

DIANA FRASER



# DIAINA LASLA

# TAKEN FOR THE SHEIKH'S HAREM



DIANA FRASER

# Taken for the Sheikh's Harem

by Diana Fraser

© 2021 Diana Fraser

—The Sheikhs of Havilah—

The Sheikh's Secret Baby
Bought by the Sheikh
The Sheikh's Forbidden Lover
Surrender to the Sheikh
Taken for the Sheikh's Harem

#### —Secrets of the Sheikhs—

The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction
The Sheikh's Secret Love Child
The Sheikh's Marriage Trap

## —Desert Kings—

Wanted: A Wife for the Sheikh
The Sheikh's Bargain Bride
The Sheikh's Lost Lover
Awakened by the Sheikh
Claimed by the Sheikh
Wanted: A Baby by the Sheikh

For more information about this author, visit: https://www.dianafraser.net

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is co-incidental. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the US Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without prior permission of the author.

# CONTENTS

<u>Prologue</u>

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

<u>Chapter 3</u>

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

<u>Chapter 9</u>

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

**Epilogue** 

<u>Afterword</u>

The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction

<u>Also by Diana Fraser</u>

#### PROLOGUE



Cshley Maitland brushed her hand down the draft of her manuscript and handed it to Xander, who read the title and burst out laughing. He handed it straight back to her. She snatched it from him.

"What?"

"That title." He pulled the manuscript back to re-read the title. "'Women in Harems: Conquered Concubines or Domestic Goddesses?' That's sensational, isn't it? I thought you academics preferred something drier."

"I chose something 'drier', but my head of department said I needed something more..." She hesitated as she tried to find a description which didn't degrade her work. She gave up.

"Salacious?" Xander suggested.

Ashley shrugged, refusing to agree. She pulled the manuscript from his hands. "My professor said I needed a sexy title if I wanted to get it published."

"I'd have thought that would violate your feminist principles," he said with a wry smile.

"You'd have thought correct." She pushed it inside her battered rucksack. "But I have my future to consider."

"Ah, of course, you still believe your university has equal opportunities. I tell you, Ashley, opportunities are more equal for the male of the species."

"You're wrong!" He *had* to be wrong. A good tenured career path culminating with a professorship was all she and her mother had ever dreamed of. "I just need to complete this book, get it published, and then I'll be on my way."

"On your way to where? That's the question with such a sexy thesis. You'll have all the professors wanting you, for all the wrong reasons!"

"I'd better not. I don't want a man."

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and she grinned.

"Not if I can't have you, that is." After he'd married Elaheh, Xander had confessed that, before he fell in love with Elaheh, he'd hoped Ashley would marry him. She hadn't laughed so hard, or so long, in years. It had become a standing joke between them.

Although she could appreciate how handsome and charming he was, there had never been a spark between them. Certainly nothing like the burning flame which shot between Xander and Ela every time they clapped eyes on each other. Ashley glanced at Xander and Ela, who was meant to be working with her assistant on the other side of the room. They were undressing each other with their eyes. Ashley looked away. She wanted none of that. Nothing to distract her from her future career. It was what her mother

had worked so hard to give her—a life of respect and acclaim and success, not dictated by men.

"Xander." She rose. "I'm off now, taking my salacious manuscript with me."

He tore his gaze from Ela, back to her. "Right." He gave her a hug. "All the best with your research." He raised his eyebrows and laughed.

"I don't know why you're laughing," said Ashley, folding her arms across her ample chest. "You might not keep a harem, but I bet your ancestors did!" She glanced at Elaheh who was already noticeably pregnant. "Although," she said, under her breath, "I should imagine Elaheh could seem like more than one wife."

"I heard that," said Xander. "And, yes, you're probably right. But it's only a good thing when it's someone like Ela." His gaze drifted over to his wife's and they tangled for a few moments as silence fell.

"Oh, good God!" said Ashley, walking to the door. "I'll be glad to get away from all this love stuff. It was good of Elaheh to get me the introduction to the King of Irem. It could be exactly what I need to finish the book with a punch."

Xander's attention reluctantly returned to Ashley. "Apparently he prefers to be referred to as Sheikh Zyir."

"Just Sheikh Zyir? I'm surprised."

"Oh, those two words carry a lot of prestige. His country isn't like mine, nor even like Ela's. It will be like stepping back in time, into a medieval world."

A chill slithered down her back. She stood straighter, refusing to be spooked by Xander's words. "I hope this

medieval land has petrol for my motorbike."

"Oh, it has a lot of petrol, and oil, and riches, as well as..." He trailed off and looked indecisive for a moment. It wasn't like him.

"As well as what?"

He shrugged. "Just be careful, Ashley."

"Why?" she said, as she opened the door and stepped into the corridor, creating a draft from the open windows. "Do you think I can't look after myself?"

"I know you can."

"Besides, it's only going to be for a week—that's all he's allowed me. I'm the guest of the king—I mean sheikh—and I'm only there for a short time. What could go wrong?" Even as she said the words, she felt a queasiness settle in her gut, adding to her vague feeling of unease. Her words were pure bravado, because she knew from experience that things could go wrong in an instant, let alone a week.

"But Zyir isn't like the rest of us. He's—"

At that moment a rush of cool air sprang from the open windows on the other side of the room, and the door slipped out of her hands and banged shut.

For a moment Ashley considered returning to the room and asking Xander what he meant, what this man she was going to see was like. But then she remembered the sizzling look Xander had exchanged with Ela, and she continued walking. If this sheikh wasn't like the rest of them, then so much the better.

### CHAPTER 1



"Zr. Maitland has entered the country, Your Highness."
Passport control confirms."

The ministers who sat around the table looked at their king, surprised at the interruption. Normally, he forbad interruption, and ruled their meetings with a rod of iron.

Sheikh Zyir of Irem understood their surprise, but knew they'd be even more surprised at the direction he planned to take his country. And allowing this woman the privilege of access to Irem was a strategic step in that direction.

"Bring her to me as soon as she arrives."

He dismissed the meeting with an autocratic wave of his hand, and walked over to the latticed window which overlooked the entrance to the palace and the dusty courtyard, devoid of trees and plants. His father had decreed the use of water for ornament to be wasteful. It showed his power and long reign. Also indicative of his father's character was the private gardens the public didn't see, where water was not scarce. His father had enjoyed luxury and indulgence in secret and austerity in public. Zyir was determined to change all of that, but he knew his people

wouldn't accept radical changes. They liked continuity, they liked tradition. So his changes would come slowly, so slowly he hoped they'd hardly notice.

And the slow changes were where Dr. Ashley Maitland came in. His agreement that she could visit was no mistake on his part. No, he intended to use her research on the buildings and ancient architecture of this city to show the world that, under his rule, a new era for his country was beginning.

A new era for his country, but not for him. He had no need for anything other than a life of tradition. He had his children, he no longer had a faithless wife, and he had his country. It was simple, uncomplicated, and exactly as he liked it. Everything in his life was carefully controlled. All he had to do was ensure that this newcomer, this stranger to his lands, understood her role and behaved accordingly. It shouldn't prove difficult.

Ashley thanked the two guards who manned the small border crossing high in the mountain pass. She slipped her passport back into her rucksack and buckled it in place on her back, with one last nod to the guards, who didn't seem to be able to take their eyes off her. Hadn't they seen a tall European woman dressed in a full burka on a motorbike before?

She grinned to herself. She knew the answer. But she also knew it would take some time to get used to being stared at. In England, no one stared at a tall woman who hid her generous curves under baggy clothing. And that was how she

liked it. She knew if she let her guard down, she'd be in trouble. Just like before.

Ashley roared the motorbike up the narrow pass and pulled off the gravel road, which hugged the side of the cliff as it made its way down to the plains below. At first she thought she was seeing things. Then she took off her sunglasses and gasped.

She'd seen images of Irem—a jewel of a city set amid an immense expanse of stony desert plains. But there was nothing arid about the scene before her. Fresh, bright green grass and wildflowers of every hue covered the usually dry wadi which led to the city. She rubbed her eyes. But the colors were still there—a wash of green scattered with crimson, yellow, magenta, blue—every color under the unrelenting sun. Then she remembered the unusual weather patterns they'd had—unseasonal and continuous rains which had blown in from the sea and over this normally arid land. It must have swept this way, bringing life to the desert once more, turning the dry plains into a land of color and plenty, just as it had been centuries before.

Her eyes followed the flow of the flowers along the river bed, on to the distant shimmering light and uneven outline which indicated her destination—the mysterious citadel of Irem. She pushed her footstand up from the stony ground, squeezed the throttle and began the descent to the flower-strewn desert below. It seemed her trip might hold a few surprises for her. So long as they were surprises like this, she'd be fine.

Half an hour later, she arrived at the adobe walls which surrounded the city. The walls soared high into the blue sky, their angle sloping rather than vertical. Little had changed in centuries, she knew, but that was about all she knew. The place was shrouded in mystery. Rumors and legends had grown up in the absence of actual knowledge. Few people had been granted access to the country, and it was only because of Elaheh's ancient ties with Irem that she'd been able to procure Ashley an entry visa. The mystery around Irem extended to the ruling sheikh and his family. Even Elaheh couldn't shed much light on them.

Apart from the fact the sheikh's wife had died a few years ago, that he'd followed his father onto the throne, and that he had two children—although nothing about them was known either—few other facts were known. There were no images on the internet, no up-to-date books about the country or its ruling dynasty. She held a stereotypical image of him in her mind—middle aged, with a passing resemblance to a hermit—graying long beard, wizened face. So long as the hermit could be persuaded to divulge all she needed to know about harems, she didn't care what he looked like.

Ashley was rarely nervous, but she felt an unaccustomed tremor as the guards opened the gates to the citadel and she drove slowly inside, looking around, absorbing the ancient architecture about which she'd only read in books. She would have loved to spend her time here studying this alone—after all, it had been her principal research interest up till now—but she knew she had to focus on her future, which meant her other research interest. Harems. She needed the book contract to gain her academic tenure, the dream of both her

and her mother. Her mother might be gone, but her dream remained.

As she drove along, slowly weaving through the pedestrians, who stopped what they were doing and turned to her and gaped, she realized that this world she'd entered was very, very different. It was a world of few motorcars and even fewer motorbikes. It was a world enclosed, windless and quiet—of narrow alleyways and buildings which rose in the same soft adobe clay color as the desert which surrounded it.

She knew where to go. There could be no doubting it. Rising above the city stood the ancient palace of Irem—commanding and dominating—home to the absolute ruler of this mysterious and unique country.

It seemed she was expected, and gates opened as she approached. She drove into the courtyard, which was central to the palace. She parked where shown and adjusted her scarf and abaya.

"This way, madam," a Bedouin manservant said, bowing. "Thank you."

She swung her backpack onto her shoulder and followed him across the courtyard.

Suddenly she felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickle and she looked up to her left. Someone moved behind the unglazed latticed windows. Then they were gone again. She shrugged. She guessed she'd have to get used to being observed—she was very much a stranger in a very foreign land.

Ashley followed the servant along a cloister-like corridor reminiscent of a medieval cathedral, with its stone-flagged

floor and archways whose stone was carved into decoration, which had been muted by weather and touch, over the years. The very ground she walked on was dipped in the middle where people's feet had worn away the pale stone over thousands of years.

Despite its ancient origins, its design provided welcome relief from the scorching desert. In fact, the whole of the city seemed to be semi-underground, and cooler because of it. It was what it must have been like for many of the ancient civilizations, of which this was one of the few remnants. It was what made it unique. But she didn't have the opportunity to look at it now. She had a meeting with the official with whom she'd completed her bookings—Sheikh Riyz. Once she'd met with him, she'd been promised an audience with the king.

The servant opened the door, bowed, and stood aside for her to enter. She walked into the austere reception room, momentarily dazed by the sudden glitter of light on gold, of sunshine on topaz. Then she turned to see a tall, forbidding-looking man staring at her. He looked to be around thirty years of age and dressed in plain robes with no ornamentation, nothing to show he was of any consequence. Elaheh, who'd never met the present king, only his father, had told her not to expect anything as casual as her and Xander's own countries. And, as Ashley didn't consider there was anything casual about them, her imagination had failed her on how much more formal Irem would be. At least his administrative staff didn't appear to stand on ceremony.

Ashley walked over to him and extended her hand. His eyes hadn't shifted from her.

"You must be Sheikh Ryiz," she said, forcing a smile to hide her nerves. His impassive face didn't move an inch. It could have been carved from stone. "It's good to meet you."

The man accepted her hand, and it engulfed hers. "As-salamu Alaykum, Dr. Maitland. Welcome to my country."

"Wa Alaykum as-salam." Ashley returned the traditional words of greeting. "Thank you, it's good to be here. I'm very excited to be here," she added, thinking some flattery might help her. "I've heard such tantalizing stories about your country."

He gave a small grunt as his eyes narrowed. "I trust you had a pleasant journey."

"It was amazing. I didn't expect to see such expansive fields of flowers."

"Ah, the results of the heavy rains we've had."

"It's brought the desert to life."

"Indeed. But it will also bring with it locusts—the scourge of plenty."

Sheikh Ryiz might have been approachable by email, but he sure was a pessimist. He looked pretty forbidding, too. Nothing like she'd imagined. She wanted to look around, to absorb more details of this impressive, but austere, room, but she couldn't take her eyes off him.

He gestured to an archway, through which she could see a courtyard. But, as soon as she followed him outside, she thought it could hardly be called a courtyard, because it was too luxuriously furnished. A low, cushioned seating area, decorated with jewel-like rugs and cushions, surrounded a small pond with a rill of rippling water. It was an exquisitely beautiful oasis.

"Please, take a seat. I'm sure you'd like some refreshments after your trip."

She was about to accept because she was both thirsty and hungry, but remembered her manners. "No, thank you, I don't wish to trouble you."

He smiled as if realizing what she was doing, but nodded in appreciation. "I assure you, it is no trouble. It would be an honor to extend our hospitality to you."

She couldn't refuse the polite second offer. "Then, thank you, that would be very welcome. It's been a long ride."

As she took the offered seat, the doors swung open as if they'd received some hidden command, and two men entered the room, carrying a distinctive, crescent-beaked dallah, together with two small cups and a plate of dates. They arranged the dates and coffee, infused with fresh ground cardamon, on the table.

Ashley made herself comfortable, which wasn't hard. The place was designed for comfort, designed to seduce. The word popped into her head unbidden, and she stole a glance at the sheikh, whose gaze hadn't left hers. She racked her brain to think of something to say.

"The climate is very comfortable here, in the city. I thought it would be much hotter." She glanced at the elaborate air vent which brought whatever breeze flowed high across the desert skies, down into the courtyard room. Together with the semi-transparent shades slung overhead, filtering the sunlight, they cooled the temperature. "I've read about the windcatchers here, but I've never experienced one before."

"Of course. My country has been closed to visitors for too long."

She raised her eyes, interested. "Your king intends to make changes?"

"Yes."

She waited for him to elaborate. He didn't. Instead, he nodded to a woman who was waiting by the door. The woman kneeled before them and poured a small amount of coffee into each cup. She withdrew once more, her gaze downward, as if she were in prayer. Such subservience made Ashley feel uncomfortable.

She looked up at Sheikh Riyz and realized he hadn't taken his eyes off her. It made her feel even more uncomfortable. She'd thought he would take her to the king, but it looked as if he had the task of screening her first. She had to make sure she passed the test, whatever it was. She needed this man to approve of her before she moved onto the next stage.

"You look uncomfortable, Dr. Maitland."

She looked away, embarrassed and surprised that he'd been able to read her mind so easily. She took a sip of the hot coffee, known locally as *gahwa*, and set it back down again. She shrugged and looked up at him. "It's a new land, new ways. It'll take a little while to become accustomed to them."

He frowned. "I understood you were an expert in our ways. Is that not the case?"

"Well, I am in one sense. I mean I *know* them, I've studied them, but being here and experiencing them first hand is another thing entirely."

He nodded. "Yes, one can never know something unless one has lived it. I agree."

He had a low voice, quietly authoritative, and Ashley could see why the king might have chosen him as his advisor. His eyes echoed that authority—penetrating and unreadable. He held her gaze for a few moments, and she thought that that would be how it would feel to have her brain scanned by a computer. Except this man was no computer. He held the key to her future, and if she felt uncomfortable before, she felt something else now—she felt acutely feminine. His eyes seemed to move from investigating her to an appreciation shown by his warming gaze and a tug at his lips as a glimmer of a smile settled on them. She practically purred under that caressing look. Maybe a brief flirtation with the king's advisor wouldn't go amiss.

"Tell me," he said, leaning forward, his body now echoing both the gaze of his eyes and his velvety caress of a voice, "what is it you want, Dr. Ashley Maitland?"

His words brought her crashing back down to earth. A blush flooded her pale cheeks, and she looked around, searching for an escape. He might be seducing her with his eyes and voice, but he suspected her intent. Why leave it until now to ask that question? Breathe, Ashley told herself. Keep calm. He's just testing you. She summoned a smile from nowhere.

"What do I want? I want to see the king, sir. I seek his permission to carry out research in Irem."

He sat back, considering her. "And this research of yours..."

He hesitated and nerves made her jump in. "It's on—"

He held up his hand; it was all he needed to do to make her stop mid sentence.

"I know what your research is on, Dr. Maitland. What I don't know is what you intend to do with it."

She narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out what he wanted to know. Whatever it was, she'd give it to him. She was desperate. She hadn't come all this way for nothing. Her entire career depended on it. "Do with it?"

"I want to know what's in it for my country, Dr. Maitland. It's all very well allowing you access to privileged information, providing you with resources, but we need to know how this will benefit Irem."

"Oh!" She nodded, trying to figure out how she could reshape her research to meet this new requirement. This man, and therefore presumably the king, had no interest in research for research's sake. They knew their buildings, and their world. To them, her research was of interest for something very different. But what? "I have no wish to do anything which might harm Irem." She hesitated. She had no idea if he wanted her to keep the research to themselves, or to spread it far and wide. But she had to come clean, because as soon as she left this country she'd be shouting her work from the rooftops. She drew in a deep breath. He was attentive, patient, waiting for her to speak.

"I intend to publish it," she said, the words tumbling out.
"I have interest from an international publisher who is keen to publish the book as they believe it will have broad appeal.
And I will write the book for that market—not as an academic text." She held her breath, hoping she wouldn't be

turned around and expelled from the country. "It will have popular appeal," she added, for clarification.

He gave a small grunt and for the first time lifted his gaze from hers, and nodded his head. "That is satisfactory."

Relief fell off her like a burden. "Good," she smiled. "Ah, that's a relief. And, believe me, I know there's wide international interest in the subject."

For the first time, Sheikh Ryiz appeared surprised. "Is that correct?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Good. Then, Dr. Maitland, maybe we should begin with a quick tour of the city."

"Yes, that would be lovely, thank you."

He rose with the ease of someone who was accustomed to sitting cross-legged while Ashley tried her best to rise gracefully. She was glad of her early training in ballet—given up when the teacher had ruined her life forever at thirteen by telling her bluntly there was no way that someone of her height and curves would ever be a ballerina. So, although she was no slender waif, Ashley still knew how to move with grace.

While Sheikh Riyz exchanged a few words with the woman who, Ashley thought, bowed with unnecessary humility, she turned away, unwilling to watch a woman lower herself in such a way. As she did so, she caught sight of a couple of chrysalides, clinging to the underside of a butterfly tree.

She stroked the leave to which one clung. She turned suddenly, a sixth sense alerting her to his gaze.

"The khof al gamal flowers are extraordinary this year."

"So are the butterflies," she said. "There are a lot of chrysalides on this plant. I don't know about locusts, but it looks like the rains are also making the butterflies happy. And that has to be a good thing."

"Happy butterflies," he repeated, coming to a halt a few steps from her. He turned to face her. "I have to say that I have never considered whether a butterfly is happy. It simply goes about its business."

She shrugged and stroked the length of the chrysalis before pushing away the leaves to reveal yet more clusters. "Maybe, but who are we to say whether butterflies have feelings? Besides, the two things aren't exclusive." She looked at him. "Business and happiness, I mean."

He raised an eyebrow and his dark eyes held humor which she hadn't seen before. But he didn't speak.

She refused to be cowed by a glowering, silent man—no matter how compelling he was. "Surely your king would like to know that you're happy in your work?"

He shrugged. "Maybe you should ask him."

"I would if I could meet him. I mean, I understand that you're screening me for him, but I hope I can get to see the king soon." He still didn't speak. "I mean, it's good of him to take the time to meet with me, although I guess there's not a lot of distraction here in the middle of the desert." She smiled again, hoping to get a positive response.

The humor in the man's eyes disappeared.

"You'd be surprised, Dr. Maitland, how busy a ruler of a kingdom can be, even in the middle of a desert."

She realized her mistake. "Yes, I'm sure." She fell into step beside him. "Are we going to meet the king now?"

He didn't miss a step.
"You've met him already, Dr. Maitland."

### CHAPTER 2



Sheikh Zyir waved his hand, indicating they should continue.

He could have stayed looking at her pale, blushing skin for a few minutes longer, but he felt irritated with himself. He hadn't intended to trick her. He was accustomed to people knowing his identity. But it hadn't stopped him from deciding to use it to his advantage, when he realized she did not know who he was.

"Your Majesty! I'm so sorry, I thought you were the king's assistant."

"So it seems."

They took a few more steps

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty, but you didn't introduce yourself and your image is not known throughout the world. And, your name..." She trailed off, obviously unwilling to accuse him of introducing himself by a different name. She had a point.

"My full name is Zyir Ali Solomon ibn Mohammed of Irem. Sometimes I find it useful to communicate incognito so I use an anagram of my first name." She was silent as she walked beside him, but her eyes were expressive. He'd noticed that immediately. Her thoughts would never be in doubt. And, right now, she was trying to remember everything she'd said to Sheikh Riyz, without knowing she'd been talking to the king. He'd let her process those thoughts, because it gave him time to consider the things about her which had surprised him.

From her emails and work he'd formed an opinion which, he now realized, was far from the truth. She'd sounded the quintessential academic—considered, precise in her thoughts and expressions, pedantic—in a nutshell, dry. But the woman who'd roared into his citadel on a motorbike and who'd sat opposite him—the folds of her robes draping around her generous curves while she chatted easily, her large blue eyes illuminating the courtyard with their brightness—wasn't in the least bit dry. She was vivacious, she was sexy, and she was utterly alluring. And, most interesting of all, she could prove extremely useful to him. He decided to take pity on her.

"Don't be concerned, Dr. Maitland, you said nothing out of place, nothing to rise the ire of the terrible King of Irem." He swallowed a smile. He knew his reputation, both here and overseas. Thanks to his father, and with nothing more concrete to go on, people had assumed, because of his physical similarity, he was also the same.

She shot him a quick, uncertain look. "Ah, good."

A few more steps passed in which he could appreciate the rustle and pull of her robes around her body. As well as being very curvy, she was also tall. He liked tall women. And she

hadn't acquired the habit of bowing her head, which was an unwelcome legacy of his predecessors' rules.

"I'm glad I didn't say anything amiss." She swallowed. It was interesting watching her swallow—her scarf didn't cover her throat as it did local women. He had the sudden urge to taste her neck. "Not that I would have said anything amiss. I mean, I respect your country—I've been studying it and similar architecture for years—and I have the utmost reverence for it—"

He stopped walking. She had to stop apologizing, it was interfering with his erotic daydreams.

"Dr. Maitland. Please, think no more of it. The problem is that I consider myself both to be Sheikh Riyz and King Zyir. Two identities, one person."

She raised a finely drawn, dark eyebrow. "That must be... difficult."

He shrugged as they walked through the palace. "For me? No. But for other people? Maybe."

It surprised him how at ease he felt talking to her. Despite his lack of overseas study, he'd had the advantage of a welltraveled tutor and his world, like Ashley's, was one he'd learned through books.

They walked in silence until they reached the rear door, through which they passed into a tunnel. Guards opened a door which led into a small building. Sunlight shone through the lattice-work and sun screens filtered light over the courtyard. He paused there.

"You may wish to adjust your hijab, Dr. Maitland." He had to ball his hand into a fist to stop himself from adjusting it for her.

"How so?"

"Cover your neck a little more." He watched as she did as he suggested. He hoped he'd see that throat again soon. "Otherwise it will be obvious that you are a stranger."

"You don't have many visitors?"

He nodded to the guards to open the door.

"You are the first foreign visitor to my country in a long time."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be."

She looked up, as if struck by his brief reply. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't be flattered. I allowed you access for a reason."

She paused on the front step, her large eyes fixed on him. The query was there. But he didn't intend to satisfy it immediately. He required satisfaction first. Before he told her what he wanted, he wanted to make sure she was the woman for the job.

What the Hell had he meant by that? But Ashley had no time to ponder the king's words as they exited the long, narrow building directly into the market square, unobserved. They joined the throng of people in the market, buying and selling what looked like all kinds of produce. The square was under cover, like so much of the city, its adobe ceiling held aloft by dozens of carved pillars, around which market stalls had been erected, selling a dazzling array of food. Despite the desert location, it seemed acquiring a wide range of fresh produce wasn't a problem. She had no time to wonder about

that, either, as she followed the king through the square, until they arrived at the mosque.

And then all thought left her mind. She gaped up at the mosque, which was so much more than she'd learned about from books, so much more than she'd seen from the grainy black and white photos of early explorers, so much more than she'd imagined. And she'd imagined a lot.

The building rose before them like a mighty reminder of a once powerful and wealthy civilization. "It's beautiful," she breathed, her eyes trying to take in the exquisite detail of the patterns which she knew represented the line of the kings down the millennia, while also absorbing the overall impression of the building—power.

"It is," he said, his voice closer to her than she'd imagined.

She turned to him. With his eyes, as dark as obsidian, and the strong lines of his jaw and nose, he looked like the old photos of his father she'd seen, and she wondered why she hadn't made the connection immediately.

Then his eyes dropped to her lips, and she did the same thing. That was why, she thought. His lips. His father's mouth had formed a grim line—never smiling in photos. But this man's appearance—while forbidding—was softened by his lips, which weren't fleshy, but also weren't thin. They were beautiful. She looked up into his eyes as she formed the thought and met his gaze. The look he gave her made her breath catch in her throat and she turned away.

"It's far more..." She hesitated as she tried to think of a suitable word. There was nothing that satisfactorily

described the building before her. "Awe-inspiring, than I imagined."

He nodded and turned away. "I am glad you think so. Now, Dr. Maitland, perhaps we should continue. We will return here tomorrow. But, for now, there are many more buildings I wish to show you."

Ashley's heart fluttered. This man was nothing like as chauvinistic and autocratic as she'd been led to believe. He showed her an interest which was totally disarming. An interest, she emphasized to herself, that was no doubt stirred by the lack of strangers to his country. But still. It was very seductive to be treated as someone intensely desirable for once. But, of course, it would go no further. She had no of becoming his conquest. **Apart** compromising her research and her entire future career, she wasn't sure she'd know the rules of dating someone from such a different culture. Would this cultured man revert to primitive ways in private? The thought shouldn't have sent a frisson of awakening down her spine.

"You are not cold, Dr. Maitland?"

She shook her head, perturbed that he'd noticed her shiver. "No."

"Then why did you shiver?"

She shrugged, trying to think of something to cover her all too primitive reaction to this man. "Just a little overwhelmed by all of this." She gave a quick smile, hoping her reply would put him off the scent. She didn't want him to know what his gaze did to her.

He pursed his lips and grunted and looked away. She had no idea if she'd fooled him. Trouble was, she hadn't fooled herself.

"Then," he said, turning to her once more. "If you find this overwhelming, I'll be interested in your reaction to what I'm about to show you. Please..." Those beautiful lips turned into a smile for the first time. "Follow me."

By the time Zyir had showed Ashley a few more notable buildings, he was satisfied that she was, indeed, knowledgeable about ancient Arabic architecture. She knew all the intricacies of the decoration, its meaning, and its construction. The only things she hadn't known was how they would make her feel. And he was now assured about that. She had a sympathy for his country, which was important. He'd needed to make sure she'd be an advocate for his work, not a hindrance. She had a passion for the architecture which almost equalled his own. Queen Elaheh of Tawazun had done him an unexpected favor in introducing Ashley to him. Ashley could be precisely what he, and his country, needed.

It was only when they'd reached the edge of the magnificent gardens he stopped. He knew that this would be something about which she knew little. His father had forbidden satellite images of his country from appearing on the internet, and few foreigners had been allowed access. It was the jewel in the crown.

They walked up the wide steps to the terrace, framed by columns, where the vast gardens—miles wide and long—opened out before them. But he didn't look at the gardens. He looked at her, interested to see her reaction. Her mouth

fell open and her eyes widened in astonishment. "Is this...?" She stopped, unable to speak, put her hands on her hips and shook her head. She blinked. "Am I seeing things?"

He allowed himself to grin for the first time. It had been a far more enjoyable morning than he'd expected, and now, seeing her reaction, he felt he could relax.

"If you're seeing miles of gardens before your eyes, then no, you aren't seeing things, Ashley."

She jerked around to look at him, and he was suddenly aware that he'd called her by her first name. He'd done so in his mind the moment he'd met her, but formality had prevailed. Until now.

"It's amazing! Is it a recent innovation?"

"No. Ancient. We can grow Mediterranean crops thanks to the reservoirs of prehistoric water which we can tap into. Beneath our city are miles of underground canals which feed our cereal crops of wheat and barley, as well as allowing us to grow all varieties of vegetables and fruits—figs, grapes. Whatever fruit you name, Ashley, it's been grown over the millennia here. We care for our lands. We feed our lands and they feed us."

"Well, it's amazing. I can see why you might be worried about plagues of locusts."

His face darkened. "Indeed. They are a scourge we try to protect ourselves from because these fields allow us to keep our independence from the world."

"But you say that's all going to change. Why now? Why do you want to open your world, now?"

"It's time. I do not want the subsistence economy to continue. There is more to the world than my people imagine, much more that is good. And that is where you come in."

He gestured to some stone seats overlooking the magnificent gardens, shaded by swaying bamboo shades slung high overhead, casting shifting shadows over them. He waited until they were seated.

"I want you to establish my country in the world, but on my terms. The architecture is one of a kind and could be a symbol of the way forward. I want someone who revers it to take it to the world. I have chosen you."

He wondered why she frowned. Then she looked at him, the frown still shading her large blue eyes. "You want me to showcase your architecture."

"Exactly, your research will be invaluable."

She nodded. Then the frown lifted. "I'd consider it an honor."

"One thing. I'm curious what makes you so interested in my world."

She gestured to everything around her. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me. You're an Englishwoman from the very traditional English background of Oxford University. How did you first hear about my country, let alone study it?"

He wondered what caused the shadow that crossed her face. It seemed the lovely Ashley had secrets. It could be interesting, not to say fun, discovering them.

"I've always loved buildings and the stories they could tell." She blinked and a light blush suffused her cheeks, as if she'd decided to tell him something personal. He liked that. "I was raised a feminist, Your Majesty, and I decided to blend my interests—feminism with buildings." He gave a surprised grunt. "A strange mixture."

"Maybe, but it's given me a competitive advantage when it comes to promoting my research."

He frowned as his mind ranged over the ways in which feminism and architecture could combine. "And how are you doing that?"

She was silent for a few moments. And then her expression changed, and he knew she wasn't going to tell him the absolute truth. Only part of it, anyway.

"Everything has an angle. When you compare the work of female architects, they're informed by every aspect of their lives. Just as men are."

He was suddenly concerned. "But your work on the architecture of my country hasn't been thus presented."

"No." She mumbled. "It's a future interest."

"So long as it stays in the future. I wish the work to be balanced."

Her blue eyes heated a little. "Surely, bringing a feminist perspective will make it more balanced."

"That depends. On the feminist." Not that he knew much about feminists. Ashley Maitland was the first one he'd ever met. It seemed they weren't as bad as he'd imagined. "You are the best person for this job, Ashley." Not to say the *only* person who'd approached him. "And I trust you will do the work with due diligence. I, of course, will have final say on any publications arising from the research you undertake here."

"Of course." The passion had disappeared, replaced by a tight-lipped professionalism which he was disappointed to see. He'd give anything to see those lips relaxed again. He couldn't seem to help responding to her at a very sexual level. She exuded sensuality and yet her pale cheeks were often suffused with blushes. It was as if she wasn't aware of how attractive she was, or else she didn't have the confidence to acknowledge her sensuality. Lack of awareness, or lack of confidence? He didn't know, but he was determined to find out. Maybe then he could unlock her secrets and have a little dalliance with this very sexy feminist.

Ashley couldn't remember the last time a man had paid her so much attention. Sure, she had friends, but they were all platonic friends like Xander. Handsome, way out of her league who, after a brief attempt at flirting, settled for friendship. And that was how she liked it. Once upon a time, as a new undergraduate at Oxford, she'd fallen for a man. It had been a brief affair. She'd found out too late that he'd seduced her on a dare—a dare to sleep with the biggest girl in class. She'd decided then and there that she would never be vulnerable again.

So she'd hidden her generous curves, which her exboyfriend had so many bad things to say about, behind her baggy shirts and trousers, scraped her hair back into an uncompromising ponytail and turned her attention to her studies. She found she had easygoing friendships with men and women and nothing that threatened her heart again. And that was how she liked it. Until now. Until this man had effortlessly lifted the lid on her disguise—not much of one when all women wore the same type of shapeless clothes—

and appeared to like what he found there. More than like, if the heat in his eyes was anything to go by.

By the end of the day she was exhausted, trying to keep up her defenses against the charms of this man, this king, this sheikh. Once she was alone, in her room, naked under the silk of her four-poster bed, the cool desert air channeling down from the air vents high overhead, listening to the splash of water from the fountain outside, and watching the shifting shadows of the bright starlight, unhindered by artificial lights, she stroked her body. It was aroused from the day with this man—needy. She didn't like needy. With a groan, she rolled onto her stomach and slid her hand beneath her, touching herself where she was aroused. She closed her eyes as her mind dwelt on his face, before settling on his lips. Her breathing quickened in time to the movement of her fingers.

It wasn't until she'd felt release from the tension which had built inside her, that she rolled onto her back, allowed the breeze to cool her heated skin. And she wondered how the hell she was going to tell him she wasn't here to research the buildings, but something else entirely, something far more controversial, something far more personal. A building for sex. A harem.

### CHAPTER 3



he call to prayer filtered through to the library where Ashley sat, surrounded by precious manuscripts, copies of which existed nowhere outside Irem. She'd spent all day immersed in the papers. Most were written in Arabic, which she'd learned at university, and some she'd gained permission to have translated from an ancient form of Arabic which she couldn't read.

She leaned back in the chair, and rubbing her neck, looked up at the decorated ceiling and sighed. She was in heaven. This was just the sort of thing she loved. She looked back down at the papers with a grimace. Trouble was, she wasn't here to study architecture. And her publisher would have zero interest in it. What she was here to write was a book on harems. Not just that, but a book sensational enough to satisfy her mainstream publishers. And she'd let a day pass without addressing the issue. She'd have to sort it tonight. The king had invited her to dinner. By the end of the evening, she'd lay her cards on the table. After all, she could always research the architecture later.

But even as she packed up her computer, and thought through reasons the king would accept her change of plan, she felt a queasiness grow in the pit of her stomach. She knew he wouldn't like it. What man didn't like to think he was in control? Especially when that man was a king.

Ashley took longer than usual to get dressed for dinner. She didn't kid herself that it was a special dinner. No doubt she wouldn't even be seated near the king. But he would be there. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath as she prepared to leave her suite of rooms. She swept clammy hands down her dark green robes. Elaheh had insisted on taking her shopping before she came, and so at least she felt confident in her dress, which was more formal than in any of the other countries she'd been to, including Xander's and Elaheh's.

The maid stepped away and smiled appreciatively, as if understanding Ashley's doubts. She opened the door for Ashley, nodding encouragingly. It was time.

Ashley followed the maid through the semi-underground maze of rooms, corridors, and gardens. There was no sun now, only a soft orange haze filtered down from the shifting shades overhead. But, instead of entering the formality of the public rooms, the maid turned away, to a more ancient part of the palace. After an ancient, blackened wood door, studded with iron nails, was opened for them, they stepped through into a columned walk, into a private world where they were on their own. No one else passed. There were no more sounds of people at work.

The maid opened one last door and Ashley stepped through to a private courtyard, walled on three sides. The fourth side was open to expansive views across the gardens and fields, their colors heightened by the last colors of sunset streaking the sky. But Ashley hardly noticed this, because of the lone figure who stood silhouetted against the evening sky. Panic gripped her. Surely she couldn't be the only guest for dinner?

She looked behind her, but the maid had vanished, leaving her alone with Zyir. As if sensing her urge to flee, Zyir looked around at that moment. "Dr. Maitland!" he said, turning to look at her. "Thank you for coming."

A feeling of ease replaced her initial fear, as she noted his smile and welcome, delivered in his clipped English accent, presumably courtesy of English tutors. Surely there was nothing to fear here?

"My pleasure," she said, conquering the desire to flee. She stepped towards him, as much to prove to herself that she was up to the challenge. "Although I'm surprised," she said, looking around.

"And why is that?"

"I didn't think I'd be your only guest."

He shrugged. "I usually dine alone. My days are busy enough. Besides, it means we can discuss your work without interruption. Would you care for a drink?"

"Sparkling water, please."

"Make that two," he said, to a hovering manservant.

He turned back to her, and she looked away, unable to meet that penetrating gaze without losing her composure. She twisted around to look at the view—the green oasis of

fields bathed in evening light. The miles of green were a stunning and restful contrast to the deepening violet of the sky. A slight breeze loosened her hair, and she took a deep breath of the mingled fragrances which drifted across the fields toward them.

"I've never, in my life, seen anything so beautiful," she said in a quiet voice. "And so unexpected."

"I think my ancestors felt the same." His voice came from behind her, sending shivers across her skin, shivers her robes disguised. "Which is why they built the palace and city around them."

She turned, forgetting her discomfort, struck by his words. "You mean these gardens were here before the palace?"

She was tall, but he was much taller. His dark eyes looked down at her with interest and warmth, again so very different from what she'd expected. "Indeed. Of course, there were buildings here in some form or other, because gardens do not look after themselves, nor are they required if there is not a city around them needing to be fed. But, yes, the gardens have been here for millennia."

She looked back at the gardens, unable to continue to meet his dark gaze. The different hues of green looked sensational, dotted with the orange and yellow of fruit and vegetables, the red of cherries, the purple-black of grapes. It was an abundance she hadn't anticipated. Irem was turning out to be full of surprises.

"To the outside world, little is known about Irem except for its mystery and intriguing architecture as seen from the surrounding desert—outside the city walls. But inside..." Suddenly his voice seemed much closer. "Inside," he repeated, "it is this miracle of God's work which we believe makes our land so special." He paused. "Don't you agree?"

Of course she did. She nodded, but couldn't look around.

"Good. Because I would like you to include it in your work. It's time for the world to know the wonders of Irem."

*Now.* Now was the time to tell him she had no intention of carrying out the research he believed she was interested in. Trouble was, she *was* interested—very much—but her future lay with the harem research. She cleared her throat and drew in a breath. She'd tell him straight.

She spun around, but the words dried up in her mouth. He was standing closer, so close she could see the lines around his eyes and his mouth—lines which softened his face and which revealed the man beneath. He was a man of warmth and smiles, nothing like the man she'd been told to expect. It seemed like his country's reputation, his own was also far from reality. Just as she thought that, a smile spread across his face.

"Tell me, what thoughts have crossed your mind, to turn your blue eyes a shade darker?"

She shook her head. How could she tell him she was thinking of his smile?

He tilted his head as if to see her better. "No thoughts? Maybe it's a trick of the twilight." He turned to the table where dinner was being laid out. "Come, I thought you might appreciate an informal dinner."

The king was thinking about what she'd like? She felt ridiculously flattered. As she sat down, she loosened her hijab, and then wondered if she should. He met her gaze and

gave her a quick nod. "We are formal in this country, but inside these walls we can relax the rules a little."

She took off the hijab and tried to ignore the way his gaze rested on her hair for too long. Whatever he was thinking, it must have been absorbing, because he looked startled when the manservant appeared behind him with a platter of steaming, roasted chicken.

"Dinner looks wonderful." Truth was, she'd been led to believe that they'd be eating very traditional food, not the range of colorful rice, vegetable and meat dishes which were now spread before her. Xander had teased her about the kind of diet she could expect in Irem, and she'd brought with her bags of nuts and sundry other snacks to tide her over. But, again, her expectations were way off the mark.

"Our traditional cuisine has developed in line with the abundance of our gardens."

She'd always enjoyed her food, but she was *really* enjoying this food. It was all she could do not to whimper with pleasure as she savored each mouthful on her tongue, identifying the different herbs and spices which had been added to each dish to bring out the best in the fresh ingredients. She closed her eyes as the piquancy of a dish of spiced rice exploded on her tongue.

"I like to see a woman enjoy her food."

She opened her eyes mid-mouthful—she hadn't even realized she had them closed—and looked down at the rapidly depleting food on her plate. She swallowed and placed her fork on the plate. "Yes, it's wonderful." She shrugged and gave a light smile. "But then I have to confess

I enjoy food." Too much, she thought, thinking of how her already curvy curves would become curvier.

"It's good to see."

Then she remembered the old adage, that if a woman enjoyed her food, she also enjoyed sex. It was true, but she hoped like hell that he wasn't thinking the same thing.

He took a sip of his drink, but there was something in his eyes which made her think maybe he was thinking along similar lines. Her heartbeat quickened at the thought of making love with this man. She almost felt he was already, with his eyes. It was clear that he had eyes only for her, and that those eyes found her desirable. It made her *feel* desirable in a way she'd never felt before.

At home her voluptuous figure, strawberry-blond hair, pale skin and full lips always seemed old-fashioned and undesirable when compared to the slender, hazel-eyed, tanned beauties who seemed to be everywhere she looked. But here, she didn't have any competition and so reveled in his admiration.

He leaned forward, his eyes never leaving hers, and her breath caught in her throat as she imagined his next move. Because this sure felt like a game of flirtation.

"And how," he said, in that wonderful voice of his, "did you get on today with your research?" He steepled long fingers and pressed them against his mouth, his eyes never losing their sense of flirtation. It took her a few re-runs of his question before it sank in. She gave herself a mental shake.

"Interesting. Very interesting," she added, as she forced herself to think about her work.

"In what way interesting?" Without looking at his servant, he clicked his fingers and her drink was re-filled. She shouldn't have found his casual display of power so seductive.

"I was reading about your lineage. The women..." How could she express it? "They were powerful."

"Oh yes," he said, with a slight smile, sitting back in his chair once more. "My mother, my grandmother, and all my female ancestors before them, were strong women. I suppose this is very different to your western preconceptions about my people."

She grimaced before toying with her drink, swirling the effervescent water around the fine glass, the delicate facets sprinkling light around them. She felt as if she were in a kaleidoscope. Inside and out, everything was moving, and her preconceptions were changing.

She nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so. I can see I'll have to amend my book." The words tumbled out before she could stop them.

His eyes pinched at the corner. He also took another drink of water before setting it down with purpose on the table. He was thinking through what she said. Unfortunately, her words could not be misconstrued.

"Your book," he said in that seductive, low voice. "Not, presumably, the book you are writing on architecture?"

She bit her lip and shook her head, suddenly becoming obsessed with spearing a piece of roasted lamb. She popped it in her mouth and gave a quick smile, as if to say, I'd answer your question but I'm eating. Unfortunately, the

meat melted on her tongue and she was free to speak once more.

"No. It's a book on a newer area of research."

He cocked his head to one side. "I'm not aware of this newer area. Maybe you could tell me a little about it. I'm curious to know what area of research could include the idea that women in my country are weak."

She flinched under his hard words. "I never consider women to be weak. Oppressed maybe, but not weak. I am a feminist and believe women are capable of anything."

"Ah, a *feminist*. Of course." His tone poured derision on the word. "And what is the proposed title of this research?"

She pursed her lips. She didn't want to tell him the title, especially not the sub title. It sounded silly, naïve even, now she was here in Irem. "It's about women in Arabia."

"Maybe you could be more precise. The title, please."

She shrugged. "The title isn't as important as the content."

"The title, please."

"Well... It's about the, er, oppression and subjugation of women in contemporary medieval Arabia."

"Contemporary medieval. Hm, nice oxymoron. Just the sort of thing academics like. I'm impressed." From his darkened expression and the grim line his lips had formed, she could see he was the opposite. "And you've been spreading this disinformation, where?"

"I've published articles from it," she said defensively.

"Where?"

She named an obscure academic journal.

"Nowhere else? You haven't been able to find a more prestigious journal to take your baseless conjectures about our women?"

She shook her head, wishing she'd never allowed herself to be so seduced by him that she'd let her guard down and say things she shouldn't have.

"So, please enlighten me. What is the connection between your current interest in architecture and the state of our poor, subjugated women? What is it you've come here to study?"

Her mouth was dry as she opened it to speak the one word which, somehow, she now knew would be even more distasteful to him.

"Go on," he said, his tone the opposite of encouraging.

"Harems," she whispered.

"Harems." He spoke the two syllables with harsh emphasis, as if the word tasted foul to him.

She nodded. "I believe you have a tradition of harems."

"We do." He didn't even bother to deny it. The injustice of this gave her confidence.

"Then you won't mind showing me the harems and any records pertaining to them?"

He leaned forward, his weight on his folded arms on the table. "And why, may I ask, do you wish to see the harem buildings and to discover what went on in them?"

"Because..." She felt the hammering of her heart for a few second as the adrenalin pumped through her veins, giving her courage. "Because I'm interested in women, and in this country in particular." "That, Dr. Maitland"—she registered that he'd stopped calling her by her given name—"does not explain why you wish to be shown my palace's harem buildings, nor its records on the subject. If you were only interested in those two subjects, you could write about how our women work alongside men in the fields, how they are as learned as them. But you are not interested in that, are you?"

His eyes blazed, and she recoiled a little. She hoped he wouldn't notice. She shook her head. He jerked back, as if he suddenly understood.

"And the actual title of your book is?"

There was no use hiding it. "Women in Harems: Conquered Concubines or Domestic Goddesses?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them again, his eyes were dark with restrained anger.

"Was this your publisher's idea?" he asked. "Something sexy and salacious to make them money, at our expense?"

"Not at your expense. No, I'll write only what I discover and it will be fair."

"Ah, so you don't deny it's your publisher's idea?"

She shook her head. How could she? "No, but—"

"But what, Dr. Maitland? Do you want to go ahead, dig in the dirt and present that dirt so that millions of people can pay money to read it?"

It was exactly what she wanted. "Do you think millions of people would be interested?" she couldn't help asking. The thought of what that could do for her career was mindblowing. It would ensure her future as a tenured academic. Then she saw his face—dark and dangerous.

He shook his head, and his lip curled in derision. "Is that all you can think of? Is that all you are taking away from our discussion?"

"No, I won't write about anything that isn't true. I'm an academic and feminist first."

"Ah, a feminist. That word again. No doubt your faculty head requested a book on the oppression of women in traditional Arabic countries.

She did a double-take. This man was well informed.

He didn't wait for an answer. "And so you agreed to come here and risk yourself in this strange land. You're brave, I'll give you that."

Brave? She wasn't sure if she was brave enough. She swallowed, but didn't reply because she didn't think her voice would sound at all brave.

"I'll give you what you want," he continued. "I'll show you the harem quarters, I'll allow you access to the harem records."

She was relieved. "Thank you."

"But"—he leaned over her, his presence swamping her —"in return I want something."

Her mind ran over the options. If he wanted kudos, money, mention in the research, she'd do it. "Anything." Her entire future depended on this.

His lip curled, as if he despised her weakness. "I had not expected you to be so desperate."

She couldn't wait to leave. "Please, tell me." The sooner he told her, the sooner she could be released from his icy gaze. "What is it you want?"

"You." he said. And in that one word her world collapsed. She felt it crumbling, stone by stone around her. The edifice of her life which she'd painstakingly built over the past six years was collapsing around her.

"Me? How do you mean, me?"

"You, in my harem."

She swallowed. Surely she'd misunderstood. "You have a harem?" In that moment she realized how little she knew about this man, who'd turned into a stranger before her eyes. All the things she thought she knew, she realized she'd conjured up in her mind, pulled together from signs, clues to form a meaning which bore little resemblance to the truth. She'd thought she'd be studying the past. She was wrong.

He leaned in to her, gripping the arms of her chair, his face so close to hers that all he had to do was move an inch and his lips would be pressed against hers.

"Yes. And, if you wish to continue your research, you will now be its first lady."

## CHAPTER 4



Zyir's blood was boiling as he watched Ashley's blood pressure also shoot up.

"No," she said. "There is no way I'm going to be joining any harem. I'm a respectable academic."

"Respectable? You wish to write about sex and sell it to the highest bidder. Is this the sort of behavior which deserves respect?"

She raised her chin. "It's not like that at all! I'm using my research..." She groped for words. "I'm using my research to gain a wider audience. That's all."

"You're selling out. You're exchanging sex for money. And don't think you aren't."

"I'm not participating in the sex," she said, with the primmest English accent he'd ever heard. "That is the difference."

He moved closer and noted her reaction to his proximity. His first impression had been correct. She was as attracted to him as he was to her. Shame she was turning out to be as pig-headed, arrogant and ignorant as every other westerner he'd ever encountered.

"If you have no wish to join my harem, you can leave." He turned to go.

"No!" she called out to his back, as he knew she would. "No, please. I need this."

He turned around. "I realize that. The question is, how *much* do you need it?"

"I can't return to England without this research. I need it... a lot."

He crossed his arms and watched her. He could feel his face resume its usual stern expression. He was no longer in the mood for smiles. He was in the mood for teaching her a lesson, one that she would never forget. How dare she treat his country with such arrogant disrespect?

"I've too much riding on it. My future career depends on it," she added.

He raised his eyebrows. "Your career? And selling your arrogant views of my world to ignorant westerners is your way of securing your career?"

To her credit, she blushed and nodded. "Yes," she said in a small voice. "I mean, I don't see it like that... or at least I didn't see it like that."

"I'm not interested in *how* you see it. If you wish to learn about the harem, the best place for you is in one. Mine."

She swallowed. "What...," she said croakily, before clearing her voice. "What will be involved?"

"What's normally involved in a harem? I thought you would know that much, at least! You, with your academic knowledge of harems, should at least know what goes on in one."

She opened those beautiful full lips to respond and a wisp of a word emerged on her sweet breath. "Sex."

"I'm glad your research has been accurate on that point, at least."

She blushed again, the pink of her cheeks a bright contrast to her otherwise pale skin. It further brightened the blue of her eyes. It reminded him of cornflowers, strewn through the green, green fields of England he'd once seen in an English movie. At the time he'd thought he'd never seen anything so beautiful as the pale watery sky from which misty rain fell, creating a world full of fresh and delicate colors. Such a contrast to the stark colors of his own land. But the movies weren't real, he reminded himself. And nor was the appearance of this woman, who hid her arrogant, ulterior motive for being here behind the beautiful facade.

"So, what is your answer? Will you join my harem, or will you leave immediately?"

"Those are my only two options?"

"Yes. There can be no other."

She bit her lip. It shouldn't have been so seductive. Then she looked up at him from beneath lashes which were curls of black against her pale skin. She nodded.

He raised an eyebrow in query. He would not rest until he'd heard her voice her agreement.

She nodded again. "Okay, I will."

"Will what?"

"Be part of your harem. But I won't have, you know... sex."

He threw his hands open wide. "Then you may leave."

"No, wait. Okay, so maybe we could come to some other arrangement."

"Such as?"

"Well, I could move to the harem and sleep and work there, as is traditional."

He gave a curt nod. "Go on."

"And then I might see you... from time to time..." She trailed off.

He could have called a halt there and then, but he was curious now, and enjoying watching her squirm, wondering how she was going to get out of this situation she'd created with her duplicity.

"You call this version of a harem traditional? No! I will come to you each night and you will entertain me."

She went as pale as moonlight. He almost regretted the show of his power. Almost.

"Entertain?" she asked in a whisper.

He walked around her, sizing her up. "You can dance for me if you wish. Do you?"

She shook her head. "I can't dance. Not anymore. I mean... ballet... when I was young, but..."

He gave a gruff grunt of humor. "Then you can sing for me." He paused, struck by the look of horror on her face. "Don't tell me. You can't sing."

"No, I can't. Well, I can sing but it's not exactly... tuneful."

"Then tell me what exactly you can do."

"I can talk."

He grunted a stifled laugh. "I doubt that has ever been a key attribute of a woman in a harem. About what do you propose to talk? The state of feminism in the Middle East? How our ancient buildings were constructed? How the tiles were quarried? I can talk with my ministers about such matters. I am not interested in talking with *you* about such things."

"No, *more* than that. I can talk about..." She trailed off with a shrug and looked at him helplessly. Maybe he was prepared to compromise. He'd assumed she'd walk away, but she had guts, he'd give her that. And she also had what looked to be an amazing figure beneath those robes.

"Sex," he said, expressing the thought that was foremost in his mind whenever he laid eyes on her. "You can talk to me about sex. But"—he glanced at the robes behind which she hid—"not wearing those robes. I want seduction, so you must wear appropriately seductive clothes."

Her eyes flared. "Okay," she said, between gritted teeth. "But no sex. Just *talk* about sex."

He shrugged. "We'll see. I'll not force you. But if you come to me and ask me to satisfy you, then"—he shrugged—"it would be churlish of me to refuse."

Her pallor vanished under a flush of red. "I will never—" He waved his hand. "You may leave now."

But, instead of leaving, she stepped toward him, her eyes blazing, taking them from the blue of cornflowers to the violet of a stormy sky. Unfortunately, he found both incarnations of her eye color alluring.

"I will do this because I need it. But there is no way I will ever do..." She trailed off, as if she couldn't bring herself to say the words. He thought he'd help her out. "Do what? Have sex with me?" He shrugged. "It's up to you." He took a step toward her. Her blush faded into pallor once more, but he wanted to show her who had the power here. "You have three days—"

"But I have a visa for longer."

"Three days," he said in a firm voice, "in which you can..." He paused to allow her to consider what exactly it was she could do to him. "Entertain me. But I am not an unfair person. I will give you something in return. By night you can entertain me and by day, I will educate you. By the end of the three days, we both should have gained something. Now, go. Prepare yourself. Your lessons will begin tomorrow morning in the Old Quarter."

"And then, later..." She trailed off, her voice small.

"Later? I will come to you in the harem. You may leave now, but be prepared to seduce me tomorrow night with your words, in which you have so much faith."

He didn't know whether it was the word 'leave', or 'harem' which made her almost stagger back. But away she went, with a swirl of her green robes, leaving only her fragrance—subtle yet invasive. It didn't seem to leave him. He inhaled it and it settled inside him. It was annoying all the more because it did something to him. It gave him something he hadn't even known he wanted.

With a flick of the hand, Zyir dismissed the staff who'd borne silent witness to the scene, and began pacing the tiled terrace, not seeing any of the beauty which surrounded him, only feeling the throbbing anger and frustration.

At what point had Ashley duped him?

He felt like an idiot. He leaned over the balustrade and closed his eyes tight. But he knew. The moment he'd heard the roar of her motorbike enter the palace gates, his interest had been piqued. It had been stirred when she'd turned her steady blue gaze on him. It was like looking into the deep well of the sea, a cooling oasis which held promise of satiation behind its cool English facade. And the intrigue he'd felt with her had dissolved into intense desire when he'd seen her step confidently onto the terrace in the green robes which so became her.

And then this. He'd let his guard down and he'd been tricked. It wouldn't happen again because he intended to use Ashley as surely as she'd expected to use him. He thought of her lush body beneath those green robes. He'd expected to woo her, to seduce her slowly and thoroughly. It seemed he had no need for this now. She'd be doing all the wooing, all the seduction. There would be no need to make sex a requirement, because it would happen anyway. There was no doubting their sexual connection. It would be a transaction, but would be no less pleasurable for all that.

He'd make her pay for her superiority—with herself.

### CHAPTER 5



# $\mathcal{O}_{\mathcal{O}}$ hat the hell had she got herself in to?

It was the one thought which beat in Ashley's mind to the rhythm of her quickened heart as she returned to her quarters at a half-run. She couldn't put distance between herself and the king fast enough. In an instant he'd turned from a man whose company she enjoyed, a man who'd awoken her sexual impulses with just one look, to the severe, uncompromising king of legend.

It wasn't until she was safely in her suite of rooms that she could relax. She tugged off her abaya and scarf, tossing them onto the sofa, and went to the open windows, and gulped in lungfuls of cool, desert air.

She gripped the balustrade of her balcony and looked out into the night. There was no moon, and the stars were bright in the sky, brighter than they had any right to be, given the darkness of the land she'd found herself in. And the darkness of the soul of the man she was bound to for three more days.

What had she been thinking in coming to this strange land?

She remembered Xander's oblique warning, and now she understood. There were depths to Zyir about which she had no idea. She was here, trapped in the heart of the palace, the heart of this isolated city, deep in the desert, and the only way out was to seduce a man she now hated.

But even as the word 'hate' formed in her brain, she knew she was lying to herself. She'd been drawn to him from the moment she'd first set eyes on him. And she'd been suckered in, believing she was seeing the real man behind that grim exterior. But oh, how swiftly that had changed. Gone was that charming, educated, warm man and in his place stood a very different version—scary, uncompromising and dangerous—a man who she knew wouldn't give her a second chance. A man who wanted her to talk sex to him.

She turned her back on the window and looked around the opulent, medieval suite of rooms—dark, ancient wooden beams, white-washed stone walls, exquisitely decorated and colored tiles, all draped with the finest of silks and tapestries. She felt like a bird trapped in a cage of luxury and decadence. Her breathing quickened as she tried to calm a sense of panic. She turned once more to the windows, wide open to the night, and gulped in the cool desert air, pressing her forehead to the still warm stone wall. She closed her eyes. Could she do it? Could she last the three days?

She turned around. She *could* do it, she told herself sternly. She could still do her research, find out what she needed, then return to her world and achieve the success she'd worked so hard for. All she had to factor in was a little play acting. That was all.

And, it seemed, her dreams needed no such persuading. They were full of sensuous touches and dark eyes which undressed her and more... She awoke only once in the night, panting as if about to climax and she remembered how, in her dreams, he'd made love to her. She lay back down on the tangled sheets and wondered if it would be playacting after all.

THE NEXT MORNING she was awoken by the sound of the maid sliding a cup of coffee onto the bedside table. She pulled up the sheets to cover her nakedness and sat up in bed, eyeing the woman warily.

"I hope you like your coffee, madam," said the woman in heavily accented, but otherwise perfect, English.

"Thank you," she said, taking a sip of the coffee. It was good. Exactly how she liked it. "It's perfect." She took another sip. "But it's not traditional Iremi."

The woman smiled as she stepped away, keeping her eyes averted. "No. I was instructed to make it thus."

"And your English..." She had to ask. "It's very good. I didn't think there was much..." She hesitated as she tried to think of a polite way to frame her question. "Much western influence in your culture."

The woman raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Didn't you? Oh yes, there is. Of course, our culture is traditional and very important to us. We will never deviate from it. But our new king wishes us to learn about foreign things, foreign languages. He has a different vision to the old king."

"In what way is he different?"

"Only men received education in languages in the time of the old king. Our new king has widened that to include everyone." The woman's pride was obvious. "Education is no longer the province of men. Now, madam, I'll show you what it has been suggested you wear today."

As her maid moved around the room, selecting robes from the closet as if it were her own, Ashley couldn't help wonder at the two versions of Zyir. One, the enlightened king who threw education wide open to everyone. And two, the angry autocrat who had demanded she join his harem, and also appeared to have views about what she should wear. She couldn't reconcile the two versions of the same man. But she'd been informed that she was to meet with him in one hour to go out into the city. No doubt she'd find out more then.

Ashley was ready at the appointed time. Apparently, she and Zyir were to go incognito. She wondered how incognito they could be surrounded by his guards. But at least she felt anonymous behind the robes, which weren't as plain as she'd imagined. She'd been about to refuse to wear the 'suggestions' but, when she saw the dark blue robes, with the light blue horizontal bands of decoration, she agreed. Fine embroidery decorated the seams and above the hem. The robes were both dignified and beautiful. While not all the women wore full burkas, she did. Her pale skin would be a giveaway. Everywhere she'd gone so far, she'd been the object of interest.

She'd never encountered any hostility from this nation, which was far friendlier than the press had led her to believe. She realized that whenever there was a vacuum of

information, sensational conjecture would fill that space. The people of Irem were proving to be friendly, not regarding anything outside of themselves with suspicion, but with interest. And they were educated, too. She suspected that the inhabitants, especially the younger, more educated ones who'd been able to take advantage of the new king's regime, knew far more about the world than the world knew about them. However, it was clear that the King of Irem didn't want to attract any undue interest as they walked around the city today.

As she waited for the king to appear, she looked around at the decorated walls, ceilings, and floor. It was ornate, like a jewel box, and she wished she had her phone on her to take some photos. But that had been confiscated upon arrival. Irem might be friendly, but the hold the king had upon information was tight. But, if she played his game, she just might come away from this magical place with everything she wanted—information and photographs for her book, as well as her dignity. She was more confident about the information and photographs than her dignity at that moment.

"Dr. Maitland!" Ashley turned around to see Zyir standing, hands on his hips, alone. Not a guard in sight. She hadn't heard him enter. "If you've quite finished staring into space, maybe we could proceed."

She clamped her lips together to stop herself from shooting him a curt retort and satisfied herself with a glare instead. It must have done the trick because he looked away first, as if something had brought him up short. He stepped aside. "Shall we?"

She nodded and walked through the doorway.

They walked in silence along passages she hadn't been to before. Eventually they came to a small, obscure door, which he unlocked with an ancient key, and they stepped outside, immediately consumed by the busyness of the dusty street.

He nodded behind her. "The Grand Mosque."

She turned. Little of Irem had filtered out to the outside world, but old pictures of the mosque had. She'd glimpsed it the day before, but, from this angle, so close, its magnificence struck her once again.

She had to gaze upward into the sky to see its dome, glittering like a jewel in the blue sky. She forgot where she was, who she was with, swept away by its splendor. "It's... it's..." She groped for a word to describe it.

"Peerless, is what it is," said Zyir.

"Yes. In all my studies, I've never seen nor heard of anything that could match this. The minarets..." She trailed away as she looked at the two towering minarets which stood either side of the entrance way to the mosque. They were decorated from top to bottom in tiles of all shades, but predominantly blue. It seemed the Bedouin—both then and now—revered blue, the color of their sky, but also the color of something more miraculous to them, the color of the sea.

"It is more than you imagined." She looked at him and saw his face had softened, revealing the person she'd thought she'd first seen in him. Then it was gone, and he shook his head. "The arrogance of the west, to assume nothing outshines your own civilization."

"No, you're wrong. In my case, anyway. I'm not arrogant."

"Maybe not. Maybe you're simply ignorant. I will endeavor to remedy that."

He gestured for her to precede him and, as they walked through the mighty portal with the glistening minarets on either side, Ashley reflected on his words. He'd been correct the first time. Because, not only had she not imagined such beauty, she'd also not imagined that the men would be quite so chivalrous in his country, not something that other countries in Arabia had in common.

JUST THE SIGHT of Ashley examining the ancient scrollwork on a pillar with that penetrating gaze of hers, had his mind and body in a tumult. The attraction was there, as it had been from the start—as intense as ever—but now it was enraged and ruffled, like a stormy wind over the desert dunes, with the thought that Ashley wished to present his country to the world like an exhibit in a museum.

He'd intended to give her a brief tour of the mosque, barking out the highlights, forcing her to see its beauty. He'd intended to confront her. But, instead, it seemed he was the one to be confronted. Because every time he went ahead and listed a feature's salient points, he'd look around and discover Ashley was still at the previous place, her hand stroking a tile, her gaze caressing its intricate decoration. He'd expected note-taking and intellectual appreciation—he'd got an *instinctive* appreciation, an emotional one that was entirely unexpected.

Eventually she'd turn her head, catch his gaze and hasten to his side. She kept her distance from him, and for that he was thankful. It was hard enough keeping to the script without her presence beside him, without her fragrance filling him. Even in the traditional robes which he'd insisted she wear, she was beautiful. The way she held herself, level gaze and shoulders back as if prepared to meet, head on, whatever came her way. He liked that. And her eyes... That deep blue which struck at the heart of him. She was looking at him now, her eyes questioning, her lips closing after having spoken. He pulled himself up short. What had he missed?

"I'm sorry?" he asked.

"Where does that stairway lead to?" she repeated.

"Ah." He cleared his throat, angry with himself for losing concentration, looking across the courtyard in which they stood, to the stairway which rose mysteriously in one corner. "I will show you later. First, I wish to show you the *shabestan*, heart of the sanctuary chamber." Without waiting for her, he strode into the center of the courtyard, above which soared brick vaulted archways.

"It's beautiful." She looked around. It was quiet at this time of the day, and she took her time absorbing the sweeping arches which framed the central pool, helping to create the cool, comfortable atmosphere. The ceiling dome soared up into the windcatcher, high above them. She turned to him with wide eyes. "And so cool. Does it have a *qanat* and a windcatcher?"

"Indeed." He nodded approvingly. She knew her stuff. "The hot air from outside is drawn down deep into the ground where it is cooled both by water and the tunnel walls. At the same time, the warm air from inside is drawn up the

windcatcher and expelled through an opening opposite to the wind direction—"

"Which creates the lower pressure, which draws up the cool air from underground and into the chamber. Yes, I studied them. Invented at least 3,000 years before our modern ventilation systems. Sophisticated, effective, and"—she strained her neck up to look up the windcatcher—"silent and beautiful."

He couldn't have shifted his gaze from her if he'd wanted to. With her lips still lingering on the last word, he couldn't help thinking how it also pertained to her. Her lips were full, open, and her tongue flicked onto the center of her bottom lip, as she gazed at the intricacies of the decoration with concentration. How he'd like to be the object of such single-minded focus. She had the trained mind of an academic, able to blot out anything which distracted her from her purpose. Luckily for him, her purpose would be him tonight.

She looked at him suddenly, catching him unawares. "Don't you think?" she asked.

He cleared his throat and looked around, looked at anything so long as it wasn't her. He had the feeling that those eyes would look straight into his mind and soul and uncover everything there. "Of course. It is a wonder of the world which few in the West are concerned with."

"I am," she breathed, in that low, husky voice of hers which ruffled against his skin, pricking the hairs, as if she caressed him with her fingers. He had to get a grip.

"Yes, I know," he said. He forced himself to look at her, bracing himself for the attack of her eyes. "And you are one of the few."

"For now, maybe, but that can all change."

"And how exactly will that change if—"

"When-"

"*If*," he emphasized, "you publish a book about harems. The old stereotypes of my country will be perpetuated."

"Not necessarily. That depends on what I discover during my research."

He raised a cynical eyebrow. She needed to know that he wouldn't be fooled. "You have three days. Do you truly believe you will change your mind?"

"You assume I've already made up my mind. You assume wrong." She turned her back on him with a swish of her robes and walked over to the square pool at the center of the chamber. Her reflection joined that of the tiles which sparkled overhead and flickered as the cooling breezes traversed the chamber, ruffling the water slightly. As ruffled as he'd made her. He realized she was correct. He knew she had the mind of an academic, so he was wrong to assume she wasn't open to ideas, or information. And yet he'd given her scant information.

He walked over to her, allowing himself to come closer. He wanted to see her reaction. He was gratified to see her eyes darken when she looked up. She was as physically aware of him as he was of her. Tonight would be interesting.

"You're right." She'd never know how much it'd cost him to admit it. It was a rare thing for him to admit he was wrong. Partly because he was so seldom wrong. "Our Great Library is close by. Perhaps you would care to go there next?"

The dark in her eyes instantly transformed. It was as if the sun had come out from behind a dark, thunderous cloud. The effect was transformative—not least for him.

He stepped to one side and allowed her to go first through the exit and out of the mosque. It wasn't usual, but it didn't look like much of the next few days would be 'usual'.

#### CHAPTER 6



The day passed too quickly, and night had already fallen like a curtain over the exotic land. Just like its ruler, Ashley thought, as she glanced out the window to where the adobe buildings were softening under the indigo blue of the sudden dusk, Irem appeared to be either dark or light. It seemed there was no room for any subtlety with either the country or the man.

But maybe she'd discover another side to the man, just as she'd done that first day. The thought was both alarming and seductive. She blushed as she imagined what lay ahead of her. She'd done her best to prepare for the night ahead in the harem in an academic way—devouring the palace's papers and books on the subject—not dwelling on their practical application. But she hadn't done enough, she knew. Because she'd been too easily distracted.

It had been easy enough *not* to think about the harem because the papers and books she'd unearthed in the city library, adjoining the palace, were fascinating. She'd convinced herself that preparing herself for the night ahead could wait because she only had three days and three nights

to study the treasures hidden in the library, before she'd have to leave. It was a frustrating thought, because she'd need forever to do justice to the rich vein of research she'd struck—both on the harem, and the city's historic architecture and culture—but three days should give her enough material to allow her to move forward with her career. It *had* to be enough, because the price of a longer stay was too big to pay.

She rose and rolled her shoulders, stiff after an afternoon bent over the decorated manuscripts with their neat but small script. She'd learned a lot from the images and stories she'd discovered of the women who'd lived in the harem over the centuries. Even down to the present sheikh's father, who had several wives and children who lived in the harem. Trouble was, what she'd found wasn't salacious. The only sexy thing she'd discovered was a handwritten series of short stories of seduction written by the present sheikh's mother. She smiled to herself. She doubted whether even Zyir knew of its existence. It had been placed on the book shelves along with sundry other works. What was curious was that the stories of seduction contained none of the meekness Ashley had expected to find. Instead, they revealed a power that Ashley had never considered in relation to a harem. It seemed that strong women could be found anywhere—even in the past, even in a harem.

And then it struck her. She might be at a loss to know what to say in her own words, but she could use someone else's. Not the people whose words she'd been reading all day, but the words of a poet. No one could express love and seduction better than the Persian poet, Rumi. She had only a

couple of hours in which to memorize the poetry she'd encountered at university, a couple of hours to sift through and find the lines which would satisfy the king's requirement of seduction. And that would also satisfy her requirement *not* to be seduced.

Ashley walked through the darkened corridors, accompanied by the ever-present sound of water. Gentle splashes came from the fountains, and between gardens. It was present in the trickle of the water as it made its way in the narrow rills from one garden to the next, connecting and criss-crossing the whole desert palace with that commodity with which westerners didn't associate the desert. But it seems the springs were deep and constant, far beneath the city, and quite capable of sustaining the city of Irem.

The gardens became more lush as she moved from the outer wings of the palace ever deeper to the most ancient center—the harem. The flowers, with their luscious petals and pungent scents, became ever more seductive the further she ventured. She forced herself to keep moving forward. But when she stood outside the fabulously carved stone entrance of the harem where centuries before, eunuchs would have stood guard, she felt her nerve falter.

She smoothed her hands down the sheer, silk dress she'd selected from the wardrobes which had been opened for her. Whoever the dresses had once belonged to, they'd been designed to seduce. The material was of the finest silk, the colors as vibrant as the jewelry with which it was adorned, and the cut left nothing to the imagination. But then, she

thought, inhaling a deep breath to calm her nerves, she needed to make it as easy as possible for King Zyir to be seduced. Only that way would her future be ensured. He'd promised that he wouldn't touch her unless she wanted it, which meant all she had to do was make sure she didn't want it. That was the only danger.

She held her head up high, determined to ignore the way the semi-transparent silk clung to her breasts, and pushed open the heavy doors. Their lack of use was obvious in the creak of the hinges and the dust motes which bloomed in the rays of the setting sun, which stretched across the room.

She saw Zyir immediately. He stood with his back to the setting sun, its rays radiating out from all around him, making him look even more powerful than he was. She wondered if he stood there on purpose.

"You are late," he said. "I expected you to be here when I arrived." He frowned at her and sat down on what appeared to be a throne. So this was where the sheikh must have sat to receive his women. Let the playacting begin, she thought, as she moved to where he indicated, in front of the window, and bowed low.

"I apologize, Your Highness," she said, in a voice which was as demure as she could make it. Trouble was, it sounded even more husky than usual, but there was little she could do about that. "I have been preparing for your visit, anticipating your needs." She looked up from under lowered lashes and the expression in his eyes changed, heated and intensified as if a fire had been stoked. It seems she hadn't underestimated the power of words to inflame.

"In what way?" he asked, settling back.

"First, in my clothes. I hope they meet with your approval." She opened her arms to allow the gauzy material to drape down and flutter in the breeze coming from the window. Too late, she realized that the last of the sunlight behind her would make her dress even more transparent, her body even more visible to his eyes. She went to move, but he shook his head.

"I wish you to stay where you are."

She knew why. Still, wasn't that why she was there? She tensed under his scrutiny but was gratified to see him rub his lip as if disturbed. The dress was working. It gave her the confidence to continue. She twirled around, enjoying the obvious admiration she saw in his eyes as she turned not once, but twice, the material flying and floating around her in a haze of orange and reds. She savored the movement of air over her skin, unencumbered by any other clothing, and the feel of the plush carpet under her bare feet.

She faced him once more and brought down her arms. "As you can see, I did as you commanded, Your Highness." She lowered her eyes once more. It was playacting, but somehow she was enjoying it, beginning to take on the role which had been assigned to her. Pleasure shimmered across her skin, prompted by his intense gaze, as strong as the cooling breeze.

"Yes, I can see." She was sure he could. His eyes roamed her body and for a moment she felt both aroused and scared, and most of all, confused. She looked around for an escape and saw the door open to the garden.

"Do you intend to escape?" he asked.

She snapped her gaze back to him. He was devouring her with his eyes. She should have run away, but her fears were consumed by an over-riding knowledge of her own sensuality, and her body's needs, which were responding to his gaze.

"No. You commanded me to be here, and here I am. I would not dream of disobeying your command."

His only response was a narrowing of his eyes. She liked he was unsure. "Is that a fact?" He sounded as if he knew it wasn't.

She sat on the cushion opposite him, aware that her gown settled in a revealing way, exposing her cleavage and the shape of her breasts.

She kept her eyes lowered, so she could continue to playact more easily. "You are correct, of course. I might dream of disobeying you." She looked up into his eyes. "But I would never act on it. You are King here in Irem, and absolute ruler. If I disobeyed your command, I would not be allowed to stay."

He nodded in reluctant agreement. His eyes sparked, and she wondered why. It didn't take long to have her answer. "And of what else do you dream?"

"I dream of many things. But, Your Highness, it is the words of that master of poetry, Rumi, with which I intend to address you."

He waved his hand. "It is *your* words I wish to hear now. You may recite Rumi later if you wish. Tell me, of what do you dream?"

Her first instinct was to tell him where to go, but that would be the end of her stay here, the end of her dreams of a

secure future. She was here to seduce him with her words, and it looked like he wanted her own words. But how could she tell him of her daydreams? She'd long ago confined her sensuality to her dreams. It was safer that way.

He sighed. "You may begin by telling me *when* you dream—day or night?"

He was making it a little easier for her. She could start at the beginning.

"I have no time to dream during the day. I am busy—reading, working, traveling—always busy."

He nodded and sat back in his chair, his finger pressed against his lips as if considering her words. She didn't want him to consider things too deeply, or else she might be in danger of him knowing her. And knowledge was power.

"It's at night I dream," she said quickly, wanting to get it over with. Perhaps the more she gave him, the quicker he'd be satisfied and allow her to recite poetry. "If I cannot sleep, I lie still, close my eyes and think of different things."

The brief silence was filled only with the sound of a tapping at the window, of a sturdy vine whose leaves twitched in the wind.

"What things?"

She shrugged, wanting to tease him a little. "Sheep. Counting sheep, that sort of thing."

His eyes narrowed dangerously. It was clear he wasn't here for humor, or to be teased. "What things?" he growled.

"It depends," she said.

"On what?"

"On how I feel." She licked her lips as she reflected on the things which kept her awake. She wasn't a promiscuous woman, despite a healthy libido. She didn't wish to hand over her power to a man who might hurt her, might damage her self-esteem, her career path, her friendships, her life. She had to be strong, she had to give him something of what she knew he wanted. They were only words, she reminded herself. "Sometimes, when I go to bed, my mind is tired from working, but my body is"—she shrugged—"not tired. It wants more. My body desires more of me."

"And do you give it more?"

A simple nod sufficed. It was enough to darken his eyes with desire.

"So..." The pause stretched, encompassing visions of what she did in the privacy of her bed. "And of what do you dream as you pleasure yourself?"

Dream? She dreamed of things she could never admit to in real life—crazy things, of using her body in ways to extract the maximum satisfaction, and of being used by men in ways she would never submit to in the cold light of day. She had to change the subject. She refused to cross the line from fantasy to reality at such a personal level. She had to answer his question, she'd agreed to that, but she wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know. She had to get this conversation back on track.

She cleared her throat. "Maybe I can better describe my dreams at night by using the words of the Persian, poet, Rumi, who has a mastery of words which I, as a woman"—she shot him another dark look which negated her words—"do not imagine I can surpass."

He nodded for her to proceed.

She rehearsed them in her mind. She didn't want to falter or ruin the poetry.

"At night before sleeping you take off the tight shoes, and your soul releases into a place it knows. Dreams glide deeper."

"Dreams glide deeper," he repeated. "And where do your dreams take you?"

Damn. He refused to be diverted. She had to give him something. After all, she'd agreed to this method of seduction.

"To a place where I can satisfy the demands of my body, where men are there to pleasure me."

"Men? Plural?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"It is a fantasy, Your Highness."

"And your fantasy involves..."

"Sex."

"Are you penetrated?"

She blinked. It was a curiously unerotic word. "Yes."

"And are you clothed?"

"Sometimes, sometimes not."

"Does this happen in public or private?"

"Public," she muttered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." She bet he did.

She took a deep breath. "In public, where people can observe how the man enters me, again and again and releases his seed deep inside of me, driving me to an orgasm which often awakens me." The words tumbled out. She hoped by giving him what he wanted, they could move away from the subject. Unfortunately the words awakened in herself a desire. She was wet between the legs, throbbing

with a need that the memories of her fantasies awakened within her.

He didn't speak for a few minutes. It seemed she'd given him something to think about, too. Then he beckoned her closer to him.

"Your Highness?" she asked, hoping that he wasn't about to renege on his promise of no sex.

"Come closer. I would have you stand before me. Close."

"And that's all?"

"No, I wish to hold your hand."

"But the poetry—"

He waved his hand, stopping her from speaking. "You may recite some poetry tomorrow night. But now, I'm not in the mood."

"What are you in the mood for?" She had to know.

"Come closer and I'll show you."

She did as he said, stepping close to him so that all she would have to do was place her hands on either side of the chair, to lean in and kiss those lips which she'd spent much of the day trying not to think about. Instead, she lowered her eyes. It was easier that way, she realized. She could keep her thoughts hidden.

"And what would you show me, my sheikh?"

He reached out for her and lifted her chin, and her gaze met his for the first time that evening. "I thought I would be teaching you things, Ashley. But it seems you are also teaching me." He trailed his finger under her chin, drifting down to the hollow at the base of her throat. Then he looked up and met her gaze. "I've learned that I dislike to see an averted gaze."

He didn't move his finger but kept it under her chin. It felt as if his touch was the center of her being, as if all points of her radiated out from him. It shocked her to the core that one simple touch could have this effect. Why? Did her story, designed to seduce the man, also seduce her? She knew it did. There was no denying the evidence. Her sex felt swollen, as if wanting him to put his finger there, rather than on her chin, and her breasts were betraying her. She followed his gaze down to the gauzy top she wore, where her hardened nipples poked out from the sheer material which her full breasts strained against.

She wondered if he would take her there and then, and she knew that if he did, there was nothing she would do to stop it. Not because she had no power to do so, but because she had no inclination to stop him. Every part of her yearned for him to make her his.

She knew he knew this because she saw it in his eyes.

"Give me your hand."

She swallowed but, still holding his gaze, lifted her hand. He smoothed his fingers over the back of hers, then gripping it, pushed her hand back against her stomach. His gaze challenged hers, but there was nothing she could do. She was shocked by the heat of her palm pressed against her stomach, held there by his firm grip. Still watching her eyes, he pushed her hand lower until it was hard against her sex. He curled his fingers around, molding her own to the shape of her sex. She jerked involuntarily at the pressure of their joined hands upon her clitoris, her hips pushing in to meet that pressure.

A flush of heat filled her body and moisture soaked the fine material through which their joined hands pressed against her sex.

"Now," he said, his voice hoarse with lust. "Show me what you do to satisfy yourself."

She could have refused. She knew she could, and yet she didn't want to. It was a sexual fantasy which she'd never imagined before, but it was one she could play out here and now, and then disappear from this man and this country in days, never to see either of them again.

She licked her lips as her breathing quickened. She moved her fingers, finding the places which excited her. His fingers followed her movements. He was pleasuring her and yet keeping to his word of not touching her. It was breathtakingly exciting.

She pushed her hips into their hands, slowly at first but with increasing rhythm as first one finger slipped inside of her, followed by another. Their faces were close, but he did not try to kiss her, just watched her as the pleasure increased, and all thought fled under the ecstasy of her body. Her breathing became ragged as she teetered on the edge of orgasm. One slight contraction of his hand was all it took to make her own hand tip her over into the bliss of release. She cried out as her insides rippled with pleasure, and her hands and feet tingled with the intense sensations which still flowed from that one point—not her hand, but his eyes fixed on her.

If he hadn't released her hand and steadied her, she would have fallen with the draining sense of weakness which flowed over her. He rose, and she fell against him for a few

moments until her breathing was restored. He smelled intensely sexy but, as she shifted her lips closer to his neck, he moved away.

He held her by the arms for a few moments until she stood up straighter. And then he stepped away. She could hardly believe it.

"Goodnight, Ashley."

Without a further touch, or kiss, or word, he walked to the door, leaving her incredulous. As the door closed behind him she spun around and looked about her, not seeing the beauty of the decorated walls, the jewel-like colors in the woven rugs, or the calming waters of the fountain. No, all she could feel was that Zyir had hooked her on the end of a long line, and had reeled her in. But, at the moment he could have had her, he tossed her away again. But he'd be back. She had tomorrow night, and the night after that. And next time she'd make sure she got what she wanted—her fantasies made real. Poetry or no poetry.

ZYIR WALKED AWAY with his mind full of Ashley. He knew he could have taken her there and then. He stopped at the entrance to his own quarters, as he imagined what he could do to that lush naked body of hers. It had taken all he had to walk away, but he needed to show her who was in control, who would be obeyed here.

He closed his door behind him and shut his eyes. He pictured her standing before him, anything but subservient. It was there in every inch of her body, in every part of that clever brain of hers, and, more importantly, in that pure,

loving spirit of hers. He'd understood the first two—her body and brain—but had had no clue that her words of seduction would reveal the heart of the woman. And that was the most seductive thing of all. And the thing that made him want to run for the hills. Sex he could handle very well, but love? That was an entirely different matter. Sex he could look forward to tomorrow night. He wouldn't refuse her twice. And then? She would be gone and there would be no more thought of love.

## CHAPTER 7



Ashley pushed away the papers which had managed to absorb her interest all day. She was grateful she had the sort of mind that could focus on a book to the exclusion of everything else. Her mother had used to say that the house could burn down and Ashley wouldn't notice if she had her head in a book. And she was thankful for that now, because at least it had meant she could stop thinking about what had happened in the harem. It gave her some respite from the flushed cheeks of embarrassment, and the vivid memories of how his touch had ignited her body.

She groaned at the memory and put her head in her hands, as echoes of the sensations which had filled her, rippled through her still. How was she ever going to look him in the eye with any sense of professionalism now? It was clear from how she'd reacted to him that all her talk about no sex had been only that—talk. All he'd had to do was look at her, touch her, and she was putty in his hands. And, what was even worse, was that she couldn't wait for the night ahead when she could take things even further. Because she was decided. She wanted him and she would have him.

Because in a few days she'd be gone and this would all be a memory.

She looked up with renewed determination and closed the ancient tomes which, she suspected, hadn't been touched in centuries. Whatever she might think of Zyir, however she might react to him physically, she was grateful to him for the free access he'd given her to his country's archives.

In just two days she'd gleaned enough information to flesh out her book on harems and to make it the kind of book the publisher was looking for, even if it wasn't exactly what she wanted to write. She'd discovered far more than she'd expected, facts which challenged her own notions and beliefs.

She sighed. There was so much work she could do here on the city's architecture, so much more to learn. But she'd cut off any possibility of further research with her insistence on the harem research. What had seemed like an excellent way to further her career now felt far less than excellent. In fact, she thought, as she collected her things and made her way to the exit, it was beginning to feel very much like a mistake—but one she was committed to now. Like it or not.

As she walked along the outer walkway with a view over the surrounding plains, a bird of prey caught her attention. It wheeled in the winds which moved high above the city. It was completely free, and for one long moment, it appeared suspended in the air, before it disappeared, an everdwindling dot in the bright blue sky.

She might not have her freedom now, but she would. In two days' time she'd leave this place with all the information she needed to be exactly like that hawk—going wherever she wanted to, being whoever she wanted to be. A few days and she'd be free. But, even as she thought this, she wondered quite how free she'd be with the memory of Zyir's touch and gaze always ready to haunt her the moment she relaxed her mind.

The doors to the king's suite opened for Ashley with barely an acknowledgement, as she made her way to meet Zyir at the appointed time. It was mid afternoon, and she'd spent the day researching as arranged, but now it seemed Zyir wished to further her education in other ways. And she couldn't help being both curious and on edge. Would he acknowledge what had passed between them? Or would she simply be the visiting academic, to be tolerated for a short while before she was kicked out of the country she was beginning to love.

It didn't take long to find out.

As a second set of doors swung open, Ashley found herself in an office. On one side was a board table and, on the other, a communications center. But her gaze didn't shift from the sight directly before her—Zyir, seated behind a large desk. He gave her a brief, cool nod before looking down at the papers on the desk.

The butterflies which had been fluttering lightly in her gut now went crazy. She was glad she didn't have to meet that gaze as it gave her a few precious moments to compose herself. She drew in steadying breaths to counteract the power he emanated, not only as king but also as a man.

His formal robes fell in soft folds from his broad, powerful shoulders, and a white keffiyeh covered his head. But it was his fingers where her gaze came to rest. His hands were large, but his fingers were also elegant, holding the old-fashioned fountain pen in the air as he read the paper, with all the composure and presence of a conductor holding a baton, about to create music, or cut it dead. They were powerful hands. She closed her eyes briefly as she remembered them pressing against her hand, aiding her to orgasm.

She balled her hands into fists, trying to forget the intimacy of the previous night, determined to ground herself in the moment. But another inhalation of breath bound her more intimately to him, edged as it was with a trace of aftershave. Seconds ticked passed before he signed the paper, looked across at his assistant and pushed the sheath of papers towards him. He gestured for the man to leave, which he did, with an obsequious bow before closing the door behind him.

They were alone now, and, only after he'd closed his laptop shut with a click, did he look up at her, with a sudden intensity which made her gasp. There was no way she could avert her gaze from his. He held her in his thrall, just as he had the night before. It seemed there would be no forgetting.

"Dr. Maitland," he said, the light from the window behind him lending his presence even more power. "Please, take a seat."

She gave a brief, nervous smile and took the seat in front of his desk.

"I trust your research went well today?"

His eyes sent her a different message. She focused on what he said because she didn't think she could handle anything personal, any reference to their physical encounter the previous night.

"Yes, thank you." The words came out breathless, so she decided not to elaborate.

"And you were given all the access you required?" She nodded. "Indeed."

"Good. Perhaps you could give me a summary of your findings."

"Here? Now?"

"Yes, here and now. I want to know that my trust in you isn't misplaced. I've granted you permission to write this book, but I want to know what will be in it."

"Your trust isn't misplaced. I will present a balanced view point. In fact, just from this morning, I learned things which will change the major thrust of my book."

"In what way?" He sat back in his chair, his hands steepled before him, his expression interested rather than seductive. For that, she was thankful.

She cleared her throat and sat taller. "The women of the harem. They have been influential in policy making. Not just through the men, but in their own right."

"Yes. Our culture is complex and the women have always had power, even if they exercise it behind closed doors."

"It's not what one normally assumes from a harem."

"Not all harems are alike, Dr. Maitland. You think all monarchs are alike? You think your Queen of England is the same as the king of an oil-rich, African nation, who has complete authority?

She shook her head and gave a surprised laugh. "No."

"Then why would you consider one harem to be exactly like another? We're different people, different cultures. Don't place us all in the same box, simply because it's easy, simply because it's neat. Nothing is neat and easy in this world."

"I know."

"Then don't portray it as such. Don't let me down."

"I'm not sure my publishers will like it, but, yes, I don't intend to write anything but the truth about what I find."

He gave a small grunt—whether of approval or surprise, she couldn't have said. "I have some other papers here for you, which I thought you'd find of interest." He riffled through some papers on his desk.

She also looked down, but not at the papers. His fingers transfixed her as they moved across the papers. They were long, thick and strong, and yet they moved across the papers with a delicacy which made her breath catch in her throat and her skin tingle. The way his forefinger traced the Arabic script and decoration showed an appreciation of its beauty, which wasn't evident anywhere else in him. For a split second, she imagined his finger doing the same thing against her skin.

"Dr. Maitland?"

She looked up to find him looking at her strangely. For, while his finger had been tracing the elaborate script, his eyes seemed to have strayed to her. She blushed.

He pushed a bundle of handwritten texts over to her. "Here, take them." She took them from him, their fingers

brushing in the exchange. "I want you to work on these, too."

She scanned the papers. They looked old, they looked like nothing she'd seen before. "I'd love to. Thank you. I've spent since dawn looking at the harem papers but couldn't resist winding up looking at the papers relating to the building of the mosque. Two thousand years old, and yet such sophistication."

His face warmed, although it didn't quite make it into a smile. "I think I see. The harem book is something to open doors with, but your heart is in the buildings."

She shrugged. "The buildings?" She pushed a paper around with her finger. "Yes, but buildings are all about people, aren't they? The people who live in them and use them."

"And so you're interested in my buildings, my people. Hm, I wonder why."

The silence was only broken by Ashley sliding her leather sandals over the decorative tiled floor, as they pulled in beneath her. She crossed her arms to defend herself. But, unless she wanted him to continue to conjecture about what lay behind her research interests, she had to supply an answer. She looked up into his penetrating gaze. "I guess they're different, the people different, to my own."

"Are you so disillusioned with your own people that you would seek to engage your mind so far from them?"

With an unerring aim, he'd hit the nail on the head. Or the bullet in the heart. She shrugged. She didn't want to go there. He leaned forward, as if aware he'd found her weak point. "What are you running from, Dr. Maitland?"

Her mouth dried. No one had ever asked her that question. Everyone—from close friends to family—had always been taken in by the exterior she showed them. Bold, ambitious and confident, her sexuality conveniently hidden behind her clothes and her intellectual manner. But this man, whose background, culture and life was so different to hers, seemed to have put that beautiful finger of his on the pulse of her pain.

"Running from?" She shook her head. "Nothing."

He rose and walked over to her. She looked away. Her breath caught as he placed his finger under her chin and gently brought her around to face him. "Yes, you are. I can see it in your eyes now. Something has made you run, far away from your past. But there is little point. One can never outrun one's past."

Her eyes widened in pain. "But how can one get rid of the pain, then?"

"Simple," he said. "You have to face it."

She looked down at the papers once more. Papers which described the kind of family life she'd never had growing up, and the kind of adult loving she dared not trust. She had to change the subject, find something to divert him.

"I wonder..."

"Yes?"

She looked up at him with renewed courage. "I wonder... About the children. Are children still raised in the harem?"

"My children are raised in the same manner in which I was raised, in the harem." His lips flickered with a smile.

"Other cultures call it a nursery. But my children aren't raised in the old harem buildings. They are raised in the same wing of the palace as myself." He rubbed his chin with his knuckle—something she'd noticed he did when he was thinking something through. "Would you care to meet them?"

"Thank you, I'd like that."

From the way the crease between his eyes deepened, Ashley was pretty sure Zyir knew that her sudden interest in children had been created to deflect his interest in her past. But, as they left the library, she didn't care, because it had worked. There was no more mention of what she was running from. Which was just as well, because Ashley hardly knew herself.

In the end, it turned out to be a very different sort of meeting than she'd expected. Instead of being taken to a room in the palace, he introduced them to her in the stables. Ashley immediately saw that Zyir's children had two very different personalities.

"So who are you?" asked the daughter, Dayana, who was about seven years of age.

Zyir frowned.

"My name is Dr. Ashley Maitland, and I work at an English university."

"Papa!" exclaimed her younger brother, Talmon. "What's a university?"

"An educational establishment."

"Do we have them here in our own country?"

"Yes, but they are not as large as the one Dr. Maitland works in."

"Oh!" The boy turned to Ashley with enormous eyes.

"Dr. Maitland—"

"Please call me Ashley."

"It is proper that the children address you as Dr. Maitland," said Zyir.

She felt irritated, but shrugged and nodded.

"Dr. Maitland," Talmon repeated. "What do you do at the university?" It seemed this young boy was the quieter one of the two children, and thoughtful with it.

As Ashley explained a little of what she did at the university, Dayana raced across to the horses and jumped on one that had been prepared, minus the saddle.

"You can ride, I take it?" asked Zyir, somewhat belatedly, Ashley thought. Because it looked like if she didn't, she'd be in trouble.

"Yes. Not expertly, but I can hold on for dear life."

His expression didn't change. "I hope it won't come to that."

Accompanied by a large group of retainers, they rode off into the desert. Zyir went to the front with Dayana, while she and Talmon followed behind at a far more cautious rate.

When they reached their destination, she realized what was going on. They were heading toward a group of people who were retrieving hawks from cages.

Zyir jumped off his horse, flinging the reins to an attendant, and strode off to the hawks. Dayana slid off while the horse was still cantering and landed in a cloud of sand with the grace and athleticism of a dancer. Her loose hair streamed behind her. Ashley couldn't help thinking that Zyir would have trouble keeping his daughter in check as she

grew older. She appeared to have all his spirit and far more beauty than any young girl had a right to. Although, at the moment, she seemed quite oblivious to it.

Ashley and Talmon dismounted and joined Zyir and Dayana. Dayana stood, echoing her father's stance, feet apart, hands on hips as they surveyed the hawks. Her father was obviously Dayana's hero. Ashley stepped back as Zyir unhooded the hawk, who spread his wings and responded to Zyir's touch in a way which Ashley couldn't help thinking she'd respond, too.

"Come closer, Dr. Maitland. The falcon won't hurt you."

She stepped closer, entranced by the bird's size and color of its plumage. "He's beautiful."

The children snickered, and Zyir shot them a warning look.

"It's a she. We use only female falcons."

"Why is that?"

"Because they are larger and more powerful."

Ashley liked that idea.

The falcon gripped Zyir's gloved hand, ducking its head with pleasure as he stroked its plumage.

"And they're also intelligent. They know their own names and will return to their owners when called," he said.

"That's amazing."

"They *are* amazing birds, indeed. They can see their victim move from a distance of a mile or more and return to a lure created by the rustling of dried bustard wings."

Ashley stepped back and watched as the family flew their hawks. It was only when Zyir's falcon returned with a small animal in its talons that Ashley turned away. The savage vision was confronting—it was life in the raw. It seemed this land in which she'd found herself had no problem facing the truth about things. Sex was to be enjoyed, children to be nurtured, and death to be accepted. All things which she'd either run from, or been denied her, her entire life. Maybe Zyir had been right—it was time for her to stop running and face the truth about her own desires and needs.

When she looked back, she found Zyir's questioning gaze upon her. She went to talk with Talmon, who was more than happy to tell her about his collection of rocks and fossils.

The sun was lowering in the sky by the time they returned to the palace. Ashley joined them in the family sitting room, which was unlike anywhere else in the palace. It was full of the clutter of books and toys, just like a home. While their amah made tea, Ashley found herself seated beside Zyir, watching Dayana boss her little brother around.

Ashley laughed. "I think your daughter will have to fall in love with an obedient man." But her laughter died when she glanced at Zyir and saw the frown lowering on his face.

"Love will not come into it. A marriage will be arranged for Dayana."

"An arranged marriage?" She couldn't help sound incredulous because she couldn't see Dayana agreeing for one minute to anything she didn't want to do.

"Of course. It is our culture, especially in the royal family. I, myself, had an arranged marriage."

"And how did that work out for you?" The question slipped out and she realized from his expression that she'd overstepped the mark. But she didn't care, she was curious.

He hesitated, and she wondered if he'd deign to answer. "It was fine," he said abruptly, turning to his children. "And it brought me two beautiful children."

Ashley was, once again, struck by how close his relationship with his children was. Another thing she hadn't expected. Another stereotype shot down.

"And you will have more, no doubt, when you re-marry." He looked at her strangely. "I will not re-marry. I have all I need."

She couldn't help thinking that his marriage must have been a lot less than 'fine', if he had no desire to repeat the experience.

He looked around and barked something short and succinct at his children, and they scrambled off their respective chairs and left the room with their amahs. Dayana struggled to hide a flash of irritation, while Talmon looked hurt. Despite their feelings, they'd both obeyed instantly.

Zyir rose and looked out at the setting sun. Without turning to her he said. "It is time, Ashley." It was the first time that day that he'd called her by her first name. "To prepare for the evening ahead."

Fear guttered low in her stomach. A flutter, but it wasn't fear alone. She knew, now, the potential for pleasure that lay in the evening ahead.

## CHAPTER 8



She'd have him tonight. She wanted him, he wanted her, she would be gone in a few days. It was now or never.

She dressed with care, even fewer garments than the night before, and went to the harem earlier than was required. She wanted to be there when he arrived. She arranged her robes on the bed.

At the appointed time, there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," she called out.

It seemed giving permission was her right. And it was a right she very much wanted this night.

He walked in and closed the door, before turning to her. He didn't move straight away, and she wondered if she'd overplayed her hand.

She felt the night air through the light material which draped over her, revealing every inch of curve — and she definitely had curves. And it seemed he liked what he saw. His eyes darkened, and he extended his hand to her. He hadn't done that the previous night.

She walked over to him, into the last rays of the sunset which flooded her, revealing her nakedness beneath her clothes. If he'd wondered as to her intent, it was clear to him now.

He took her hand in his and they walked to the window seat which overlooked the lush gardens. The seat was wide and long and strewn with cushions and luxurious fabrics. It was a seat designed for seduction.

She sat down and re-arranged the flimsy fabric, aware with a swift downward glance that her nipples were hard, and her breathing had quickened, just from touching his hand, and the sweeping caress of his thumb over her skin.

He also sat, and he didn't retrieve his hand as she dropped hers to her thigh. His fingers splayed over hers so that she felt his touch through the fine fabric on her naked thigh.

"You look very beautiful tonight, Ashley."

"I decided to make it a special night. After all, I will not be here in a few days and I wanted to... make the most of my time left."

"You wish me to make love to you."

She should have known that he would come straight to the point.

"Yes."

He smiled. "And, of course, I will if you wish it. But do not think you are getting out of your words of seduction. I am looking forward to them."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Again they are Rumi's words—words which cannot be outshone."

His fingers spread a little further up her leg and it was all she could do to restrain herself from jumping on him there and then. But you didn't jump on a sheikh. He always called the shots. She realized that now. All she could do was suggest a path he could travel. Whether or not he traveled it, was up to him.

"Would you care for refreshment?" she asked, reverting to the formal.

"No." He didn't take his eyes off her.

She inclined her head. "Then I shall waste no more time." She inhaled a deep breath.

"I want to see you," she began to recite Rumi's poem quietly and hesitantly.

"Know your voice.

Recognize you when you

first come 'round the corner.

Sense your scent when I come

into a room you've just left."

She paused as she reflected on how accurate Rumi's words were. She instinctively, at some primitive animal level, recognized Zyir's voice and presence now.

"Know the lift of your heel," she continued.

"the glide of your foot.

Become familiar with the way

you purse your lips

then let them part,

just the slightest bit,

when I lean in to your space..."

She paused once more, allowing herself both dramatic license and to act out the words by leaning towards him, encouraged by the way his hands crept higher up her thigh.

"and kiss you," she said. She took a deep breath and, so close now, she had to move her head to look around his face

before lowering her gaze to his lips—lips which opened as if readying for her touch, but not betraying his promise to her. It would be all up to her after all. She lifted her lips to his and pressed them against his. He breathed in sharply and then she felt his fingers move to the back of her head and keep her there as he kissed her deeply, erotically and thoroughly. Eventually she pulled away. She needed to finish the words of the poem.

"I want to know the joy," she continued.

"of how you whisper

'more.'"

She let the last syllable linger in the air. It drifted into that small space between them which had been bridged only by a kiss. But she wanted more now.

It was now or never. She had only one more night before she left the country. And she knew that she'd met the person who had existed in her heart ever since the notion of love had been breathed deep inside of her.

She shifted so his hand had no choice but to move further up her leg. But it still wasn't where she wanted it. "When we began, you said I could ask you for something and you would give it."

He frowned, his eyes holding hers with intention. He gave a brief nod.

"I know your voice, now; I know when you are about to round a corner; I know when you enter a room, even if I do not see you."

His eyes turned from fierceness to a dark recognition. He nodded for her to continue.

"And I know the feel of your lips against mine, how your kisses make me feel. But what I don't know is how your body feels when pressed against mine, when intimate with mine. I don't know what it will be like to feel you inside me. And I ask you to give me that pleasure. I wish to know you. Completely."

It was as if a switch had been flicked. He rose and opened his arms to her and she entered them. It was like coming home. Her body fitted into his as if it were made to do so. He smelled of a subtle, very male perfume—what was natural and what was aftershave, she couldn't have said. But it wrapped around her, enveloping her as his arms did. She closed her eyes as she pressed her cheek against his chest. She could feel the beat of his heart through her cheek, vibrating through her bones, throughout her entire body, filling her with himself. But it wasn't enough.

She pulled away and looked up into his eyes, dark, dark pools of desire which melted her. She could hardly believe she was going to carry out the actions she'd given so much thought to.

She traced his lips, still in a firm line, around the edges, and then went on tiptoe and, closing her eyes tight, she pressed her lips to his. They flared open against hers and he leaned into the kiss, his hands splaying out behind her head to keep her firm in his hands as he kissed her. And there was no doubt who was kissing whom now. He was in charge and she no longer had to manage anything, simply enjoy the kiss which connected them both in a way that seemed entirely natural. They'd connected in mind and spirit, and now the physical was all that was required to complete the

connection—at least for now. She wouldn't think about tomorrow.

He sat on the bed, and pulled her onto his lap, where he could better kiss her and his hands could caress her. As she pulled away, panting from the kiss, she put her hands on his shoulders and kneeled astride him. He pushed aside her loose silk gown and took her breasts in his hands, flicking their nipples before tasting them with his mouth, first one then the other. She thrust her hips forward and let her head fall back as the sensations scoured through her, setting her afire with lust. He tasted her as if he couldn't get enough of her, and the thought of this man enjoying her body made her feel even more powerful. And she wanted to exercise that power by using restraint.

When he at last left her breasts to trail kisses across her stomach, she pushed him gently down onto the bed. She kissed him, her tongue sliding against his as she kept him still with one flat hand against his chest. Then she began to undress him.

He'd come to her in western clothes—a shirt and trousers. So she undid a button at a time, followed by a kiss against his naked skin. When she'd undone the last button, she pushed his shirt aside. She swept her tongue up the length of his stomach and chest, the hairs buzzing against her tongue. He tasted sheer, mouth-wateringly male.

"Don't move," she whispered in his ear. He turned his head to try to capture her mouth with his, but she shifted away with a smile. To her surprise he did as she said, and lay there amongst the cushions and jewel-like covers, dark and dangerous, his broad chest strong and powerful. But all that strength was held in abeyance—waiting for her.

She untied her robes and let them pool at her feet, landing in a cloud of red silk, before she stepped out of them.

She was rewarded with the sound of his sharply inhaled breath. He shook his head. "You are so beautiful," he breathed. "Your breasts are magnificent."

She liked that. Her breasts had been something she'd hated growing up, trying not to be seen as sexual by friends and lecturers. She'd ended up wearing baggy clothes to hide them. But now, she gloried in her full curves.

She reached over and unbuttoned his trousers. His zip strained under the pressure of his swollen cock. It seemed only kind to release it. And, as soon as she had, she realized she'd shifted control back to him, and she instinctively stepped away.

Once he was naked, he got off the bed. He swept his hands over her body, his eyes following the progress of his hands, until his hands moved under her generous buttocks and he gripped them and pulled her hard against him. His cock pressed into her soft flesh as they kissed.

Within seconds he'd lifted her, and her legs curled around his hips. She angled herself ready for him. He needed no further invitation, and thrust inside her. He stopped part way in, as she was suddenly aware of his size. He kissed her, and she relaxed again. With one hard thrust he was fully inside her and she forgot any nerves, anything at all, except the pleasure of being filled by him.

Still connected, he laid her on the bed. It seemed for the first time her body was alive—from the tingles in her

fingertips, to the explosive sensations as he pulled out slowly, his flesh moving against her most sensitive places, before thrusting inside of her again, taking her breath away.

He raked his fingers through hers, spread them out to her side so she couldn't move, and then he thrust repeatedly into her. There was no waiting, no judgement, nothing except an urgent need which they shared. As they inched closer to their orgasm, his movements became more powerful, shunting her back on the bed as he increased his rhythm. Finally she could hold on no longer. She closed her eyes and put her head to one side, needing some shelter from his penetrating gaze in order to let go. She cried out, but still he thrust inside her until she cried out again, and only then did he come, pumping his seed deep inside of her, claiming her for his own. Oh, and how she wanted to be claimed.

As he withdrew, she realized she was a changed woman. Intellectually she was still the same, with the same attitude and beliefs, but her body had been awakened by him, and she knew now that she'd never be the same. She'd always want this man. She'd always crave the pleasure his body could bring to hers—a pleasure like no other.

She lay, spreadeagled, her legs and arms wide, naked, on the rumpled silk sheets, unmoving from where his body had pinned her. The moonlight danced over her body as the windcatcher brought down the cool night air from the starry skies above. It was just as well, as her body emanated heat. Her skin was sensitive and felt each puff of wind upon her. Her breasts heaved as she struggled to regain her breath. His seed pooled between her legs, and she crossed them, as if hoping to keep it inside of her. She'd always wanted a child, but hadn't wanted to marry. Maybe, just maybe, she could have that child now.

She turned her head to see him, his profile limned by the starlight which was bright out here in the middle of the desert. His eyelids flickered as he, too, tried to regain his breath. Their lovemaking had been explosive. She'd experienced nothing like it. She was strong, but he was stronger, and she'd never felt subdued by a man before, or wanted to be, but she'd been controlled by Zyir and the sex had been all the more thrilling because of it.

He reached out and grabbed her hand and tugged her to him. She rolled onto him and kissed him. Hungrily, she sought his tongue with hers, caressing it, nipping his lips lightly before kissing his chin and his throat and suckling on his neck. He grunted and pulled her away.

"Are you a vampire, Ashley?" he asked with a laugh.

She sat up, her legs astride him, his already erect cock pressing against her wet sex. She shrugged. "I feel I could be anything with you."

She didn't wait for a response, but lifted herself, her eyes never leaving his, and took hold of his erection in both hands, caressing it before lowering herself onto him once more. Only then, when he was inside her, did she lose connection with his gaze, her eyes closing as bliss swamped her.

She rose, watching him from behind lowered lids. He reached out for her breasts and she lowered herself until they were within reach of his mouth. He suckled on one, unwilling to let it go until she pulled it away, her nipple elongating as it left his mouth. She lowered her other nipple

into his waiting mouth and allowed the sensations to flood her. Inside and out, his body pleasured hers, and it was all she could think about. She was consumed by feeling, consumed by him, filled by him.

She pulled her breasts away and leaned back, resting her hands behind her as she rose and fell, slowly to begin with, but unable to stop herself from taking what she wanted, rising and falling with increasing frequency, until it was all she could think about, all she could do. She needed a release from the tensions which coiled inside her. It came with a blast of light and she felt weakened, impossibly his, as he brought her down and held her tight with his arms.

They rolled to one side, him still inside of her, and she fell into a brief but deep sleep where no thought disturbed her, only a bone-deep satisfaction and relaxation such as she'd never known before.

## CHAPTER 9



Ashley awoke the next morning in the harem to find herself alone. She blinked in the bright morning light and rolled over, wincing as she became aware of parts of her body which had been well used the night before. Naked, she rose and went to the bathroom, where someone had run a hot bath on which fragrant flower petals floated. As she stepped into the still-warm water with a sigh, she realized that what had passed between her and Zyir was no longer private. But what did it matter, she tried to persuade herself, when she wouldn't be here after today? She'd be traveling back to Havilah tomorrow, where she'd arranged to stay with Xander and Elaheh for one night before taking the flight back to England. She'd be returning home. She knew that, and yet that didn't explain why she felt as if she were leaving home.

BACK IN THE LIBRARY, surrounded by the books and manuscripts which she now had full access to, Ashley imagined her return to Oxford. She'd return with far more

knowledge about how harems worked than any other academic. And, she knew, her colleagues would want to know why. What had happened to enable her to glean so much information, which had always proved elusive?

She bit her lip and tried to force herself to concentrate on getting as much out of the papers in the little time she had left. She wouldn't think about it. But the thoughts had taken hold, and she sat back with a sigh and closed her eyes as she imagined her colleagues discovering that, not only had she joined the harem, but that she'd also had sex with the sheikh. They'd assume she slept with Zyir in return for information. It couldn't have been further from the truth. Zyir was too honorable a man to force himself on her, or to take what she offered if he'd believed it was for any other reason than she wanted to. And her? She'd had sex with Zyir for no other reason than her body had demanded it.

She knew that anger at her attitude had been the only reason he'd come up with the preposterous idea of her joining his harem in return for information. He'd intended to put her in her place, and he had. Except not the place he'd imagined.

She doodled love hearts with her pen in her notebook. He'd made her fall in love with him, and she couldn't see that there was anything she could do about it—except leave. It was always what she'd intended to do. But now, she'd be leaving her heart behind.

As she had the day before, in the afternoon she accepted Zyir's invitation to join him. But this time it wasn't in the

privacy of the family's quarters, or out in the desert. It was in the public part of the palace where the festivities were already underway for the country's Mother's Day celebrations. She'd been given leave to miss the mid-day feast so she could focus on her research on this, her last day. But her attendance at the afternoon of dancing was nonnegotiable.

As soon as Ashley entered the room, she was swept along to where the king sat watching the festivities. He looked up, and she was struck by how relaxed he appeared. There was even a glimmer of a smile on his lips as he greeted her and she took the proffered seat beside him.

"Welcome to our Mother's Day celebrations," he said, leaning in to her so she could hear above the music. "I believe your own country also celebrates mothers in a similar way."

"Not so similar. We send cards, flowers maybe, and if the children are particularly attentive, mothers may have their dinner cooked for them one night of the year."

Zyir raised an eyebrow in surprise and leaned back in his chair. But Ashley noticed he still kept an arm around the back of her chair. Surreptitiously, so no one could see, he trailed a lazy finger up her spine. She sat up straighter and hoped no one would notice how turned on she was. But when she could return Zyir's gaze, she realized *he* had. She shot him a dark look. She wasn't used to being at the mercy of her sexual urges.

"It dates to the time of the Pharaohs," he continued, as if nothing had happened. "The Pharaohs, just as our kings do, very much respected women." "And that's why they place them in harems."

"They kept them safe and in luxury, as you do something, or someone, precious."

She shrugged. She couldn't respond because she didn't know how to. She'd always loved freedom, always wanted to come and go as she wished. But her stay in the harem at night had proved the opposite. By day she had her intellectual and physical freedom, but by night, she was in the harem. And she didn't feel trapped there. Instead, she felt desirable, pampered, and treasured, just as he'd described.

"Spring has always been the time to celebrate life—flowers, new life, and of course women, who are the fount of all life."

"I guess we couldn't do it without you. You do perform a small part."

"But an important one," he grinned, a rare, heartstopping grin. "Egyptians built boats and filled them with flowers to float around the Nile to celebrate mothers."

"But, there being no Nile here—"

"We celebrate like this." He gestured to the dancers, the flowers, the new growth, the children.

"It's beautiful." She leaned back in the chair, against the palm of his hand, which continued to caress her. She looked at Zyir's two children. "They must miss their mother."

Zyir stopped stroking her. He grunted, a non-committal sound.

She looked at him. "You never speak of her."

"One should not speak ill of the dead."

"There is nothing good to say about her?"

He gave a short, sharp shake of the head. "My children are better off without her. They rarely saw her and when they did they appeared frightened of her. Her status went to her head. I didn't wish her to be around them."

They sat in silence, as she adjusted her previous image of them as a happy family, bereft of a loving mother, to the reality of the situation. But, maybe, there were other women, women of the harem who had taken the place of their mother? She hadn't come across any information as to Zyir's harem, although there was plenty of information about his father's. She licked her lips. She had to know.

"Maybe..."

"Yes?" He turned his now stern gaze on her.

She cleared her throat. "Maybe one of the other women from your harem is kind to your children?"

Zyir didn't reply. And, at that moment, the music stopped and his children appeared before them. They looked reserved and anxious as they waited for Zyir to give them permission to approach.

Ashley leaned forward with a smile of welcome, forcing Zyir to move his hand away from her back. The children's faces lit up as she turned her focus on them, and they chattered, charmed by the attention. Their guarded behavior changed to warm smiles and laughter. Dayana punctuated her conversation with brief touches to Ashley's hand, as if making sure she was real, as if she needed that physical contact. While Talmon shuffled his bottom along the seat closer to Ashley, until he was leaning into her. Ashley moved her arm until it was around Talmon's shoulders as he talked to her, his face upturned and trusting.

After Talmon had finished talking, Ashley glanced at Zyir, whose face held an expression she couldn't read, and he turned away too swiftly for her to work it out. She continued to talk to the children, congratulating them on their singing, but all the while wondering what lay behind Zyir's lack of response to her question about the harem. What was he hiding from her?

As soon as she could, Ashley excused herself and sought out her maid. Each day she'd grown more fond of the woman, who was more than happy to share whatever she knew with the foreign mistress in exchange for English lessons.

It didn't take her long to find out the answer to her question. With a burst of laughter, her maid informed her that, no, His Highness was not like his father and had never had a harem. It was all Ashley could do to thank her maid for the information and to contain the anger which had shot through her at the news. Still fuming, she returned to the celebrations and her seat beside Zyir.

One glance at Zyir revealed that he appeared more comfortable with his children than before. They sat around him, Talmon's hand clutching his robe, Dayana's sunny face turned up as she chatted and Zyir listened. Ashley quietly seethed, as she turned to watch the musicians whose performance was drawing to a close. The intricate melodies plucked from the lute-like ouds were slowing and becoming atmospheric ripples which hung in the air. In direct contrast to the calming of the music, Ashley grew more angry. If Zyir had felt tricked by her publishing contract for the harem book, she felt she'd also been duped by his insistence she

join his harem—a harem which didn't exist, and had never existed. She fumed, all thought of what she wanted to do to this man later that evening forgotten.

Zyir inclined his head to her confidentially. "And what thoughts are making those beautiful lips of yours so grim?"

Her lips tightened a little more. She didn't look at him. "I've been hearing about your harems."

He grunted. "My country has a long tradition of harems, as you know." She felt his hand on the small of her back again and remembered their intimacy of the night before. She ground her teeth. She wouldn't be diverted. "But none of the women have been as glorious as you."

She closed her eyes and sucked in a harsh breath. She had to focus. She *had* to. She couldn't allow... Her mind trailed off as he slipped his hand lower, unseen by anyone, his middle finger finding the groove between her buttocks through the fine silk layers of her dress. He was teasing her, knowing that she had a strong mind and unerring control when she wasn't diverted by the desires of her body. But she refused to be distracted.

"When I came here, you said I could join your harem if I wanted to do my research, and I agreed."

He nodded. "Go on."

"I agreed because I believed you when you said you had a harem and the only way I could understand it was to join it."

"I never said I had a harem, you assumed that."

"But you let me go on assuming."

"I was annoyed."

"Why? Because I was interested in your country? Because I wanted to find out more about your customs?"

"Because, Ashley, you believed these things to be true of me."

"You're a product of your country."

"I'm an individual, with my own beliefs, and yet you saw me simply as a stereotype. I believed you might come to know me and the truth about my world if you joined it. After all, isn't that what you academics do? Hey? You read the words, but you never truly understand until you walk a mile in my shoes. Isn't that the expression? Well, that is what I wished you to do."

"You tricked me. You made me believe you had a harem, just as your father had, and his father before him."

"My only lie was one of omission. But, if you want it spelled out—I don't have a harem, I've never had a harem, and I don't ever wish to have a harem!"

"But, all that stuff you told me about what it was like having the women kept separate to the men, about your family's traditions."

He shrugged. "The traditions are true. But maybe there was a little artistic license included in my descriptions."

"A little?"

He shrugged again, as if it was of little consequence. "A lot, then. What does it matter? You know the truth now."

"Only because I discovered it. How long were you going to let me continue to believe the lie? How long, Zyir?"

He didn't answer her, which was an answer in itself. He wasn't ever going to tell her if he didn't have to. And why not? Because he had her exactly where he wanted her.

She shook her head, as she tried to fight off tears of emotion. "I can't believe you did this to me."

"Did what? All I did was be the person you wanted me to be. All I did was give you the opportunity you wanted."

"You tricked me, Zyir." She wished her voice hadn't faltered quite so much on the word tricked. She rose and left the room, unnoticed by anyone else except him. She could feel his eyes on her as she stumbled into a chair, and then fumbled with the door handle as she opened the door, before slamming it behind her. She half-ran along the corridor away from him. She was afraid he'd follow her, then she was afraid he *wouldn't* follow her. Then she stopped as silence fell all around her. And she knew he wouldn't come. Why would he? She was nothing to him. He'd used her just as effectively as she'd intended to use him.

She'd be gone tomorrow. If he expected her to spend her last night in his mythical harem, he had another think coming.

#### CHAPTER 10



Zyir left the festivities after Ashley, not to follow her, but to return to his offices. He had work to do. But, even as he immersed himself in the familiar work, he found it didn't bring him the peace he desired. Instead, he flung down his pen and paced his study.

He'd believed his reaction to the fact that Ashley was only in Irem to research a book on harems was justifiable. He'd assumed she was an ignorant westerner trying to further her career with more lies to reinforce stereotypes of his country. And he'd reacted accordingly—tricked her right back while showing her the truth about his country. It was a justifiable trick, he told himself. But he stopped mid-pace and turned to look out the window at the gardens upon which the light was fading. Then why did he feel so bad?

He strode out onto the balcony and gripped the stone wall, peering out to his country as if seeking answers. But he saw nothing except the visions in his mind.

Of Ashley arriving on her motorbike; of Ashley looking, with wonder in her eyes, around the mosque; of Ashley, her curves barely contained by the gauzy fabric she'd worn on

entering the harem. And then, most of all, of Ashley, the expression on her face, her mouth open, ripe for kissing, her eyes closed, as she cried out as the orgasm he'd given her had exploded through her body.

He'd never met anyone like her before. She charmed his mind, his body and... He closed his eyes as the truth hit him. Somewhere deep inside, where a heart would normally have been, he felt a tug. He'd felt it from the moment he'd first seen her, but had ignored it. He'd put it down to residual pain, like when a limb is chopped off and the nerve endings still feel something, still believe it's there. He'd been wrong. Dr. Ashley Maitland had also charmed his heart—a heart which still appeared to be very much present. A heart which now appeared to belong to an ambitious academic with the mind of an intellectual and a body of a courtesan. He was in thrall to her.

He turned his back to the setting sun. So what was he going to do about it? He had to change tack. He wanted her for longer than one more night. And he knew his children also wanted the same. The way they'd behaved with her had been nothing short of astonishing. His shy son, his wayward daughter, both had been drawn to Ashley as if they were starved of something. He knew what that was now. He'd been ignoring not only his own heart, but those of his children.

Zyir loved his children, but he knew he loved them at a distance. And Ashley had bridged that distance effortlessly. He'd been raised to be separate, to be in control, and he'd learned his lessons well. But Ashley had taught him a bigger, more powerful lesson and he accepted that lesson, too.

He'd marry her. He had no choice. She would be an asset to him, his children, and his country. He nodded, relieved to be in control once more. He'd have the papers drawn up. He picked up his phone and summoned his assistant. He had work to do. He'd go to Ashley that night in the harem, after the paperwork had been prepared.

Ashley had spent what was left of the afternoon trying to figure out what the hell she was going to do. She'd lost her heart and body and soul to a man who'd tricked her into a situation into which she'd fallen headlong. Trouble was, she'd forgotten to put in place a rescue plan. History had repeated itself. She knew this intellectually, but that knowledge hadn't extended to her heart.

It hadn't taken her long to come to a decision. Because there could be only one outcome. She'd leave, and she'd leave as soon as it was light. There was no other way. She gave a quick glance around the beautiful bedroom, in the corner of which was her packed bag. She'd return only to collect her bag.

She opened the door and stepped out into the colonnaded walkway, and retraced her steps to the harem. Just an hour there to convey her decision to Zyir, and then she'd return. She'd considered not coming to the harem, but it was her last night and where better to conclude the relationship with the man who'd taken her into a harem which didn't even exist?

She was conscious of everything around her and inside her. From the splash of water in the fountain in the inner courtyard, to the pulsing of her heart—insistent and demanding. She stood—dressed not in the robes of seduction, but in the plain robes in which she'd arrived in Irem—and looked at the door, nervously wringing her hands. She wasn't afraid of what she had to say to him, or his response. No, what she was afraid of was weakening.

When the knock at the door came, she jumped, forced her hands to her sides and took a deep breath.

"Come in," she called out, not moving from her position in the center of the room, surrounded by the glamor, the richness of the decorations, imbued with the ancient atmosphere of the buildings. Despite her brief time in the harem, she felt at home there, and never dwelt on the noises, smells and sights of the city she'd left behind in England. That, now, seemed to be the alien world to her. She'd lost her heart not only to the sheikh but also the country. But it could make no difference to her future.

He walked into the room, took one look at her and stopped. "What is it? What's happened?"

It seemed that he, too, was perceptive where she was concerned. Their lovemaking had broken down the limits between them. She wondered how on earth they would survive away from each other. But survive they must.

"Quite a lot has happened in the space of a few short days. Don't you think?" she said, relieved to find her tone even.

He held her gaze before tearing his away and nodding, looking around at the bed, which she'd stripped bare of its luxurious linen. Only the gauzy curtains hung limp in the stillness of night. He turned back to her, as if understanding what he'd seen.

"You're still angry about my harem."

"Your *imaginary* harem," she amended. "You tricked me, Zyir."

He crossed his arms and held her gaze. "Ashley, you came here under false pretenses. I hardly think you are blameless."

She swallowed as she felt emotion rise. She had to keep it at bay if she was going to have any control. "Maybe not. But..." She was forced to break the gaze, to look away as she felt hot tears press against her eyes.

He sighed and walked over to her, thrusting some papers into the pocket of his robes. He took her hand and kissed it and in that moment Ashley knew that the chance of emerging from their last night together untouched by Zyir was non existent.

"Ashley, we can put this behind us."

She faced him then, not caring anymore if he saw the tears in her eyes. She shook her head. "You're wrong. We can't."

"Why not?"

"Because how can I trust you?"

"One mistake and you can't ever trust me again?"

He didn't understand, but how could he without her telling him something which few people knew? She sucked in a deep breath for courage. She'd tell him once, and then he'd know.

"It's not that easy."

"Yes, it is."

"You don't understand."

"Then tell me."

"I... It..." She trailed off. How could she tell him what happened?

"Go on."

"It happened when I was eighteen." She gave a brief smile, trying to be brave. It faded as quickly as it had come. "He was my first boyfriend. I was shy, embarrassed by my figure, and I avoided going out. Until I met Ian. I couldn't believe it when he came over to me in class one day and asked me out."

She fell silent for a few moments, as she remembered the events of that night six years earlier. She forced herself to continue, to confront the humiliation of that night and its legacy.

"I fell for him. Hard." She grimaced as she forced herself to remember. "But then I discovered why he'd approached me in the first place, why it was he made love to me that same night of our first date. It was only for a dare. A dare for him to have sex with the *biggest* girl in the class."

Zyir pulled her to him in a fierce embrace and kissed the top of her head. "That is ridiculous! You are beautiful, and I am not that boy, Ashley. I am a man who would never do such a thing, never stoop to such depths. You must not allow that one night to influence your life."

She pulled away. "Oh, but the consequences were for longer than one night. I fell pregnant, you see. My mother insisted I have an abortion. She hated men for what my father did to her, leaving her when I was young. And I, too, never trusted a man again. Instead, we concocted a plan, an ambitious plan of advancement for me in an academic world

—a world where I could deny my body and focus on the mind."

He shook his head. "You were led astray."

Anger flared inside her. "I found a career for myself—a fulfilling career."

Again he shook his head. "You quoted Rumi to me, and now I shall quote him back to you. You staved off your inner hunger for something external, something material, something unimportant. To quote Rumi, 'you miss the garden, because you want a small fig from a random tree.'"

She frowned as she tried to fight the meaning, which was slowly becoming clear.

"'Let yourself be silently drawn,'" Zyir continued. "'By the stronger pull of what you really love.'"

"What I really love? And how should I know that?"

"You have to look into your heart. It's time to stop hiding."

She pulled her hand away from him. He'd tricked her, and yet now he had the arrogance to tell her what to do! "From you, I suppose! You're changing the subject, Zyir. We're talking about *you*. *Not* me! I've tried to explain why I cannot trust men."

"But you need to know that you can trust me."

"They're just words, Zyir. Empty words. I can't believe in words anymore. I need something more than words if I am to trust again."

She pulled away from his arms and swept her robe across her face, to rid her cheeks of the tears she hadn't even noticed had tracked down her face. She walked over to the window and pushed it open, needing the night air on her face, needing to not look at him. Moments passed as she breathed deeply and he allowed her those. Then the moments passed into a silence heavier than before, and she knew before she turned around what she would find.

He'd gone.

She was alone in the harem, which had witnessed her fall for a man she could not have. A man who, it appeared, had nothing more than words to give her.

#### CHAPTER 11



Zyir swept through the doors and walkways back to his quarters, seeing nothing but the expression on Ashley's face. He had to leave because it was clear there was nothing he could say which would make her trust him.

The marriage contract rustled in his robes as he walked, reminding him of how he'd imagined, only hours earlier, that he could simply present it to her, propose marriage and all would be well.

He sighed and shook his head. When had anything ever been that simple?

He'd see her later, and they'd have a rational talk then. It would be all right. He'd *make* it all right. But, as he left the harem, it didn't feel as if would ever be all right.

In his heart he knew she would leave as abruptly as she had arrived. But the tracks of her visit would not be swept away as easily as the tracks she'd left in the desert, now covered by the wind-churned sands. He and his children would be forever changed at a fundamental level by knowing her. She had bought beauty and love to his locked citadel,

and they were all the better for it. He wished the pain would go away, but he knew it never would.

He didn't return to his own rooms but to those which had once belonged to his mother. He rarely went to them, but knew nothing had been removed from them since she'd died. His father—fierce to everyone else—had doted on his beautiful mother and had never recovered from her premature death.

He opened the doors and took a few moments to look around in the moonlight. It still smelled of her. He breathed in her fragrance for a few moments, allowing himself to remember how loving she'd been, how affectionate a mother and how doting. Somehow, over the years, he'd forgotten. But he wasn't there to remember. He turned on the lights and looked around. Where would it be?

Then his eyes alighted on her jewelry chest. He opened it and checked the compartments, but it yielded nothing. Then he looked at the collection of photographs on a side table. Nestled between them was a heart-shaped solid gold box. He walked over to it, picking up each of the photographs in turn. They'd been placed there, in that exact position, by his mother all those years ago, with only the cleaners ensuring the dust never settled. There was a photo of him as a baby in her arms, and a photo of his father with a smile such as he'd never seen on his face before. He frowned as he remembered the man his father had become after his mother's death. The stream of women, the ferocity of his rule and how he'd ignored his only son. Then he looked at a photo of his mother, taken on her wedding day. He picked it up.

She looked radiant, a far cry from the ravaged woman who'd ended up dying after a prolonged battle with cancer. It tore at his heart to see her, as he knew it would. It was what he'd been avoiding all these years. He missed her. A lump caught in his throat. He missed the woman who'd poured love and care and tenderness upon him with all the strength of her loving heart. He missed her.

At that moment he felt a movement catch his eye, and he looked across to see a butterfly flutter in from the window and move across his field of vision, alighting briefly on the photo frame before moving on, returning to the window, lost in the dark shadows of pre-dawn.

It was as if she'd returned to comfort him. He kissed his mother's face and then returned the photograph back into position.

"I take it you approve, Mother," he said with a smile. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand as he opened the heart-shaped box and found what he was looking for. His mother's engagement and wedding rings.

He lifted them up to the light. They were beautiful. The engagement ring was a heart-shaped ruby, surrounded by diamonds, while the wedding ring was a golden band, studded with diamonds. He hadn't wanted them for his first marriage. That marriage had been political, it had been loveless, and his mother's rings had been entirely unsuitable. But now? Now, things were very different.

With one last look at his mother's photograph, no longer painful but reassuring, as if she approved of his decision, he turned out the lights and left the room. IT WAS TOO dark for Ashley to leave yet. But the time difference meant that she could communicate with her college, which she did.

It hadn't been hard to give up everything she'd dreamed of for years. Resigning from the university, withdrawing from the book contract. The reason was that it had never truly been her dream. It had been a dream that she and her mother had concocted to protect Ashley from the damage wrought that night when she'd lost her virginity, taken by a boy on a dare. There was her life before her innocence had been taken from her, with devastating repercussions, and her life afterwards. But now, she knew, it was time for a new chapter to begin. And it wouldn't be based on fear.

Zyir had been right. She'd been focusing on the wrong things for so many years. But now she could see, and it was time to change.

Ashley closed the laptop with a relieved sigh. She was done with that, for now at least. What lay ahead, she did not know. All she knew was that it would be closer to what she really wanted. She didn't think she'd ever felt so exhausted in all her life. Listlessly she turned her head and looked at the curtain, unmoving in the still morning air. It looked as drained of energy and life as she felt.

She felt numb, devoid of emotion, as if nothing would ever stir her again. She heaved another big sigh and put her head in her hands, as her heart tugged as if in protest at the thought, and her throat constricted as it tried to contain the emotion which threatened, once more, to overwhelm her.

She'd done it. Finished with the university, finished with her old life... and her present life. All she had to do was find a new life. A new life by herself. Her career was in tatters, as was her heart. But she'd make them both whole again. She was determined. Starting now.

She jumped up and checked her phone. Zyir, again. He hadn't stopped contacting her all night, asking for a meeting. She had answered none of his texts, and she had no intention of seeing him again before she left. This whole time she was losing her heart to him, he'd simply been playing her for a fool. Well, she wasn't one anymore.

She looked around. It wouldn't take her long to get her things together. Then it was onto her motorbike and off on the open road, wherever it took her. She'd be free. Free, she repeated, trying to create excitement with the word. But it felt dead and empty to her now.

But she wouldn't leave without saying goodbye to Dayana and Talmon. One look at the clock confirmed she had a couple of hours to burn before light dawned and she could see them.

She left the room to spend the rest of the hours of darkness retracing her steps around the palace, filling her mind with memories, which would be all she'd have to remind herself of the week which had changed her life.

Where the hell was she? Zyir had gone to the rooms of his children after being unable to find Ashley. Her room had yielded no clues. It was tidy, her things packed away into a backpack by the door, ready for her to disappear at first light, no doubt. He doubted she would leave without saying

goodbye to the children. He didn't doubt she'd leave without saying goodbye to him.

As an extra insurance he'd brought her backpack with him to the children's suite of rooms, and there he waited for dawn to break, and for his two children to awaken.

At first light, Ashley went to see the children. They weren't there, so she was taken to the terrace to wait for them. As soon as she stepped outside, she looked around. She couldn't see anyone at first. But she knew something had changed. Even before she looked across the gardens, there was something different in the air, like a flickering shadow relieving the land of the intensity of the sun, dancing light, like sunlight through leaves.

She frowned. She walked over to the edge of the terrace and looked out across the gardens. Nothing was like it had been before. For miles, the gardens flickered under a moving cloud. She couldn't think what it was to begin with. It appeared to be one immense cloud shifting up and down and around like some alien species. But then the sound came to her, light flutterings magnified a hundredfold. And a butterfly landed on her hand—part of the cloud that swooped around her as if welcoming her. She felt the merest tickle as it landed on the back of her hand for one second, before flying off with the others—a cloud of brown, dotted with orange—filling the blue sky with its fluttering sound and changing shape.

But these weren't the chrysalides which were attached to the crops and flowers in the gardens below, there were too many. She looked to the West where the mountains were and saw where the cloud of butterflies began. She watched as it continued on its way, settling briefly on the gardens below—bringing new pollination, enhancing their vitality—before continuing on its way to destinations unknown.

She couldn't have said how long she stood watching the shifting cloud of butterflies pass over the land. Zyir had always envisaged a cloud of locusts swooping upon Irem's precious gardens and stripping them of their bounty. But there were no locusts here. Only butterflies bringing pollen from the wildflowers and taking pollen away. Bringing life full circle. As she stood watching the cloud pass over, she thought she'd never forget that moment.

Then she heard his voice and knew she had to leave. She should never have come, should never have stayed so long on the terrace. But before she had time to leave, she heard Zyir and his children enter the same terrace upon which she stood. She moved behind a screen.

The first thing that struck her was that he was holding his children's hands.

"Look, Talmon, look at the butterflies."

The second thing that struck her was his tone, no longer domineering, but warm and gentle.

"But, Papa, what are they doing here?"

He was silent for a few moments and Ashley held her breath, wondering what he was going to say.

"What are they doing here?" He answered in a voice of wonder. "Following their spirit, following their heart."

"Do butterflies have hearts?" asked Talmon.

Zyir rested on his haunches and put his arm around his two children. "Every being on this planet has a heart. Or else how would it live?"

"Silly!" said Dayana. "You need a heart to pump blood around your body." She looked up at her father, wanting confirmation. "Isn't that correct, Papa?"

The smile he gave his daughter also melted Ashley's heart, especially when she saw Dayana's cheeks flushed with delight. "You are correct, my love. But their hearts are needed for more than that." He looked out across the garden, his gaze unfocused now, as if he were looking into a faraway place that existed only in his mind. "The heart is required for love. And existence isn't complete without that."

"So butterflies need to love, too?" said his serious son.

"Undoubtedly," said Zyir. "They need the blood the heart pumps around their bodies." He nodded to his daughter. "And they need the love that being with the other butterflies brings them."

Ashley leaned back against the wall, feeling suddenly weak.

"Where are they going to?" asked Talmon.

"I don't know, Talmon, but wherever they are going, they will take their beauty with them and they will create a magic around them."

"Like Ashley," said Talmon, sticking a thumb in his mouth.

Zyir stiffened. Ashley watched as he brought his son tight against his side. "Yes, exactly like that."

Ashley could bear it no longer. She didn't care if they thought she had been eavesdropping. She stepped around the

screen.

Three faces turned as one to stare at her. Talmon's face was alight with happiness, his thumb forgotten. Dayana grinned. But it was Zyir's face which caught her attention and held it. She didn't think she had ever seen him look quite so vulnerable, or as surprised. She forced herself to look at the children as she walked up to them.

"Ashley!" the two children exclaimed, before running to her. She kneeled down and opened her arms to them and gave them a big hug. "We thought you had gone," said Talmon.

"I wouldn't go without saying goodbye," said Ashley.

Dayana's face fell. "So you are still going?" she said in a small voice. Talmon's thumb was now hovering, ready to be inserted into his mouth if comfort was needed.

"I'm... I'm not sure. There's something I need to do first."

"And then you might decide to stay?" asked Talmon.

She gave a brief nod. "Maybe," she said in a whisper. She met Zyir's gaze, and she knew she wouldn't be able to tear it away any time soon.

"Children, it is time for your breakfast," said Zyir firmly.

It wasn't time for their breakfast, but both Dayana and Talmon were too well behaved to question their father. He turned and beckoned the nanny who was inside the room, and she called the children who went inside, leaving Ashley and Zyir alone.

Ashley walked up to the edge of the terrace so that she stood beside him, and followed his gaze out to the receding clouds of butterflies.

"I wonder where they are going," she said, her gaze fixed on the darting butterflies. She felt his eyes upon her before he turned back to the view.

He shrugged. "Who knows? But wherever it is, people will raise their eyes to the skies in wonder. A sight such as this hasn't been seen in a hundred years."

"It's enough to make you believe in magic," she said, repeating the word he had used earlier to his children. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him flex his hands over the wall. Then he turned to her.

"You heard me then. You heard me talking to the children."

"Yes, I'm sorry I overheard. I'd come to find them, to say goodbye."

"You intend to return to the university then."

"No. I'm not returning to Oxford. I've resigned."

"You did what?"

"I resigned from the university. Something you said, about following what was truly in my heart. You showed me I'd be selling out to write a book about something I'm not passionate about."

"Good. Then, it makes it easier..." He trailed off, uncharacteristically unsure.

"I'm still leaving, Zyir. I only came here to say goodbye."

He reached out and swept his fingers along the side of her face. She closed her eyes and turned and kissed his palm before it slid away too soon. "You mustn't say goodbye."

"You'd prefer me to leave without saying goodbye? Just to walk away?"

"Walk? I imagined you'd be on your motor bike."

"You really have no qualms about me leaving, do you?"

"You're wrong. The reason I don't want you to say goodbye, is because I do not wish you to leave."

"Zyir, there's nothing you can say—" She stopped midsentence as, in one swift movement, he retrieved a heartshaped gold box from his pocket and got down on one knee. "What are you doing?"

"Marry me, Ashley."

"What? I..." She shook her head. "What are you doing?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'm asking you to marry me." He flipped open the box and plucked out a stunning engagement ring. "It was my mother's, and I would have you wear it now." He frowned in response to her stunned silence. "Ashley, don't you know I love you? I loved you the moment I saw you step off your motorbike and into my life. I knew for sure I loved you when you began telling your stories. And I knew in that moment that I would never be the same without you. Please, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She shook her head, stunned. In all her wildest dreams, she'd never imagined he would propose to her.

"You think I am too hasty, perhaps. You think three days and three nights aren't long enough in which to fall in love? Hm? I will fall back to Rumi again to support me. 'Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. They're in each other all along.' Another day, another year, would not have made any difference. Our love existed in each other all our lives. It is only our meeting that is recent."

Again she shook her head, bewildered by his arguments.

"You need more proof? Rumi, again. 'Choose love, Choose love. Without this beautiful love, Life is nothing but a burden.'"

"Please, Zyir, stand up." She tugged at his hand, but he didn't move.

"Not until you give me an answer to another question."

"What's that?"

"Do you love me? You came here seeking knowledge. I want to know what you found."

"Zyir, all my life I wanted to be independent, to be free to follow my own path, scared to trust in anyone. And I thought I was free until I met you, but now I realize I wasn't. In Irem, with you, I found the freedom I was searching for, not through knowledge, but through love.

He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the tension had gone. "Then stay, Ashley. Stay here with me."

She smiled. "In your harem?"

"As my wife. As my queen. Dr. Ashley Maitland, will you marry me?"

Her grin widened. "Definitely."

At last, Zyir rose to his feet. Anything she had been about to say was swallowed by his mouth pressing against hers, demanding and insistent.

"However," she said, when she emerged. "I think we should definitely revisit the harem. There was something very sexy about being taken for the sheikh's harem."

"Consider it done."

#### **EPILOGUE**



## A year later...

Zyir and Ashley, both dressed in traditional robes, watched the team of university professors representing key Western universities leave for the airport. Ashley's work on Irem's ancient architecture had stirred up a good deal of positive interest overseas and at home, but Zyir and Ashley were careful to manage that interest. There were no plans for their country to change, but, equally, they no longer wanted it to be veiled in secrecy. They were a part of the world and wanted to make sure that Irem and its people were understood, not clothed in ignorance. Where there was ignorance, there was the potential for instability and war. And neither of them wanted that for their children.

With Dayana and Talmon busy with their afternoon studies, and their distinguished visitors departed, Zyir and Ashley didn't have to speak out loud about their desires. It was always that way, thought Ashley. Especially now she was six months pregnant with their child.

A FEW HOURS later Ashley lay naked on the harem bed, its rumpled silk sheets half-falling onto the luxurious rugs which now carpeted the ancient floors of the harem. With the filtered sunlight flickering over her rounded six-month pregnant stomach, and her large breasts even larger now, Zyir's sperm sticky inside her, spilling out onto the sheets, she sighed and lazily fingered his seed around her sex, starting as she touched her clitoris. She gasped and opened her eyes.

Zyir sat on the sheikh's throne-like chair in front of the bed, watching her. His eyes were hooded, his gown open, falling to the floor, as he threaded his fingers and brought them to his mouth. He made no move, just caught her eyes with a desire which intoxicated her, that she knew she'd never be able to live without.

She opened her legs wider and continued to circle her fingers around her most intimate parts. His eyes darkened with desire, which turned her on so much. She'd only just had him, and yet she wanted him again.

She reached out to him. "Zyir." It was all she had to say.

She didn't resist him as he rolled her gently over until she was on her knees, supporting her weight with her elbows as he entered her from behind.

He stayed, thrust to the hilt inside for long seconds before he moved, pleasuring her with everything he had—his fingers, his mouth and his cock. But there was no rush. They had all the time in the world to show their love for each other, both inside the harem and out.

She might not be tied to his harem, but she sure was a slave to the sensations which only he could give her—in her

mind, in her body and, most importantly, in her heart.

#### AFTERWORD

#### Dear Reader,

Three days isn't long to fall in love. But I've known people who claim to have fallen in love at first sight and have been married within months. Despite being battered from past relationships, Zyir and Ashley instinctively knew they'd met their soul mates from the first moment they saw each other. All they had to do was address the issues which were stopping them from coming together and embrace their future. Not easy. But, with a sexual connection like theirs, they had a big incentive to make it work!!

The poetry of Rumi was an inspiration for Zyir and Ashley's story. As was the ancient city of Yazd in Iran—upon which the fictional country of Irem was based—with its adobe buildings and windcatchers drawing cooling desert breezes down into the city. And, lastly, when I discovered this <u>article</u>, I knew I'd have to include the butterflies.

There are no butterflies in my newest sheikh series but there are a lot of secrets! The **Secrets of the Sheikhs** series includes a secret revenge, a secret baby, and a secret marriage.

I love secrets—but only in fiction, in real life they're simply trouble! If people want to tell me a secret, I ask them not to. Because I'm an open book and don't want to know people's secrets in case I forget they are secrets and let them slip! But fiction is a different matter. I know these sheikhs' secrets and will happily share them with you...

### **Secrets of the Sheikhs**

The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction
The Sheikh's Secret Love Child
The Sheikh's Marriage Trap

What's coming up in the future? I have a strange fascination with the Middle East—with its ancient civilizations and cultures—which is hard to resist. Put this attraction together with romance and you can count on more sheikh romances heading your way. Because we could all do with a little more love in our lives.

## As Rumi said:

"Choose love. Choose love. Without this beautiful love, Life is nothing but a burden." Below is a complete list of my sheikh books in case you've missed any.

## **Desert Kings**

Wanted: A Wife for the Sheikh
The Sheikh's Bargain Bride
The Sheikh's Lost Lover
Awakened by the Sheikh
Claimed by the Sheikh
Wanted: A Baby by the Sheikh

### The Sheikhs of Havilah

The Sheikh's Secret Baby

Bought by the Sheikh

The Sheikh's Forbidden Lover

Surrender to the Sheikh

Taken for the Sheikh's Harem

## Secrets of the Sheikhs

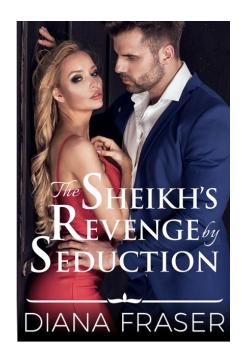
The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction The Sheikh's Secret Love Child The Sheikh's Marriage Trap

Happy reading!

Diana

X

## THE SHEIKH'S REVENGE BY SEDUCTION



# A sheikh intent on revenge, a Englishwoman caught in a trap, a love that cannot be denied...

Sheikh Rayan ibn Mohammed Aziz is as uncompromising as the desert in which he was raised. So when his half-sister is seduced, dumped, and ruined by a middle-aged English aristocrat, there is only one way in which Rayan intends to exact revenge.

The only child of a notorious womanizer, Lauren Alexandra Le Harivel is the apple of her father's eye. While he roams the world seeking pleasure, she's left by herself to run the family estate and dream of a different life. But when a darkly handsome stranger starts work on the family estate and makes her feel beautiful and desired, she agrees to return with him to his desert homeland.

But what began as a means to vent Rayan's anger and avenge his sister's death turns into something very different under the heat of the desert sun and their love affair, which proves even hotter...

**Buy Now!** 

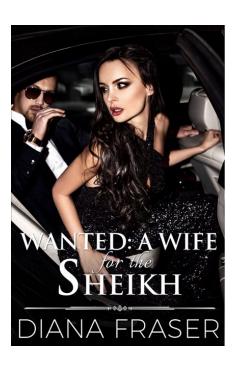
#### ALSO BY DIANA FRASER

## All of the ebooks below can be purchased direct from the author. Thank you for your support!

#### Diana Fraser's Store

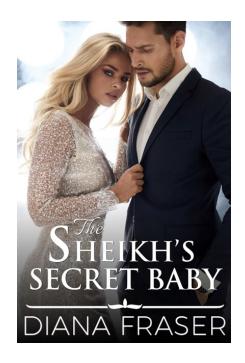
Or click on the individual links which follow. These will take you to your favorite online store.

#### **Desert Kings**



Wanted: A Wife for the Sheikh
The Sheikh's Bargain Bride
The Sheikh's Lost Lover
Awakened by the Sheikh
Claimed by the Sheikh
Wanted: A Baby by the Sheikh

## The Sheikhs of Havilah



The Sheikh's Secret Baby

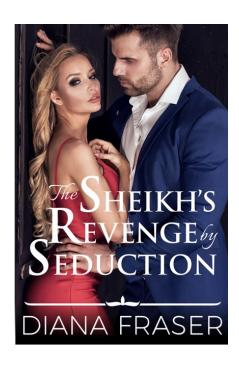
Bought by the Sheikh

The Sheikh's Forbidden Lover

Surrender to the Sheikh

Taken for the Sheikh's Harem

Secrets of the Sheikhs



The Sheikh's Revenge by Seduction
The Sheikh's Secret Love Child
The Sheikh's Marriage Trap

Italian Romance



The Italian's Perfect Lover

Seduced by the Italian

The Passionate Italian

An Accidental Christmas

