddenly very important to Karim to prove this had not changed—that what he was feeling now was a reaction to the weeks of stress and the sudden release of tension.

'You want me so badly that you'll beg me to take you.'

The taunt brought a rosy flush of outrage to her cheeks. 'Never!' she choked.

Kim Lawrence lives on a farm in rural Anglesey. She runs two miles daily and finds this an excellent opportunity to unwind and seek inspiration for her writing! It also helps her keep up with her husband, two active sons, and the various stray animals which have adopted them. Always a fanatical consumer of fiction, she is now equally enthusiastic about writing. She loves a happy ending!

The Sheikh’s Impatient Virgin

by

Kim Lawrence

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To Peter, for telling me I can and learning to cook

Chapter One

'LET me get this straight.'

Luke was looking at her as though he expected her to produce a punchline.

'You're some sort of…' he paused for dramatic effect, pushing his floppy blond fringe from his eyes before adding with a half-smile '…princess? Princess Evie…?'

He chuckled.

Eva did not join him, but she had some sympathy for his skepticism. She had taken some convincing herself when on her mother's death the previous year a family she had not known existed had materialised—and not just any family!

She hooked her fingers into the belt loops of her jeans, stuck out her chin haughtily and tossed her plait over her shoulder before asking in a hurt voice, 'Are you saying I don't look regal?'

Luke Prentice could think of many terms, including *gorgeous* and *sexy* to describe the daughter of a woman who had been, in the small world of academia at least, a legend in her own lifetime.

He had no idea if Eva knew her mother had seduced him when he had been an eighteen-year-old student taking one of her classes to broaden his horizons—she had *definitely* broadened them—but he did know he stood no chance with the daughter, a situation Luke was philosophical about. Though he was something of a novice when it came to platonic relationships with women, he did find Eva's company kind of relaxing.

'I can't say I've ever associated freckles and red hair with Middle Eastern royalty before.'

Eva expelled a deep sigh and admitted, 'Me, neither.'

Even now it all seemed a little surreal. Her mother—her lovely, academically brilliant mother—had not been the single parent Eva had always believed, but the estranged wife of an Arab prince. Not a prince high in the pecking order, admittedly. The King, her grandfather—*King,* now *that* was still *seriously* weird—had produced nine sons and her father had been the youngest.

But he had been a prince and, as her uncle Hamid had explained when he had arrived at the funeral in his big black limousine with its bullet-proof windows, she was a princess, and he had produced the documentation to prove it.

Despite the fact her mother had always preached independence to her daughter, in a secret corner of her heart Eva had longed for a family, and now she had one. It had felt like fate when at the most terrible moment in her life and feeling utterly, totally alone she had found herself drawn into the heart of a large and exotic family.

Now of course she was learning there were drawbacks and a price for being part of this family. Still, she remained confident she could steer a course through this new obstacle diplomatically and maintain the relationship she valued with her grandfather.

'Princess Eva…? What is this really about, Evie?'

Eva struggled to contain her impatience. 'I've already told you.' Luke, the youngest professor of Economics in the history of the college, was not normally so slow on the uptake.

'But your mum wasn't married. Not that she was lacking male company…' He flashed Eva an apologetic look. 'No offence intended.'

'None taken,' Eva promised. Her mother had never attempted to hide her lovers, many considerably younger than herself. The relationships, or 'throwaway lovers' as her mother had termed them, had never lasted long, but unlike the rest, Luke had remained a friend.

It often struck Eva as ironic that her sexually liberated mother, who had discussed such matters with painful—for Eva at least—frankness, had produced a daughter who was still a virgin at twenty-three…Perhaps this was her own personal rebellion? On the other hand it was possible she just had a low sex drive—a depressing thought.

‘It turns out she was, but she had a big bust-up with my dad.’ A wistful expression drifted into Eva’s eyes; she really wished she had had the opportunity to know him.

She had studied photos of him and the portrait that hung beside those of his brothers in the palace and could see no trace of him in her own features, but then there was little of her mother’s classical beauty to be seen in her face, either.

Maybe she was a changeling? Though according to her mother Eva had inherited her fair skin, freckles and red hair from her own grandmother, who had been Irish.

‘So they got divorced?’

Eva shook her head. ‘No, he died in a boating accident before they could make the separation legal.’

Luke carried on looking astounded and not quite sure this was not part of some elaborate joke. ‘And you didn’t know any of this until your mum died?’

‘No.’

‘And now you want me to shack up with you?’

Eva frowned and snorted. ‘In your dreams.’

This drew a grin from Luke, who shrugged and mused with a leer, ‘How well you know me, Evie.’

‘My grandfather thinks it’s his duty to marry me off and before you say anything I know this is the twenty-first century, but that’s the way he thinks. It’s been instilled in him since birth that a woman needs the protection of her family or a husband. I think in time he’ll see that I’m more than capable of looking after myself, but I’m his only granddaughter. There’s plenty of boys but I’m the only girl.’ So Eva was making allowances and, to give him his due, so was her grandfather.

‘In the meantime he’ll force you to marry this guy who might have halitosis or a beer gut…’

‘No beer,’ Eva said, recalling that, beer or not, several of her male uncles and cousins carried more than a few extra pounds around their middles. ‘Or for that matter, coercion.’

‘But they do expect you to marry…what’s his name?’

‘Karim Al-Nasr,’ Eva supplied, her brow puckering at the thought of her prospective spouse. He would certainly make a politically expedient husband.

King Hassan had obviously considered it a good sales pitch when he had brought babies into the conversation. Though Eva had no problem with babies—she definitely wanted some of her own one day—when they were mentioned in connection with a man she had never met, her first instinct was to run!

‘No, they won’t force me, but if I don’t, which clearly I am not going to, it will feel like I’m throwing all their kindness and warmth back in their faces.

‘I know it seems weird to you and me, Luke, but it is their way. I just thought it would be a lot easier if it was this Prince Karim who did the rejecting.’

‘And you not being some innocent virgin is going to be a deal breaker, Eva?’

Her eyes dropped. ‘They’re very traditional.’

‘Nobody’s *that* traditional, Eva.’

Eva smiled and thought, *You’d be amazed!*

‘This is, as you’ve already mentioned, the twenty-first century and you haven’t spent the last twenty-three years in some cloistered desert palace.’ His eyes made the journey from the top of her glossy head to her size-five feet and he sighed. ‘Also you are exceptionally hot.’

Eva accepted the compliment and the mock leer that went with it with a roll of her eyes and a dry, ‘And they say romance is dead.’ She didn’t like the worryingly speculative light that had appeared in Luke’s blue eyes as he removed his glasses and stared hard at her again. She could almost see the cogs turning as she added a shade uncomfortably, ‘Shall we leave my sexual credentials out of this, Luke? Will you or won’t you?’

‘Pretend to be your live-in lover?’ He carried on looking at her in a way that made Eva uneasy and loosed a laugh, adding, ‘Try and stop me.’

Eva clapped her hands in relief. ‘You’re an angel.’

‘And you’re a virgin,’ Luke announced, his grin broadening as her blush confirmed his suspicions. ‘The girl who is writing her thesis on how the sexual revolution affects twenty-first-century woman is a virgin princess!’ He rubbed his hands together gleefully. ‘I just love it!’

‘Shut up and put your razor in my bathroom.’

‘Now that is an offer no man could refuse.’

The doctor, a physician renowned in the field of childhood cancers, did not normally feel apprehensive when he dealt sound advice to parents. Especially exhausted ones like this father, who had stood beside his daughter’s bed for four days straight.

But he felt a tremor run through him as he approached the tall, imposing figure who, despite the fatigue that was etched in every line of his stern, hawkish features and the classic glassy look of total exhaustion in his disturbing penetrating platinum eyes, was standing ramrod straight, staring out of the window as the nurses made the slight figure in the bed comfortable.

Every so often he would turn and look at the figure, the pain in his eyes when he thought no one was observing belying the stern composure of his expression.

‘Prince Karim?’

The tall man turned his head. ‘There is news?’

The doctor, struggling to maintain eye contact, shook his head. This was not a man who looked as if he would be receptive to advice, and, though he gave the impression of someone who had iron control over his emotions, under the surface there was an almost *combustible* quality. This disturbing characteristic had become more conspicuous the longer he had gone without rest. ‘As I said, Prince, we will not know the results until tomorrow.’

‘But if the levels are within the safety parameters you will continue?’

The doctor nodded. ‘We will, but you do realise that even if we are able to continue with the treatment, there are no guarantees…This treatment is still unproven.’

The man’s cautious manner was beginning to irritate Karim. What was the point of caution at a time like this? A time when doing nothing would mean Amira died.

His thoughts veered sharply away from the possibility—the doctors warned probability—he utterly rejected. The muscle that ticked like a time bomb in his lean jaw was half hidden by the day’s growth of stubble that shadowed his lower face as he clenched his fists at his sides and thought, *It will not happen.*

Ignoring the painful white light that exploded behind his eyes when he turned his head sharply and suppressing the primal urge to hit out, he responded with careful stilted courtesy to the medic.

‘I am aware of the statistics, Doctor.’ His glance slid to the heavily sedated figure in the bed, a person who had nothing to do with cold number-crunching, and he felt rage at the sheer helplessness of the situation. A man who normally had no problem facing the reality of a situation, he was breaking all his own rules.

It was his job to care for his child, to make her safe; relinquishing that role to others went against every instinct he had.

‘Prince, I really think you should rest.’

‘I’m fine.’

Despite his instant impatient dismissal of the suggestion, at one level Karim was aware that his vigil was beginning to have both physical and mental consequences.

His reflexes were slow, his thought processes…well, they were worse than slow. He struggled to concentrate on the simplest of tasks, and when he had signed the papers that Tariq had without explanation held out for his signature—Tariq had been a tower of silent, stolid strength—the tremor in his hand had rendered his signature virtually illegible.

‘Your daughter does not know you are here. She is heavily sedated.’

Karim’s lips compressed. He knew he would be of little use to his daughter if he could not function. ‘I will be here when she wakes.’

‘Of course, but in the meantime you could get a few hours’ rest. We have rooms here…’

There was a pause before Karim reluctantly nodded his head.

The doctor, who had been standing there with his fingers crossed, let out a sigh of relief. ‘Fine, I will arrange for—’

‘Just give Tariq the details,’ Karim said, already losing interest in the conversation as he walked back to his daughter’s bedside.

The doctor, who found the man in question—an individual of indeterminate age who wore full traditional dress and possessed a face that looked as though it had been carved from granite—only slightly more approachable than his royal master, gave a weak smile of assent.

‘The room is *adequate,*’ Tariq said, managing despite his colourless tone to suggest that it was anything but. He inclined his head respectfully and held the door. ‘I will wake you in four hours.’

‘Two hours.’

‘As you wish,’ the man who was officially designated his aide, but was in reality a great deal more, agreed, managing despite his respectful tone to convey extreme disapproval. ‘I will position the guards at the end of the corridor. I have left a cup of tea by your bedside—it might help you sleep.’

‘Fine,’ Karim said, following the direction of Tariq’s nod with his eyes but very little interest.

He was sure that had the guards decided to tap dance outside his room it wouldn’t prevent him sleeping.

It turned out he was wrong. Far from sliding into blissful unconsciousness the moment he lay down, his brain went into overdrive.

For half an hour he lay there staring at the ceiling, tasting the bitter aftertaste left by the herbal tea he had obediently swallowed even though he hated the stuff, a fact Tariq was aware of—it was an uncharacteristic oversight on his part. He was conscious of an intense overwhelming weariness in every cell of his body, but his brain just wouldn’t turn off.

Karim’s thoughts continued to go around in nightmarish circles until finally he snapped his fingers and inhaled. ‘Enough is enough!’ he said as he levered himself into an upright position, ignoring as he did so the extra throb of pain in his head.

He glanced at the metal-banded watch on his wrist as he shrugged on the jacket he had dropped on a chair, then, dragging a hand through his hair, walked to the door.

He might, he decided, take a walk outside before he returned to Amira’s room.

As he emerged into the corridor the guards stationed down at the far end remained unconscious of his approach; halfway there he stopped and retraced his steps. If he was going to take a walk to clear his head and escape the claustrophobic hospital atmosphere, it would be pleasant for once in his life not to have his steps dogged.

Amazingly Karim encountered no one else as he made his way to the conveniently placed fire exit, down the steps and out of the building. It was raining outside but he barely registered the moisture streaming down his face as he began to walk across the gravel, his thoughts drifting back over the weeks since Amira had been diagnosed.

It barely seemed credible that only a month ago his life had been normal, a mere four weeks since he had first noticed the purple shadows beneath her eyes…*how long had they been there?*

What sort of father did not *know* such a thing?

Pushing aside the guilt he inevitably felt when he considered the shortcomings in his parenting skills, he recalled bringing up the subject with Amira’s governess.

‘It seems to me that Amira has been tired often lately?’ He waited, wanting her to politely dismiss his comment as that of an overanxious parent.

She didn’t.

The suggestion initially brought a slight defensive stiffening to the middle-aged woman's narrow shoulders, then as she considered his words Karim saw a speaking flicker of concern cross her face.

His own unease immediately solidified into apprehension.

'Well, I suppose she has seemed a little lethargic lately…' she conceded. 'But she's an active child…'

Not active enough to explain the bruises he had seen on her arms.

Karim felt an icy fist of dread clutch in his belly. It was not his custom to waste time worrying about problems that might not even exist, but where his daughter was concerned his normal practice went out of the window.

When Amira had been born, Karim had been determined that the child should not suffer for her mother's deception or his own stupidity. He would, he had decided, act towards the child that bore his name the same way he would have had she been his flesh and blood—which as far as the rest of the world was concerned she was.

When the baby had arrived eight months after the wedding most had pretended not to be able to do the maths, though his father had given his son an indulgent wry look and commented on the impatience of the young, and his cousins had indulged in the odd joking comment. Their reactions might have been less amused if they had known the truth—if they had known that, far from anticipating his wedding vows, he had never slept with his wife, who had chosen their wedding night to inform him that she was carrying another man's child.

Despite this vow Karim had never expected to *feel* the emotions that a man felt for his own child, but he had been wrong. Her mother had lain still heavily sedated when the screaming wet bundle had been placed in his arms and he had been utterly unprepared for the rush of feeling that had washed over him.

The screaming red-faced scrap had seemed to look directly at him, and by the time she had stopped crying Karim's heart had been firmly in the clenched little baby fist.

The baby was now eight and the situation had not changed, except since her mother's death two years earlier he was the only one who knew the secret—Amira was not his biological daughter.

Now the doctor knew. When the subject of marrow donation had arisen Karim had been forced to admit that it was unlikely he would be suitable, and then responding to the medic's tactful probing he had revealed that he had no idea who her biological father was.

For the first time he had cause to bitterly regret his lack of interest in the identity of his wife's married lover. If he had asked the question there might be someone out there who could help Amira.

But he hadn't asked.

Of course, if he had loved Zara, Karim might have wanted to torture himself with the details, but he had not. And a day did not go by that Karim was not grateful for this and his apparent inability to fall in love. History was littered by men left destroyed and humbled when the women they loved had cheated and deceived them.

It was not a situation that Karim ever intended to place himself in. If he ever had been a romantic his marriage had opened his eyes to the dangers of that condition. No, he would marry for duty; for love or, rather, sex, he would look elsewhere.

Chapter Two

WHEN he spotted the car parked on the kerb on the other side of the narrow road, Karim's first thought was that his bodyguard escort had seen him leaving the precinct of the hospital earlier… How much earlier?

He frowned as he attempted to clear the fog in his brain and tried to think…Why could he not think? His glance drifted downwards, and the permanent groove between his darkly delineated eyebrows deepened. He was wet. He brushed a hand across the fabric of his saturated suit and said out loud, 'Very wet.'

Suggesting…suggesting what? Karim, struggling to make the mental connection, lifted his face to the rain. He stood there with it streaming over his face and realised he had no conscious recollection of leaving the hospital precinct. He felt a surge of impatience. Presumably, as he had not just materialised here, he had done so. What was that taste in his mouth?

Of course…Tariq's tea—he had slipped away to get some air.

To get some air, but he had obviously got more air than he'd intended and, though he had unintentionally escaped the hospital precinct, he had not escaped the dark thoughts that gnawed with the merciless precision of a surgical blade into his head—he had brought them with him.

He had to get back from here, but where, he wondered, scanning the street he found himself in, was here? He recognised nothing, including the men in the parked car. Men who would, if they were any good at their job, have noticed him before he had registered them.

They were paid to be observant; they were paid when required to blend into the background. They were blending and if he had not been watched and guarded all his life, Karim would not have given the anonymous vehicle a second glance—but he had.

It said a lot about his frame of mind that he only glanced with mild curiosity towards the building they were watching as he squinted in the dim light to bring the name on the red brick façade into focus.

Church Mansions…a grand name for a not very grand building, a typical Edwardian villa divided like most in the street into flats. The groove between his dark brows deepened as he impatiently pushed away a hank of wet hair that dripped a steady stream of water droplets into his eyes from his forehead.

Now why, he puzzled, did that name seem familiar? And why could he not string two syllables together, let alone two thoughts?

Then as he was turning to retrace his steps it hit him: this was where King Hassan's granddaughter lived. This was the address where on Thursday evening he had been meant to pick her up. The arrangement had been made prior to Amira's diagnosis—presumably Tariq, his right-hand man, had made his apologies.

What day was it now? Thursday, no Friday…just, and now he was here, led by what…fate?

Karim did not believe in the arbitrary hand of providence; the idea of not being in charge of his own destiny was total anathema to him. A man made his own fate; he took responsibility for his own decisions, the bad ones and the good ones.

Was this a bad one? he wondered as he scanned the names on the doorplate until he found the one he was searching for.

There was a logical reason for his decision, though in truth at that moment it eluded him, but it would be logical and probably to do with duty. He shook his head in the vain hope of clearing his tangled thoughts—the lift wasn't working so he took the stairs—his life involved a lot of duty.

It had been duty that had made him agree to the meeting with this girl, the meeting that had never happened.

He had agreed out of duty and respect for Hassan Al-Hakim, King of Azharim, a country that shared a border with Zuhaymi. The two desert states had been allies for many years, as had the royal families, but before that they had been traditional enemies.

King Hassan was not the first to suggest that it was time he married again, but he was the first to actually suggest a possible bride.

'You don't need me to point out your duty, Karim, but while you are without a wife every politically ambitious ruling family lives in hope, they plot and connive. Being born who you are has given you status, power and wealth, but at a price. A hereditary leader's first duty is to his country and people. They look to you for stability, a sense of continuity and permanence—an heir…'

'And preferably a couple of spares.'

His flippancy, though not appreciated, had been tolerated, but it was not in the same league as refusing to meet the granddaughter of his neighbour with a view to marriage. Such an insult might not have returned the respective countries to war status, but it would have strained the relationship, so Karim had been willing to go through the motions and treat the suggestion with the gravity it did not deserve.

Karim could readily appreciate the King's desire to see his granddaughter married, and of course by birth this girl fulfilled all the criteria for a royal bride.

But birth was not the only consideration.

Karim was one of the few who were privy to the story of the lost princess who had been ignorant of her birthright. It made for good romance and an even better headline when the media found out, which to his mind was inevitable. But to expect a woman brought up knowing nothing of tradition to take on such a role as his wife would be called upon to perform would be like expecting a ten-year-old to conduct a lecture on astrophysics!

Karim knew he had to marry and his expectations were realistic. He was not expecting to find a soul mate to make his wife—if such things existed outside the pages of romances—though someone who didn't actively dislike the idea of sharing his bed would be a step up from the first time.

But the lost princess would not be his first or last choice.

And anyway there was no hurry—he was enjoying his freedom and he was only thirty-two. Young, but not as young as some—Amira was eight.

And he would have given all he had to exchange places with her. An image of her little face beneath the cap she'd taken to wearing since the chemo had made her sweet curls fall out flashed across his vision. If ever he had been under the illusion that life was either fair or certain he had learnt otherwise over the past weeks.

Pushing aside the dark thoughts, he concentrated on taking the next shallow, slightly shabby step and then the next. Best not to think too far ahead…marriage too was far in the future. Why marry now when he was enjoying his freedom, and enjoying sex without guilt or responsibility? He mentally skimmed over the post-coital emptiness that, had he been a man given to introspection, might have bothered him.

Of course, if Amira had been a boy things would have been different. Marriage would not be on his agenda and there would not be the ever-present pressure from those advising him to marry.

Karim did not need others to point out his duty. He would eventually have to remarry and provide the much-desired heir.

His face relaxed into a half-smile that briefly warmed the bleakness of his platinum eyes as his thoughts returned to his daughter. It amazed him that two people who could only make each other so unhappy had produced such a marvellous, perfect little creature.

It was 1:00 a.m. when Eva decided to head for a shower as she was too wound up and plain mad to sleep. Irrational really. It wasn't as if she'd wanted him to turn up, but bad manners were bad manners even if she had no complaint about the result.

Her night had started badly and gone steadily downhill. For starters her computer had crashed and she'd lost a week's work, and then the manager in the hotel bar where she worked to supplement her adequate but not generous post-grad funding had rung to ask her to cover a shift.

An offer she'd had to refuse so next time he wouldn't ask her first, and with her computer on the blink she could do with the cash. Not that she was really broke—the startlingly generous allowance her grandfather had insisted on making her was sitting in the bank where it was going to stay. Using it somehow felt too much like relinquishing her freedom.

God, this entire day had been a waste. As if she didn't have anything better to do than spend hours deciding what to wear that was completely unsuitable and more hours artistically arranging Luke's personal items in her bathroom and several articles of his clothing around her flat to suggest cohabitation.

Of course she should have recognised the Prince wasn't exactly keen as mustard when a flunky had rung to arrange the date a month previously—he clearly had a busy calendar.

'Damn man!' she muttered, kicking off her shoes. In a mood of righteous indignation she removed the rest of her unsuitable outfit. 'Who does the man think he is anyway? Other than rich and powerful…obviously common courtesy and good manners don't apply to royalty.'

It was just a pity, she reflected, that not all the men in her life were letting her down tonight.

Luke had arrived on cue. 'Where is he?'

'Not here.'

Her tetchy tone had not been lost on Luke, who had not done the tactful thing and vanished but instead had hung around, wanting the gruesome details, enjoying immensely the joke at her expense.

Eva liked to think that she didn't take herself seriously, that she could laugh at herself with the best, but there were limits and someone laughing his socks off because she'd been stood up was definitely over her limit.

She'd been pretty cranky and terribly unappreciative with Luke, but anyone who observed with a grin, 'Looks like the guy is not as enthusiastic as you thought, Princess,' in her opinion deserved cranky!

Luke had carried on digging the hole when he'd added, 'You've got to appreciate the irony, Evie!'

At this point Eva had opened the door and invited him to leave, ignoring the jibe about a sense-of-humour bypass.

As she stepped into the shower, Eva decided to draw a line under the entire 'prince's prospective bride' scenario. If the wretched man's flunky rang back to schedule a meeting again, she would be washing her hair.

In the meantime she was revolving in the warm spray of the shower when she heard the strident shrill of the doorbell.

Damn! It would be Luke, who, since he had made the big move out to the leafy suburbs, had got into the annoying habit of using her sofa when he had missed his last train home. Well, actually, she didn't normally find it annoying, but tonight she wasn't feeling exactly hospitable.

Lifting her face briefly to the water to rinse off the remnants of soap, she pulled off the shower cap and shook out her hair before fighting her way into a towelling robe, muttering, 'Hold your horses,' under her breath as she dashed to answer the door.

This time her sofa was *not* going to be available even if Luke did the 'pathetic puppy dog' look.

Her problem, she told herself, was she was too damned *nice,* and niceness, as her mother had always told her, was an open invitation for people to walk all over you.

Was it any wonder she got stood up? She clearly sent out victim messages even over the phone!

Mid-mental rant, she came to an abrupt halt when she saw the shadow of a large figure through the frosted glass of the door.

Too large to be Luke?

Surely the damned Prince wouldn't have the cheek to think she'd still be dutifully waiting until he deigned to show up? Her eyes narrowed wrathfully at the idea as she reached up and slid the bolt on the door. In his world did women wait patiently? Eva's temper fizzed. For sheer, mind-numbing vanity, this man really did take the cake.

Sucking in a deep sustaining breath, she really couldn't wait to explain that she only gave a man one chance and he'd blown his. Pleased with the line, she closed her eyes before pinning a combative smile on her face and checking the towelling robe was covering everything it ought. It was and more —it reached her toes.

She opened the door with a flourish.

The tall figure who had been standing with his back to the door turned and Eva's vocal cords froze. Actually pretty much everything she had, including her ability to think—correction, *especially* her ability to think—froze.

Chapter Three

FOR some reason Eva had been expecting the Prince to in some way resemble the royal male relatives of her new family—well, he was both male and royal—who were squarely built men whose height enabled them to carry the extra pounds that most did indeed carry.

The man she tilted her head up to look at was indeed tall but he had no spare pounds. Not that Eva immediately registered his lean, athletic frame—it was his face that initially totally transfixed her.

Never had she expected to connect beauty to a face that was so essentially masculine—if you made an exception for the sweep of those curling ebony eyelashes that any woman would have traded an inch of cleavage for.

But he was beautiful, each sybaritic carved line and sculpted angle of the face she gazed at, from the sternly sensual mouth, slashing cheekbones, strong jaw, strongly defined dark brows to the spookily silver—*really silver*—eyes was without flaw. Even his skin was flawless, a deep even gold.

Eva gathered her wits and, expelling a tiny gusty sigh, closed her mouth with an audible click. Her lashes came down in a protective screen as she dropped her chin and took a deep sustaining breath.

This was really her prince?

The one her grandfather had conceded was *quite* goodlooking when pressed.

Well, not *hers,* obviously. Men like this did not *belong* to women who looked like her, though *belonged* was actually the wrong word. *Belonged* implied a degree of domestication that she was unable to mentally connect with this feral, though admittedly completely magnificent creature.

He might be dressed in western clothes, but this was not his natural habitat. It was not a leap to imagine him framed against a cerulean desert sky, his tall, lean frame covered in flowing desert robes.

Eva imagined it and felt her stomach muscles quiver at the sybaritic image…what was her grandfather thinking of? Suitable match, he'd said! *Suitable*? For heaven's sake, they were about as suited as an Arab stallion and a shaggy Shetland pony!

One thing was clear, she realised as she lifted her chin and tried to collect her wits, her elaborate plans to convince him she was unsuitable were fairly pointless. This tall man who oozed male arrogance from every perfect pore was not going to buy what was on offer.

On offer…like I'm a commodity on a market stall! Eva's temper cut through the thrall that had held her immobile. She opened her mouth to say something cold and cutting, but before she could the eyes that had been focused on some place over her left shoulder suddenly connected with her own.

The unfocused blankness and lack of recognition, the pain mirrored in those silvery depths, sent the words from her head.

The last time she had seen an expression like that it had been in the eyes of a young man who had stood watching the car he had been thrown from consumed by tongues of orange flames.

'I should be in that,' he had said over and over when Eva, along with another driver who had pulled off the road to help, had tried to pull him back from the heat.

Shock, the paramedics, after one glance at the shivering figure, had explained as they led him to the ambulance.

She angled an assessing glance at her late-night caller, and struggled to be objective. It was hard when the person you were trying to be objective about oozed animal magnetism…It was frankly distracting even for someone like her, who did not go for the muscular macho type.

As she continued to subject the strong lines of his handsome face to a critical scrutiny the last sparks of annoyance in her green eyes morphed into anxiety. Despite that sinfully sexy mouth he did have the look of the walking wounded.

Had the Prince done the equivalent of walking away from a burning car? She was no paramedic, but the man standing there looking back at her but, she suspected, not actually seeing her seemed to

be suffering from a similar trauma. And if the purple shadows under his eyes and the deep lines of strain bracketing his sensual mouth were any indicator, galloping exhaustion.

Concern conquered caution, common sense and instinct—the latter was telling her to close the door. She heaved a sigh and tried to inject a note of enthusiasm into her voice as she said abruptly, 'You'd better come inside. I'm assuming you are the Prince?' It didn't seem a big assumption considering the hauteur he projected even in this clearly tormented condition.

He started slightly at the sound of her voice as if he'd forgotten she was there and his glazed eyes narrowed on her face. Eva was conscious of a strange sensation trickling down her spine.

'I'm Karim Al-Nasr.' The furrow between his dark brows deepened as his eyes swept her upturned features. There was too much intelligence lurking in those troubled depths to call his expression vacant, but he continued to look at her with an uncomprehending lack of recognition and the sensation she had noted stopped being a tickle and turned into a flood that spread out across her skin, crackling like an unearthed electrical current just beneath the surface.

'I'm not sure why I'm here.' His eyes narrowed to silver slits. 'Do I know you?' His voice dropped to little more than a husky murmur as his veiled glance brushed across her bright head, following the fall of the tousled curls as they fell down her shoulders. It made the fine hair on Eva's arms stand on end.

'Red hair, like flames…'

Heavens! The man could invite sin with a single syllable.

Eve had read of bedroom voices, but this was the first time she'd ever heard one—deep with an abrasive rasp beneath the rich velvet smoothness that was wickedly seductive.

'I wouldn't have forgotten that.'

He sounded as positive as she had yet heard him about this and Eva self-consciously reached a hand to drag a tangled Titian skein from her face.

'Once seen never forgotten.' Which for some people might be a good thing, but for someone like Eva, who didn't enjoy drawing attention to herself, it was not. 'We had a date, Prince,' she reminded him bluntly.

And after all the names she had called him it looked as if he had a legitimate excuse not to show. What she wasn't sure of was why he had shown up now, here of all places.

The frown that dug grooves into his broad smooth forehead tugged his strongly defined ebony brows into a straight line above his patrician nose.

'Did we…? Yes, you're King Hassan's lost princess…' The comprehension that had flared in his eyes faded as he appeared to lose track of what he was saying once more.

From the look on his face Eva got the strong impression that the place his thoughts had gone was not fun. *Lost,* he'd called her—it looked to Eva as if he were the lost one!

As she watched he swayed slightly and put out a hand to steady himself, clearly dead on his feet. Struggling against a swell of empathy, Eva let the hand she'd instinctively raised fall back to her side.

Even though her next move was obvious and Eva had never had trouble extending a helping hand to someone in trouble in her life, continuing to encourage this man over her threshold was one of the hardest things she had ever done.

Not only was she utterly sure that under normal circumstances he was the total antithesis of vulnerable, but she knew—every instinct, particularly the ones that did not work on a logical level, was telling her—that the kindly gesture would have unforeseen repercussions.

You're being dramatic, Eva, she told herself, squaring her shoulders and murmuring, 'Get a grip.' Anyway, what choice did she have? She could hardly close the door in his face. Gritting her teeth, she took a sustaining gulp of air and, reaching out, laid a hand tentatively on his arm.

He appeared not to notice the hand, but she noticed the muscular hardness—it was hard to miss.

'Come inside, erm…Prince,' she said, pitching her voice to a soothing level as her fingers closed over muscles that did not give. *Bad idea,* said the voice in her head as her unselective stomach muscles responded to the innocent contact with a less than innocent series of butterfly kicks.

'Inside…?' she repeated hoarsely.

After a moment he responded. Eva's relief was short-lived as the voice in her head very legitimately asked once more, *What do you think you're doing, Eva?*

She said, 'Duck,' a moment too late and he didn't. The top of his dark head—the man towered over her; he had to be at least six four—connected in a glancing blow that he appeared not to notice with the doorjamb.

'Oh, my God, be careful!' she groaned.

Explaining a royal prince with a fractured skull to the emergency services would really make the day complete.

'Are you all right?'

'All right?' Karim repeated, lifting a hand to his head. His fingers came away damp and stained red. He couldn't feel a thing, he felt weirdly disconnected from his body. Sleep deprivation, he thought as he made a concerted effort to clear the fog in his brain and in a moment of lucidity thought this was more than lack of sleep. Before he could figure what the more was, the moment passed.

He still retained the recognition that he ought not to be here. He was meant to be at the hospital…Amira was there and his inability to do anything was driving him slowly out of his mind.

How ironic was it he could influence the political stability of an entire region with a few well-considered words, he could transform the day to save the lives of an entire community by delivering power and running water, but when it came to his own child he was powerless…he had to stand and watch as she endured pain…as *she slipped away from him?*

He should prepare himself. Karim closed his eyes, rejecting the advice.

Preparing implied a resignation that he did not and would not feel.

'I should go,' he said, inhaling the scent of this woman's body and wanting not to stop.

Please, Eva thought, and immediately felt guilty. It was odd, but when she looked at him her usually abundant kindness to strangers went out of the window. Any number of other things happened when she looked, but Eva was grimly determined not to go there.

Where's your heart, Eva? she asked herself. She wouldn't show a stray cat the door looking as he did. Of course, he wasn't a stray cat, and if he had been this would have been a lot simpler.

'I think you should sit down for a moment, Mr…Prince.' The title sounded so ludicrous she fought off a smile. Then as she tilted her head back to look into his face, she lost all desire to smile… He really was stupendous to look at. 'I could call a doctor…?'

'No doctor!' The hazy look was gone from the eyes that drilled into her like silvered surgical scalpels.

'All right,' she said, not willing to push the point. It was, after all, none of her business. 'A cup of tea, then.'

'A cup of tea?' he repeated with a frown.

'I don't have anything stronger,' she said apologetically, thinking, More's the pity. She could do with something to steady her nerves.

His glazed gaze strayed from her face, wandered towards her hair, and an expression of edgy fascination that made her heart rate quicken spread across his lean face.

He lifted his hand and reached out. The gesture had all the hallmarks of compulsion as he touched her hair. Eva stiffened and thought, *Don't just stand there, do something,* as she felt the light pressure of his long fingers moving across the silky surface.

In her head she had pulled back; in reality she stayed nailed to the spot, her heart racing as he lifted one strand and then another and let them fall through his fingers. As his brown fingers sank deeper, grazing her scalp, a tremor that reached her toes passed through Eva's body.

'Like silk…a flame…'

His voice broke the spell and with a gasp she stepped back, breathing hard. She dragged both hands through her hair, tucking it behind her ears as she tightened the knot on her towel and cleared her throat. The entire 'naked under the layer of towelling' thing had intensified the illicit thrill of being touched with such casual intimacy by this incredible-looking stranger.

'Look, I think…' She stopped. He wasn't looking, at least not at her, which was a relief. It made it easier for her to think, not to mention breathe. If what this man exuded like a force field could be isolated and marketed no woman would be safe!

And she'd invited him in. *Really great idea, Eva*!

'Sit down,' she suggested hopefully—if he didn't move of his own accord, she was in trouble. He was a big man and all of it was solid muscle.

Do not go there, Eva, she told herself as her stomach flipped.

'For God's sake, sit down or…' She felt alarm and then relief when he took a step away from the sofa and folded his long length into her overstuffed wing-backed armchair. 'Great.'

Now what, Eva?

Eva turned a deaf ear to the unhelpful voice and, frowning and praying for inspiration, dropped down on her knees beside the chair.

'Are you all right?' Eva rolled her eyes and bit her lip thinking, *Sure, he's great, Eva—that's why he's sitting there with his face in his hands.*

She ground her teeth in sheer frustration. This man probably had an entire army of people to look after him. Why had she decided to play Florence Nightingale? She wasn't even very good at it!

'Is there someone I can call for you?' She laid a tentative hand on his arm and felt the vibration of the invisible tremors that ran through his tense body. 'My God, you're wet through!' she exclaimed, belatedly registering his wet hair and even wetter clothes. 'We should get you out of these things, erm, sheikh…Prince.' She stopped the mental image in her head causing colour to flood her face. 'Maybe not…' she added hoarsely as she sat back on her heels.

She swallowed as her eyes were drawn of their own volition to the golden skin of his throat where his tie had been pulled askew. His saturated white shirt clung like a second skin and Eva, seeing the shadow through it of dark body hair on his chest, averted her eyes quickly, but not before her stomach had lurched.

She scrambled hastily to her feet—at least he was in no condition to notice the scalding blush of shame that washed over her skin.

'You wait there. I'll get you something dry.' Her eyes flickered to the blood on his forehead. 'And something to put on that head.' She cast a worried look at the blood oozing from the small but seemingly deep cut on his forehead. 'Don't move,' she added sternly as she tightened the towelling robe across her heaving bosom and ran from the room, not waiting to see if her words had registered with him.

She really needed some time out to regain her equilibrium. In the bedroom she closed the door and leaned against it with her eyes closed. She lifted a hand to her head. It was shaking and her palm was clammy with nervous sweat. Maybe it was a proximity thing but she had never encountered anyone that had such a *visceral* effect on her before.

Not the best time for her dormant hormones to kick in. She had to…what…? She frowned in concentration and struggled to focus her thoughts. For a start get some clothes on. She pulled on the fresh pair of pyjamas laid out on the bed.

What she needed, she decided, picking up a tartan throw from the bed, was a number of someone to call for him. Or even an address and she could call a taxi and put him in it. Calling her grandfather's number for advice was the very last resort. She was still shaky on royal protocol, but she was assuming it was a given that her present situation broke several rules and, though they had cut her a lot of slack and put down several of her worst faux pas to ignorance, this might be pushing it.

She ducked into her tiny en-suite shower room and snatched up a couple of towels from the linen hamper before heading back into the sitting room.

Chapter Four

'I'VE got…' She stopped, her mouth falling open as the towel fell from her nerveless fingers.

On autopilot, she stepped over the wet shirt and jacket on the floor and whispered hoarsely, *'Oh, God!'*

Her agitated comment went unheard because her guest, his dark head cushioned against the wing-back armchair, was asleep.

Deeply asleep.

Deeply asleep and half naked, the upper half.

Thank God for small mercies!

A laugh that had more than a hint of hysteria in it left her throat as Eva ran her tongue across her dry lips. There was a naked man in her sitting room—a naked man who had a body that would have put the average Greek god to shame.

Feeling like a voyeur but unable to stop herself, Eva gazed curiously over the sleeping figure. He lay half on his side, one arm flung above his head. His build was powerful but greyhound lean, and he didn't carry an ounce of excess flesh on his gleaming torso to conceal the perfect muscular development of his broad chest, powerful shoulders and muscle-ridged flat belly.

He had the perfectly toned body of an athlete at the height of his powers.

Eva approached, breath held. Up closer she could see that the even bronze of his skin had a satiny gleam. It reminded her of dull gold. The light dusting of body hair on his chest terminated in a thin line that ran across his belly and, like a directional arrow, then vanished into the waistband of his trousers. His powerful chest rose and fell in time with the sound of his deep, regular breathing.

Her own breathing was less even as she willed her eyes not to follow that arrow. It was extremely fortunate—considering the effect his naked torso had on her nervous system—that he appeared to have fallen asleep *before* he got any farther than his shirt.

Eva started guiltily as he moaned in his sleep and shifted his position, causing a lot of muscle rippling that sent a lustful stab of longing through Eva's helplessly responsive body.

Her face burning with guilt, she carefully draped the throw over him, avoiding all form of skin-to-skin contact as she pulled it up to cover his shoulders and, her eyes still on him, bent to pick up the wet clothes scattered around the room.

She did not need the hand-stitched labels to tell her they had not come off any peg. In the act of raising the silk fabric of his shirt to her face to inhale the subtle fragrance that she had noticed, she froze when she realised what she was doing.

'You have a problem, girl!' she told herself as she folded his clothes neatly at arm's length and placed them over the back of a chair. She cast a last look at the sleeping figure before switching off the lights and tiptoeing, though heaven knew he seemed dead to the world, towards the door. Hand on the handle, she turned back, and by the light shining under the door from her bedroom retraced her steps and flicked on the lamp beside the sleeping figure.

This time her glance lingered. She couldn't help herself. His face in repose exerted an almost hypnotic fascination for her from the chiselled angle of his high cheekbones to the contrasting soft sweep of his lashes. And his mouth…Swallowing, she dragged her gaze clear of the sensually sculpted outline and expelled a shaky sigh. He really was an astonishing-looking man.

Eva had never understood the attraction herself, but they did say that power and wealth, both of which he apparently had in abundance, were aphrodisiacs—but frankly he didn't need any assistance. If Prince Karim Al-Nasr had been born just plain Joe Bloggs and his worldly possessions only consisted of that mouth he'd collect women as a honeypot collected bees!

Eva found herself wondering about women. Was there a particular one who woke up looking at that face, maybe seeing that mouth smile? Those eyes smoulder with need? Would his marriage alter that situation?

The unsettled line of speculation sent a rush of heat through Eva's body, but despite the hot prickle under her skin she was shivering as, feeling ridiculously like a thief in the night, which was pretty crazy considering this was her flat and he was the intruder, she crept back to her bedroom.

This time she didn't look back.

She wasn't exactly amazed when sleep eluded her. Her overactive brain kept replaying the strange events that had led to a man being asleep in the next room.

A man her grandfather would have liked to see her married to. Up until this point she had considered King Hassan a fairly rational man. She shook her head. The evening had not been what she had anticipated, but who could have foreseen what had actually happened?

As she lay tossing and getting hot, sticky and tangled in her pyjamas, Eva was plagued by doubts that she had done the right thing.

What if he was concussed or worse?

She could have invited a homicidal maniac into her home.

She comforted herself with the fact if he was he was in no condition to do her much harm and, to her admittedly untrained eye, his condition appeared to have more to do with sleep deprivation than anything more life threatening. His colour had seemed healthy as he lay sleeping and he had been quite clear on the subject of medical assistance.

She wondered a little about his seeming aversion to doctors.

She shook her head impatiently. If she was going to lie in her bed, reading something into every syllable he had uttered and every expression, she was never going to sleep. The answer was probably as simple as the man had just been partying too hard.

Not that he had looked the self-indulgent type, unless that indulgence was sex, she thought, her stomach muscles quivering as an image of his face floated before her eyes. The aura of raw sensuality and power he projected did not suggest he was exactly a stranger to carnal pleasures. It was an aura that Eva was glad she had not walked into unprepared when he wasn't in a physically weakened condition.

In the morning, after sleep, he would probably be back to his normal self, whatever his normal self was. Eva couldn't help but be mildly curious.

She toyed with the idea of going back into the room to check on his condition, but after a sly voice in her head cast some doubt on her motivation, she decided against this action.

At some point Eva did fall into a fitful sleep. When she woke it was morning and the light was filtering through her curtains. She gave a sleepy yawn, began to stretch, then suddenly the events of the early hours came flooding back and she was fully awake.

At almost the same moment the memories surfaced she became aware of the mattress creaking gently, only she wasn't moving. She carried on *not* moving as her heart rate picked up and she recognised the sound of someone breathing and it wasn't her!

The sound was very close. It was…She swallowed convulsively and fought down an inappropriate desire to laugh—a normal person would have screamed. There was someone in her room. The mattress gave way…there was someone in her bed!

Hysteria a heartbeat away and not daring to move or open her eyes, Eva tried to breathe quietly as horror steadily ate into her fragile control.

Well, you can't just lie here, woman—do something! Heart thudding, she forced herself to open her eyes.

Oh, my God!

Even though she had been half prepared it was still a shock to her nervous system to see Prince Karim Al-Nasr, his dark head lying on the pillow beside her.

His breathing suggested he wasn't going to wake up any time soon—her first break. All she had to do was get out of bed without him noticing—the simplest plans were always the best—and a lot of embarrassment would be spared all round.

Her racing thoughts, not racing as fast as her heart, reconstructed a probable scenario that had ended with him in her bed. Stumbling around his unfamiliar surroundings half asleep in the night the Prince had presumably stumbled his way into her bed…or rather any bed—it just happened to be hers.

Nothing personal, it wasn't the lure of my body. A bubble of hysteria rose in her throat as she pressed a hand to her lips. She finally had a man in her bed. Of course, he was unconscious and she hadn't intended for him to be there, so possibly it didn't count.

Eva, her wide eyes fixed on the sleeping man, began to surreptitiously ease herself away from the sleeping prince and towards the edge of the bed.

She was tantalisingly close to achieving her goal when the sleeping figure moaned in his sleep and shifted his position.

Dismayed, she looked down at the arm that he had thrown across her waist. A second later a heavily muscled thigh followed and she was effectively pinned to the bed.

She was reviewing her options when he reached out blindly and pulled her to him. Their bodies collided, her softer one automatically moulding itself with startling ease to his hard contours.

Shock held her momentarily immobile, then something else stopped her from pulling back.

The something had a lot to do with the intoxicating novelty of being held this intimately close to a hard male—or was it just this male in particular?

The disturbing question was for another time when her mind was not being bombarded with so many new and exciting sensations. Her nostrils flared as her senses responded, independent of her brain, hungrily to the musky male scent of his warm body.

Eva had never thought about how different the male body was from her own. She lay there now, her breath coming in short, shallow, painful gasps, thinking about it, thinking about how seductive the differences were—hard instead of soft and the solid weight of a male body. She wondered about being under that weight, feeling it press her into the mattress, and felt her temperature spike—or was that him? Eva felt sure that if she touched his skin it would burn her…not that she would, of course, because that would be wrong on too many levels to count, and, besides, not a good idea. She needed to cool down, not inflame an already dangerously inflammatory situation.

What I need is distance and plenty of it.

Eva swallowed and tried unsuccessfully to ease her leg from under his; she needed to be somewhere safe from the musky male scent of his body.

The thought was there but not the will to carry it through. Drowning in the sensual lethargy that made her feel intensely aware yet simultaneously strangely disconnected from her own body and what was happening to it, she got fatally distracted by the length of his eyelashes.

Training her gaze on this relatively safe area of his anatomy, she examined with growing fascination his eyelashes. Dark against the angle of his high cheekbones, a hank of dark glossy hair had fallen across his face.

Eva had actually lifted her hand with the intention of pushing it back—this felt as if it were happening to someone else…but it wasn't!

What was she doing?

Face burning with shame, she began to pull away. As she did so his grip tightened. She felt rather than heard the groan that vibrated in his chest and panicked…He was waking up!

Clumsy in her haste, her elbow connected with his ribs. She was muttering a mortified, 'Sorry,' while trying to slide out from under the weight of his arm when, without warning, he buried his face in her neck.

Thoughts of escape went out of the window along with common sense. Her tightly closed eyelids fluttered as she felt his mouth on her neck. Then his hand was pushing under her shirt and closing over her breast and everything inside her melted as his thumb moved across her sensitised nipple and a feral moan was dragged from somewhere deep inside her.

'No…yes…this is…' Eva made a token attempt to move, but only managed to get her fingers tangled in his hair.

She wanted to make love to a total stranger—*wanted* barely began to cover the driving urgency that blitzed along her nerve endings through her veins. The realisation shocked her back to reality.

What are you doing, Eva? Whatever it was it was incredible. 'Wake up!'

She was afraid her plea did not carry the conviction it ought, but it seemed to have some effect. He stopped nuzzling her neck and lifted his head.

Eva could never be sure in what order the next three events occurred, but his slumberous eyes opened and connected with hers.

She heard herself say stupidly, 'I'm Eva. How's your head, Mr…Prince?'

And Luke walked in, his eyes trained on the two takeaway coffees and a carton of croissants he was balancing.

'I knocked, no answer. I let myself in—a peace offering. Do you know you're late for your tutorial, Evie?'

Luke's head lifted and his eyes opened wider than seemed physically possible as he saw the couple in the bed. His eyebrows shot to his hairline as he murmured, 'Oops!' And did a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn before exiting.

Eva gave an anguished groan as she sat up in bed, scarlet to the roots of her hair, and yelled after him, 'This isn't what it looks like, Luke!'

'He is particularly gullible, then, your boyfriend? Or just the forgiving kind?'

Eva looked down at the man lying in the bed beside her, one arm curved over his head, the other touching the gash on his head. Gone was the air of vulnerability and vagueness of the previous evening; replacing it was a sardonic expression and a remarkably expressive and deeply unpleasant sneer.

He didn't look forgiving; he looked like a man who held grudges.

There was a time lapse of several seconds before she realised that his eyes were trained on her gaping top.

Hating the blush that rose to the roots of her hair, Eva bunched the fabric of her top in one hand and, flinging off the duvet with the other, leapt out of bed. Her expression of indignant reproach produced a bold grin that revealed even white teeth and contained no hint of repentance for the ogling—not that she had a lot to ogle.

Not that she gave a damn how this stranger rated her breasts, because that would make her needy and mildly pathetic.

'Last night…' she began, struggling to look like someone who took waking up with a man in her bed in her stride, '…you were…'

'Last night…' he echoed.

Eva saw the sudden recognition flash into his eyes and watched as the sardonic amusement faded abruptly.

'You're Hassan's lost princess.'

'I'm not lost. I live here.'

He flashed a less than enthusiastic look around the room and said, 'But you're planning on moving up in the world, aren't you, Princess?'

The rather cryptic observation brought a distracted frown to Eva's brow…distracted because she was conscious of the background clatter as Luke slipped the latch on her front door.

'I won't be a minute.' She gave an apologetic grimace and snatched up her robe from a chair.

‘I do not have a minute,’ Karim observed grimly.

His guilt climbed as he thought of his extended absence…his recollection was hazy, but one fact was inescapable: he had presumably, in some aberrant moment of unforgivable, shameful weakness, walked, or at least wandered, away from his responsibilities.

If he was not there when Amira woke he would never forgive himself.

The glance he slid her had the chill factor of an arctic front and Eva couldn’t help but contrast his present manner with the heat of his lips on her neck and the urgency in his hard, hot body as it had pressed into hers minutes earlier.

‘What time is it?’ he snapped, throwing aside the covers and vaulting with fluid grace from the bed.

Eva tried not to stare. His body stood up well to daylight scrutiny. Perfect was like that, she thought with a sigh. His eagerness to be gone was not exactly flattering to her ego, but his departure could not, she told herself, be too soon for her.

‘I don’t know.’

The honest response drew a forbidding frown.

‘Look, I won’t be a second…’ she called back as she ran to catch Luke. While she was answerable to nobody about whom she shared her bed with—up to this point no one—she felt an urgent need to put the record straight, and she really didn’t want Luke to leave with the wrong idea.

Chapter Five

KARIM walked into the minuscule sitting room, his eyes moving immediately to the face of the clock sitting on the mantle. He grimaced and felt a fresh surge of guilt when he thought of Amira waking up and him not being there.

And why wouldn't he be there? Even with hazy recall the answer did not require hours of deep analysis—it was right there in the waking impressions that lingered in his head.

Lithe pale limbs, warm soft curves, skin like satin and a supple body curved into his.

His mouth curved into a grimace of self-contempt even as his body hardened in response to the memory. During the barren years of marriage he had turned control of his passions into an art form, but inexplicably that control had deserted him at the worst possible moment.

A muscle worked in his lean jaw emphasising the hollows beneath his strongly etched cheekbones as Karim considered what the moment of inexplicable weakness combined with the scheming of a woman was going to cost him.

The irony was he couldn't even remember the pleasure he was about to pay so dearly for—that part of the night remained a total blank.

The same could not be said for all of the night. A brooding frown on his face, he walked to the window and glanced down at the street below. Any faint hopes he nurtured that this specific section of intact memory was not real died an instant death.

The stationary car opposite was depressingly real. He turned away and wondered how long it would take for the information his granddaughter had spent the night with Karim Al-Nasr to reach King Hassan.

Of the King's reaction there was no similar question. While the ruler of Azharim was not a man who was averse to change, tradition and honour were two things he placed highly. Karim had offered him an insult and only one response would make that insult forgivable.

Karim closed his eyes and, his expression harsh with selfrecrimination, wondered if there was a fatal flaw in his makeup.

Was he preordained to make the same mistake over and over again? Recognising the self-pity insidiously creeping into his thinking, he pushed away the thought, firm in his belief such a mindset was for men who could not accept responsibility for their own actions.

No excuses, no extenuating circumstances and no amount of extraordinary red hair changed the fact he had messed up and he would pay.

The depth of his own stupidity was still hard for him to fully grasp. He inhaled through flared nostrils and, exerting the control that had let him down the previous night, he pushed away a subject he had no time to explore right now and estimated how long it would take him to get to the hospital.

He found his jacket and retrieved the phone from the pocket, punched in a number while shrugging on his shirt. The dampness brought back the memory of rain…and walking.

Tariq picked up immediately.

Karim, his shoulder hunched to hold the phone while he buttoned his shirt, was thrown by the deep sigh of relief that reverberated down the line. His calm and ultra-composed right hand then threw him some more when Tariq proceeded to launch into a breathless emotional monologue that inexplicably involved a central theme of choked, almost *tearful* self-recrimination.

When he began to repeat himself Karim, bemused by the uncharacteristic overreaction, felt it time to interrupt.

'I'm sorry I gave Security the slip, but you are hardly responsible for that, and I am no longer a child, Tariq.' Tariq, who had known him since he was assigned bodyguard duty when Karim was ten, sometimes had to be gently reminded of this. 'I can look after myself.' Though after last night this was open to debate.

Far from being soothed, Tariq appeared even more agitated when he replied, 'When the room was discovered empty we did not know where you had gone and I thought…This is my fault. I am so sorry. I did what I thought was best.'

Karim's bemused frown deepened. *'Best?'*

'You recall that sedation…the sleeping draft the hospital doctor prescribed…'

'I recall throwing it away.' Karim was not a fan of quick fixes and even less of numbed emotions. He would face what he must with all his wits about him and sleep, when it came, would be natural, not drug-induced.

'I retrieved it.'

'You retrieved it,' Karim echoed, his tone neutral as the last piece of the puzzle he hadn't known existed clicked into place in his head.

It was a very loud click! And things made more sense. Not that being drugged counted as a 'get out of jail' card when applied to sleeping with a royal princess of a close political ally.

'Yes, and I put it in the tea.'

Karim exhaled. The tea…at least now he knew why he had been wandering the streets. It had not been temporary insanity brought on by stress; it had been drugs!

'I was most afraid that you had come to some harm…'

You have no idea, old friend, Karim thought, pressing the phone to his chest. He knew it would be a mistake to speak at that moment and say something he might regret…even though it would make him feel a lot better in the short term!

The idea that anyone thought they knew what was best for him did not sit well at any time with Karim, but the knowledge that this particular piece of monumental interference was going to have dire consequences only increased his level of outrage.

If it had been *anyone* else but Tariq who had been watching his back since he was a child, anyone else but Tariq who clearly already was consumed with guilt…

He closed his eyes and, lifting the phone, reminded himself that it was weakness to yell at someone who was not in a position to yell back.

'That was very resourceful of you.'

'Of course I will formally submit my resignation and in the meantime—'

Karim, his tone brisk and impatient, cut across the stilted speech. 'In the *meantime,* Tariq, you will send a car to flat 11 A Church Mansions, and if you drug me again we will definitely fall out…'

There was a pause before he heard a fervent, 'Yes, Prince Karim.'

How could he punish a man who always had his best interest at heart, a man who offered him unswerving loyalty? 'Is Amira awake yet…?'

'No…no…she is still asleep. Church Mansions…is that not the address of King Hassan's gran—?'

'Yes, it is. You, Tariq, can be the first to congratulate me, and if King Hassan tries to contact me before I return send him my compliments and tell him I will speak to him personally at the first opportunity.'

He was sliding his phone back into his pocket when the sound of voices in the hallway that had been a constant background noise stopped. Into the ensuing silence he heard a distinctive click as the door closed.

Karim sensed rather than heard her enter the room. He could feel her eyes on him but did not immediately turn his head. When he did she froze in the act of taking a step towards him, uncertainty reflected in her emerald-green eyes. For a moment her eyes held his, then her eyes and her half-outstretched hand fell in unison.

Karim turned his gaze from her burnished head, conscious as he did so of the rage and hunger so deeply entwined when he looked at her that attempting to separate the emotions was pointless.

'Luke's gone.' And to her annoyance he hadn't believed a word she'd said.

Oh, well, there was a silver lining at least. Now Luke was not going to be spreading stories about her alleged virginity—any sniggers were going to be about one-night stands, which was, as it happened, marginally less embarrassing.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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