



The Sheikh's Pregnant Prisoner (Harlequin Presents)

By Tara Pammi

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But when he finds out that Lauren is carrying his child and intending to keep it a secret, Zafir imprisons his feisty fling in his palace. Unlike him, his baby will not be the illegitimate heir of a sheikh. And to ensure this, Zafir will make Lauren his wife...!

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Editorial Review

From the Author

"Stop that," Lauren said softly, suddenly wishing the dark stranger from that afternoon back. She wanted to be angry with him, she was, yet her body seemed disjointed from her mind.

He raised his hands like shields, a butter-won't-melt expression on his face. "Stop what?"

"Looking at me like that," she croaked.

"It gives me pleasure to look at you."

She rolled her eyes, hoping that he couldn't hear the thudding of her heart. "I fell for that line six weeks ago. Fool me once--"

His finger on her lips cut her off. She trembled all over, the simple contact breathing a firestorm of need all over. "Choosing that gown and the jewelry was the most pleasure I've had in six weeks."

He had picked the gown himself? Her heart, if possible, skipped a beat, his words falling over her like sparkly, magic dust, ensnaring her senses into a web of intoxicated desire. How else could she explain the gooey mass in the center of her stomach?

"If you had worn it and accepted my invitation for dinner, I would have been even more pleased."

"I...me...my pleasure, self-absorbed much, Zafir?" she mocked him. Something uncoiled in his gaze but her bitter words were the only things she had to fight him with. "Your gifts don't mean anything to me except that you think you can buy your way out of anything. You locked me up here. Dinner with you is the last thing I want."

"I wanted to make sure Farrah could take proper care of you. What is bothering you?" he said, steel creeping into his words.

"You're kidding, right? Should I fall at your feet because you moved me here, because you threw some gifts at me? Three days ago, you accused me of conspiring against you and now..."

She vibrated with anger and hurt, barely getting words out. "You talk to me as if nothing happened. I've had quite enough of you and this...place."

"I would like to apologize for that. I knew that you weren't capable of scheming like that."

"And you came to this realization after getting concrete proof from David and not a second before?"

His mouth hardened and Lauren realized she hated this version of him. Every time he spoke or thought of Behraat, he became someone she didn't know, someone she didn't want to know. "I needed that video, Lauren. I have to be ruthless from time to time. Consider it one of the hazards of being the ruler."

"More like the effect of being drunk on your own power."

Instead of the anger she had expected, his mouth curved into a smile. His gaze moved to her mouth and she felt his perusal like a tingle. "Surrounded by my people, I've forgotten how outspoken you are." He pushed a lock of hair from her forehead. "It was the first thing I noticed about you."

Whatever she had been about to say flitted away. Pure sensation skittered over her skin. He cupped her jaw and pulled her close, the rough pad of his thumb rubbing his skin. "I brought Huma to the ER, you took one look at her, and demanded if I was the one who had given her those bruises. The way you looked at me with fire burning in your eyes..." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"You reminded me of a lioness I once saw in the zoo... ferocious and breathtaking." His tone became molten, honeyed on those last words, a fire burning in his eyes.

"I have never in my life become so hard just by looking at a woman, ya habeebi."

Wet warmth pooled at her core and she clutched her thighs together.

Torture, that's what it was. And worse than being locked up. Because when he accused her of nefarious intentions, she could fight him, and despise him.

But when he spoke like that, with desire, with honesty, with nothing but that warmth, she stood no chance.

About the Author

Tara Pammi can't remember a moment when she wasn't lost in a book, especially a romance which, as a teenager, was much more exciting than mathematics textbook. Years later Tara's wild imagination and love for the written word revealed what she really wanted to do: write! She lives in Colorado with the most co-operative man on the planet and two daughters. Tara loves to hear from readers and can be reached at tara.pammi@gmail.com or her website www.tarapammi.com.

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Could he be dead? Could someone as larger than life as Zafir be truly gone? Could someone she had known for two months, someone she had laughed with, someone she had shared the deepest intimacies with, be gone in the blink of an eye?

Lauren Hamby pressed her hand to her stomach as dread weighed it down.

It had been the same for the past two days. The more she saw of the colorful capital city of Behraat and the destruction the recent riots had wreaked, the more she saw Zafir everywhere.

But now, staring at the centuries-old trade center building, every nerve in her vibrated. The answer she had been seeking for six weeks was here, she could feel it in her bones. All she had was his name and description but she was desperate to find out what had happened to him.

Desperate to find out about the man who had somehow come to mean more than just a lover. More than a friend, even.

The richly kept grounds were a lush contrast to the stark silence in the city. The glittering rectangular shallow pool of water lined on either side by mosaic tiles and flanked by palm trees showed her strained reflection. She walked the concrete-tiled path laid out between the pool's edge and the perfectly cut lush lawn, her heart hammering against her rib cage.

Marble steps led to the enormous foyer with glinting mosaic floors, soaring, circular ceiling and, she couldn't help smiling, palm trees in giant pots.

There was so much to look at, so much to breathe in that the sights and sounds around her dulled the edge during the day. But at night, the grief pushed in with vehemence, pressing images of *him* growing up in this country.

She saw him in every tall, stunning man, remembered the pride and love with which he'd painted a picture of Behraat to her.

"You coming, Lauren?"

Her friend David had spent the past few days capturing footage about the recent riots in the city.

She looked up and averted her face as he pointed his camcorder at her. "Stop filming me, David. Is my asking to see the records of people who died in the riots so necessary to your documentary on Behraat?"

Her gaze moved past the reception area, taking in the spectacular fountain in the middle of the hall, the water shimmering golden against the light shed by the orange, filigreed dome.

A hum of activity went on behind the gleaming marble reception area.

Her rubber soles made no sound as she walked past the fountain toward the reception desk. The glass elevator pinged down, a group of men exiting.

A quiet hush descended over the activity. Her nape prickling, Lauren turned, the sudden shift in the very air around her raising goose bumps on her skin. Six men stood in a circle in front of the elevator, all dressed in the traditional long robes. One man, the tallest among the group, addressed the rest in Arabic.

His words washed over Lauren, the tenor of his tone harsh and unyielding. It whispered over her skin like a familiar caress.

Rubbing her palms over her midriff, she tried to quell the sudden shiver. She turned back toward David, who was filming the group of men with arrested attention. The tall man turned, bringing himself directly into her line of vision.

Lauren stilled, her heartbeat deafening to her ears.

Zafir.

The red-and-white headdress covered his hair, rendering his features starker than usual. His words resonated with authority, power, his mouth set into a hard line.

He was not dead.

Relief was like a storm, rippling and cascading over her. She wanted to throw her arms around him, touch the sharp angles of his face. She wanted to...

A cold chill seeped into her very bones even though she was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt and loose trousers to respect the cultural norms of Behraat.

Zafir was unharmed.

In fact, he'd never looked more in his element. Yet she hadn't heard a word from him in six weeks.

She moved toward the group, an incessant pounding in her head driving away every sane thought. Adrenaline laced with fury pumped through her. The man standing closest to her turned around, alerting her presence to the group. One by one, they all turned.

Her breath suspended in her throat, her hands shook. The few seconds stretched interminably. A hysterical bubble launched into her throat.

Zafir's gold-flecked gaze met hers, the sheer force of his personality slamming into her.

Everything else around her dulled as the explosive chemistry that had punctuated every moment of their affair sparked into life, a live wire yanking her closer.

There wasn't a trace of pleasure in his gaze.

No shock in it.

But there was no guilt either.

The fact that he felt no remorse whatsoever fueled her fury. She'd shed tears over him, she'd reduced herself to a shadow of worry over him and he didn't even feel guilt.

The men stared with interest as he stepped toward her. Two guards flanked him at a little distance.

Why did Zafir have guards?

The question shot through her and fell into nothingness like dust. His dark sensuality swathed her. Her skin shivered with awareness, her stomach churned with every step that they took toward each other.

The intoxicating power of his masculinity, her intimate knowledge of that leanly honed body, everything coiled around her, binding her immobile under his scrutiny. He stopped at arm's reach, his mouth a hard slash in that stunning face, the burnished, coppery skin a tight mask over his features.

A regal movement of his head, his nod was barely an acknowledgment and so much a dismissal. "Ms. Hamby, what brings you to Behraat?"

Chilling cold filled her veins.

Ms. Hamby? He was calling her Ms. Hamby? After everything they had shared, he spoke to her as if she was a stranger?

Every little hurt Lauren had patched over since she'd been a little girl ripped open at that indifference. "After the way you left, that's what you have to say to me?"

A taut nerve throbbed in his temple but that golden gaze remained infuriatingly sedate. He looked so impossibly remote, as harsh and bleak as the desert she'd heard so much about. "If you have a complaint to register with me," he said, as now a thread of temper flashed into his perfectly polite tone, "you need an appointment, Ms. Hamby. Like the rest of the world."

His dismissal scraped her raw with its politeness but she held on to her temper. *Somehow.* "An appointment? You're kidding me, right?"

"No. I do not...kid." A step closer and she could see something beneath that calm. Shock? Displeasure? Indifference? "Do not make a spectacle of yourself, Lauren."

A shard of pain ricocheted inside her, stealing her breath.

"Don't make a scene, Lauren."

"Grow up and understand that your parents have important careers, Lauren."

"Swallow your tears, Lauren."

Her heart beating a wild tattoo inside her chest, memories and voices swirling through her head like some miniature ghosts, Lauren covered the last step between her and Zafir and slapped him.

His jaw jerked back, the crack of the slap shattering the silence like a clap of thunder.

The sound of quick footsteps pierced the haze of her fury, her hand jarring painfully at the impact, her breathing rough. Angry commands spoken in Arabic rang around them.

But she...it was as if she was functioning in a world of her own.

Something ferocious gleamed in his eyes then. *Oh, God, what had she done?*

Caught in that flare, Lauren shivered, something hot twisting low in her belly. His long fingers dug into her forearms as he jerked her toward him, the scent of sandalwood and musk drenching her. "Of all the—"

An urgent whisper spoken in rapid Arabic rattled behind them. Zafir's fingers instantly relented. His gaze raked her, before the fire of his emotions slowly seeped out, settling that indifferent mask into that lethal face.

When those golden eyes met hers again, it was like looking at a stranger—a forbidding, dangerous, contemptuous stranger.

"Your Highness...let security deal with the woman."

Your Highness? Security?

The adrenaline ebbed away, leaving her cold.

Zafir barked out a command, something short and hard in Arabic and then stepped back.

Cold sweat trickled down her back as she looked around. The most unholy silence enveloped her, and everyone watched her with curiosity and contempt.

Two men with discreet-looking guns flanked her. "Zafir, wait," she called out, but he'd already turned his back on her.

Her gaze followed the elevator's ascent, but he didn't look at her, not once. She tried to step back, only to find her every move blocked.

What nightmare had she walked into? Where was David?

Trying to stem the panic bubbling inside her, she turned and noticed an older man who spoke to the guard. "What the hell is going on?"

The man's eyes chilled. "You're under arrest for attacking the Sheikh of Behraat."

Zafir Al Masood stalked out of the meeting with the High Council. His displeasure must have been evident in his face because even the most audacious members quickly shuffled out of his way.

For the first time in six weeks, the outrageous complaints from the council pricked him.

Who was the woman? How could a woman, a Western woman, an American at that, have such familiarity with him as to strike him? Was he going to bring the Western world's wrath on Behraat?

Was he going to doom Behraat for a woman like his father had done?

He entered the elevator, hit the button to hold it there.

Fury and frustration pumped in his veins as he sought to control his temper.

The glass walls around him reflected his image back at him, forcing him to take stock. Forcing him to swallow his bitterness, as he had done for the past six years.

Did they see a glimpse of his father, the great Rashid Al Masood, the man who had brought Behraat out of the dark ages, in him?

Would he be never allowed to forget that his father had only acknowledged him as his son when he had needed a different crown prince, thanks to his corrupted half brother Tariq?

Once upon a time, he would have been glad to hear that his father's blood flowed in his veins. But now...now that he was spending his life paying for his mistake.

He cursed the wretched High Council and its power to elect the High Sheikh. Maybe if the bunch of corrupt cowards had spoken up during Tariq's regime, Behraat wouldn't be in this state now.

But with Rashid's strict regulations blown apart, they had been busy stuffing their pockets with Tariq's bribes while he had ruined relations with neighboring countries, destroyed peace treaties and violated trade agreements.

Yet they used any reason to doubt *his* rule over Behraat, harped on and on about the separation of tribes from the state.

As if it was his mistake and not his father's.

Zafir headed straight to the situation room, determined to stomp them out. Much as he hated his father for bringing him up as a favored orphan, he couldn't turn a blind eye to Behraat. Even before he had learned about his birth, duty had been filled in his very blood.

This was his father's legacy to him.

Not love, not pride, not even the knowledge of his mother, but this infernal sense of duty toward Behraat.

Lauren's face on the huge plasma screen monitor brought him to a sudden halt.

Something twisted deep and hard in his gut...a hard thrum in his very muscle, an echo of a primal need that he couldn't fathom to this day.

That plump bottom lip caught between her teeth, her complexion paler than usual. Blue shadows marred the

beauty of wide-set black eyes. The scarf she had used earlier to cover her hair loosely was gone, her black hair cut to fall over her forehead, once again hiding her entire face from him.

The long-sleeved cotton T-shirt molded the curve of her breasts. She sat with her fingers entwined on top of the table, her posture straight, reckless defiance in every line.

Defiant and honest, sensuous and wary, from the moment he had set eyes on her, Lauren had ensnared him.

At his command, his special security force had locked her up, confiscated everything from her. Punishment meted out to anyone who was suspected of being a threat to his new rule. And all the evidence they had gathered since didn't bode well for her either.

But he couldn't shake off the betrayal, the hurt that had glittered when she had looked at him. He had wanted to kiss her. He'd wanted to plunder her mouth until the betrayal etched into her face turned into arousal.

"She planned the charade," Arif said in his matter-of-fact tone. "She clearly means to exploit your weakness in indulging in an affair with her. You should have mentioned her to me after you returned so that I—"

"No."

Still transfixed by the sight of her, Zafir scrubbed a hand over his face.

There was no place for regret. There was no place for softness, in his feelings or in his actions. There was no choice to be anyone but himself.

Already he'd made a mistake, somehow he'd let her get too close.

"What would be her motivation, Arif?" he asked the older man. His father's oldest friend, Arif was now his biggest ally.

"She walks around the trade center with a journalist friend who knew you would be present, Zafir. It's all planned," Arif spat out, with a vehemence that had been nurtured over a lifetime for women, foreign or otherwise.

Zafir remained quiet, giving the doubts that polluted his thoughts free rein.

The few members of staff present at the trade center had already been pledged into silence. He had offered an explanation to the High Council—to keep the peace for Behraat's sake.

Her bow-shaped mouth was pinched, her shoulders strained under the weight of her feigned defiance. "Did they find him?"

The older man's disquiet was answer enough.

Zafir switched off the monitor, taking away the temptation messing with his head.

"We need to contain this as soon as possible. If that video falls into the hands of the media..." Arif continued, letting his silence speak for the consequences.

"We might have a full-scale riot on our hands again," Zafir finished. Tariq had used too many women, bloated with power and Zafir couldn't be seen in the same light.

If they didn't find the video and contain it, what little trust he had gained of the people of Behraat could be blown to smithereens.

Already, the High Council was questioning his proposals for change, looking for ways to skew public perception of him. "I'll talk to her. No one else," he said, wondering if he had misjudged the first woman to mess with his head in...ever.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Paula Mendoza:

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