

MARGUERITE KAYE

The *Scarlot*  
and the  
SHEIKH

MILLS & BOON  
HISTORICAL

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Marguerite Kaye

**The Harlot And The Sheikh**

«HarperCollins»

## **Kaye M.**

The Harlot And The Sheikh / M. Kaye — «HarperCollins»,  
— (Mills & Boon Historical)

A defiant woman...in a desert king's world! Inheriting a broken kingdom, Prince Rafiq made a vow – to restore its pride by winning a prestigious horse race. To ensure success he hires an English expert. But even notoriously controlled Rafiq is shocked when his new employee is introduced...as Miss Stephanie Darvill! Stephanie is determined to leave her shameful past and broken dreams behind – she will prove to Rafiq she deserves his trust! But this hard-hearted desert sheikh calls to Stephanie in the most primal of ways...dare she give in to her wildest desires?

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A defiant woman...in a desert king's world!

After inheriting a broken kingdom, Prince Rafiq made a vow—to restore its pride by winning a prestigious horse race. To ensure success, he hires an English expert. But even notoriously controlled Rafiq is shocked when his new employee is introduced...as Miss Stephanie Darvill!

Stephanie is determined to leave her shameful past and broken dreams behind—she will prove to Rafiq she deserves his trust! But this hard-hearted desert sheikh calls to Stephanie in the most primal of ways... Dare she give in to her wildest desires?

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#### [Author Note](#)

Stephanie is the third English heroine in this series to find herself in deepest Arabia at the start of the nineteenth century. Preposterous, right? Maybe not as fanciful as you might think. Lady Hester Stanhope, who inspired my first desert book, *Innocent in the Sheikh's Harem*, lived in Arabia from 1815. The last of Lady Jane Digby's four husbands was a sheikh. She settled permanently in Arabia in 1853. Lady Anne Blunt, a breeder of Arabian horses and part inspiration for Stephanie, met with Lady Jane Digby in Damascus in 1877. And Gertrude Bell traveled to the Arabian desert in the early twentieth century and was instrumental in the foundation of Iraq. So my intrepid heroines do have a sound foundation in historical reality.

I have, however, chosen to avoid some of the more contentious aspects of nineteenth-century Arabia. My fantasy Arabia is free of the controversies of religion, imperialism and world politics, which affected it then and, unfortunately, continue to do so to this day. This series is quite a departure for me, but it's been creatively liberating. I hope you enjoy my fantasy kingdom as much as I enjoyed dreaming it up.

I'll end with a small confession. Before I started this book, I knew absolutely nothing about horses. I've ridden two. A donkey on the beach on the Isle of Bute, Scotland, and a carousel horse

in Glasgow. I fell off both times. So please forgive any inaccuracies relating to equine matters; they are entirely my own doing.

The Harlot and the Sheikh  
Marguerite Kaye



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

MARGUERITE KAYE writes hot historical romances from her home in cold and usually rainy Scotland. Featuring Regency rakes, Highlanders and sheikhs in her stories, she has published almost thirty books and novellas. When she's not writing, she enjoys walking, cycling (but only on the level), gardening (but only what she can eat) and cooking. She also likes to knit and occasionally drink martinis (though not at the same time). Find out more on her website, [margueritekaye.com](http://margueritekaye.com).

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[Chapter One](#)

Kingdom of Bharym, Arabia—June 1815

Dawn was gently breaking as Rafiq al-Antarah, Prince of Bharym, trudged wearily out of his stables after another tense all-night vigil. The outcome had been tragically predictable: the loss of another of his prized Arabian thoroughbreds to this mysterious new sickness. Inas, on this occasion, a beautiful chestnut mare, her suffering brought mercifully to an end when it had become obvious that there could only be one outcome. Eight of his priceless breeding stock lost in just six months, and the only mare to have contracted and survived the seemingly random infection left utterly debilitated. Would there be no end to this torment?

Leaning against the wooden picket fence which bordered the empty paddock, Rafiq surrendered momentarily to the fomenting mixture of grief, rage and frustration which consumed him. It was enough to bring the strongest of men to their knees, enough to make even the most stoic weep. But a prince could not countenance displaying human weakness. Instead, he clenched his fists, threw back his head and roared impotently at the fading stars. His beautiful animals were innocent victims, punished for his crime. He was certain of it. In this darkest hour which was neither night nor morning, when he felt himself the only man alive in this vast desert region, he had no doubt at all. The fates

had visited this plague upon him in retribution, making a mockery of the public pledge he had made to his people, the private vow he had made to himself. Reparation, in the form of restored national pride and a salved personal conscience, were both in danger of slipping from his grasp.

He had to find a cure. If nature continued to wreak her havoc unrestrained, it would destroy everything he had worked so tirelessly to achieve. He and Jasim had come to recognise the tell-tale symptoms, but even his illustrious Master of the Horse, whose claim to be the foremost trainer of Arabians in all of the East was undisputed, even he had been powerless.

Turning his back on the paddock, Rafiq rubbed his eyes, which were gritty with exhaustion. When he had inherited the kingdom from his father, the stable complex had been quite derelict, Bharym's legendary Arabian horses, whose blood lines could be traced back through ancient scrolls and word of mouth to the purest of antecedents, long gone, lost in the course of one fateful day. A day that destroyed his father personally and sullied the honour of the entire al-Antarah royal family. A day that his people believed to be the blackest in their kingdom's long and proud history. A day of humiliation that dealt a fatal blow to their sense of national pride, and his own. The day that the Sabr was lost.

Rafiq had been sixteen, on the cusp of manhood, as he stood amidst the smoking wooden embers that were all that remained of Bharym's stud farm. He had sworn then that when he eventually came to power, he would make good the loss. For six more years, he had been forced to witness his father's slow but terminal decline, and the resultant decline of his kingdom's fortunes.

Eight years ago, just days after his twenty-second birthday, he had inherited the throne and a kingdom that seemed to have lost its way and its sense of identity. He had promised then to make Bharym a better place, a richer place, a kingdom fit for the new century, but his changes, improvements, renovations, were met with apathy. Nothing mattered save the restoration of the Sabr, the tangible symbol of Bharym's pride and honour. Until the Sabr was won, his people would not fully embrace the bright future he wished for them. Until the Sabr was won, it seemed that Bharym had no future worthy of mention.

And so, five years ago, he made a solemn vow to deliver the one thing his people longed for above all else. He had been certain that his honourable intentions more than compensated for the cold bargain he had struck in order to deliver on that promise. Only later, when the true, tragic price had become clear had Rafiq's resolve faltered. To continue on a path that had extracted such a terrible cost went against every tortured instinct in his being. But as darkness segued into a grey, gloomy morning on that tragic day, he knew he had no choice but to carry on. The return of the Sabr was not irrelevant in the face of such loss, it was doubly important. To give up would make the tragedy utterly futile.

A soft whinny carried on the breeze through an open window. Above him, the sky was turning from grey to the milky-white shade which heralded sunrise and a new day. Rafiq drew himself upright. He would not concede defeat now, or ever. He was Prince of Bharym, ruler of all he surveyed, one of the most powerful men in Arabia, and not yet entirely helpless. There was still time to hear word from the renowned English expert to whom he had turned in desperation—more in hope than expectation, if truth be told. Perhaps even now Richard Darvill was on his way, the royal travel warrant which Rafiq had enclosed with his letter helping to speed him towards Arabia. Even Jasim, fiercely resistant to any outside interference in what he considered his personal fiefdom, grudgingly conceded the English horse doctor's reputation was unimpeachable, his fame well earned.

It was reputed the man could work miracles, bring horses back almost from the dead. Rafiq certainly needed nothing short of a miracle now. These stables, the thoroughbred racehorses within, had to be protected at all costs. He owed it to his people to be the Prince they believed him to be. He owed it to his father's memory to repair his family's reputation. Most importantly of all, Rafiq owed it to himself to honour the debt he had incurred. He had carried the burden of his guilt for so long, he would not permit the fates to extend his punishment any longer. His atonement would be made.

He could not alter the past but he would ensure something positive emerged from the darkest chapter in his life. It could never be enough, but it was all he could do.

Two weeks later

The end of Stephanie's long journey was finally in sight. The dhow in which she had sailed the length of the Red Sea from Egypt docked at the closest port to her landlocked destination just as dawn was breaking. On the quayside, a tall, austere-looking man scrutinised her papers before beckoning her to follow him.

A small train of camels awaited them at the end of the quay. Stephanie's cumbersome baggage was secured on the accompanying mules while she was assisted into the saddle of a camel with brusque efficiency. The official then took the reins, indicating by means of hand gestures that he would lead her mount. His inscrutable expression faltered only when she spoke to him in his own tongue, informing him that she understood him perfectly well and was grateful for his assistance. But if Stephanie imagined that her command of his language would encourage the man's demeanour to soften, she was mistaken. The official responded to her overture with a formal bow before turning his attention back to the four men who accompanied them. His short, sharp instructions were immediately and efficiently obeyed. Within half an hour of setting foot on land, Stephanie was once again aboard a ship. Only this time, it was a ship of the desert.

They traversed the bustling port, a chaotic melee of people, camels, mules and goats. Wagons piled high with goods fought for space on the stone jetties. A cacophony of bleating and braying and shouting filled the air, the clatter of hooves and wheels on the rough-hewn roads competing with the cries of the drivers and riders, the sailors and dock hands, and the excited knots of children who followed anything and everything, for no other reason, it seemed to Stephanie, than for the simple joy of adding to the noise and the crush.

As they left the coast the sea breeze quickly died and the briny air gave way to a burning heat. The sun rose and the wide road which led them inland narrowed to a rocky track which opened up on to an expanse of true desert, as the air around her grew hotter and drier. Her face protected from the worst of it by her wide-brimmed hat, Stephanie nevertheless began to feel as if she were sitting inside a huge kiln. Occasional gusts of wind blasted red-hot sand on to her face like the fiery breath of a lion. The light cotton jacket and blouse she wore felt like they were made of thick pelts of bearskin. Perspiration trickled down her spine, pooling in the small of her back where her wide belt cinched her waist. Her undergarments and stockings clung unpleasantly to her damp skin. Her eyes, her mouth and her nose were gritty with sand and dust. Inside her long riding boots, her feet throbbed.

\* \* \*

Some time around noon, when the sun had reached its zenith, her guide informed her that they had crossed the border into the kingdom of Bharym. Here, they made the latest in a series of stops for refreshments, just at the point where she thought she might die of thirst. She, who had refused to wilt under the blazing heat of the Spanish sub in the height of summer, was struggling not to drink the entire contents of her goatskin water flask down in one gulp. This furnace-like heat, this desert terrain, should not be alien to her. It was in her blood, for goodness sake, she had reminded herself at the second stop, trying in vain to mimic the measured sips taken by her escorts. But the heat in Alexandria and Cairo had not prepared her for this. She shook her flask, aghast to find it almost empty. When the silent but obviously observant official handed her another, she was too grateful to be embarrassed.

\* \* \*

As the day wore on and the rolling gait of the camel took its toll on her stomach and her head, Stephanie ceased to care what he thought of her. All she wanted was for the journey to be over, for then she could clamber down from this animated fairground ride and out of the blazing sun. Yet on they travelled.

Finally, the imposing walls of a city reared up, nestled snugly in the foothills of a range of flat-topped mountains. Constructed of red stone decorated with paler swirls which reminded Stephanie of an elaborate cake, and surmounted by wide ornate battlements, the parapets were triangular in shape rather than the more traditional rectangular design. Like ravening teeth, she thought with a shudder.

The city gate was an enormous, soaring stone arch with a fortress-like tower set on either side, like two impassive sentries. Though every other camel and mule and cart on the road passed through it and into the city, Stephanie's caravan continued onward, following the contour of the city walls before beginning to climb the wide, clearly marked route which led upwards, where her final destination came into view.

The edifice which could only be the royal palace stood on the plateau of a hill overlooking the city below, enclosed entirely behind a set of soaring square walls. Tiny rectangular windows were inset at regular intervals on the lower level and seemed to monitor her approach, making Stephanie feel distinctly uncomfortable. The excitement which had gripped her since this undertaking had first been proposed gave way to acute apprehension. She was not expected here. Would she be welcome? Behind those shadowed windows, many pairs of eyes might be watching her arrival. Her presence must inevitably be giving rise to speculation.

The shame which had been her constant companion for the last year crept stealthily up on her. She caught herself as, instinctively, she bowed her head. She had travelled halfway across the world in order to leave it behind. Here in far-flung Arabia, whatever else might become of her, she would not be publicly branded a scarlet woman, a harlot.

Stephanie sat up straight in the saddle and turned her attention back to the present. Much larger arched windows were set higher into the walls of the palace, which replicated the design of the city walls. A decorative band was cut into both the walls and battlements, formed from what looked like dazzlingly white stone. Alabaster? The fang-like battlements took on an air of menace as she drew nearer, the many hooves of the caravan resounding over the piazza, where the marble floor was veined with something that glimmered like gold, but couldn't possibly be. Well travelled as she was, she had seen nothing to compare with this palace. It was intimidating, stark, yet utterly exotic and magically beautiful.

As the double doors swung open her stomach knotted with nerves, making her forget her travel weariness and discomfort. The Prince who lived behind these walls must be wealthy beyond her comprehension. Of the man himself, she knew only what she had gleaned from those who considered themselves experts in such matters, that the Prince bred and sold his thoroughbreds only to a privileged and chosen few, personally vetted by him. To own one of Bharym's Arabians was fast becoming an honour which no amount of gold could buy. A clever and cunning prince, she had thought cynically. Men, especially rich and privileged men, always wanted what they were told they could not have, be it horse or woman. Was she not living proof of that? And proof too, that once obtained, the object of desire quickly lost its lustre.

No more, Stephanie reminded herself sternly! There would be no more looking over her shoulder. She had had a year, time enough to come to terms with her shame and her guilt, to curse the lack of judgement which had led to her downfall. She had paid a high price for her sin, and inflicted a great deal of pain on the two people in the world she loved most. Now it was time to make amends by taking control of her own life, mitigating the effects of her foolishness by putting the past firmly behind her.

If, that was, the Prince accepted her proposition. Stephanie shuddered, reminding herself that the Prince knew nothing of her disgrace, and nor did he need to. The parting words of encouragement spoken to her rang in her ears, reinforcing her determination to live up to those expectations and by doing so repair some of the heartache she had caused. She was here now. It was up to her to grasp the opportunity and make of it what she could.

\* \* \*

In the central courtyard, Stephanie's escort handed her over to another intimidating official after a prolonged and, as far as she could discern, acrimonious dispute. There was much gesticulating, many pointed looks in her direction, and several minions sent scurrying. As this new official finally made her a formal bow, he eyed her from below beetled brows as if she might at any moment metamorphose into a brigand, or perhaps explode like a cannonball.

It was growing dark as she followed the man across the now deserted courtyard, the servants, the official who had escorted her here, the camels and mules bearing her luggage having all melted away in the gloom. A hazy half-moon swathed in thin cloud hung in the sky as she followed the official through a door at the far side.

Long narrow corridors with marble floors, tiled walls, their double-height ceilings supported with soaring arches, were lit at regular intervals by flickering sconces. Guards stood impassively at each door, their short-sleeved black abba cloaks worn over white dishdasha tunics doing nothing to disguise their muscular bulk. On their heads chequered red keffiyeh headdresses were held in place with an igal formed by a twisted black scarf. A lethal-looking scimitar hung from one side of a belt, from the other a khamjar, or dagger, the sheath emphasising its vicious curve. As the official passed, each guard solemnly bowed his head. As Stephanie trailed in his wake, she could sense their eyes boring into her back. By the time she arrived at a huge set of doors, she was out of breath and bristling with nervous anticipation.

Two particularly menacing guards manned this portal. Her escort announced her in a tone that clearly indicated his desire to wash his hands of her. 'Most Royal Highness, Prince Rafiq al-Antarah of Bharym, I present to you, the English Woman.'

A small but determined shove to the small of her back propelled Stephanie from the spot where she had temporarily taken root, forcing her to step into the magnificent chamber with its high vaulted ceiling. Quite overawed, she gazed around her at the dark marble pillars veined with gold. More gold was evident in the richly painted friezes and cornicing. The tiles on the high walls dazzled with multi-hued jewel colours. The stained glass reflected the light from the star-shaped chandeliers. Rich silk rugs covered the massive floor, and heavy embroidered brocade drapes fell in lustrous folds from the only piece of furniture in the room. A gilded throne. On which, imperiously, sat the Prince.

The doors behind her closed with a soft click. Glancing back over her shoulder, Stephanie discovered that she was quite alone with the royal personage. She had no idea what to do. Should she approach him? She took a tentative step. Curtsy? She hesitated. Or would he expect her to fall to the floor in obeisance? Completely unable to decide, she was still poised to perform any or all of these acts when the Prince rose from the throne, and she froze.

He was very tall. And extremely forbidding. And quite the most stunningly handsome man she had ever seen. Stephanie stared, round-eyed and open-mouthed. It was rude of her, and it was gauche, but she simply couldn't take her eyes off him.

Prince Rafiq was dressed from head to foot in white and gold. A white silk tunic high at the neck and tight at the sleeves, clung to a well-muscled body, long legs, a broad expanse of chest and wide shoulders. The heavy belt slung over his slim hips was studded with precious stones. The sheath of his scimitar was similarly jewelled. The thin cloak which covered his tunic seemed to be spun from silver and scattered with tiny diamonds. His keffiyeh, made of the same material, was held in place with what looked like rope woven from gold.

But it was the face framed by the headdress which held Stephanie's attention. She had encountered some handsome men in her time, but this man could have served as a model for perfection. Skin the colour of sand in shadow. Sculpted cheeks, a nose verging on the aquiline, offset by a mouth that managed to be at the same time both utterly sensual and completely unforgiving. Under his high-arched brows, his eyes were such a dark brown shade as to be almost black. She could not see his hair, but she was willing to bet that it was the colour of night. A fallen angel steeped in

sin. She had no idea where that fanciful notion came from, but sinful in every way exactly described this man.

And sinful in every way exactly described her thoughts. For goodness sake! She of all people should be wary of harbouring such dangerous notions. It was not the Prince's handsome looks which should be occupying her mind. Though his lids might be heavy, his gaze seemingly merely languidly contemplative, his expression almost one of dignified lassitude, Stephanie was not deceived. Here was a man so accustomed to power he needed no ostentatious demonstration of it. Prince Rafiq could be wearing tattered rags, and still she would have been in no doubt of his status. It was in his eyes. Not arrogance but a sense of assurance, of entitlement, a confidence that he was master of all he surveyed. And it was there in his stance too, in the set of his shoulders, the powerful lines of his physique. Belatedly garnering the power to move, Stephanie dropped into a deep curtsy.

'Arise.'

She did as he asked, acutely conscious of her dishevelled appearance, dusty clothes, and a face most likely liberally speckled with sand. Those hooded eyes travelled over her person, surveying her from head to foot with the dispassionate, inscrutable expression she had seen the Duke of Wellington adopt when inspecting his troops. It was a look which could reduce the staunchest, most impeccably turned out of officers to blithering idiots.

'Who are you, and why are you here?' Prince Rafiq asked, when the silence had begun to stretch her nerves to breaking point. He spoke in English, softly accented but perfectly pronounced.

Distracted by the unsettling effect he was having on her while at the same time acutely aware of the need to impress him, Stephanie clasped her hands behind her back and forced herself to meet his eyes, answering in his own language. 'I am here at your invitation, Your Highness.'

'I issued no invitation to you, madam.'

'Not as such, admittedly. Perhaps this will help clarify matters,' Stephanie said, handing him her papers.

The Prince glanced at the document briefly. 'This is a royal warrant, issued by myself to Richard Darvill, the renowned Veterinary Surgeon attached to the Seventh Hussars. How do you come to have it in your possession?'

Stephanie knitted her fingers more tightly together, as if doing so would stop her legs from trembling. 'I am Stephanie Darvill, his daughter and assistant. My father was most concerned to read of the malaise which has afflicted your stud farm but he could not, in all conscience, abandon his regiment, with Napoleon on the loose and our army expected to go into battle at any moment.' Which was the truth, though far from all of it.

'And so he saw fit to send his daughter in his place?'

The Prince sounded almost as incredulous as she had been, when Papa suggested this as the perfect solution to her predicament. The enormity of the trust her father had placed in her struck her afresh. She would not let him down. Not again.

'My father tutored me in the physiology of horses and the treatment of their various ailments,' Stephanie said more confidently. 'From a very early age, I have worked at his side, learning from him. In addition, for the past year I have been working at one of England's largest stud farms, located near Newmarket racecourse. So I do have relevant expertise, Your Highness, though I would never claim my father's vast experience.'

'Richard Darvill has the reputation of being the foremost equine expert in the world. His fame has spread even here, to Arabia.'

'It is a fame well earned,' Stephanie said proudly. 'In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that my father is something of a visionary. He has fought tirelessly over the years to bring the practice of veterinary medicine out of the dark ages, to persuade the army farriers to abandon their unnecessarily cruel and largely futile treatments. To introduce new methods, new ideas based on the principles of that radical surgeon, the great Mr John Hunter himself. My father—'

‘I am aware of your father’s achievements, Miss Darvill,’ the Prince interrupted her. ‘It is the reason I requested his help and not his daughter’s.’ He eyed her with another of those cool looks of his that were beginning to get under her skin just a tiny little bit. Though not as effectively as his next words. ‘Apart from anything else, you are a woman.’

‘Daughters usually are.’ Stephanie gritted her teeth. It was hardly the first time she had encountered such prejudice. ‘I find it is not a factor which weighs heavily on my animal patients’ minds.’

‘Perhaps, but I cannot believe it is a factor their masters so readily ignore.’

‘One of the many reasons why I prefer horses to men,’ Stephanie retorted. Her headache was intensifying. She pulled off her hat, raking her hands through her sweat-damp hair. No point in antagonising the Prince. It was far more likely to get her thrown out into the desert than gain her entrance to the stables.

‘Your Highness,’ she said, striving for a more conciliatory tone, ‘I understand that my arrival here has come as a surprise, to put it mildly, but I assure you I possess the necessary expertise to be of assistance to you.’ Rather belatedly she remembered the letter her father had written and handed it over. ‘This should provide you with the reassurance you seek.’

The Prince broke the seal and scanned the note, written and signed in Papa’s precise handwriting. ‘A most impressively effusive testimonial. One that I trust is not distorted by a father’s benevolence.’

Taking the letter back, Stephanie refused to lose heart. ‘My father is a man of science. He prefers to deal in facts, not emotion, as do I. The fact is, Your Highness, you would not have sent all the way to England for assistance if the situation was not dire, or if you had anyone else who could help you. I am not my father, but I am here with his blessing, I am an excellent veterinarian, and I promise you I will do my utmost to help you. So why don’t you forget that I’m a woman and permit me to attend to your sick horses?’

\* \* \*

He ought to be outraged by her temerity in addressing him thus, but Rafiq was, reluctantly, impressed by the petite female glowering up at him, her big brown eyes defiantly challenging, seemingly oblivious of the fact that she had broken almost every rule of propriety, breached all etiquette and ignored every protocol.

She was not as young as he had taken her for—twenty-five or six, perhaps. Though her hair was streaked with gold by the sun, he guessed it must be naturally darker, for her brows and lashes were a very dark brown. Her skin was not that of an English rose but more olive in tone, flushed by the sun but not burnt. She was not beautiful. Her cheeks were too round, her eyes far too bold, her chin too decided. She had far too much strength of character to be anything so insipid as pretty, but there was something very attractive about her, an indefinable allure he could not name. Despite the evidence of her long day’s travel, despite the fact that there was nothing remotely provocative about either her appearance or her demeanour, she gave him the impression that she had just risen languorously from a night of tumultuous and highly satisfying lovemaking.

He doubted that he would ever be able to do as she bid him, and forget that she was a woman. Looking at those pink lips, plump as pillows, he could not think of anything other than kissing them, of stripping the masculine attire from that very feminine form to discover if her nipples were the same shade of pink. Was her waist, cinched by that belt which looked as if it was meant to holster a gun, really as small as it seemed? Did those riding boots of hers stop at her calves, or her knees, or reach up to the soft flesh of her thighs?

Forget she was a woman! No, he could not do that, but he could remind himself that it was not the most salient fact about her, Rafiq thought grimly, and he could acknowledge that there was one thing on which they were agreed. He needed someone to save his horses. Could that someone really be this woman?

‘My scepticism as to your abilities is understandable, Miss Darvill,’ he said. ‘I am sure even you would concede that a female practitioner is extremely rare, if not unique, in your chosen field.’

It seemed she would concede no such thing. ‘Why would I make a false claim to skills and expertise I do not possess,’ she demanded of him, ‘when I can so easily be proved wrong? I have no desire to be thrown into your dungeons or cast out into the desert for being an imposter, I assure you.’

She threw back her shoulders as she spoke to him, looking him straight in the eye—or at least as straight as she could, given that she was a full head smaller than him. He admired her nerve, though her lack of deference was beginning to get under his skin. ‘You forgot to mention the option of being escorted to my harem, Miss Darvill, and incarcerated in luxurious surroundings to await my bidding.’

He had meant only to put her in her place. Her reaction to this sally took him completely aback. Her eyes flashed in anger. Her hands curled into fists. ‘I am not that sort of woman,’ she said, through gritted teeth.

Her words piqued his interest. What type of woman was she? The challenge in her eyes, the defiance in her stance made it clear she was accustomed to fighting her corner, but why choose such a difficult fight in the first place? And how had such an attractive woman, one who, it seemed, had spent her life surrounded by elite English army officers, managed to remain defiantly unmarried? Sultry, that was the word he had been searching for. Stephanie Darvill was sultry, and she was either wholly oblivious, or wholly indifferent to this fact.

Not that it was in any way relevant. It was not her appearance but her sex that was the issue. If by some miracle she was the skilled veterinarian her father’s letter claimed, she was going to have to work in his stables, with his men. Her very presence there would be seen by many as close to sacrilege. And as for one man in particular...

But he was getting ahead of himself. ‘While I appreciate your father’s good intentions, you must understand that your arrival here in his stead is a rather mixed blessing. Loath as you are to accept the fact that your sex is irrelevant, the fact of the matter is that it would make your appointment as Royal Horse Surgeon problematic. You will excuse me for a moment, Miss Darvill, I need to order my thoughts.’

Rafiq stalked over to the row of windows at the far end of the Royal Receiving Room and gazed out on the Courtyard of the Mirrored Fountain. The situation was, as the redoubtable Stephanie Darvill had rightly pointed out, dire. The plague would strike again and again, until it struck at the very heart of his ambition, wiping out the racehorses in which he and his people had invested all their hopes. This year was to be their year, the year the Sabr was recaptured.

Yes, the situation was dire indeed, but did it warrant the undoubted risk of appointing this woman? He turned from the window to study her. She stood with her arms crossed, her expression an endearing mixture of defiance and supplication. For weeks, months, Rafiq had been struggling to keep himself from the pit of despair. Could this female prove to be his unlikely saviour? Even if her spirit and her courage were sufficient to the challenge of working in the exclusively male preserve of the stables, her claims to expertise could still prove to be exaggerated.

He wanted to believe her, though he must be careful not to allow his hopes to override his caution, nor indeed her disconcerting allure to cloud his judgement. ‘You speak our language exceedingly fluently,’ Rafiq said, re-joining her. ‘How does an Englishwoman come to be so proficient?’

‘My mother is Egyptian, Your Highness.’

Which explained her colouring, he thought, careful not to allow his surprise to show. ‘Your command of Arabic would certainly be an advantage if I did appoint you.’

‘Though it is hardly the decisive factor. I do understand that.’

Her words had just the faintest hint of irony in their tone. Not something he was accustomed to encountering, which gave him pause for thought. ‘The decisive factor, Miss Darvill,’ Rafiq said coolly, ‘is whether you can promise me that you will save my horses?’

Her face fell comically. 'No, I cannot, Your Highness. If such an assurance is a condition of my remaining here then I must reluctantly take my leave. My father taught me never to offer any such guarantees. Even in the most routine of cases, the vagaries of nature cannot be discounted. From the details of the sickness you gave in your letter to my father, it sounds as if it is something quite new and undiagnosed. You have been very unfortunate.'

'My misfortune is entirely of my own making, Miss Darvill.' She frowned at the bleakness evident in his tone, and Rafiq, knowing enough of her already to guess that she would pursue the matter, unaware or careless of the fact that to do so amounted to gross impertinence, forestalled her. 'What matters is not how this plague came to visit the Bharym stud, but whether you can put an end to it.'

Most men would furnish him with a blustering affirmative. No man would dare reply in the negative. Stephanie Darvill was silent for a long time, biting her lip, when she eventually spoke, choosing her words with care. 'I can promise that I will do my utmost to save your horses, but I can offer no absolute guarantees that I will be able to do so. Perhaps that is not the wisest response to your question,' she added with a grimace, 'but it is the most honest one I can give you.'

She could not have given him a better one. Rafiq permitted himself a small smile. 'Your honesty is refreshing, and strangely reassuring. I am surrounded by people who tell me what they think I want to hear, rather than what I need to know.'

'Does that mean you will permit me to examine your horses?'

Her eagerness was touching. 'None of my bloodstock is at present infected by this plague. The affliction takes hold suddenly and violently. We lost Inas, a four-year-old mare, two weeks ago. Since then there has not been another occurrence, but that has been the pattern. I don't doubt there will be another, and another, in due course. Tomorrow I will introduce you to my Master of the Horse.' Rafiq paused, wincing at the thought. If only there was a convenient way of removing Jasim temporarily from the stables.

Once again, he was getting ahead of himself. Jasim was a problem only if he decided to appoint the intriguing Miss Darvill. 'We will talk more when you join me for dinner. You have endured a long and gruelling journey and will no doubt wish to bathe and refresh yourself first.'

His invitation clearly startled her. 'Join you? But I have not the correct attire. I thought—that is I did not expect...'

'Any expectations I had flew out of the window, Miss Darvill, when you walked into this Royal Receiving Room,' Rafiq said ruefully, taking her hand between his. 'Your arrival here in Bharym has been most unexpected. I hope it will also prove most effective.' A thick hank of hair had fallen over her forehead, partly obscuring one of her eyes. For some reason, it increased her sultry air. His fingers tightened on hers. 'Welcome to Bharym, Miss Darvill.'

He lifted her hand to his mouth, meaning to brush only a courteous kiss to her fingertips, but as his lips touched her skin, a bolt of desire shot through him, turning the gesture from one of polite courtesy to an overture he should not be making. She gave a little gasp. He had a glimpse of the heat he felt reflected in her eyes before she snatched her hand away, and he wondered if he had imagined it.

'I will have you escorted to the harem,' Rafiq said. 'Lest there be any misunderstandings,' he could not resist adding, 'my harem functions only as the quarters of the palace set aside for the female servants. I am sorry to disappoint you, but it contains not a single concubine. You will be the only other occupant.'

## Chapter Two

After following another servant through a different maze of corridors, Stephanie came to a halt outside a door guarded by a veritable giant of a man. A grille slid briefly open. The door swung inwards. The servant made his bow and ushered her in, where a genteel-looking older woman stood, obviously awaiting her arrival. 'I am reliably informed that you speak our language, madam?' she said

after they had exchanged a formal greeting. 'My name is Aida, Mistress of the Harem. You will be so good as to follow me.'

She led the way into a huge terraced courtyard, the centre of which was open to the dusky desert sky. The floor was cool tiles studded with mosaic. A fountain tinkled, but Stephanie barely had time to register any of this before she was whisked off to the far corner. 'Your quarters, madam. I hope they meet with your approval.'

'Oh, my goodness.' Stephanie stared in wonder at the luxuriously appointed chamber. Somewhere between leaving the dhow this morning and the long, arduous trek through the desert, she seemed to have left reality behind and stepped into a dream world.

'There is a sitting room and dining salon across on the other side of the courtyard,' Aida informed her. 'I have taken the liberty of pouring you a refreshing cold drink. If madam would excuse me, I will ensure that the bath is made ready.'

'Thank you.' Stephanie picked up the tall frosted glass. The drink was both sharp and sweet, delicately scented with rosewater.

A high divan bed dominated the room, a homage to opulence. She had never seen anything so sumptuous. She trailed her fingers through the layers of voile hangings, stroking the silk covers, lifting a soft velvet cushion to her cheek. The tassels tickled her chin.

She was in a royal harem. In a royal palace. Belonging to a royal prince. Who happened to be the most handsome man she had ever met. Yet his harem was conspicuously bereft of concubines and wives. Had she misheard him or misunderstood him? Prince Rafiq must be around thirty, maybe a year or so older at most. Surely it was expected of him that he marry, if only for the sake of an heir? Royal families, whether Arabian or British, were not so very different in that respect.

Stephanie refilled her glass and perched on the edge of the divan. Prince Rafiq's marital status was not any of her concern, of course. Nor indeed, was the fact that when he had kissed her hand she had felt the most delicious frisson, had been so certain, for just a fleeting moment, that he felt it too. It was quite ridiculous to imagine that a man as attractive as the Prince could find her desirable. And even if he did, she wasn't going to be so stupid as to reciprocate his interest in her. She had sworn to learn from her mistake. This was the perfect opportunity to prove that she had!

Stephanie gave herself a shake. This room might look fit for a princess, but she was not here to lounge about dressed in silks and eating sweetmeats, she was here to try to cure the terrible sickness with ailed Prince Rafiq's Arabian thoroughbreds. A misfortune entirely of his own making, he had said, which was odd. How could he imagine that it was his fault? He did not strike her as a superstitious man. He had not summoned a soothsayer to his aid, but a man of science. 'And what landed on his doorstep instead was a mere woman of science,' Stephanie muttered to herself, 'who is likely going to have to work magic of some form, if she is to succeed in finding a cure.'

The butterflies in her tummy, which had never quite stopped fluttering since her arrival here, started up again in earnest. She so desperately wanted to succeed. So much depended upon it. She would no longer be a lost cause. She would have the means to support herself, and if she succeeded, the prestige of this appointment would surely outweigh the scandal which, despite a year spent in what amounted to hiding, still clung tenaciously to her like a noxious smell. Papa would never have urged her to come here had he thought her skills inadequate to the challenge, she reminded herself. He most certainly would not wish to do further damage to her already dented confidence by setting her up to fail. So she had better get on with it, starting with making sure she wasn't late for her dinner appointment with the Prince.

Opening the trunk which contained her clothes, and which had been deposited at the bottom of the divan, Stephanie groaned. There was absolutely nothing within in which to make a good impression. She had packed solely for her role as horse doctor, boxes of books and notes and instruments, expecting to live in the stable quarters and to spend her time with the horses. Her dismay

was compounded as she turned away from her meagre attire to the long mirror which stood by the high lacquered cabinet.

She must have imagined the flicker of desire in Prince Rafiq's eyes when he kissed her hand. The man was sin incarnate, whereas she looked as if she had been rolled first in oil, then in the desert sand. Her hair managed to be both limp and wild at the same time and her face—now she could see why desert travellers used their keffiyeh for protection from the sun. With considerably less than an hour to make herself presentable, Stephanie tore off her clothes and rushed through to the bathing chamber clad only in a dressing robe. The room was decorated entirely in cool creamy-white marble. There was a washing fountain, and a long table which would presumably be used for massage, besides the huge bathing tub which was filled with warm water, the surface strewn with flower petals.

'Thank you,' she said to Aida, who discreetly—to Stephanie's relief—left the room. Though she longed to luxuriate in the delicately scented water, there was no time for anything other than a very swift but efficient toilette. Emerging much cleaner and considerably refreshed, she secured her newly washed hair in a chignon and was once again faced with the dilemma of what to wear. Aside from her spare riding habit and accompanying supply of shirts, she had only packed only nightwear, undergarments and one day gown. Fashioned from plain white cotton, with short puffed sleeves and a high waist, the décolleté gathered with a satin ribbon, the wide panel of white-work embroidery running down the centre of the gown from neckline to hem was the gown's only adornment. Clad now in her chemise, corsets and stockings, Stephanie held the dress up for Aida's inspection. 'I'm afraid I don't have anything else, do you think this will suffice?'

The Mistress of the Harem looked dubious. 'It is a pity I had not more notice of your arrival. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to dress a fine lady again.'

'Oh, I'm not a lady, I am an army officer's daughter and work with horses.'

Stephanie held the dress against her to study it in the mirror. It was a comfortable, cool garment, and it was her favourite. The trouble was, her affection for it showed all too plainly in its almost threadbare state. Perhaps she would ask Aida to make her a new gown. Nothing extravagant, but...

'You said that you would appreciate the opportunity to dress a fine lady again,' she exclaimed, turning back to face Aida. 'What did you mean by that? Do you refer to—to concubines?'

Aida flushed deeply, looking even more shocked than Stephanie felt. 'Indeed no, there have been no such women in the palace since the reign of Prince Bassaym, the grandfather of our revered and honourable prince. No, I refer to...' She paused, looking over both shoulders before continuing, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper. 'I refer to Prince Rafiq's wife, the Princess Elmira.'

So he was married. Why then had he implied that he was not, with his reference to an empty harem? And where was his wife, if she was no longer resident in the harem? 'I don't understand,' Stephanie said. 'Is the Princess Elmira elsewhere at present?'

'I'm afraid the Princess Elmira is no longer with us.'

'No longer—oh! I'm so sorry, do you mean she is dead?'

'Two years ago, the Princess Elmira died tragically in her sleep,' Aida said in hushed tones. 'Such a mortal blow for the Prince and for our people, for we long to see the Royal House of al-Antarah flourish once more.' The Mistress of the Harem shook her head sadly. 'But as it is for Bharym, so it is for Prince Rafiq. Until the Sabr is reclaimed, none of us can truly be happy.'

'The Sabr?'

'The Sabr,' Aida repeated reverentially. 'You said you work with horses. That explains your presence here, madam. The Prince has summoned you all the way from England in order to safeguard our chances, yes?' She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'At the stables they are sworn to secrecy, but I have heard rumours of a sickness.'

Prince Rafiq had not specifically forbidden her from discussing the nature of her business here, but then again, Prince Rafiq had not actually appointed her yet. Why would an outbreak of sickness be such a state secret? Curious as she was to know the answer to that question, Stephanie opted to

change the subject instead. 'Now tell me honestly Aida,' she said, holding up her gown, 'do you think this quite unfit for dinner with Prince Rafiq?'

'It is not, in all truth, ideal. Unfortunately there is nothing to be done about the robe itself, madam, but if you will wait a moment, I may have a solution.'

Aida disappeared. Stephanie stepped into her gown and tied the ribbons at the neck and waist, the simplicity and ease of these only fastenings another reason for the gown's well-worn state. She had pulled on a pair of slippers, and was studying her reflection with resignation when Aida returned with a long length of fabric over her arm.

'May I?' It was finest crêpe de Chine, spangled with what looked like a galaxy of gold stars. Aida folded it in two and fixed it into the back of Stephanie's hair with a huge comb and a selection of pins, where it fell in filmy folds down her back, rather like the beautiful mantillas worn by the haughty Spanish ladies whom Stephanie had seen pay court to Wellington in Madrid. This mantilla though, was much longer. Taking up both ends, Aida draped it over Stephanie's arms so that it added a lustre to her gown, and covered the bare skin of her forearms which would have been rendered more decent by the addition of evening gloves, if she had any, which she did not.

'It's beautiful. My gown is quite transformed.' Delighted, Stephanie twirled around in front of the mirror. 'Now I feel suitably dressed to dine with a prince. How clever you are.'

Aida smiled shyly. The sound of a bell tinkling in the courtyard made them both jump. 'It is time,' she said, 'that is your summons, madam.'

A final glance in the mirror was reassuring. She barely recognised herself. Her eyes sparkled with anticipation. A new Stephanie. It truly was time for her to put her past behind her and embrace whatever the future might hold.

\* \* \*

The dining room into which Stephanie was shown was even grander than she had expected. A perfectly square chamber, each of its walls was an exact replica of the other, with three tall arched windows topped by three half-size arches, the whole surrounded by another huge corniced arch stretched between two marble pillars. The walls between each of the windows were tempered a soft lemon, the simplicity a stark contrast to the geometric pattern of tiles in multiple shades of ochre, terracotta, umber, russet and mahogany, which decorated the floor, the pattern replicated in the ceiling. There were candles everywhere. Light flickered from the huge chandelier which hung on a long chain over the centre of the table, from the myriad candles which burned in the free-standing clusters of candlesticks which stood in each corner, and in the blazing sconces which adorned the walls.

The low circular table with scrolled and gilded legs took up most of the available floor space. It could, Stephanie reckoned, have seated at least thirty people, though there were only two places set with gold plates and crystal glasses. The servant who had escorted her from the harem waved her to the smaller collection of cushions, shaking his head when she would have seated herself. Two more servants stood by each of the four doors. Stephanie shuffled nervously from foot to foot. She was extremely hungry, but she wasn't at all sure she'd be able to eat anything. She was about to have dinner with a prince, for goodness sake.

The doors—different doors from the ones through which she had entered—were flung open. 'His Most Royal Highness, Prince Rafiq al-Antarah of Bharym.'

The servants did not bow, but stood sharply to attention. Stephanie dropped uncertainly into a curtsy. 'Your Highness.'

'Miss Darvill. There is no need to curtsy every time we meet.'

He had changed from his formal robes. Over the traditional white dishdasha robe buttoned high to a little round collar, Prince Rafiq was now dressed in a tunic of indigo-blue silk richly trimmed with gold braid. His hair was swept back in damp waves from his high forehead, his jaw freshly shaved. Once again, Stephanie's body reacted with an unmistakable shiver of desire. She resolutely ignored it.

‘Please, sit.’

He took her hand to assist her on to the heap of cushions. His skin was so cool, it made her own feel uncomfortably hot. She dropped down with very little grace, almost as if her knees had given way under her. ‘What a beautiful room,’ Stephanie said inanely, in an effort not to stare at the beautiful man.

‘My private dining room,’ Prince Rafiq said, seating himself cross-legged on the large cushion at her right hand. ‘I thought you would be more comfortable in a less formal setting.’

‘A less formal setting?’ Was he teasing her?

‘The Royal Dining Salon can seat up to three hundred guests comfortably, the kitchens can spit-roast fifty goats simultaneously. I thought you would appreciate a more modest venue and less ostentatious menu. You may commence.’

Realising just in time that this last remark was addressed to the servant who had appeared, as if by magic, at the head of the table, Stephanie watched in astonishment as yet another of the room’s four doors was flung open, and a positive cavalcade of servants, each bearing a covered gold platter, began to load the table with enough food to feed an army. The domed lid of each was removed with a flourish before being carefully placed on the table. Hot food was served in chafing dishes, the lid removed for the Prince’s inspection and approval, before being replaced. The familiar, appetising aroma of grilled meat and warm bread mingled with other, less familiar but no less mouthwatering smells.

Stephanie tried to recall all her mother had told her of the eating customs of Egypt, but her mind was a complete blank. Was she to serve herself? The question was answered when the last dish was placed on the table, the doors closed, and two fresh servants joined them, each carrying a gold tray. Waiting for permission from the Prince—Stephanie made a mental note that the Prince’s permission seemed to be required for everything—the servants knelt on the floor. A precursor to ritual hand washing, she realised, recalling some of her mother’s stories hazily now, but she was not to be permitted to carry out that menial task for herself. Her fingers were dipped in the scented water. Her hand was rubbed with lemon, and then rinsed again. The linen which was used to dry her was pleasantly warmed.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, as the servant repeated the process on her other hand, Stephanie allowed her attention to drift to the man seated beside her. Prince Rafiq had very long legs. He was also very supple, for such a tall man. And very athletic looking, for a prince. It must be all the physical work with the horses. In the army, when they were not campaigning, the cavalry regiments spent endless hours training their horses, riding them over obstacles both wide and high. In the sunshine, the men often rode shirtless. Riding gave a man very strong shoulder muscles. The flimsy silk and cotton robes he wore showed Prince Rafiq’s muscles off to fine effect.

‘I can tell by your expression that you are ravenous, Miss Darvill.’

What on earth was wrong with her! Stephanie’s cheeks flamed. ‘It all smells delicious, though I am not sure that I recognise many of the dishes.’

‘I will explain. We will converse in English,’ he said, switching to that language. ‘By doing so we can talk both freely and privately. As you can see, the table has been laid with food of the same colours grouped together. Green for prosperity. Yellow for happiness. We begin with those. Then there are the meats and the mixed salads. And finally there are the sweets, dates and honey, which represent life.’

‘Goodness, I had no idea.’ She was vastly relieved to see that her plate was being delicately filled by one of the servants. Whether this was yet another newcomer or not, she had no idea. ‘Thank you,’ she said to him, relieved, when he returned her gesture, that she had not broken protocol by doing so, and pleasantly surprised when the Prince also thanked his servant, calling him by name. In a palace whose staff must run to hundreds, it was an impressive feat of memory.

‘Please, begin,’ he said. ‘I have had them set out silverware cutlery for you. We have no shortage of European visitors here, and some are most averse to our custom of eating with our hands.’

‘Thank you, but I am happy to eat as you do,’ Stephanie replied, tearing a piece of flat bread and preparing to scoop some tomato salad on to it, hoping fervently that she would not make a fool of herself.

‘Your mother has retained the customs of her native land in your father’s English household then?’ Prince Rafiq asked.

‘Some of them, though Papa prefers more plain fare, to be honest. And Mama’s family are not particularly wealthy. I suspect she would be every bit as overwhelmed as I am, by this veritable feast.’

‘It is a modest repast, believe me, compared to the state banquets I am required to endure. I am a man of simple tastes. Be careful,’ Prince Rafiq added as she scooped what she thought was another piece of salad on to her bread, ‘those dishes containing chilli are extremely spicy. Unless you are accustomed to them, they will destroy your palate. Let me explain the various dishes on your plate. The smooth purée topped with yoghurt is moutabal, which is made from roasted aubergine. The salad of tomatoes, mint and cucumber is called fattoush, and beside it is tabbouleh, which is made from steamed grains of bulgur wheat. Oh, and the little patties are falafel, made from chick peas.’

‘My mother has talked fondly of falafel. She said that every family has a different, secret recipe that they claim to be the best and most authentic.’

Prince Rafiq smiled. ‘My grandmother used to say the very same thing. What does your mother think of your coming to Arabia?’

The change of subject was smoothly done, but Stephanie was not fooled. This was not so much a private dinner as an interview. She was—unsurprisingly—being vetted. She studied the small fritter-like falafel, which tasted nutty, and nothing at all as Mama had described it. ‘Once my father had persuaded her of the advantages,’ she said carefully, ‘my mother was most supportive. Though Egypt is some weeks’ travel from Bharym, the presence of her family relatively nearby in Alexandria was of some comfort.’

Stephanie swallowed a mouthful of the wheat salad which she had scooped up on a piece of flatbread and absent-mindedly put her fingers to her mouth to lick a dribble of tomato juice. It was delicious, but she was suddenly conscious that the Prince was looking at her with the strangest expression. ‘Oh, I do apologise,’ she said guiltily. ‘I’ve just remembered that my mother told me that it is considered rude to do such a thing before the end of a meal.’

He seemed to be fascinated by her mouth. Was there a smear of juice on her chin? She couldn’t resist checking. She wished he wouldn’t look at her like that, as if—as if he wanted to lick her fingers. And where on earth had that ridiculous thought come from! Stephanie took a sip of iced sherbet.

‘If one licks one’s fingers before the end of a meal it indicates to one’s host that one has finished eating, though is not yet replete,’ the Prince informed her. ‘Which is deemed a negative reflection on the quality of the repast.’

‘I assure you, I intended no such slight,’ Stephanie replied hastily. ‘On the contrary, the food is utterly delicious, but I am not quite accustomed to using my fingers and so when I licked them...’

‘Please,’ Prince Rafiq said, giving his head a little shake, ‘there is no need to draw attention to you—I assure you, no offence was taken.’ He seemed to be suddenly thirsty, taking a long draught from his glass. ‘I am interested in the—advantages, I believe you called it—this appointment provides you with.’

Whatever had been distracting him a moment before, he was completely focused on her now. Stephanie stared down at her half-empty plate. ‘The opportunity to gain experience working in such a prestigious stud farm is a prize beyond rubies. Success here, Your Highness, will go a long way to ensuring my success back in England, in a field of endeavour in which, as you have pointed out, my sex is a great disadvantage.’

Prince Rafiq raised his eyebrows. 'It did not prevent you from securing a position on a leading English stud farm, Miss Darvill. I believe you said you had been working there for the past year.'

Her plate was removed, and Stephanie was thus granted time to consider her answer while another was set out with a variety of meats. It went completely against her nature to prevaricate, though her naïve belief that everyone, especially army officers, valued honesty and integrity as highly as Papa, had taken a severe knock. But a partial truth was no lie. 'My father is not without influence, and facilitated matters. His reputation assisted me in establishing my own credibility,' she said.

'And association with my name—or more accurately, the name of my stud farm—will further enhance it?'

'If you will be so kind as to permit me to use it as a testimonial,' Stephanie said. 'Assuming, of course, that I am successful in effecting a cure for the mysterious sickness. There is also,' she added awkwardly, 'the matter of financial reward. Not having my father's experience, I would not expect you to compensate me quite so generously, but frankly, Your Highness, with apologies for raising such a vulgar topic, even half of the remuneration which you offered would give me the freedom to set up my own establishment and live independently. Something which I am very eager to do.'

Thinking about what it would mean to her, and to her parents, to have her future secured brought a lump to her throat. Aware of the Prince watching her carefully under those sleepy lids, Stephanie concentrated on making a little parcel of roasted goat meat and couscous studded with pomegranate.

'What induced you to leave your father's patronage to work on a stud farm? Did you tire of military work, Miss Darvill? It has been your life, you said so yourself.'

'Army horses, Your Highness, are heavy working breeds, either draught horses for pulling artillery or chargers, neither of which are used for breeding purposes. Working on a stud farm was, my father felt, an excellent way of filling this gap in my knowledge.'

She had not lied, her experience at the Newmarket stud had been invaluable, it was simply that she wouldn't have left her army life and gone there were it not for another, much more unpleasant experience. Prince Rafiq's expression gave absolutely nothing away, yet somehow she was certain he had detected her unease. Flustered, Stephanie picked up her fork then set it down again. Her food was no more than half-eaten, but she had quite lost her appetite.

'You have had a sufficiency?'

'Yes, thank you.' Her plate was cleared. Another was prepared, of sweet pastries dribbled with honey, dates covered in chopped nuts. The foods representing life. Most appropriate since her presence here was driven by her desire to establish a new life for herself.

She hoped that the changing of dishes and the serving of the final course meant the topic was now closed. The Prince, however, had merely been biding his time. 'Your desire for independence is intriguing, Miss Darvill,' he said. 'A most unusual ambition for a woman. A more common aspiration is marriage, surely?'

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Stephanie Darvill's glass slipped from her hand, spilling sherbet over the table. In the moments it took for one of his servants to clean the mess up, Rafiq watched her covertly, noting the effort it took her to regain her composure. The robe she wore was cut demurely enough at the neck, but it was still low enough to show the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. Her curves distracted him. He wondered if the ribbon tied at the neckline was the only fastening of the dress. He wondered what she wore beneath that gown. It looked flimsy enough, but it was most likely an illusion. In his limited experience, the complexity of the undergarments worn by European women seemed expressly designed to repel a man's advances.

Miss Darvill herself, on the other hand, seemed designed to encourage just such advances, yet she was not married, and nor was she, in her own words that sort of woman. What sort of woman was she? And why did she crave what she called independence? Would she live alone? Why would a woman wish for such a thing? Though admittedly, his experience of Western women was not

extensive, he did not think they were so very different from women in the East. Didn't all women wish for a husband, children? But this woman—he had never met anyone quite like this woman.

'I have no interest in marriage, Your Highness,' Stephanie Darvill said, interrupting his thoughts, 'and I confess I fail to understand what my aspirations—or lack of them—in that direction have to do with my ability to cure your horses. Save of course,' she added tightly, 'that as a single woman without a husband to dictate my movements, I was free to travel to your aid.'

'My apologies,' Rafiq said, equally tightly, for he was quite unaccustomed to being placed in the wrong. 'You are in the right of it. What matters are your skills as a horse surgeon, and whether those skills will compensate for the disruption your presence in my stables will undoubtedly generate, for they are an exclusively male domain.'

'Then they are no different from any other stables in which I have worked.'

'The difference, Miss Darvill, is that here you have neither your father's presence nor his reputation to shield you from what can be a rough-and-tumble environment.'

'Not as rough and tumble an environment as a battlefield,' she countered, 'although Papa would never permit me anywhere near the actual fighting. I was left in sole charge behind the lines. My place will be taken by his new assistant, in this conflict with Napoleon that is to come. For all I know, battle may even have commenced by now.' For a moment she was lost to him, her gaze unfocused, her thoughts clearly with her family, but then she gave a little shrug, a tiny smile. 'He made me promise not to worry about him. It is a promise we who followed the drum—family, servants, wives, children—were always being obliged to make, though I doubt any of us ever managed to truly keep it. It was worse, in a way, being so far from the battle lines, imagining what was happening not just to one's family but one's friends, and of course the horses. Though I would never equate an animal with a human life, I do not subscribe to the view that they possess no feelings.'

'Nor I,' Rafiq said warmly. 'In fact I would go further, and say that there can be a true affinity between a horse and a rider.'

'Oh, I agree,' Miss Darvill said enthusiastically. 'If a man is afraid going into battle, he transmits that fear to his horse. I have seen it so many times. And though you may scoff, I have also seen a horse make a man braver with a display of—of eagerness. That sounds silly, but...'

Rafiq shook his head, smiling. 'Not at all. Arabians, mares especially, are highly valued for their fearlessness in a battle charge, which can give a rider the confidence he lacks, or enhance what fortitude already exists. But it is more than that. In the most hostile parts of the desert, I have seen a horse struggle on, carrying her master to the safety of an oasis when all hope seemed lost.'

'And in battle too,' Stephanie said eagerly, 'there have been many, many times when Papa has witnessed horses returning men almost dead in the saddle to the safety of our lines, often at great cost to themselves. And those same men, they will do almost anything to save their horses too. I have seen the most battle-hardened of soldiers weep for the loss of his steed. And weep too, when an animal which looked beyond recovery has been saved against the odds. That,' Stephanie Darvill said, clasping her hands together fervently, 'is one of the very best aspects of my vocation.'

He could not help but be endeared. 'Your love of horses shines through.'

She beamed at him. 'As does yours.'

'I quite literally grew up around horses,' Rafiq confided. 'When I was three months old, I was sent out to be raised by a Bedouin tribe. It is the custom here, for a prince's sons to live outside the palace confines for ten years in this way. Bedouins treat their horses as part of the extended family. They even bring them into their tents at night to shelter from the chill desert air.'

'Those early years then, sowed the seed of your ambition to establish the Bharym stud farm?'

'Bharym has a proud legacy of breeding the finest thoroughbreds. It is part of our heritage.'

She flinched at the edge in his voice. 'I'm sorry, I had no idea. I was under the impression that this stud was relatively new.'

‘In a literal sense you are correct,’ Rafiq said stiffly. ‘The stables were rebuilt when I inherited the kingdom eight years ago, but I believe—and my people also—that they are a continuation of what has gone before. The seed of my ambition, as you put it, was planted fourteen years ago, on the day when Bharym lost the Sabr.’

‘The Sabr? Aida—your Mistress of the Harem—mentioned this Sabr, what is it?’

‘The Sabr is the most prestigious annual endurance race in all of Arabia.’

‘Like the Derby in England?’

‘There is no comparison,’ Rafiq said. ‘To win the Sabr brings prestige not only to the owner, but to the whole kingdom. The Sabr is a symbol of national pride.’

‘So this race, it is to win it that you established—re-established—the stud?’ Stephanie Darvill was frowning. ‘Your Highness, this outbreak of sickness, why must it be kept secret? Aida—you must not think badly of her, she said nothing indiscreet, save only that it was not to be talked of.’

‘This year, after fourteen years’ absence, we finally have a string of horses with sufficient stamina and fleetness of foot to compete with the very best. All my people’s hopes are pinned on winning. This sickness puts not only a horse race but Bharym’s entire future at risk.’ He smiled thinly. ‘I am certain that to you that must sound preposterous. How can a mere horse race determine the fate of a kingdom? With respect, you are a stranger, you cannot understand the history of Bharym and the Sabr, but I assure you, its importance to my people cannot be overstated.’

To say nothing of how critical it was to him. Could this foreign woman save the race for them? Could she be the one who would help him defeat the fates and secure a future for his country, his people, himself? A preposterous notion, he’d thought when he first set eyes on her, but now—now, his instincts told him to trust her. And his head told him he had no better option. ‘Tomorrow,’ Rafiq said, ‘I will tell you the story of the Sabr. Then you will understand how vital it is that you save my horses.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Does that mean you will permit me to treat them? I cannot tell you how much this means to me, Your Highness.’

Her smile, the first real smile he had been granted, lit up her face. ‘Rafiq,’ he said, checking first that the servants had left the room. ‘When we are alone, you may call me Rafiq.’

‘Then I must be Stephanie. If it pleases Your Highness. Sorry, Rafiq.’

She pleased him rather too well. It was to be hoped that her abilities matched her enthusiasm, for one thing was certain, Stephanie Darvill would not please his Master of the Horse. Once before, Jasim had violently objected to a woman’s presence in the stables. Rafiq shuddered. The outcome had not been Jasim’s fault, but his. Only he was to blame. But he refused to think about the past tonight. Tonight was about securing the future.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘your work will commence. I will be frank, Miss—Stephanie. I am concerned about your reception in the stables. It is likely to be very hostile.’

‘As I said, I am accustomed to that. Your Highness—Rafiq—it is my experience that those who work with horses do so because they love them. When they see that I share that love, that I can alleviate the suffering of sickness or injury, they don’t see a woman, but a veterinarian.’

She spoke with an assurance that he admired, but which in one case was undoubtedly misplaced. ‘That may be true for the majority of my grooms and stable hands, but my Master of the Horse is a different matter. Your role here does not depend upon Jasim’s good opinion, but you will find your task a great deal easier if you can find a way to earn it. There is little he does not know about Arabian thoroughbreds.’

‘Save how to cure this sickness,’ Stephanie pointed out. ‘When he understands that we are both working towards that goal then I am sure he will co-operate.’

‘He will co-operate, because I will instruct him to do so.’

‘I would prefer you did not.’ She grimaced. ‘I am sorry to contradict you, but I am not, as you have already pointed out, the type of person to tell you what you want to hear, rather than what you need to know. Respect cannot be imposed, it must be earned. Please do not make matters

worse between myself and your illustrious Master of the Horse by forcing him into a pretence of co-operation, it will only make it more likely that he will resort to sabotage to discredit me. I prefer to fight my own battles.'

Admirable sentiments, though thoroughly misguided. Resolving to take matters into his own hands, but deciding it would be better for Stephanie if she remained oblivious to his manipulation of events, Rafiq bowed over her hand. 'You are a very surprising woman. I hope that you will prove to be equally gifted.'

His kiss was the merest whisper, the lightest touch of his lips to her fingers. He would have done no more, had she not shivered at his touch. But she did, and he reacted instinctively, his fingers tightening around hers, pulling her a fraction closer. The folds of her gown brushed against his leg. Her hair had fallen over her eye again. He could not resist pushing it back, and then he could not resist trailing his hand down the curve of her cheek, to rest on the slope of her shoulder. She shuddered again, and he responded to that shudder. When she tilted her head, her lips parted. He bent his head, drawn irresistibly to her. The sound of a door opening and then being hastily closed made them jump apart.

'Forgive me,' Rafiq said, taking another step backwards, away from further temptation.

'There is nothing to forgive,' Stephanie said, blushing furiously. 'It was as much my fault as yours. I should not have—but I am fatigued. The effects of a surfeit of sun too, no doubt. So there is nothing—'

'The hour grows late,' he said tersely, cutting short her embarrassment and his own. 'We will meet in the stables in the morning. As of this moment, you are formally appointed Royal Horse Surgeon.'

His words, spoken primarily to remind himself of her purpose here, made Stephanie gasp. 'The appointment will be for six months,' he continued in a brusque manner, 'by which time you will either have cured this plague which has descended on Bharym, or we will have established that you are incapable of curing it. Your remuneration will be on the terms I proposed to your father.'

She gazed speechlessly at him. He wished she would not look at him that way, as if she was having to work very hard to prevent herself from throwing her arms around him in gratitude. 'The appointment may be terminated by me at any time prior to the end of the six months,' Rafiq continued, more sternly than he intended, 'if I feel your presence has compromised the smooth running of the stables. You understand?'

'Perfectly.'

'Excellent. Then I will see you in the morning.'

'Rafiq.' He had turned to leave, but Stephanie caught his sleeve, yet another breach of protocol. 'Thank you,' she said, with a shy smile, 'for trusting me. For giving me this opportunity to prove myself. I am extremely grateful and very much aware of the honour you confer on me. I promise you I will do all I can not to let you down.' She surprised him once again, this time by bending over his hand, pressing a light kiss to his knuckles before opening the door herself, startling the waiting guard.

Watching her follow a servant along the corridor back to the harem, her sashaying walk drawing his eyes to her swaying rear, Rafiq sighed. His passions had been all but dormant since this plague descended. It was inconvenient to say the least, to have them reawakened by the woman who had come to Bharym to cure that self-same plague. Though perhaps it was apt. A sign that he was coming back to life.

The end which would be a new beginning was so terrifyingly, tantalisingly close. The vision he had once carried so close to his heart, of the colours of Bharym tied to the Sabr trophy, of the victory flag flying proudly above the palace and above every city and village in the kingdom for the first time in two generations, was one he hardly dared conjure for fear the fates would deprive him of it.

But they would not. Stephanie Darvill would ensure that they could not. His stud would bring victory to Bharym, confidence to his kingdom, joy to his people, and quieten his troubled conscience. Payment for his crime. Reparation fully made, all debts repaid.

Departing the dining salon, Rafiq headed for his own chambers, and the meagre solace it provided.

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