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COLLECTION

Princess's
SECRET BABY

— THE —
CHATSFIELD®

CAROL MARINELLI

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Princess's Secret Baby

Аннотация

A Princess for the PlayboyThe Princess of Surhaadi is desperate to escape a life lived in the shadows of her family's past. One misguided night of rebellion later and Leila's world comes crashing down thanks to two little blue lines on the pregnancy test!When James Chatsfield - world-renowned bad boy and soon-to-be father - hears the shocking news, he knows he needs to act, and fast! He'll propose to protect his heir, but will Leila ever believe he sees her as more than just the mother of his child?Welcome to The Chatsfield, New York!

'I am going to raise my baby alone ...'

'Our baby,' James corrected and Leila felt her throat constrict as she heard the snap of possession in his voice.

'I don't need your help in this, James.'

'It's not about what *you* need. It's about what the baby needs,' James said. 'Though I'd suggest that you do need some help. I've heard on the grapevine that your credit card has been stopped ... I guess mummy and daddy are not very amused with their daughter's behaviour.'

'I doubt that they will ever speak with me again,' Leila said, 'so I doubt I will find out.'

James looked at her and felt a bit bad then—his parents were trouble enough, but Leila was dealing with a king and queen. 'I'm sure they'll come around.'

He took a breath; a gnaw of disquiet was growing as the ramifications of that thought hit home. Yes, her parents would surely come around and what then?

What would happen then to the princess and her baby?

What would happen to *his* child?

'How did your parents take the news?' Leila asked.

'I'm not here to talk about our families,' James said, 'I'm here to sort things out between us.'

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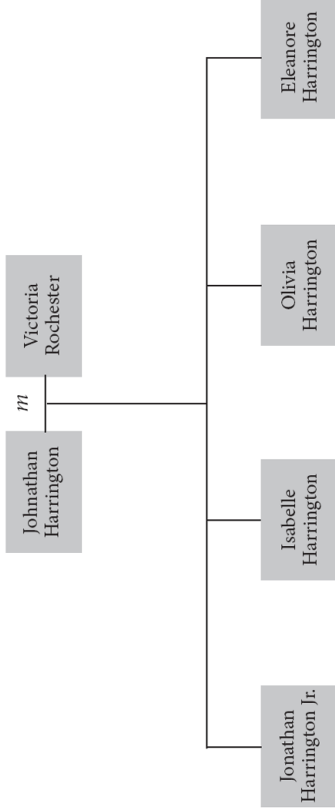
Princess's
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CAROL MARINELLI recently filled in a form where she was asked for her job title and was thrilled, after all these years, to be able to put down her answer as ‘writer’. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation. After chewing her pen for a moment Carol put down the truth—‘writing’. The third question asked: ‘What are your hobbies?’ Well, not wanting to look obsessed or, worse still, boring, she crossed the fingers on her free hand and answered ‘swimming and tennis’. But, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, and the closest she’s got to a tennis racket in the last couple of years is watching the Australian Open, I’m sure you can guess the real answer!

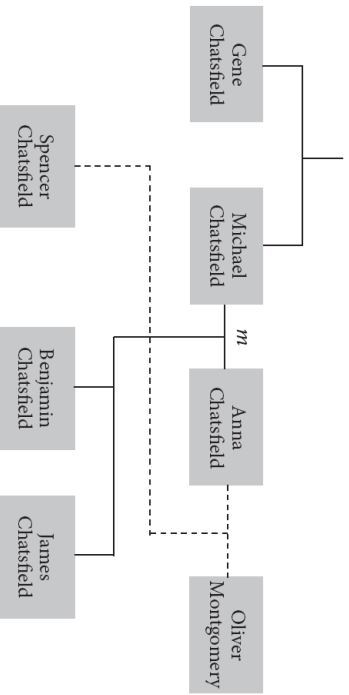
Harrington Family Tree



----- Illegitimate Relationship

———— Legitimate Relationship

Chatsfield Family Tree



----- Illegitimate Relationship

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CHAPTER ONE

'I WISH THAT it had been you!'

Princess Leila Al-Ahmar of Surhaadi froze as finally Queen Farrah voiced her truth.

Deep down Leila had always known that her mother would have preferred for it to be Leila, rather than her sister, Jasmine, who had died on that terrible night. Having it verified though, hearing her mother say the words that no parent ever should, felt like an arrow was right now being shot through Leila's heart and caused an agony that even she hadn't properly anticipated.

Not that Leila showed it to the woman who was now staring her down.

Only at night, only in sleep, did Leila cry for a love she had never been shown.

The absence of love in her life had made Leila resilient though, so she stood, unflinching, as her mother poured boiling oil onto already raw wounds. Only it wasn't just resilience that made Leila stand proud and silent—quite simply she was too stunned to react.

For all of her twenty-four years Leila had done everything she could to avoid this moment, but she had finally stopped running from the truth tonight.

After dinner, instead of heading to her suite, instead of disappearing, Leila had taken up her beloved *qanun*—a small harp that was so much more than an instrument to Leila. It was both her friend and her companion. It was gentle and pure and wild at times too, and when she played it Leila knew for sure that

love existed.

Even if she had never known it from her parents.

Farrah loathed that her daughter adored music so.

Jasmine had played better apparently, Farrah said as she took up her embroidery. It was the same tapestry that she had been working on for more than sixteen years.

Night after night she unpicked the threads and reseeded, going over and over it and refusing to finish as Leila's father sat silent in the chair.

No, she hadn't played better than me, Leila wanted to scream, for she knew that was not true.

Jasmine, her mother goaded, had held a note until doves lined the palace windows just to hear her play.

Tension had been building for years, yet on this night Leila had refused to give in and obey her mother's silent command to remove herself. Instead she had continued to play—plucking the *qanun's* strings, refusing to be quiet, as was the unspoken rule in the palace.

Had her older brother, Zayn, been here he would have, by now, defused the situation. Zayn would have diverted their mother somehow.

But Zayn wasn't here tonight.

Soon he would marry the woman whom he had been betrothed to since childhood, Leila thought.

Even though she was twenty-four Leila's marriage had not yet been arranged—it upset her mother too much to get around to

it, for Jasmine would have been such a beautiful bride, Jasmine would have had such adorable babies.

Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine.

She would be a spinster forever, Leila thought. She would be here alone in this palace with them until the day that she died.

Night after night spent hiding in her suite would be her life and so she brought things to a head tonight in the only way she knew how.

Leila said with her fingers, with each pluck of the strings, what could not be voiced by her mouth.

They told the truth.

The harmony that she created was not a peaceful one.

It spoke of the night sixteen years ago when Jasmine had died.

Leila had been only eight at the time but she remembered it well and, as an adult, she understood more clearly what had happened.

The music she made spoke of a young woman going off the rails. It spoke of drugs and drink and hips that had provocatively swayed as she'd danced with Zayn's best friend at that time. The music spoke of things that, even now, Leila didn't properly understand for she was, and had always tried to be, a good girl. Yet tonight her fingers spoke of sex and forbidden fruits and a young girl taking a dance with the devil himself.

'Leila...' Her mother spat. 'Enough!'

But still Leila's fingers strummed on.

Deep into her music she went. Exploring Zayn's fury and

anger when he had found out how his friend had betrayed him with his sister.

Leila recalled some of the furious words that had poured from her brother, things that even now Leila could not really comprehend—how men like Jasmine’s lover used women, that it was only the thrill of the chase that had them keen. How, now that he had had her, soon he would not want her.

Zayn had thrown Jasmine’s lover out into the night and Jasmine had made the decision to follow him. Their mother, to this day, had Zayn almost eaten alive with guilt over the repercussions.

Leila’s fingers revealed the screams that had filled the palace when the terrible news had hit that a car accident had left the young princess and her lover dead.

With not a word uttered, Leila exposed the truth of that night, with her musical talent.

‘Khalas!’ Her mother stood and screamed for her daughter to stop; she screamed for salvation. Farrah grabbed at the harp and sent it clattering to the floor, and as Leila’s stood to retrieve her most beloved possession, it was then that her mother said it—‘I wish that it had been you!’

Leila’s golden eyes met the furious gaze of her mother’s, willing her to retract, silently begging Farrah to break down and take back what she had just said, but instead her mother clarified her words past the point of no return.

‘I wish it had been you who died that night, Leila.’

Now Leila drew in a breath, now she fought back.

‘You fail to surprise me, for you have wished me dead from the moment that I was born.’ Leila’s voice did not waver nor did it betray the agony of the truth behind each word that she spoke. ‘You have never wanted me. Even as I nursed at your breast your milk tasted sour from your resentment.’ Leila knew that might sound an illogical statement, but as far back as she could remember Leila had known that she wasn’t wanted.

‘It was the maids who fed you,’ her mother, blameless to the last, said. ‘It must have been one of their milk that was sour with resentment. They always complained you were such a greedy baby.’

Leila wished there was no gravity; she just wanted to leave the earth, to be lifted to space, to disappear.

Yet her feet stayed on the ground.

As she somehow must.

‘Sadly for you, Mother, I didn’t die that night. I’m alive. *I have* a life and I have already wasted far too much of it trying to win your love. Well, no more.’

Her mother said nothing and Leila turned on her heel and walked past her father, who sat with his head in his hands. It hurt that he had done nothing to intervene. Yes, Leila understood that his brain was still addled with grief even all these years after Jasmine’s death, but his silence in this argument spoke volumes.

Her jewelled slippers made no sound on the marble floor as Leila swiftly walked and there was a notable absence of her

mother's footsteps running behind her.

Hurt heaped on top of hurt as her mother made no attempt to follow her youngest daughter and try to take back those cruel words. Leila wanted her mother to tell her that she was mistaken, that she was loved.

Leila passed the family portraits in the long hallway as she made her way to her suite. Always she walked quickly at this point, always she did her best not to look at the paintings that hurt so very much, but surely nothing more could hurt her now.

Leila slowed down and came to a halt and turned.

There on the walls of the palace was her history. There, for all to see, was the truth that Leila had always known and tonight had been cruelly confirmed.

The first painting that she examined was a large family portrait. Her parents were sitting in far happier times; her mother was holding Zayn and smiling as she gazed at the baby who would one day be king.

Leila adored her older brother. Zayn loathed injustice and had stepped in over and over for Leila. Growing up he had done all he could to shield her, and his protectiveness towards his youngest sister had only increased since Jasmine's death.

Her mother blamed Zayn for what had happened to Jasmine too.

He carried not just the grief of losing his sister, whom he had been closer in age with than Leila, but he carried the blame for her death. Leila's heart broke for him too.

Did she wish that Zayn was here tonight though?

No.

For there was nothing that Zayn could do to protect her from this.

He could not force their mother to love.

Leila's eyes moved to the next portrait and there was Jasmine—wearing her famous cheeky smile that her mother so often spoke about.

It wasn't a cheeky smile, Leila thought with a shiver; it was manipulative, for she had been on the receiving end of it often.

Jasmine has been everything that Leila wasn't. Jasmine was pretty and funny and charming too.

Leila was serious and diligent—and as she looked at a portrait that had all three children in it, Leila's heart ached for that child with confusion in her eyes.

Leila's hair was cut short and, unlike Jasmine, she had been chubby and plain, but far more unforgivable than that she had been born a girl.

A long and difficult birth had assured that there would be no more babies for the queen. Oh, how Leila had tried to be everything that her parents wanted—she had tried so hard to be as brave and fearless as Zayn and had begged to go out hunting with their father, only to have the queen mock her.

Leila stood there remembering the morning that she had taken scissors from the palace kitchen and smuggled them up to her bathroom. She had cut her long black hair, hoping that if she

looked like a boy, then maybe she would be loved.

‘You were *such* a good girl,’ Leila said to the image, recalling her tears when her mother had found her in the bathroom with her hair beside her on the floor and how badly she had been spanked and shamed.

Her hair had grown back, the puppy fat had long since faded and a serious beauty had emerged.

Unnoticed.

Rather than cry, she walked to her suite.

‘Dismissed,’ she said to the maid who sat outside but did not move to Leila’s command, and so she reiterated. ‘You are dismissed for the night.’

‘But you might need me.’

‘I don’t *need* anyone,’ Leila said. She knew the maids thought her arrogant—her mother did too—but arrogance was her shield and she wore it well now.

‘Dismissed!’ Leila hissed, and she waited till the confused woman had left before going into her suite.

Leila headed straight for her dressing room. It was filled with the most exquisite robes that had been handmade by the skilled palace seamstresses, then beaded and embroidered by Surhaadi women. It was not the gowns that held her interest though. Leila dropped to her knees and crawled behind them, reaching into the dark corner and dragging out a huge jewelled chest.

She found the key that was hidden in the pocket of one of her robes, but as she knelt to open the chest, Leila’s hands were

shaking and it was as if Jasmine was here with her again, for she could hear her voice.

‘You have to hide these things for me. If anybody found them I would get into so much trouble.’

‘But what if they find them in my room?’ Leila had asked.

‘As if they would ever think to look through your things.’ Jasmine had laughed at the very thought. ‘The only thing that they’d expect to find are books and more books. Just hide these for me, Leila, please.’

‘No.’

Jasmine had smiled that smile and given Leila a small cuddle, a little bit of contact that Leila craved. ‘Please, Leila, do it for me?’

Leila had agreed.

Here was the proof that Jasmine had been far from perfect, Leila thought as she opened the trunk that had stayed locked for years. She wanted to run back to her parents, to hold the contraband up at them, to tell them once and for all that their memory of Jasmine was wrong.

Jasmine wasn’t, nor ever had been, perfect. Even Zayn, who carried so much guilt over the death of his younger sister, didn’t know the full extent of Jasmine’s wild ways.

Yes, she had been far from perfect, Leila thought, looking at a short black dress that was scooped low at the front. There were high black heeled shoes too amongst other things and Leila examined them all now. She opened a bottle of vodka and sniffed

it.

She would tell her parents; she would show them. Yet, even now, Leila knew that she couldn't do that to her sister.

Even when she had died, still Leila had played her part in protecting Jasmine's reputation—a day after the funeral a package from overseas had arrived at the palace addressed to Jasmine and Leila had smuggled it back up to her suite and had thrown it in the trunk unopened.

She picked up the package and Leila's slender fingers tore at the paper, wondering what might be inside. There was a small cellophane packet and she pulled out the contents. There was a velvet bra in the deepest red and as she opened it up a tiny pair of panties fell out. Leila ran the soft fabric through her fingers. It was decadent, it was provocative and it was sexy. It was everything that a young princess should not be.

It was, Leila thought, terribly beautiful too.

Leila picked up a packet of tablets and though naive and innocent, she knew it was the pill. She knew that if you took it each day you could have sex without consequence.

Leila tossed the packet back in the trunk and took out a lipstick. She read the label—Pride. What an inappropriate name, Leila thought as she opened it and saw that it was the same deep red as the underwear.

It should be called Shame.

But why?

It was she, Leila, who lived a life of shame.

Jasmine, even if her life had been cut short, had known fun. She had at least had her parents' love and must have known the bliss of being held in another's arms.

Her eyes were drawn again to the pills and Leila picked up the packet and punched one out.

Sin lay in the palm of her hand.

Oh, to be held by another, for even a moment.

Imagine how it must feel to be kissed?

Leila lowered her head, her tongue taking up the pill, and she swallowed it down.

She took out a small case that she used when travelling for official engagements. Her maids took care of her luggage but this was the one she would take on the royal plane. Leila had a credit card—she used it to purchase books and music sheets online.

Could she use it to purchase a flight?

She was running away, Leila realised as she went in her dresser and took out her passport.

But to where?

Leila picked up the package that had contained the underwear and she looked at the address. New York, New York.

Excitement licked at her stomach, yet it was laced with fear and Leila knew she could never do it.

Jasmine could have.

Jasmine would have.

Leila dressed in a gold robe and put on her veils and packed Jasmine's contents in the case and then walked back through the

palace, past the portraits, past the lounge where her parents sat, no doubt speaking about Jasmine.

She wondered if they'd even notice that she had gone.

Leila told a servant to ring for a driver.

'Yalla!' Leila snapped, ordering him to hurry, and when a driver arrived she told him to take her to the airport.

Leila ordered a first-class ticket and held her breath as she handed over the card.

It worked.

It should have been a comfortable flight, but Leila could not relax and she declined when the steward offered to make up her bed.

Leila was tired, yet she would not sleep because she knew that it was then, and only then, that she cried.

Jasmine used to tease her about it, but there was no one to tease her now. Still Leila would wake in the midst of it sometimes, or in the morning her pillow would be wet and her eyes swollen, and the dreams, though all a bit different, all made her feel the same.

So, instead of sleeping, Leila selected a magazine and got goosebumps as she flicked through it and saw the bright lights of Times Square. It was hard to imagine that soon she herself would be there, for her life had been lived behind palace walls. Zayn had had more freedom, given that he was a male, and Jasmine had created her own, but Leila had never really ventured out.

Leila looked at an advert for a bar and saw pictures of cocktails

in bright colours with tempting names. Even if she didn't really know what it was, she blushed when she saw there was one called Screaming Orgasm, and there were other names too, but she liked the look of one called Manhattan. She read about restaurants where people met just to talk and eat. She read about two luxury hotels in the heart of New York. The Chatsfield caught her eye. It had branches around the world and it would seem that the most scandalous and famous people stayed there.

There was talk of some rivalry between them and another hotel called The Harrington. It was glamorous and elegant and ensured privacy for its most esteemed guests.

She remembered the hotels when, having cleared customs, Leila found herself shivering in her robe on a cold winter night as she waited in line for a taxi. While others complained Leila patiently waited, her face to the heavens tasting snow on her tongue for the first time.

'Where to?' the driver asked.

Leila knew which one Jasmine would choose and she was about to say The Chatsfield, but changed her mind at the last moment.

'The Harrington,' Leila said.

Try as she might, Leila could never be Jasmine.

CHAPTER TWO

EVERYTHING WAS UNFAMILIAR.

Beautiful, yet unfamiliar.

Leila was grateful for her veils as she walked over to reception,

for she felt as if everyone was looking at her.

Leila certainly turned heads—her gown was breathtaking. She held her back completely straight and asked to be taken to their very best suite.

It wasn't quite that easy though. There were many questions asked of her and Leila didn't answer all of them truthfully—she lied as to her address and just gave them a blank look when they asked for her phone number.

'I would just like to be taken to my suite.'

But still they asked more of her.

'Ms?'

Leila frowned at the receptionist's question.

'Your title?' the receptionist clarified. Leila glanced at her credit card and it read only as Leila Al-Ahmar, and she let out a breath as Leila realised that she could be whoever she wanted to be.

'Ms,' Leila said as her details were added to the computer. She handed over her credit card again, wondering if now her parents would have stopped it from working. The receptionist smiled at her, and handed her a swipe card for her suite, and Leila wondered if her parents had even bothered to notice that she'd gone.

When Leila stepped into the suite a maid was already in there, unpacking her small case, and Leila told her that she would not be needed.

She stood as if waiting for something.

‘Dismissed,’ Leila said. Once alone, she walked over to the window and looked to the busy streets below, trying to picture herself out there.

She couldn’t.

She must.

Leila removed her robes and modest underwear and replaced it with Jasmine’s. She did not recognise her own body, for in the mirror it was a wanton woman that looked back. She put on the black dress that revealed her cleavage and she struggled terribly to do up the zip at the back. She had never had a zip before and the maids did up her buttons. She added high shoes to her bare legs. Leila brushed her long black hair till it was gleaming. She had never worn make-up but tonight she carefully painted her lips and then stood back and gazed again at her reflection.

She could be Jasmine.

Yes, she was more slender than her sister had been and already she was a good few years older than Jasmine had been when she died. Yet, for the first time, she saw the resemblance to her older sister. Leila practised Jasmine’s smile and wondered if their similarities were why her mother loathed her so much for living when Jasmine had died.

No, Leila reminded herself, her mother had loathed her from the second she was born.

Recalling her mother’s words about the maids, Leila was hurt and angry enough to gather resolve and she stuffed her robe and veils into her small case and then hid it under the bed.

Princess Leila of Surhaadi no longer existed.

She had no bag to put the swipe card in and no maid to carry her things and so Leila tucked it into her bra.

The elevator took her down to the reception area and Leila looked around for a moment.

Elegance was the policy at The Harrington and famous people welcomed that they could be there without fuss. Such was her beauty though, such was her way, that people could not help but look around.

Leila was completely unused to being noticed or looked at and she was starting not to like it.

She heard the sound of a piano and followed it. As Leila walked into the bar, the chink of glasses and the sound of subdued conversation dimmed for a moment. She stood in the doorway in absolute terror, not that she showed it.

A portly man looked over and his eyes roamed Leila's body. Another man did the same, very briefly, but his eyes certainly flicked down to her breasts. It was so overwhelming for Leila she was about to turn tail and dash back to her suite. It had been a stupid idea, she decided. What the hell had she even been thinking?

But then *it* happened.

For the first time in her entire life, Leila felt welcome when she walked into a room. A man at the bar turned around and his chocolate-brown eyes met hers. For a brief second he startled and then frowned, as if trying to place her, and then he simply

smiled.

Leila had never, not once, felt so welcome. His eyes did not roam her body as the other men's had; they simply met and held hers. Leila found that she was smiling back. Then, as naturally as breathing, she walked over to him.

'I've changed my mind,' the man said. His voice was rich and expensive and he turned and spoke to the barman. 'I shall have another drink after all.' Then his eyes returned to Leila's. 'What can I get you?'

'I don't know,' Leila said, and she looked at the glistening bottles of different colours and she did not feel naive. She felt looked after, for her vague response did not seem to faze him and he patiently waited for her to decide. She thought for a moment and remembered the cocktails she had seen in the magazine on the plane. Certainly wasn't going to ask for the one that made her blush! 'How about a Manhattan, given that is my first night here?'

'How about a *perfect* Manhattan,' he suggested, because that was what she was to him—utterly perfect. From her long glossy black hair to her golden eyes. The only thing he would change was the very bright lipstick she wore.

He would kiss it off soon, James knew that.

Bored by the subdued mood of The Harrington, James Chatsfield had been about to leave and head to somewhere more lively. He had just declined another drink when a hush had descended. Even the barman had paused mid-conversation with him and James had turned around and looked at a woman who

could, upon entering, silence a room.

Leila nodded her consent to his drink selection and watched as the barman got to work but it did not hold her attention; instead it was the man who stood beside her, so she turned and looked at him

He was beautiful, with dark hair that fell to his collar. He was tall and well-dressed but there was a ruggedness to him that told Leila he was untamed. There was an element to him that defied convention, for he was like no one else in the room. He wore a tie, yet the top of his shirt was unbuttoned. He was not clean shaven, yet he was clean—the scent of him told her that—and when he smiled, when she stood a little closer to him, his mere presence rendered her unafraid.

Her whole life she had been afraid, yet she wasn't now.

Her whole life she had taken up too much room merely by existing; now she stood by his side and peace somehow invaded.

'My name is James.'

'I am...' She was about to offer her title, but again changed her mind. 'I am Leila.'

She did not belong standing at a bar, James decided, and so he suggested that they move to one of the low tables. Leila chose one in the shadows not because she wanted to be more alone with him; she simply didn't want others' eyes on her. She sat on the sofa, expecting him to take a seat opposite, yet he came and sat beside her.

It wasn't invasive; there was distance but that he *chose* to come

and sit by her side had her smile at him.

Their drinks were brought over and he watched as she took a sip and her eyes widened. She ran the tip of a pink tongue over her lips and then put her glass down.

‘That tastes amazing,’ Leila said. ‘I can still feel it burning even though it tastes freezing.’

James, who usually needed to know so little about his sexual conquests, suddenly wanted to know every last thing about her.

‘So this is your first night here?’

‘It is.’ Leila smiled. ‘I have tasted snow as I waited for my taxi at the airport.’

‘Why didn’t you call me,’ James said. ‘I’d have come and got you.’

It was a silly thing to say perhaps, but it made so much sense to them both that Leila smiled. She felt as if they had been waiting for the other all their lives, as if she might have walked out of the airport and straight to his arms.

He asked her where she was from and James saw that she hesitated before answering.

‘I am from Dubai,’ Leila lied. ‘I am here on business.’

‘What sort of business are you in?’

It was a natural question but again she hesitated before answering, and James watched as one slender hand moved and tugged at her ear. ‘I am a musician,’ Leila said. ‘I am here to see some performances.’

Liar, James wanted to say, for her cheeks dusted pink, though

it was the oddest attempt at a lie that he had ever heard.

He didn't care that she lied though.

She just didn't have to lie to him, that was all.

James glanced at her hand and noted that she did not wear a ring, then he saw her long slender fingers. Perhaps she was not lying, for they were so long and delicate that possibly she should be stroking the ebony now.

'You?' Leila asked. 'What is it that you do?'

'Not an awful lot,' James admitted. 'My father calls me Jiminy.' When she frowned he elaborated. 'Jiminy Cricket.' Still she frowned and James realised she probably didn't know the song that he was referring to. 'He's a happy fellow who doesn't work very much,' James explained. 'I work for about half an hour a day making a fortune playing the stock markets and then I spend the next twenty-three and a half hours doing my level best to blow it.'

'And so what brings you here tonight?' Leila asked, taking another sip of her drink.

'I'm checking out the competition,' James said. 'I'm James Chatsfield...' He saw her nonplussed look. 'The Chatsfield hotels...' James further explained. His brother Spencer was determined to acquire The Harrington and had thought he had had the sale in the bag, but Isabelle Harrington, who was newly in charge, had unexpectedly knocked back the offer and things were starting to get extremely messy.

James was weary of his family; he wanted as far away from

them as possible. Yet, idly curious, he had decided to drop in to The Harrington unannounced.

‘My elder brother Spencer wants to buy this hotel. I decided to come and see for myself what all the fuss is about. I’m very glad now that I did.’

‘I’m very glad that you did too,’ Leila said.

He took one of her hands, the one nearest to the table, and Leila looked down as his fingers stroked hers. The contact was sublime—subtle but present, his fingers laced into hers—and she watched as their hands intertwined and their palms pressed together.

‘I want to sip my drink,’ Leila said, ‘but I don’t want to let go of your hand.’

‘Then don’t.’ It was James who reached for her drink and brought it to her lips and she took a sip of it and felt his eyes on her throat as she swallowed.

‘Actually, I do recognise the name,’ Leila said, and her words brought his eyes back to hers. ‘I think I read about your hotel on the plane.’

‘It’s not my hotel,’ James said. ‘I want nothing to do with the lot of them.’

‘You have a lot of hotels?’

‘I meant the family.’ James smiled at the slight miscommunication. ‘But yes, there are a lot of hotels. We have a very nice hotel in Dubai, but I haven’t actually been there, though I might have to rectify that.’ He gave her a flash of that

depraved smile and then checked himself, for already, without even so much as a kiss, he was suggesting that they might be seeing each other again. For James, that was a no-no and so he quickly rectified things. ‘Though perhaps not—Manu, the PR woman, has warned me my ways might not be welcome. Things are rather more strict there apparently...’

‘Do you misbehave, James?’ Leila asked, and he smiled at her curious question.

‘That’s a very nice way of putting it, but yes, I guess I do tend to misbehave.’ She looked down to where his hand caressed hers and she was the bravest she had ever been—he made her so.

‘Misbehave with me,’ Leila whispered, terrified he might say no.

‘God, yes.’

He released her hand although she wished he would not. She was not starved from his contact for long though, for he picked up a napkin and dipped it in some water. Leila frowned as his wrapped finger came towards her face, but she did not flinch and she did not move back.

‘What are you doing?’ Leila asked.

‘Getting rid of the unnecessary,’ James said. He usually preferred made-up women—he liked the mask, he liked the stranger—but he did not want that from Leila. He wanted her stripped, he wanted her naked, and that started now.

She liked the gentle pressure of his finger on her lips. She liked the way his eyes narrowed as he concentrated on removing

the lipstick from her mouth.

And concentrate he did.

‘Now, you’re perfect,’ James said. ‘Almost.’

‘Almost?’

He went in his pocket and pulled out what Leila thought was another lipstick. ‘What sort of man carries lipstick?’ Leila asked, and he simply smiled as he got to work on her very full mouth.

‘It’s lip balm,’ James corrected. ‘If you ski as much as I do, you tend to carry it.’

She liked the waxy feel of it as he applied it. She ran her tongue over her lips and there was a slight taste of vanilla, but still she could not imagine her father or Zayn carrying such a thing.

For all her naivety Leila had not been completely shielded from men. She thought of Zayn’s friends of yesteryear. Cocky playboys who used women, yet she did not feel used tonight. There was something else to James—something that made her smile, made her feel warm, made her feel very beautiful indeed, and that was something she had never felt before.

‘You are like no one I have ever known,’ Leila said.

‘Snap.’

‘Snap?’ Leila checked, because even though her English was excellent she didn’t know what that word meant.

‘It means that I feel the same about you,’ James said, and then he checked himself, because he didn’t get involved in any one woman. He was saying things to Leila that he didn’t usually say and he didn’t want to give her mixed messages.

Tomorrow he would be gone.

‘For now,’ he amended.

‘For now?’

‘I’m very, very bad at relationships,’ James said. ‘I tend not to do them.’

‘Tend?’ Leila checked, for she did not understand that word also, but James took it that she wanted him to elaborate.

‘I’ve had one serious relationship and she chose to go to the press and share every last thing that I’d told her in confidence as well as a lot of salacious details. What about you?’ James asked. ‘Have you ever been seriously involved with anyone?’

‘Never,’ Leila said.

She told the truth; James just never thought that she might mean literally.

More drinks were on the table, but it was not the liquor that made her giddy and laugh. It was this man who asked questions, who gave of himself, who laughed deeply and who simply could not release her hands save to feed her her drink.

‘Do you want dinner?’ James asked, but she shook her head for there was a different sort of hunger in Leila tonight and she told him that.

‘I want to know about you.’

He revealed too much perhaps, but the gold of her eyes mesmerised and, even as he warned himself not to disclose it, James found himself telling Leila, warning her even, that he was a cad, a playboy, a rake. How he lived life his way, and it seemed

to be working for he had the Midas touch when it came to the stock markets. How he partied at night, how he threw himself off mountains, how nothing and no one could tame him and how he chose not to impress. 'I tried behaving and I gave it up at the age of eighteen,' James said, and revealed how he had strived for perfection, but that nothing he had ever done had been good enough for his father.

He did not get sympathy from Leila.

'At least you were noticed,' Leila said. 'I was ignored.'

'How could anyone ignore you?' James asked. 'I don't believe it could be possible to ignore you.'

'It's true,' Leila said. 'My mother...' She hesitated. That her mother had never loved her would surely make her unlovable to him. That she had never, ever been wanted was her deepest, darkest shame and so she bent history a little. 'Since Jasmine, my sister, died, my mother has not been able to look at me,' Leila said. 'And I have grown tired of waiting and so now I do as I wish. I live as I want to.'

'They don't approve of that?'

'Oh, no, they don't approve,' Leila answered,

They never had.

'To two black sheep,' James said, and raised another glass.

They were drinking shots now, saluting their failures to measure up in their parents' eyes. Knees were touching, eyes caressing and, oh, it was the very best night of her life.

'So what,' Leila asked, for she could not ever get tired of

getting to know this man, 'is your ambition? What do you aim for when everything you touch turns to gold? When you party all the time, when the world is at your feet, what do you strive for? What is it you want that you have never had?'

'You,' James said, and his mouth neared hers, but she knew that wasn't the full answer and Leila moved back her head.

'Tell me.'

'You wouldn't understand my answer,' James said.

'I might,' Leila said, 'or I might not, but either way I would love to hear it.'

She just might understand, James thought, and so he told her his truth. 'I want to know what it is to hit rock bottom,' James admitted, because maybe then he might feel...something.

'I already have,' Leila answered. Her life as she knew it was gone. Her family would disown her as surely as the sun would rise in the morning. Everything had sunk around her, but so long as she was here with James it simply did not matter as to the surroundings, for the night was beautiful. She looked to the man who had saved her from hell and his mouth was approaching hers. 'But I'm on my way up now,' Leila said.

Leila had never been kissed, she had really never even imagined being kissed, and yet now here it was—his mouth was soft and warm on hers. She did not move her lips to his at first, just relished the intimate weight, and when she saw that his eyes had closed, so, too, did hers.

And then her lips started to move and she was kissing him

back softly, sliding her mouth over his. His hand captured her cheek and the other moved to her waist. She wanted to get closer to him, wanted to climb onto his lap; she wanted to be held in his arms.

Her lips parted, for no reason other than she wanted more of something she had never known, and James halted their kiss. Usually he did not care as to surroundings or discretion but she deserved better than his hand moving up her thigh, as it wanted to.

‘Dance,’ James said, his mouth just an inch from hers, aching in both of their groins.

‘I don’t want to dance,’ Leila said, her eyes opening. ‘I want to keep kissing.’

‘Dance,’ James said, for his body yearned for more contact, and so he stood, and offered her his hand.

‘I’ve never danced,’ Leila admitted as they headed to the dance floor.

‘I thought you said that you loved music.’

‘I love to play it,’ she admitted as he took her in her arms. ‘I love to hear it...’

Now she got to feel it.

The slow sensual beat of the music was matched by the slow sensual caress of his body moving with hers. His face was in her hair and his arms loosely held her. His fingers stroked her bare arms and the shiver that ran through Leila had nothing to do with the temperature, for she had never been more warm.

‘You smell amazing,’ James said to her hair, and he pulled her in just a little closer, but enough that she felt his hardness. The nudge of his erection on her stomach had her giddy, had her damp, had her mouth move to find his.

‘Not here,’ James said, denying her another kiss, and he offered what he hoped she would not want. ‘We can go to a bar I know, if you think here is a bit staid...’

Staid?

She had never been wilder in her life. She was moving to music, pressed to a man whose body made hers ache with suspense.

‘Or,’ James carefully suggested, ‘we could go back to The Chatsfield...’ he offered, for it was where he usually took women. Never back to his penthouse, which made things too personal. But, James decided, if she declined his offer, he might even suggest they go there, so desperate was he to have her, but her response most pleasantly surprised him.

‘Can we go to my suite?’ Leila asked, for she was looking at his mouth, feeling his warmth, and she craved for it to be just the two of them, to finally be alone with him.

Hearing her ask to retire to her suite now had him wonder if an angel had just fallen from heaven.

‘We can,’ James said.

‘One more dance though,’ Leila said, for she did not want to leave his arms for even a moment.

It was music she had never heard before but it was etched to

her heart now, for with each sway, with each breath, he brought her to somewhere she did not know existed. Her breasts ached, her thighs at the top ached too, and at her very centre she needed more of him. Her mouth yearned for his and his fingers, now gently exploring her spine through her dress, made her feel naked and produced a sudden tension in her.

‘I need your kiss,’ Leila said, and James looked right back at her.

There was no language barrier to her words; she spoke the truth.

‘Now,’ Leila said, and her voice was a touch urgent.

‘Don’t you want to dance some more?’ James said, for she was so close he could feel it building in her and so he whispered into the shell of her ear. ‘A musician that’s never danced,’ James murmured. ‘That must have taken some restraint.’

She was glad, so glad, he was holding her, for without him she would simply sink to her knees. She answered him with a truth that had him lead her from the dance floor.

‘I have no restraint tonight.’

CHAPTER THREE

THANK GOD THEY WERE alone in the elevator, for they kissed the way a couple should only kiss when alone.

Their mouths belonged to each other, his hands pressed at her buttocks and he ground his pelvis into her. The ache he procured deepened, his erection something she needed to feel, yet even with it pressed hard into her groin it was not enough.

They made it halfway along the corridor to her suite, then he kissed her up against the wall. Her hands pressed his head into hers and like conjoined crabs they walked sideways kissing to her door.

‘Where’s...?’ James said to her mouth, for he remembered that she did not have a bag with her and they needed the swipe card to her door so badly.

‘In my bra,’ Leila mumbled, and his hand slid to the wrong breast and it lingered, stroking her to the edge of orgasm, then moving over to the other. He retrieved the warm card and opened the door and barely registered their surrounds as he shrugged off his jacket. He simply had eyes only for her.

Leila’s hands went to her back to undo the zip of her dress and, seeing her breasts jut and her struggle to be naked for him, when first he had wanted Leila up against the wall and inside her this moment, James turned her around instead.

‘*I’m undressing you,*’ James said with command, for it could very easily be over in a moment, yet he wanted to take his time.

Leila’s maid usually undressed her.

But not like this.

He placed her palms to the wall and she rested her head on it. With every inch the zip lowered down her spine, her skin was caressed by his tongue. Down, slowly down with the zipper, until, on his knees, he kissed the small of her back and she shivered as his jaw scratched her soft skin and his hand moved up between her legs. Her tiny panties were damp and Leila let out a moan

as his fingers slid inside and she gasped as he located a spot that she had never even known existed.

‘How do you know...?’ she begged as he continued to bring her to life with his touch. Her thighs were like water and his mouth was leaving her back now, his hold on her easing as he shifted position.

‘Don’t stop,’ Leila begged, but he stood and removed her palms from the wall and turned her around.

‘We’re not stopping,’ James said, for there were still six hours left of their one night. He discarded her dress and Leila felt free. Free to stand in her underwear and heels and watch him admire her.

His thumb stroked the red velvet of her bra and she watched her already erect nipples grow under his touch, then bit on her lip as his mouth suckled her through the fabric.

‘Please...’ Leila begged. It was the nicest thing she had ever experienced, yet it was still not enough.

‘Slow down,’ James said, words he rarely did.

Were it not Leila he’d have had her by now, would be deep inside her, taking her up against the wall. The temptation to do so was still there, still strong...

Yes, it was there but instead he was teasing out a dark nipple, caressing it with his mouth, and the moans from Leila were worth his rare restraint. The scent of her hair was the same as her skin—rare, exotic and oiled—and so he lingered.

She was shocked that a man might suck from her breast, but

it was so sublime that she pleaded for more when he stopped.

‘James...’ His mouth left her breast and it left it cold, swollen and aching, yet his mouth did not leave her skin. Standing she endured his deep kiss down her stomach. Yes, endure, Leila thought as she stood there almost weeping. It felt like hunger, it felt like sin, it felt delicious what his kiss could do.

‘This isn’t sex...’ Leila whimpered as he slid down her panties and he probed her with his tongue. This wasn’t like the pictures in the palace library that she had peeked at a few times and had made her forbidden place feel warm.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ James asked, his mouth hovering over her clitoris, his breath warm and tempting.

Leila answered him with her hand, pressing his head back into her, and for a moment she stared down. One breast was exposed, the other covered by fabric made wet by his mouth. Her stomach was not familiar, for beneath it was his hair, and the noise of his intimate explorations had her moaning.

‘James...’ She wanted him to stop, yet she did not. His mouth was soft, yet she had never felt anything more intense. Her thighs were shaking; his hand clamped her buttocks so there was no escape from his relentless tongue and the soft sucking noises he made. When he moaned into her mound, everything gathered, every nerve pointed and shot to her centre. Leila thought she would topple, but instead the wall supported her back and his arms pressed her groin to his face as she came shockingly, wickedly, deliciously.

The warning that he was close to coming himself had him pull back and look up at her as she slowly opened her eyes and met his.

‘My turn now,’ Leila said, and he smiled at her back-to-front way of thinking. ‘I want to see you.’

His shirt had too many buttons, Leila decided, for she was very bad at undoing buttons when the maids usually did it for her. She tried to kiss his chest as he had her back, but she grew impatient and tore the bottom of his shirt open instead. ‘You are beautiful,’ Leila said, for he was—his pale skin was toned and his nipples were the same dark red of his mouth and deserved tasting. So, too, did his stomach; the snake of hair there as she undid his belt was rough to her mouth. She could feel his erection straining beneath the fabric against her cheek and for a moment she kissed him through it, then she pushed up from her knees to stand.

Nothing scared her; he only made her curious. The way his cock sprang to greet her as she freed it, the way he moaned as she ran her fingers along its length. She pressed her free hand into his mouth and he suckled on her fingers as he stepped out of trousers and then she stopped touching him, for Leila did not like his socks.

‘Take them off,’ Leila instructed, and it was said with such authority and command James half expected her to produce a whip.

‘Do you like giving orders, Leila?’ James asked, removing the offending garments.

‘It comes very naturally to me.’ Leila nodded.

‘Not tonight it doesn’t,’ James said. ‘Take off your bra.’

It was half off already but she did not comply. ‘Remove it for me.’

They stood in a delicious stand-off and with a wry smile he tugged it around and removed the clasp and dropped it to the floor.

‘Get on the bed,’ James said.

She could not breathe, no air would go in and no air would come out. She liked the command of his voice and even though he was stern it did not feel like being told off.

‘Get on the bed, Leila...’ James said. ‘It can be your turn tomorrow.’

What the hell was he talking about tomorrow for? James wondered. He picked up his jacket and took out some condoms as the beguiling beauty finally complied and got on the bed. Naked, Leila lay there; every cell in her body thrummed in anticipation and she told him how she felt. ‘I want to writhe beneath you...’ Then she stopped as she saw he was putting a sheath on. She knew a little and she also knew that she did not like that ugly pink thing.

‘Take it off,’ Leila said. ‘I’m on the pill.’

James stood there; he was the most careful of careful but he’d long since lost his head tonight. When he did not obey her instruction, when he stood by the bed, Leila removed it for him and lowered her head and licked him. ‘I will take away the taste

of plastic...’

She wanted back to the musky scent of him and she licked along his length. Leila licked her tongue around the shaft, working her way to his head, tasting and swallowing the thin stream that came from the delicious tip with a mounting pleasure. She felt his hand on her head as he guided her to take it fully in, but she was enjoying simply licking him. Then suddenly she toppled as James pushed her back onto the bed and as he came over her she felt his impatience and power. His mouth crushed hers and as his thigh parted hers, Leila opened her legs readily. The weight of him on top of her was pure pleasure and the harshness of his kiss and the roughness of his jaw took her higher. The swollen feel of him there at her entrance served as poor warning for the absolute pain as he seared in, tearing her, parting her in one deft thrust, and she arched into him and let out a scream.

What the...? James stilled. He’d never had a virgin before, but there was no mistaking he was having one now. She was incredibly tight around him and he’d taken her with such force that he’d been unable to halt. ‘I hurt you...’

‘That was not hurt,’ Leila whispered. Hurt was a world without him, hurt was a lifetime of being ignored. She placed her hand over his buttock and did not like that she was without his kiss and her mouth sought his.

‘You should have told me...’ James said.

‘I did,’ Leila said. ‘I told you I had never...’

He'd run out of questions; all he could feel was her wrapped tight around him and the slight pressure of her hand that told him to go on. He moved back a little and then in again, and it must have hurt her because James could see tears in her eyes and her teeth gritting. He moved up on one elbow and put an arm beneath her head to have her mouth more accessible to him. He kissed her as he had never kissed another and Leila's heart knew it. He kissed away the pain as he moved just a little inside her. Not the pain down below, for there was bliss coming back there now. His lips made up for every slight, for every cruel word that had been said, and he was better than music, for Leila knew then that love existed.

His hesitation diminished as her body started to move to his. He moved his arm so her head dropped back to the mattress and her hips started to lift. Her moans of pleasure, Leila realised, drove him on. So, too, did the lift of her groin. Faster and harder he moved as her body willed his to and then when he could surely not fill her anymore, he swelled further.

And it was then she found it.

The place she had always been seeking. It was navy and silver and she entered that place with James.

He saw it, too, as he shot into her.

It was all he could see as she sobbed out his name and her tight space clenched around him over and over as he filled her.

She loved the collapse of him on top of her and the twitch of both of them after, sated but still sensitive, as they came back to

the world together.

He had a million questions but there was not one he could think of now because nothing really mattered as they kissed and then lay there.

‘Go to sleep,’ James said, because he could feel her soft and exhausted, and her eyelashes were blinking on his chest as she fought to keep her eyes open.

Instead she lay there pretending to be asleep until he was.

She did not want to cry out, even though Leila was quite sure that she would not tonight for she had never felt such peace in her life. It wasn’t just the sex; it was the feel of his arm around her and the rise of his chest as he breathed beneath her cheek.

It was the bliss of finally being held in another’s arms; it was contact. And now she had it she would stay awake forever if she had to, just to revel in this.

And stay awake Leila did till morning. James stirred and her face turned to his chest and she tasted again the salty skin. Her hand slid down and she closed her fingers around the solid length that had driven her to new places in the night, felt again its power and her kiss to his chest deepened.

James’s hand came over hers for a moment, guiding her slow movement, giving in to the sensations.

James didn’t, as a rule, like morning sex.

It was too intimate; it promised too much and it was promising it now.

He wanted to turn, wanted to lift her chin and kiss her; he

wanted his hand that was stroking her buttocks to slip between her legs and part her and take her again.

He was that close to doing that, but last night's many questions were making themselves known now, and he told Leila that he was going to take a shower.

The mirror told the tale.

His chest was bruised by her mouth and his hangover was starting to catch up with him. One cocktail too many, James thought as he stepped into the shower. That, he was used to, but as James looked down and saw the smear of blood at the top of his thighs, it wasn't his hangover that was troubling him—one virgin was one virgin too many for him.

That, he *wasn't* used to.

He reached for soap and looked around; he liked the clues of a woman's bathroom. He expected exotic fragrances, for her hair had smelled divine, but it was just the exclusive toiletries synonymous with The Harrington.

Out of the shower he wrapped his hips in a towel and opened a hotel toothbrush and that niggle that something didn't sit right started to multiply.

No woman, *no* woman he had ever been with, possessed so little. There was a hairbrush and a small toiletry bag with a lipstick and, *thank God*, James thought, there was a packet of contraceptive pills.

His businesswoman from Dubai sure travelled light.

Leila watched as he came out of the shower. She could see

the tense set of his unshaven jaw as he walked towards the large fitted wardrobe.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Just getting a robe.’

James pulled one from the hangers but he wasn't there for a robe; instead he had confirmed his suspicions, for there were no clothes, no shoes, no bags.

Nothing.

Instead of putting on the robe he dried himself and looked over to the mystery woman who lay in bed.

Was she a journalist? James wondered. They were all over him at the moment. God knows he'd told her far too much last night.

Had Isabelle hired her as some sort of plant when she'd heard that James was at the hotel? That would make more sense because Isabelle would do anything to discredit the Chatsfield name.

‘Do you want to go down for breakfast?’ James said.

‘We could have it here,’ Leila answered, for she knew she could not put on last night's dress and shoes.

‘Why don't we go somewhere,’ James pushed, and Leila stared back. Her eyes felt gritty from a lack of sleep, and as she looked at James she started to realise that whatever they had found last night had gone.

‘Come on,’ James said, ‘let's go down for breakfast.’ He wanted her to tell him that her luggage had been delayed, he wanted her to tell him her reasons, yet Leila did not.

‘Why are you getting dressed?’ Leila asked.

‘I’ve got a meeting at nine,’ James said.

It was just after six.

He was actually conflicted.

For the most part he did not want to leave, yet it wasn’t just getting involved with her, or even her innocence, that unnerved him, but her deception.

He simply couldn’t leave it there though. It would seem for Leila he broke every rule.

‘Call me...’ James said, writing down his cell phone number and putting it by her bedside. ‘Give me your number...’

‘My number?’

‘Your cell phone.’

‘I don’t have one...’ Leila said, and then remembered she was supposed to be a businesswoman from Dubai and of course she would have a cell phone. ‘I mean, I don’t have it to hand...’

‘Of course you don’t,’ James said tartly, and then finished dressing and left.

No, angels did not fall from heaven.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE HAD BEEN worth the trouble he now found himself in.

The stars that James saw, as his head was slammed against a wall, were not dissimilar to the ones he had glimpsed that night all those weeks ago with Leila.

For a second the world was a deep navy, with glimpses of silver.

It consisted of nothing more than that.

James closed eyes and took in the simple scenery and would rather have liked to stay there but an angry voice was demanding his return.

A night, such as the one he and Leila had shared, could not come without consequence, James thought, and now here it was.

That's right, James remembered as he opened his eyes to hostility, he was in an alley behind The Chatsfield and about to be beaten to within an inch of his life by the Royal Prince Zayn Al-Ahmar of Surhaadi for deflowering his sister.

He'd known that Leila was lying from the very start.

He understood why a little better now.

No wonder she had needed to escape, James thought, for Zayn spoke of possession and dishonouring not just Leila but the royal family and his people.

'That's a very heavy burden to place on one woman's body,' James responded to Zayn's furious rant, and got a hand around his throat as a reward for his words, but it didn't stop him speaking. 'I was not aware that the integrity of the nation rested upon your sister's maidenhead.'

'You have no place to comment on integrity,' Zayn said, and James felt the grip tighten around his throat. 'You are a man in possession of none.'

Zayn was wrong. James had had integrity around Leila—he simply could not discard her. After he had left her that morning he'd barely made it till nine before he'd caved and sent flowers,

asking her to call him.

He'd sent more flowers the next day and the next and yet Leila still hadn't responded to him. He'd caved again and called The Harrington, but that they were so discreet combined with the fact he didn't even know her surname had meant that they would neither confirm nor deny that she was staying there.

He found himself at her door once but had attempted to let go of the madness and turned around.

In the end James had taken himself off to France for a spot of skiing, determined to screw his way out of it, but all roads led to Leila in the erection stakes. He'd danced, he'd kissed, he'd been his flirtatious, outrageous best, but nothing with another produced even a stirring. Rather than destroy his formidable reputation with a no-show in *that*

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