



MICHELLE
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Hot-Blooded Husbands

About the Author

MICHELLE REID grew up on the southern edges of Manchester, the youngest in a family of five lively children. Now she lives in the beautiful county of Cheshire, with her busy executive husband and two grown-up daughters. She loves reading, the ballet and playing tennis when she gets the chance. She hates cooking, cleaning and despises ironing! Sleep she can do without and produces some of her best written work during the early hours of the morning.

HOT-BLOODED HUSBANDS

THE SHEIKH'S CHOSEN WIFE

ETHAN'S TEMPTRESS BRIDE

THE ARABIAN LOVE-CHILD

Michelle Reid

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CHAPTER ONE

DRESSED to go riding, in knee-length black leather boots, buff pants, a white shirt and a white *gutrah* held to his dark head by a plain black *agal*, Sheikh Hassan ben Khalifa Al-Qadim stepped into his private office and closed the door behind him. In his hand he held a newly delivered letter from England. On his desk lay three more. Walking across the room, he tossed the new letter onto the top of the other three then went to stand by the grilles window, fixing his eyes on a spot beyond the Al-Qadim Oasis, where reclaimed dry scrubland had been turned into miles of lush green fig groves.

Beyond the figs rose the sand-dunes. Majestic and proud, they claimed the horizon with a warning statement. Come any closer with your irrigation and expect retaliation, they said. One serious sandstorm, and years of hard labour could be turned back into arid wasteland.

A sigh eased itself from his body. Hassan knew all about the laws of the desert. He respected its power and its driving passion, its right to be master of its own destiny. And what he would really have liked to do at this very moment was to saddle up his horse Zandor, then take off for those sand-dunes and allow them to dictate his future for him.

But he knew the idea was pure fantasy. For behind him lay four letters, all of which demanded he make those decisions for himself. And beyond the relative sanctuary of the four walls surrounding him lay a palace in waiting; his father, his half-brother, plus a thousand and one other people, all of whom believed they owned a piece of his so-called destiny.

So Zandor would have to stay in his stable. His beloved sand-dunes would have to wait while he was here to swallow him up. Making a half-turn, he stared grimly at the letters. Only one had been opened: the first one, which he had tossed aside with the contempt it had deserved. Since then he had left the others sealed on his desk and had tried very hard to ignore them.

But the time for burying his head in the sand was over.

A knock on the door diverted his attention. It would be his most trusted aide, Faysal. Hassan recognised the lightness of the knock. Sure enough the door opened and a short, fineboned man wearing the traditional white and pale blue robes of their Arabian birthright appeared in its arched aperture, where he paused and bowed his head, waiting to be invited in or told to go.

‘Come in, Faysal,’ Hassan instructed a trifle impatiently. Sometimes Faysal’s rigid adherence to so-called protocol set his teeth on edge.

With another deferential bow, Faysal moved to his master’s bidding. Stepping into the room, he closed the door behind him then used some rarely utilised initiative by walking across the room to come to a halt several feet from the desk on the priceless carpet that covered, in part, the expanse of polished blue marble between the desk and the door.

Hassan found himself staring at the carpet. His wife had ordered it to be placed there

claiming the room's spartan appearance invited no one to cross its austere threshold. The fact that this was supposed to be the whole point had made absolutely no difference to Leona. She had simply carried on regardless, bringing many items into the room besides the carpet. Such as the pictures now adorning the walls and the beautiful ceramics and sculptures scattered around, all of which had been produced by gifted artists native to the small Gulf state of Rahman. Hassan had soon found he could no longer lift his eyes without having them settle on an example of local enterprise.

Yet it was towards the only western pieces Leona had brought into the room that his eyes now drifted. The low table and two overstuffed easy chairs had been placed by the other window, where she would insist on making him sit with her several times a day to enjoy the view while they drank tea and talked and touched occasionally as lovers do...

Dragging the *gutra* from his head with almost angry fingers, Hassan tossed it aside then went to sit down in the chair behind his desk. 'Okay,' he said. 'What have you to tell me?'

'It is not good news, sir.' Faysal began with a warning. 'Sheikh Abdul is entertaining certain...factions at his summer palace. Our man on the inside confirms that the tone of the conversation warrants your most urgent attention.'

Hassan made no comment, but his expression hardened fractionally. 'And my wife?' he asked next.

'The Sheikha still resides in Spain, sir,' Faysal informed him, 'working with her father at the new resort of San Estéban, overseeing the furnishing of several villas about to be released for sale.'

Doing what she did best, Hassan thought grimly—and did not need to glance back at the two stuffed chairs to conjure up a vision of long silken hair the colour of a desert sunset framing a porcelain smooth face with laughing green eyes and a smile that dared him not to complain about her invasion of his private space. 'Trust me,' he could hear her say. 'It is my job to give great empty spaces a little soul and their own heartbeat.'

Well, the heartbeat had gone out of this room when she'd left it, and as for the soul...

Another sigh escaped him. 'How long do you think we have before they make their move?'

The slight tensing in Faysal's stance warned Hassan that he was not going to like what was coming. 'If you will forgive me for saying so, sir,' his aide apologised, 'with Mr Ethan Hayes also residing at her father's property, I would say that the matter has become most serious and urgent indeed.'

Since this was complete news to Hassan it took a moment for the full impact of the information to really sink in. Then he was suddenly on his feet and was swinging tense away to glare at the sand-dunes again. Was she mad? he was thinking angrily. Did she have a death wish? Was she so indifferent to his feelings that she could behave like this?

Ethan Hayes. His teeth gritted together as an old familiar jealousy began mixing with his anger to form a much more volatile substance. He swung back to face Faysal. 'How long has Mr Hayes been in residence in San Estéban?'

Faysal made a nervous clearing of his throat. 'These seven days past,' he replied.

'And who else knows about this...? Sheikh Abdul?'

‘It was discussed,’ Faysal confirmed.

With a tight shifting of his long lean body, Hassan returned to his seat. ‘Cancel all my appointments for the rest of the month,’ he instructed, drawing his appointments diary towards him to begin scoring hard lines through the same busy pages. ‘My yacht is berthed in Cadiz. Have it moved to San Estéban. Check that my plane is ready for an immediate take-off and ask Rafiq to come to me.’

The cold quality of the commands did nothing to dilute their grim purpose. ‘If asked,’ Faysal prompted, ‘what reason do I give for your sudden decision to cancel your appointments?’

‘I am about to indulge in a much needed holiday cruising the Mediterranean with my new toy,’ Sheikh Hassan replied, and the bite in his tone made a complete mockery of the words spoken, for they both knew that the next few weeks promised to be no holiday. ‘And Faysal...’ Hassan stalled his aide as he was about to take his leave ‘...if anyone so much as whispers the word adultery in the same breath as my wife’s name, they will not breathe again—you understand me?’

The other man went perfectly still, recognising the responsibility that was being laid squarely upon him. ‘Yes, sir.’ He bowed.

Hassan’s grim nod was a dismissal. Left alone again, he leaned back in his chair and began frowning while he tried to decide how best to tackle this. His gaze fell on the small stack of letters. Reaching out with long fingers, he drew them towards him, picked out the one envelope with a broken seal and removed the single sheet of paper from inside. The content of the letter he ignored with the same dismissive contempt he had always applied to it. His interest lay only in the telephone number printed beneath the business logo. With an expression that said he resented having his hand forced like this, he took a brief glance at his watch, then was lifting up the telephone, fairly sure that his wife’s lawyer would be in his London office at this time of the day.

The ensuing conversation was not a pleasant one, and the following conversation with his father-in-law even less so. He had just replaced the receiver and was frowning darkly over what Victor Frayne had said to him, when another knock sounded at the door. Hard eyes glanced towards it as the door swung open and Rafiq stepped into the room.

Though he was dressed in much the same clothes as Faysal was wearing, there the similarity between the two men ended. For where Faysal was short and thin and annoyingly effacing, Rafiq was a giant of a man who rarely kowtowed to anyone. Hassan warranted only a polite nod of the head, yet he knew Rafiq would willingly die for him if he was called upon to do so.

‘Come in, shut the door, then tell me how you would feel about committing a minor piece of treason?’ Hassan smoothly intoned.

Below the white *gutrah* a pair of dark eyes glinted. ‘Sheikh Abdul?’ Rafiq questioned hopefully.

‘Unfortunately, no.’ Hassan gave a half smile. ‘I was in fact referring to my lovely wife Leona...’

Dressed for the evening in a beaded slip-dress made of gold silk chiffon, Leona stepped into a pair of matching beaded mules then turned to look at herself in the mirror.

Her smooth russet hair had been caught up in a twist, and diamonds sparkled at her ears and throat. Overall, she supposed she looked okay, she decided, giving the thin straps at her shoulders a gentle tug so the dress settled comfortably over her slender frame. But the weight she had lost during the last year was most definitely showing, and she could have chosen a better colour to offset the unnatural paleness of her skin.

Too late to change, though, she thought with a dismissive shrug as she turned away from her reflection. Ethan was already waiting for her outside on the terrace. And, anyway, she wasn't out to impress anyone. She was merely playing stand-in for her father who had been delayed in London due to some urgent business with the family lawyer, which had left her and her father's business partner, Ethan, the only ones here to represent Hayes-Frayne at tonight's promotional dinner.

She grimaced as she caught up a matching black silk shawl and made for her bedroom door. In truth, she would rather not be going out at all tonight having only arrived back from San Estéban an hour ago. It had been a long day, and she had spent most of it melting in the Spanish heatwave because the air-conditioning system had not been working in the villa she had been attempting to make ready for viewing. So a long soak in a warm bath and an early night would have been her idea of heaven tonight, she thought wryly, as she went down the stairs to join Ethan.

He was half sitting on the terrace rail with a glass in his hand, watching the sun go down, but his head turned at her first step, and his mouth broke into an appreciative smile.

'Ravishing,' he murmured, sliding his lean frame upright.

'Thank you,' she replied. 'You don't look so bad yourself.'

His wry nod accepted the compliment and his grey eyes sparkled with lazy humour. Dressed in a black dinner suit and bow tie, he was a tall, dark, very attractive man with an easy smile and a famous eye for the ladies. Women adored him and he adored them but, thankfully, that mutual adoration had never raised its ugly head between the two of them.

Leona liked Ethan. She felt comfortable being with him. He was the Hayes in Hayes-Frayne, architects. Give Ethan a blank piece of paper and he would create a fifty-store skyscraper or a whole resort complete with sports clubs, shopping malls and, of course, holiday villas to die for, as with this new resort in San Estéban.

'Drink?' he suggested, already stepping towards the well stocked drinks trolley.

But Leona gave a shake of her head. 'Better not, if you want me to stay awake beyond ten o'clock,' she refused.

'That late? Next you'll be begging me to take you on to an all-night disco after the party.' He was mocking the fact that she was usually safely tucked up in bed by nine o'clock.

'Do you disco?' she asked him curiously.

'Not if I can help it,' he replied, discarding his own glass to come and take the shawl from her hand so he could drape it across her shoulders. 'The best I can offer in the name of dancing is a soft shoe shuffle to something very slow, preferably in a darkened room, so that I don't

damage my ego by revealing just how bad a shuffler I am.'

'You're such a liar.' Leona smiled. 'I've seen you dance a mean jive, once or twice.'

Ethan pulled a face at the reminder. 'Now you've really made me feel my age,' he complained. 'Next you'll be asking me what it was like to rock in the sixties.'

'You're not that old.' She was still smiling.

'Born in the mid-sixties,' he announced. 'To a free-loving mother who bopped with the best of them.'

'That makes you about the same age as Hass...'

And that was the point where everything died: the light banter, the laughter, the tail end of Hassan's name. Silence fell. Ethan's teasing grey eyes turned very sombre. He knew, of course, how painful this last year had been for her. No one mentioned Hassan's name in her presence, so to hear herself almost say it out loud caused tension to erupt between the best of them.

'It isn't too late to stop this craziness, you know,' Ethan murmured gently.

Her response was to drag in a deep breath and step right away from him. 'I don't want to stop it,' she quietly replied.

'Your heart does.'

'My heart is not making the decisions here.'

'Maybe you should let it.'

'Maybe you should mind your own business!'

Spinning on her slender heels Leona walked away from him to go and stand at the terrace rail, leaving Ethan behind wearing a rueful expression at the severity with which she had just slapped him down.

Out there at sea, the dying sun was throwing up slender fingers of fire into a spectacular vermillion sky. Down the hill below the villa, San Estéban was beginning to twinkle as it came into its own at the exit of the sun. And in between the town and the sun the ocean spread like satin with its brand-new purpose-built harbour already packed with smart sailing crafts of all shapes and sizes.

Up here on the hillside everything was so quiet and still even the cicadas had stopped calling. Leona wished that she could have some of that stillness, put her trembling emotions back where they belonged, under wraps, out of reach from pain and heartache.

Would these vulnerable feelings ever be that far out of reach? she then asked herself, and wasn't surprised to have a heavy sigh whisper from her. The beaded chiffon shawl slipped from her shoulders, prompting Ethan to come and gently lift it back in place again.

'Sorry,' he murmured. 'It wasn't my intention to upset you.'

I do it to myself, Leona thought bleakly. 'I just can't bear to talk about it,' she replied. It was what was a very rare glimpse at how badly she was hurting.

'Maybe you need to talk,' Ethan suggested.

But she just shook her head, as she consistently had done since she had arrived at home.

father's London house a year ago, looking emotionally shattered and announcing that his five-year marriage to Sheikh Hassan ben Khalifa Al-Qadim was over. Victor Frayne had tried every which way he could think of to find out what had happened. He'd even travelled out to Rahman to demand answers from Hassan, only to meet the same solid wall of silence he had come up against with his daughter. The one thing Victor could say with any certainty was that Hassan was faring no better than Leona, though his dauntingly aloof son-in-law was more adept at hiding his emotions than Leona was. 'She sits here in London, he sits in Rahman. They don't talk to each other, never mind to anyone else! Yet you can feel the vibrations bouncing from one to the other across the thousands of miles separating them as if they are communicating by some unique telepathy that runs on pure pain! It's dreadful,' Victor had confided to Ethan. 'Something has to give some time.'

Eventually, it had done. Two months ago Leona had walked unannounced into the office of her family lawyer and had instructed him to begin divorce proceedings, on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. What had prompted her to pick that particular day in that particular month of a very long year no one understood, and Leona herself wasn't prepared to enlighten anyone. But there wasn't a person who knew her who didn't believe it was a reaction that had caused a trigger reaction, when a week later she had fallen foul of a virulent flu bug that had kept her housebound and bedridden for weeks afterwards.

But when she had recovered, at least she'd come back ready to face the world again. She had agreed to come here to San Estéban, for instance, and utilise her design skills on the completed villas.

She looked better for it too. Still too pale, maybe, but overall she'd begun to live a more normal day to day existence.

Ethan had no wish to send her back into hiding now she had come out of it, so he turned her to face him and pressed a light kiss to her brow. 'Come on,' he said briskly. 'Let's go and party!'

Finding her smile again, Leona nodded her agreement and tried to appear as though she was looking forward to the evening. As they began to walk back across the terrace she felt a fine tingling at the back of her neck which instinctively warned her that someone was observing them.

The suspicion made her pause and turn to cast a frowning glance over their surroundings. She could see nothing untoward, but wasn't surprised by that. During the years she had lived in an Arab sheikhdom, married to a powerful and very wealthy man, she had grown used to being kept under constant, if very discreet, surveillance.

But that surveillance had been put in place for her own protection. This felt different—sinister. She even shivered.

'Something wrong?' Ethan questioned.

Leona shook her head and began walking again, but her frown stayed in place, because it wasn't the first time she'd experienced the sensation today. The same thing had happened when she'd left the resort site this afternoon, only she'd dismissed it then as her just being silly. She had always suspected that Hassan still kept an eye on her from a distance.

A car and driver had been hired for the evening, and both were waiting in the courtyard for

them as they left the house. Having made sure she was comfortably settled, Ethan closed the side door and strode around the car to climb in beside her. As a man she had known for most of her adult life, Ethan was like a very fond cousin whose lean dark sophistication and reputed rakish life made her smile, rather than her heart flutter as other women would do in his company.

He'd never married. 'Never wanted to,' he'd told her once. 'Marriage diverts your energy away from your ambition, and I haven't met the woman for whom I'm prepared to let that happen.'

When she'd told Hassan what Ethan had said, she'd expected him to say something teasing like, 'May Allah help him when he does, for I know the feeling! But instead he'd looked quite sombre and had said nothing at all. At the time, she'd thought he'd been like that because he'd still been harbouring jealous suspicions about Ethan's feelings for her. It had been a long time before she'd come to understand that the look had had nothing at all to do with Ethan.

'The Petronades yacht looks pretty impressive.' Ethan's smooth deep voice broke into her thoughts. 'I watched it sail into the harbour tonight while I was waiting for you on the terrace.'

Leandros Petronades was the main investor in San Estéban. He was hosting the party tonight for very exclusive guests whom he had seduced into taking a tour of the new resort with an invitation to arrive in style on his yacht and enjoy its many luxurious facilities.

'At a guess, I would say it has to be the biggest in the harbour, considering its capacity to sleep so many people,' Leona smiled.

'Actually no, it wasn't,' Ethan replied with a frown. 'There's another yacht tied up that has to be twice the size.'

'The commercial kind?' Leona suggested, aware that the resort was fast becoming the fashionable place to visit.

'Not big enough.' Ethan shook his head. 'It's more likely to belong to one of Petronades' rich cronies. Another heavy investor in the resort, maybe.'

There were enough of them, Leona acknowledged. From being a sleepy little fishing port a few years ago, with the help of some really heavyweight investors San Estéban had grown into a large, custom-built holiday resort, which now sprawled in low-rise, Moorish elegance over the hills surrounding the bay.

So why Hassan's name slid back into her head Leona had no idea. Because Hassan didn't even own a yacht, nor had he ever invested in any of her father's projects, as far as she knew.

Irritated with herself, she turned her attention to what was happening outside the car. On the beach waterfront people strolled, enjoying the light breeze coming off the water.

It was a long time since she could remember strolling anywhere herself with such freedom. Marrying an Arab had brought with it certain restrictions on her freedom, which were not due to the necessity of conforming to expectations regarding women. Hassan occupied the august position of being the eldest son and heir to the small but oil-rich Gulf state of Rahma. As his wife, Leona had become a member of Rahman's exclusive hierarchy, which in turn made everything she said or did someone else's property. So she'd learned very quickly

temper her words, to think twice before she went anywhere, especially alone. Strolling just for the sake of just doing it would have been picked upon and dissected for no other reason than interest's sake, so she had learned not to do it.

This last year she hadn't gone out much because to be seen out had drawn too much speculation as to why she was in London and alone. In Rahman she was known as Sheikh Hassan's pretty English Sheikha. In London she was known as the woman who gave up every freedom to marry her Arabian prince.

A curiosity in other words. Curiosities were blatantly stared at, and she didn't want to offend Arab sensibilities by having her failed marriage speculated upon in the British press, so she'd lived a quiet life.

It was a thought that made Leona smile now, because her life in Rahman had been far less quiet than it had become once she'd returned to London.

The car had almost reached the end of the street where the new harbour was situated. There were several large yachts moored up—and Leandros Petronades' elegant white-hulled boat was easy to recognise because it was lit up like a showboat for the party. Yet it was the yacht moored next to it that caught her attention. It was huge, as Ethan had said—twice the length and twice the height of its neighbour. It was also shrouded in complete darkness. With its dark-painted hull, it looked as if it was crouching there like a large sleek cat, waiting to leap on its next victim.

The car turned and began driving along the top of the harbour wall taking them towards a pair of wrought iron gates, which cordoned off the area where the two yachts were tied.

Climbing out of the car, Leona stood looking round while she waited for Ethan to join her. It was even darker here than she had expected it to be, and she felt a distinct chill shiver down her spine when she realised they were going to have to pass the unlit boat to reach the other.

Ethan's hand found her arm. As they walked towards the gates, their car was already turning round to go back the way it had come. The guard manning the gates merely nodded his dark head and let them by without a murmur, then disappeared into the shadows.

'Conscientious chap,' Ethan said dryly.

Leona didn't answer. She was too busy having to fight a sudden attack of nerves that sent butterflies fluttering inside her stomach. Okay, she tried to reason, so she hadn't put herself in the social arena much recently, therefore it was natural that she should suffer an attack of nerves tonight.

Yet some other part of her brain was trying to insist that her attack of nerves had nothing to do with the party. It was so dark and so quiet here that even their footsteps seemed to echo with a sinister ring.

Sinister? Picking up on the word, she questioned it impatiently. What was the matter with her? Why was everything sinister all of a sudden? It was a hot night—a beautiful night—she was twenty-nine years old, and about to do what most twenty-nine-year-olds did: party where they got the chance!

'Quite something, hmm?' Ethan remarked as they walked into the shadow of the large

yacht.

But Leona didn't want to look. Despite the tough talking-to she had just given herself, the yacht bothered her. The whole situation was beginning to worry her. She could feel her heart pumping unevenly against her breast, and just about every nerve-end she possessed was suddenly on full alert for no other reason than—

It was then that she heard it—nothing more than a whispering sound in the shadows, but it was enough to make her go perfectly still. So did Ethan. Almost at the same moment the darkness itself seemed to take on a life of its own by shifting and swaying before her eyes.

The tingling sensation on the back of her neck returned with a vengeance. 'Ethan,' she said jerkily. 'I don't think I like this.'

'No,' he answered tersely. 'Neither do I.'

That was the moment when they saw them, first one dark shape, then another, and another, emerging from the shadows until they turned themselves into Arabs wearing dark robes, with darkly sober expressions.

'Oh, dear God,' she breathed. 'What's happening?'

But she already knew the answer. It was a fear she'd had to live with from the day she married Hassan. She was British. She had married an Arab who was a very powerful man. The dual publicity her disappearance could generate was in itself worth its weight in gold to political fanatics wanting to make a point.

Something she should have remembered earlier, then the word 'sinister' would have made a lot more sense, she realised, as Ethan's arm pressed her hard up against him.

Further down the harbour wall the lights from the Petronades boat were swinging gently. Here, beneath the shadow of the other, the ring of men was steadily closing in. Her heart began to pound like a hammer drill. Ethan couldn't hold her any closer if he tried, and she could almost taste his tension. He, too, knew exactly what was going to happen.

'Keep calm,' he gritted down at her. 'When I give the word, lose your shoes and run.'

He was going to make a lunge for them and try to break the ring so she could have a small chance to escape. 'No,' she protested, and clutched tightly at his jacket sleeve. 'Don't do it! They might hurt you if you do!'

'Just go, Leona!' he ground back at her, then, with no more warning than that, he was pulling away, and almost in the same movement he threw himself at the two men closest to him.

It was then that all hell broke loose. While Leona stood there frozen in horror watching as three men topple to the ground in a huddle, the rest of the ring leapt into action. Fear for her life sent a surge of adrenaline rushing through her blood. Dry-mouthed, stark-eyed, she was just about to do as Ethan had told her and run, when she heard a hard voice rasp out a command in Arabic. In a state of raw panic she swung round in its direction, expecting someone to be almost upon her, only to find to her confusion that the ring of men had completely bypassed her, leaving her standing here alone with only one other man.

It was at that point that she truly stopped functioning—heart, lungs, her ability to hear what was happening to Ethan—all connections to her brain simply closed down to leave only

her eyes in full, wretched focus.

Tall and dark, whip-cord lean, he possessed an aura about him that warned of great physical power lurking beneath the dark robes he was wearing. His skin was the colour of sunripened olives, his eyes as black as a midnight sky, and his mouth she saw was thin, straight and utterly unsmiling.

‘Hassan.’ She breathed his name into the darkness.

The curt bow he offered her came directly from an excess of noble arrogance built into his ancient genes. ‘As you see,’ Sheikh Hassan smoothly confirmed.

CHAPTER TWO

A BUBBLE of hysteria ballooned in her throat. ‘But—why?’ she choked in strangled confusion.

Hassan was not given the opportunity to answer before another fracas broke out somewhere behind her. Ethan ground her name out. It was followed by some thuds and scuffles. As she turned on a protesting gasp to go to him, someone else spoke with a grating urgency and Hassan caught her wrist, long brown fingers closing round fleshless skin and bone, to hold her firmly in place.

‘Call them off!’ she cried out shrilly.

‘Be silent,’ he returned in a voice like ice.

It shocked her, really shocked her, because never in their years together had he ever used that tone on her. Turning her head, she stared at him in pained astonishment, but Hassan wasn’t even looking at her. His attention was fixed on a spot near the gates. With a snap of his fingers his men began scattering like bats on the wing, taking a frighteningly silent Ethan with them.

‘Where are they going with him?’ Leona demanded anxiously.

Hassan didn’t answer. Another man came to stand directly behind her and, glancing up, she found herself gazing into yet another familiar face.

‘Rafiq,’ she murmured, but that was all she managed to say before Hassan was reclaiming her attention by snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her towards him. Her breasts made contact with solid muscle; her thighs suddenly burned like fire as they felt the unyielding power in his. Her eyes leapt up to clash with his eyes. It was like tumbling into oblivion. He looked so very angry, yet so very—

‘Shh,’ he cautioned. ‘It is absolutely imperative that you do exactly as I say. For there is a car coming down the causeway and we cannot afford to have any witnesses.’

‘Witnesses to what?’ she asked in bewilderment.

There was a pause, a smile that was not quite a smile because it was too cold, too calculating, too—

‘Your abduction,’ he smoothly informed her.

Standing there in his arms, feeling trapped by a word that sounded totally alien falling from those lips she’d thought she knew so well, Leona released a constricted gasp then was totally silenced.

Car headlights suddenly swung in their direction. Rafiq moved and the next thing that she knew a shroud of black muslin was being thrown over her head. For a split second she couldn’t believe what was actually happening! Then Hassan released his grasp so the muslin could unfurl right down to her ankles: she was being shrouded in an *abaya*.

Never had she *ever* been forced to wear such a garment! ‘Oh, how could you?’ she wrenched out, already trying to drag the *abaya* off again.

Strong arms firmly subdued her efforts. ‘Now, you have two choices here, my darling. Hassan’s grim voice sounded close to her ear. ‘You can either come quietly, of your own volition, or Rafiq and I will ensure that you do so—understand?’

Understand? Oh, yes, Leona thought painfully, she understood fully that she was being recovered like a lost piece of property! ‘I’ll never forgive you for this,’ she breathed thickly.

His response was to wedge her between himself and Rafiq and then begin hustling her quickly forward. Feeling hot, trapped and blinded by the *abaya*, she had no idea where they were taking her.

Her frightened gasp brought Hassan’s hand to cup her elbow. ‘Be calm,’ he said quietly. ‘I am here.’

His reassurance was no assurance to Leona as he began urging her to walk ahead of him. The ground beneath her feet gave way to something much less substantial. Through the thin soles of her shoes she could feel a ridged metal surface, and received a cold sense of some dark space yawning beneath it.

‘What is this?’ she questioned shakily.

‘The gangway to my yacht,’ Hassan replied.

His yacht, she repeated, and thought of the huge dark vessel squatting in the darkness. ‘New toy, Hassan?’ she hit out deridingly.

‘I knew you would be enchanted,’ he returned. ‘Watch your step!’ he cautioned sharply when the open toe of her flimsy shoe caught on one of the metal ridges.

But she couldn’t watch her step because the wretched *abaya* was in the way! So she tripped, tried to right herself, felt the slender heel of her shoe twist out from beneath her. Instinct made her put out a hand in a bid to save herself. But once again the *abaya* was in the way and, as she tried to grapple with it, the long loose veil of muslin tangled around her ankles and she lurched drunkenly forward. The sheer impetus of the lurch lost Hassan his guiding grip on her arm. As the sound of her own stifled cry mingled with the roughness of his, Leona knew she hadn’t a hope of saving herself. In the few split seconds it all took to happen, she had a horrible vision of deep dark water between the boat and the harbour wall waiting to suck her down, with the wretched *abaya* acting as her burial shroud.

Then hard hands were gripping her waist and roughly righting her; next she was being scooped up and crushed hard against a familiar chest. She curled into that chest like a vulnerable child and began shaking all over while she listened to Hassan cursing and swearing beneath his breath as he carried her, and Rafiq answering with soothing tones from somewhere ahead.

Onto the yacht, across the deck, Leona could hear doors being flung wide as they approached. By the time Hassan decided that it was safe to set her down on her own feet again, reaction was beginning to set in.

Shock and fright changed to a blistering fury the moment her feet hit the floor. Breaking free, she spun away from him, then began dragging the *abaya* off over her head with angry

shaking fingers. Light replaced darkness, sweet cool air replaced suffocating heat. Tossing the garment to the floor, she swung round to face her two abductors with her green eyes flashing and the rest of her shimmering with an incandescent rage.

Both Hassan and Rafiq stood framed by a glossy wood doorway, studying her with differing expressions. Both wore long black tunics beneath dark blue cloaks cinched in at the waist with wide black sashes. Dark blue *gutrahs* framed their lean dark faces. One neatly bearded the other clean-shaven and sleek. Both held themselves with an indolent arrogance that was a challenge as they waited to receive her first furious volley.

Her heart flipped over and tumbled to her stomach, her feeling of an impossible-to-fight admiration for these two people, only helping to infuriate her all the more. For who were they—*what* were they—that they believed they had the right to treat her like this?

She began to walk towards them. Her hair had escaped from its twist and was now tumbling like fire over her shoulders, and somewhere along the way she had lost her sash and shoes. Without the help of her shoes, the two men towered over her, indomitable and proud, dark brown eyes offering no hint of apology.

Her gaze fixed itself somewhere between them, her hands closed into two tightly clenched fists at her side. The air actually stung with an electric charge of anticipation. ‘I demand to see Ethan,’ she stated very coldly.

It was clearly the last thing either was expecting her to say. Rafiq stiffened infinitesimally. Hassan looked as if she could not have insulted him more if she’d tried.

His eyes narrowed, his mouth grew thin, his handsome sleek features hardened into polished rock. Beneath the dark robes, Leona saw his wide chest expand and remain that way for a moment as, with a sharp flick of a hand, he sent Rafiq sweeping out of the room.

As the door closed them in, the sudden silence stifled almost as much as the *abaya* had done. Neither moved, neither spoke for the space of thirty long heart-throbbing seconds while Hassan stared coldly down at her and she stared at some obscure point near his right shoulder.

Years of loving this one man, she was thinking painfully. Five years of living the dream of a marriage she had believed was so solid that nothing could ever tear it apart. Now she couldn’t even bring herself to focus on his face properly in case the feelings she now kept so deeply suppressed inside her came surging to the surface and spilled out on a wave of brokenhearted misery. For their marriage was over. They both knew it was over. He should not have done this to her. It hurt so badly that he could treat her this way that she didn’t think she was ever going to forgive him for it.

Hassan broke the silence by releasing the breath he had been holding onto. ‘In the interest of harmony, I suggest you restrain from mentioning Ethan Hayes in my presence,’ he advised, then simply stepped right past her to walk across the room to a polished wood counter which ran the full length of one wall.

As she followed the long, lean, subtle movement of his body through desperately loving eyes, fresh fury leapt up to save her again. ‘But who else would I ask about when I’ve just watched your men beat him up and drag him away?’ she threw after him.

‘They did not beat him up.’ Flicking open a cupboard door, he revealed a fridge stocked

with every conceivable form of liquid refreshment.

‘They fell on him like a flock of hooligans!’

‘They subdued his enthusiasm for a fight.’

‘He was defending me!’

‘That is my prerogative.’

Her choked laugh at that announcement dropped scorn all over it. ‘Sometimes your arrogance stuns even me!’ she informed him scathingly.

The fridge door shut with a thud. ‘And your foolish refusal to accept wise advice when it is offered to you stuns me!’

Twisting round, Hassan was suddenly revealing an anger that easily matched her own. His eyes were black, his expression harsh, his mouth snapped into a grim line. In his hand he held a bottle of mineral water which he slammed down on the cabinet top, then he began striding towards her, big and hard and threatening.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with you,’ she burst out bewilderedly. ‘Why am I under attack when I haven’t done anything?’

‘You dare to ask that, when this is the first time we have looked upon each other in a year—yet all you can think about is Ethan Hayes?’

‘Ethan isn’t your enemy,’ she persisted stubbornly.

‘No.’ Thinly said. Then something happened within his eyes that set her heart shuddering. He came to a stop a bare foot away from her. ‘But he is most definitely yours,’ he said.

She didn’t want him this close and took a step back. ‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she denied.

He closed the gap again. ‘A married woman openly living with a man who is not her husband carries a heavy penalty in Rahman.’

‘Are you daring to suggest that Ethan and I *sleep* together?’ Her eyes went wide with utter affront.

‘Do you?’

The question was like a slap to the face. ‘No we do not!’

‘Prove it,’ he challenged.

Surprise had her falling back another step. ‘But you know Ethan and I don’t have that kind of relationship,’ she insisted.

‘And, I repeat,’ he said, ‘prove it.’

Nerve-ends began to fray when she realised he was being serious. ‘I can’t,’ she admitted then went quite pale when she felt forced to add, ‘But you know I wouldn’t sleep with him Hassan. You *know* it,’ she emphasised with a painfully thickening tone which placed a different kind of darkness in his eyes.

It came from understanding and pity. And she hated him for that also! Hated and loved and hurt with a power that was worse than any other torture he could inflict.

‘Then explain to me, please,’ he persisted nonetheless, ‘when you openly live beneath the

same roof as he does, how I convince my people of this certainty you believe I have in your fidelity?’

‘But Ethan and I haven’t spent one night alone together in the villa,’ she protested. ‘My father has always been there with us until he was delayed in London today!’

‘Quite.’ Hassan nodded. ‘Now you understand why you have been snatched from the brink of committing the ultimate sin in the eyes of our people. There,’ he said with a dismissive flick of the hand. ‘I am your saviour, as is my prerogative.’

With that, and having neatly tied the whole thing off to his own satisfaction, he turned and walked away—Leaving Leona to flounder in his smooth, slick logic and with no ready argument to offer.

‘I don’t believe you are real sometimes,’ she sent shakily after him. ‘Did it never occur to you that I didn’t want *snatching from the brink*?’

Sarcasm abounding, Hassan merely pulled the *gutrah* from his head and tossed it aside, then returned to the bottle of water. ‘It was time,’ he said, swinging the fridge door open again. ‘You have had long enough to sulk.’

‘I wasn’t sulking!’

‘Whatever,’ he dismissed with a shrug, then chose a bottle of white wine and closed the door. ‘It was time to bring the impasse to an end.’

Impasse, Leona repeated. He believed their failed marriage was merely stuck in an *impasse*. ‘I’m not coming back to you,’ she declared, then turned away to pretend to take an interest in her surroundings, knowing that his grim silence was denying her the right to choose.

They were enclosed in what she could only presume was a private stateroom furnished with subtle shades of cream faced with richly polished rosewood. It was all so beautifully designed that it was almost impossible to see the many doors built into the walls except for the wood-framed doors they had entered through. And it was the huge deep-sprung divan taking pride of place against a silk-lined wall, that told her exactly what the room’s function was.

Although the bed was not what truly captured her attention, but the pair of big easy chairs standing in front of a low table by a set of closed cream velvet curtains. As her heart gave a painful twist in recognition, she sent a hand drifting up to her eyes. Oh, Hassan, she thought despairingly, don’t do this to me...

She had seen the chairs, Hassan noted, studying the way she was standing there looking like an exquisitely fragile, perfectly tooled art-deco sculpture in her slender gown of gold. And he didn’t know whether to tell her so or simply weep at how utterly bereft she looked.

In the end he chose a third option and took a rare sip at the white wine spritzer he had just prepared for her. The forbidden alcohol content in the drink might be diluted but he felt it hit his stomach and almost instantly enter his bloodstream with an injection of much appreciated fire.

‘You’ve lost weight,’ he announced, and watched her chin come up, watched her wonderful hair slide down her slender back and her hand drop slowly to her side while she took a steadying breath before she could bring herself to turn and face him.

‘I’ve been ill—with the flu,’ she answered flatly.

‘That was weeks ago,’ he dismissed, uncaring that he was revealing to her just how close an eye he had been keeping on her from a distance. The fact that she showed no surprise to him that she had guessed as much anyway. ‘After a virus such as influenza the weight recovery is usually swift.’

‘And you would know, of course,’ she drawled, mocking the fact that he had not suffered a day’s illness in his entire life.

‘I know *you*,’ he countered, ‘and your propensity for slipping into a decline when you are unhappy...’

‘I was *ill*, not unhappy.’

‘You missed me. I missed you. Why try to deny it?’

‘May I have one of those?’ Indicating towards the drink he held in his hand was her way of telling him she was going to ignore those kind of comments.

‘It is yours,’ he explained, and offered the glass out to her.

She looked at the glass, long dusky lashes flickering over her beautiful green eyes when she realised he was going to make her come and get the drink. Would she do it? he wondered curiously. Would she allow herself to come this close, when they both knew she would much rather turn and run?

But his beautiful wife had never been a coward. No matter how she might be feeling inside he had never known her to run from a challenge. Even when she had left him last year she had done so with courage, not cowardice. And she did not let him down now as her silk stockings began to tread the cream carpet until she was in reach of the glass.

‘Thank you.’ The wine spritzer was taken from him and lifted to her mouth. She sipped without knowing she had been offered the glass so she would place her lips where his lips had been.

Her pale throat moved as she swallowed; her lips came away from the glass wearing a seductively alluring wine glossed bloom. He watched her smother a sigh, watched her look anywhere but directly at him, was aware that she had not looked him in the face since removing the *abaya*, just as she had stopped looking at him weeks before she left Rahma. And he had to suppress his own sigh as he felt muscles tighten all over his body in his desire to reach out, draw her close and make her look at him!

But this was not the time to play the demanding husband. She would reject him as she had rejected him many times a year ago. What hurt him the most about remembering those bleak interludes was not his own angry frustration but the grim knowledge that it had been herself she had been denying.

‘Was the Petronades yacht party an elaborate set-up?’ she asked suddenly.

A brief smile stretched his mouth, and it was a very selfmocking smile because he had truly believed she was as concentrated on his close physical presence as he was on hers. But, no. Always, Leona’s mind worked in ways that continually managed to surprise him.

‘The party was genuine.’ He answered the question. ‘Your father’s sudden inability to get here in time to attend it was not.’

At least his honesty almost earned him a direct glance of frowning puzzlement before she

managed to divert it to his right ear. 'But you've just finished telling me that I was snatched because my father was—'

'I know,' he cut in, not needing to hear her explain what he already knew—which was that this whole thing had been very carefully set up and co-ordinated with her father's assistance. 'There are many reasons why you are standing here with me right now, my darling,' he murmured gently. 'Most of which can wait for another time to go into.'

The *my darling* sent her back a defensive step. The realisation that her own father had plotted against her darkened her lovely eyes. 'Tell me now,' she insisted.

But Hassan just shook his head. 'Now is for me,' he informed her softly. 'Now is my moment to bask in the fact that you are back where you belong.'

It was really a bit of bad timing that her feet should use that particular moment to tread on the discarded *abaya*, he supposed, watching as she looked down, saw, then grew angry and stepped over again.

'By abduction?' Her chin came up, contempt shimmering along her finely shaped bones. 'By plots and counter-plots and by removing a woman's right to decide for herself?'

He grimaced at her very accurate description. 'We are by nature a romantic people,' he defended. 'We love drama and poetry and tragic tales of star-crossed lovers who lose each other and travel the caverns of hell in their quest to find their way back together again.'

He saw the tears. He had said too much. Reaching out, he caught the glass just before it slipped from her nerveless fingers. 'Our marriage is a tragedy,' she told him thickly.

'No,' he denied, putting the hapless glass aside. 'You merely insist on turning it into one.' 'Because I hate everything you stand for!'

'But you cannot make yourself hate the man,' he added, undisturbed by her denunciation.

Leona began to back away because there was something seriously threatening about the sudden glow she caught in his eyes. 'I left you, remember?'

'Then sent me letters at regular intervals to make sure I remembered you,' he drawled.

'Letters to tell you I want a divorce!' she cried.

'The content of the letters came second to their true purpose.' He smiled. 'One every two weeks over the last two months. I found them most comforting.'

'Gosh, you are so conceited it's a wonder you didn't marry yourself!'

'Such insults.' He sighed.

'Will you stop stalking me as if I am a hunted animal?' she cried.

'Stop backing away like one.'

'I do not want to stay married to you.' She stated it bluntly.

'And I am not prepared to let you go. There,' he said. 'We have reached another impassable point. Which one of us is going to win the higher ground this time, do you think?'

Looking at him standing there, arrogant and proud yet so much her kind of man that he made her legs go weak, Leona knew exactly which one of them possessed the higher ground. Which was also why she had to keep him at arm's length at all costs. He could fell her

seconds, because he was right; she didn't hate him, she adored him. And that scared her so much that when his hand came up, long fingertips brushing gently across her trembling mouth, she almost fainted on the sensation that shot from her lips to toe tips.

She pulled right away. His eyebrow arched. It mocked and challenged as he responded by curling the hand around her nape.

'Stop it,' she said, and lifted up her hand to use it as a brace against his chest.

Beneath dark blue cotton she discovered a silk-smooth, hard-packed body pulsing with heat and an all-too-familiar masculine potency. Her mouth went dry; she tried to breathe and found that she couldn't. Helplessly she lifted her eyes up to meet with his.

'Seeing me now, hmm?' he softly taunted. 'Seeing this man with these eyes you like to drown in, and this nose you like to call dreadful but usually have trouble from stopping your fingers from stroking? And let us not forget this mouth you so like to feel crushed hot against your own delightful mouth.'

'Don't you dare!' she protested, seeing what was coming and already beginning to shake all over at the terrifying prospect of him finding out what a weak-willed coward she was.

'Why not?' he countered, offering her one of his lazily sensual, knowing smiles that said he knew better than she did what she really wanted—and he began to lower his dark head.

'Tell me first.' Sheer desperation made her fly into impulsive speech. 'If I am here on this beautiful yacht that belongs to you—is there another yacht just like it out there somewhere where your second wife awaits her turn?'

In the sudden suffocating silence that fell between them Leona found herself holding her breath as she watched his face pale to a frightening stillness. For this was provocation of the worst kind to an Arab and her heart began pounding madly because she just didn't know how he was going to respond. Hassan possessed a shocking temper, though he had never unleashed it on her. But now, as she stood here with her fingers still pressed against his breastbone, she could feel the danger in him—could almost taste her own fear as she waited to see how he was going to respond.

What he did was to take a step back from her. Cold, aloof, he changed into the untouchable prince in the single blink of an ebony eyelash. 'Are you daring to imply that I could be guilty of treating my wives unequally?' he responded.

In the interim wave of silence that followed, Leona stared at him through eyes that had stopped seeing anything as his reply rocked the very axis she stood upon. She knew she had prompted it but she still had not expected it, and now she found she couldn't breathe, couldn't even move as fine cracks began to appear in her defences.

'You actually went and did it, and married again,' she whispered, then completely shattered. Emotionally, physically, she felt herself fragment into a thousand broken pieces beneath his stone-cold, cruel gaze.

Hassan didn't see it coming. He should have done, he knew that, but he had been too angry to see anything but his own affronted pride. So when she turned and ran he didn't expect it. By the time he had pulled his wits together enough to go after her Leona was already flying through the door on a flood of tears.

The tears blinded what was ahead of her, the *abaya* having prevented her from taking stock of her surroundings as they'd arrived. Hassan heard Rafiq call out a warning, reached the door as Leona's cry curdled the very air surrounding them and she began to fall.

What he had managed to prevent by the skin of his teeth only a half-hour before now replayed itself before his helpless eyes. Only it was not the dark waters of the Mediterranean she fell into but the sea of cream carpet that ran from room to room and down a wide flight of three shallow stairs that led down into the yacht's main foyer.

CHAPTER THREE

CURSING and swearing in seething silence, Hassan prowled three sides of the bed like a caged tiger while the yacht's Spanish medic checked her over.

'No bones broken, as far as I can tell,' the man said. 'No obvious blow to the head.'

'Then why is she unconscious?' he growled out furiously.

'Shock—winded,' the medic suggested, gently laying aside a frighteningly limp hand. 'It has only been a few minutes, sir.'

But a few minutes was a lifetime when you felt so guilty you wished it was yourself lying there, Hassan thought harshly.

'A cool compress would be a help—'

A cool compress. 'Rafiq.' The click of his fingers meant the job would be done.

The sharp sound made Leona flinch. On a single, lithe leap Hassan was suddenly stretched out across the bed and leaning over her. The medic drew back; Rafiq paused in his step.

'Open your eyes.' Hassan turned her face towards him with a decidedly unsteady hand.

Her eyes fluttered open to stare up at him blankly. 'What happened?' she mumbled.

'You fell down some stairs,' he gritted. 'Now tell me where you hurt.'

A frown began to pucker her smooth brow as she tried to remember.

'Concentrate,' he rasped, diverting her mind away from what had happened. 'Do you hurt anywhere?'

She closed her eyes again, and he watched her make a mental inventory of herself then give a small shake of her head. 'I think I'm okay.' She opened her eyes again, looked directly into his, saw his concern, his anguish, the burning fires of guilt—and then she remembered *why* she'd fallen.

Aching tears welled up again. From coldly plunging his imaginary knife into her breast, he now felt it enter his own. 'You really went and did it,' she whispered.

'No, I did not,' he denied. 'Get out,' he told their two witnesses.

The room emptied like water down a drain, leaving them alone again, confronting each other again. It was dangerous. He wanted to kiss her so badly he could hardly breathe. She was his. He was hers! They should not be in this warring situation!

'No—remain still!' he commanded when she attempted to move. 'Don't even breathe unless you have to do so! Why are females so *stupid*?' he bit out like a curse. 'You insult me with your suspicions. You goad me into a response, and when it is not the one you want to hear you slay me with your pain!'

'I didn't mean to fall down the stairs,' she pointed out.

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