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By Lynne Graham

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Raja's new bride has a lot to learn about being a royal, most enticingly of all...how exhilarating nights with her new husband can be—and that an heir is top of his agenda!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lynne Graham lives in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. Happily married, Lynne has five children. Her eldest is her only natural child. Her other children, who are every bit as dear to her heart, are adopted. The family has a variety of pets, and Lynne loves gardening, cooking, collecting allsorts and is crazy about every aspect of Christmas.

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The beautiful brunette lay in the tangled bed sheets watching her lover get dressed. Prince Raja al-Somari had black hair and exotic dark golden eyes. Exceptionally handsome, he was pure leashed power, muscle and magnetic attraction. He was also a wild force of nature in bed, she reflected with a languorous look of sensual satisfaction on her face.

As his mistress, Chloe, one of the world's top fashion models, certainly had no complaints. But then Chloe was excessively fond of rich men, money and fabulous jewellery. Her prince from the oil-rich country of Najar in the Persian Gulf was staggeringly wealthy and he delivered on every count, so naturally she didn't want to lose him. When a plane crash had killed the bride in the arranged marriage being planned for Raja, Chloe had breathed a secret sigh of relief for such an alliance could well lead to the end of the most profitable relationship she had ever had. And even if another arranged marriage lurked on the horizon, Chloe was determined to hold onto her lover.

Raja watched Chloe finger the glittering new diamond bracelet encircling one slender wrist as if it were a talisman and his mouth quirked at her predictability. Although the demands of his position had made it difficult for him to see her in recent months, Chloe had subjected him to neither tantrums nor tears. Like most Western women he had met since his university days in England, she was as easy to placate as a child with a shiny new toy. In return for the complete discretion he demanded from his lovers, he was extremely generous but he never thought about his bed partners when he was away from them. Sex might be a necessity to a man of his appetites, but it was also simply an amusement and an escape from the weight of responsibility he carried. As acting Regent and ruler of conservative Najar, he could not openly enjoy a sex life without causing offence.

Furthermore, Raja was always aware that he had much more important issues to worry about. The recent appalling plane crash had devastated the people of Najar and its neighbour and former enemy, Ashur. The future of both countries stood on the edge of catastrophe. For seven years war had raged between oil-rich Najar and poverty stricken Ashur and when peace had finally been brokered by the Scandinavian state leading the talks, the two countries had added a more personal cultural twist to the agreement before they were satisfied that the peace would hold firm. That twist had been an arranged marriage between the two royal families and joint rulership that would ultimately unite Najar with Ashur. Having spent most of his adult life as a businessman before serving his country, Raja had accepted that he had to marry Princess Bariah of Ashur.

That she was a widow well into her thirties while he was still in his twenties he had accepted as his royal duty to put the needs of his country first. And his country and his people did desperately *need* a fresh blueprint for a lasting peace.

Unfortunately for all concerned, a tragedy had lurked in the wings of the peace accord. A fortnight earlier,

Bariah and her parents had died in a plane crash. Shorn of its entire ruling family in one fell swoop, Ashur was in deep crisis and the court officials were searching frantically through the Shakarian family tree for a suitable heir to the throne who could take Bariah's place as Raja's bride and consort.

His mobile phone buzzed and he lifted it.

'You have to come home,' his younger brother Haroun told him heavily. 'Wajid Sulieman, the Ashuri court advisor, is already on his way here. According to his aide, he is very excited so I expect that means they've found another bride for you.'

It was the news that Raja had been waiting for, the news that honour demanded he hope for, but he still had to fight the crushing sensation of a rock settling on his chest to shorten his breathing. 'We must hope for the best—'

'The best would be if they *couldn't* find anyone else to marry you!' his youthful sibling opined without hesitation. 'Why are you letting yourself be forced into an arranged marriage? Are we still living in the Dark Ages?'

Raja's lean bronzed features were as impassive as he had learned to make them in the presence of others.

He rarely spoke without consideration. His wheelchair-bound father had taught him everything he knew about kingship. 'It is necessary that I do this.'

'Trouble?' Chloe asked, blue eyes bright with curiosity as Raja set down the phone and lifted his shirt.

'I have to leave immediately.'

Chloe scrambled out of bed and pressed her lithe pale body to his. 'But we were going out tonight,' she protested, looking up at him with wide, wounded eyes while being careful to look and sound hurt and disappointed rather than accusing, for there was very little Chloe didn't know about keeping a man happy.

'I'll make up for it on my next visit,' Raja promised, setting her to one side to resume dressing.

He was trying not to wonder *who* the Ashuri representatives had found for him to marry. What did the woman's identity matter? Hopefully she would be reasonably attractive. That was the most he could hope for. Anything more would be icing on the cake. He suppressed the thought that he was as imprisoned by his royal birth as an animal in a trap. Such reflections were unnecessarily dramatic and in no way productive.

His private jet whisked him back to Najjar within hours and his brother was waiting in the limo that met him at the airport.

'I wouldn't marry a stranger!' Haroun told him heatedly.

'I do it gladly for you.' Raja was grateful that his kid brother had no such future sacrifice to fear. 'Right now, after a long period of instability, tradition is exactly what the people in both countries long to have back—'

'The Ashuris are broke. Their country is in ruins. Why don't you offer them a portion of our oil revenues instead?'

'Haroun!' Raja censured. 'Watch your mouth. Until we find a feasible framework for this peace agreement we all need to practise great diplomacy.'

'Since when has the truth been a hanging offence?' Haroun argued. 'We won the war yet you're being bartered off to a bunch of boundary thieves, who were still herding sheep when our great-great-grandfather, Rashid, was a king!'

Conscious that many Najaris would agree with his sibling, for the war had sown deep enmity and prejudice between the people of both countries, Raja merely dealt the younger man an impatient appraisal. 'I expect a more balanced outlook from a young man as well educated as you are.'

At the royal palace, the grey-haired and excessively precise Ashuri court advisor awaited Raja's arrival with an assistant and both men were, indeed, wreathed in smiles.

'My apologies if our timing has proved inconvenient, Your Royal Highness. Thank you for seeing us at such short notice.' Bowing very low, Wajid wasted no time in making small talk. A man on a mission, he spread open a file on the polished table between them. 'We have discovered that the only legal and marriageable female heir to the Ashuri throne is the daughter of the late King Anwar and a British citizen—'

'A British citizen?' Haroun repeated, intrigued.

'Anwar was ruler before Princess Bariah's father, King Tamim, wasn't he?'

'He was Tamim's elder brother. I recall that King Anwar made more than one marriage,' Raja remarked. 'Who was the lady's mother?'

The older man's mouth compressed. 'His first wife was an Englishwoman. The alliance was brief and she returned with the child to England after the divorce.'

'And what age is Anwar's daughter now?' Haroun was full of lively curiosity.

'Twenty-one years old. She has never been married.'

'Half English,' Prince Raja mused. 'And still very young. Of good character?'

Wajid stiffened. 'Of course.'

Raja was not so easily impressed. In his experience women who coveted the attentions of a prince were only looking for a good time and something sparkly to sweeten the deal. 'Why did King Anwar divorce her mother?'

'She was unable to have more children. It was a love match and short-lived,' the older man commented with a scornful compression of his lips. 'The king had two sons with his second wife, both of whom were killed during the war.'

Although Wajid was repeating information he was already well acquainted with, Raja dipped his head in respectful acknowledgement for a generation of young men had been decimated by the conflict that had raged for so long. As far as he was concerned if his marriage could persuade bitter enemies to live together in peace, it was a small sacrifice in comparison to the endless funerals he had once been forced to attend.

'The name of Anwar's daughter?'

'The princess's name is Ruby. As her mother chose to leave Ashur, the royal family took no further interest in either mother or daughter. Unfortunately Princess Ruby has had no training or preparation for a royal role.'

Raja frowned. 'In which case she would find the lifestyle and the expectations very challenging.'

'The princess is young enough to learn quickly.' The court advisor rubbed his hands together with unfeigned enthusiasm. 'Our advisors believe she can be easily moulded.'

'Have you a photograph to show my brother?' Haroun questioned eagerly.

Wajid leafed through the file and extracted a small photo. 'I'm afraid this is several years old but the most recent photograph we have.'

Raja studied the slender blonde in the miniskirt and tee shirt, captured outside the Ashuri cathedral in their capital city. It was a tourist snap and the girl still had the legginess and slightly chubby and unformed features of adolescence. Her pale colouring was very unusual in his culture and that long blonde hair was exceptionally att...

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