



AT THE SHEIKH'S BIDDING (Harlequin comics)

By Chantelle Shaw

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Chantelle Shaw enjoyed a happy childhood making up stories in her head. Always an avid reader, Chantelle discovered Mills & Boon as a teenager and during the times when her children refused to sleep, she would pace the floor with a baby in one hand and a book in the other! Twenty years later she decided to write one of her own. Writing takes up most of Chantelle's spare time, but she also enjoys gardening and walking. She doesn't find domestic chores so pleasurable!

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The Royal Palace in the desert kingdom of Qubbah.

Prince Zahir bin Kahlid al Muntassir swept through the palace towards King Kahlid's private quarters, the expression on his handsome face so grimly forbidding that the guards quickly jumped aside to allow him to pass. 'How is he?' he demanded, when his father's servant A'waan greeted him with a bow.

'Sleeping, sire—the doctor gave him a sedative and instructed that His Highness should be allowed to rest,' A'waan murmured, hovering anxiously in front of the door leading to the King's bedroom.

'It's all right, A'waan, I have no intention of disturbing him,' Zahir assured the servant. 'The news of Prince Faisal's death has been a great shock to all of us, but especially to my father.'

'His Highness is deeply saddened. He is not properly recovered from the virus he contracted recently, and I fear that the news will prove too much for him,' A'waan said gravely. 'Your father's one glimmer of joy is the discovery that he has a grandson—a child who is now an orphan.'

Zahir's jaw clenched as he fought to control his emotions while A'waan continued.

'It is His Highness's dearest wish that you should travel to England and bring the child back to Qubbah.'

'I am well aware of my father's wishes,' Zahir said tightly. He crossed to the window and stared out over the stunning formal gardens and the ornate fountains that splashed into an azure pool. Within the grounds of the palace the desert had been tamed, but beyond the walls of the twelfth-century fortress it stretched outward in an endless sea of scorching golden sands.

The setting sun was suspended like a huge golden orb, the sky around it streaked with shades of pink and red. He remembered the times he and Faisal had raced their horses across the sands, or released their falcons and watched them soar across the dense blue sky. More than brothers, they had been the best of friends, but the bond between them had been broken—and all because they had both fallen in love with the same woman. Zahir's brows drew together in a slashing frown. *Love*, he had discovered, *was a destructive emotion and he would never allow it to rule his heart or mind again.*

A'waan spoke again. 'As you know, your father always hoped to be reconciled with his eldest son, and that, on his death the Prince would return to Qubbah to rule. But now Prince Faisal is dead, and there is unrest in the kingdom while the people wait for the King to announce his successor. Forgive me for my presumption...' the elderly servant shifted nervously beneath Zahir's narrow-eyed stare '...but I know His Highness longs for you to appoint a deputy to head your business interests in America, so that you can settle

permanently in Qubbah—and take a wife. Now, more than ever, it is your duty, sire.'

Zahir threw back his head proudly and glared at the servant. 'I do not need lessons from you on my duty,' he snapped coldly. 'You forget your place, A'waan.' He understood only too well that his brother's death meant that from now on his life would no longer be his own. He would not shirk his responsibility to the kingdom his family had ruled for generations—but marriage was a different matter. 'If you remember, I was about to be married six years ago, to a woman of my father's choosing—and what a debacle that turned out to be. I will marry when I am good and ready.' He swung abruptly away from the window and strode across the room, pausing briefly to glance back at the servant. 'When my father wakes, tell him I have gone to England.'

Ingledean House—North Yorkshire Moors

'Erin! There's a Gordon Straker here to see you,' announced Alice Trent, cook and housekeeper at Ingledean House, when Erin walked into the kitchen. 'He says he's Faisal's solicitor, and he mentioned something about the will.'

'Oh, yes.' Erin nodded. 'I spoke to him on the phone a couple of days ago and he said he would be travelling up from London.'

'Well, he's waiting in the library.' Alice paused in her task of peeling potatoes and stared at Erin's dishevelled appearance. 'What on earth have you been doing? You look as though you've been down a coal mine.'

'Clearing out the big spare bedroom.' Erin glanced ruefully at the streaks of dust on her jeans. 'Kazim's nursery is too small to store all his toys now that he's sleeping in a proper bed. The spare room will make a perfect playroom. I need to keep busy,' she added defensively, when Alice's brows lifted.

It was fine when Kazim was awake, keeping a lively three-year-old entertained took up all her time, but she had come to dread his afternoon nap—an hour of peace and solitude that gave her time to think.

It was almost three weeks since Faisal's funeral. His death had been expected—he had told her a year ago that the tumour on his brain was inoperable—and she was glad that he was now at peace, perhaps reunited with his beloved Maryam. But he had been her friend; she missed him, and she could not stem the feeling of panic that regularly swept through her whenever she thought about the future. Kazim's well-being was totally her responsibility now, and she was terrified that she would somehow let him down.

She turned to watch the toddler, who had preceded her into the kitchen and was now busy pulling open the cupboards and investigating their contents. Kazim was singing 'The Wheels on the Bus', and Erin's heart clenched at the sound of his innocent, high-pitched voice. He'd asked for Faisal a few times, but had seemed to understand when she'd gently explained that Daddy had fallen asleep for ever.

It had been the hardest thing she had ever had to do in her life, and the memory of Kazim's grave little face as he had sat on her knee still brought tears to her eyes. But, although he had been a little more clingy than usual, he seemed to have accepted the news remarkably well—perhaps because he was too young to comprehend that he was now totally alone in the world.

But he is not alone, Erin thought fiercely. True, he had no living relatives, but he had her, and she would love him and protect him for as long as he needed her—just as she had promised his father.

'I've made some tea.' Alice's voice broke into her thoughts. 'If you want to take it up, I'll keep an eye on Kazim.'

Erin glanced at the tray. 'Why have you set out three cups, Alice?'

'Mr Straker has brought someone with him. Gave me quite a turn, actually, when he walked through the front door—for a moment I thought he was Faisal's ghost.' The cook gave a self-conscious laugh. 'I expect it was just a trick of the light.'

He's obviously from the Middle East—rather gorgeous; you know, tall, dark and indecently handsome. And his features did remind me of the master,' she added slowly. 'Do you think he could be a relative?'

An inexplicable feeling of unease settled in the pit of Erin's stomach. 'Faisal had no family,' she explained quickly. 'I don't know who this man is, but he's probably one of Faisal's business associates. I'd better go up and meet them,' she said, picking up the tray.

Alice cast a disparaging look at her old clothes. 'I would suggest you go and change first, but there's no time. It's snowing again, and I know Mr Straker is anxious to get back to town before the weather closes in.'

Erin hurried out of the kitchen, and as she crossed the oak-panelled hall she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror and grimaced. Her faded jeans and tee shirt were grubbier than she'd realised, and her hair, which she had secured in a long plait, had worked loose, so that riotous stray curls were framing her face. But it was unlikely that Gordon Straker or his companion would have any interest in her appearance, she told herself as she balanced the tray on one hand and opened the library door—coming to such an abrupt halt that the delicate bone china cups rattled precariously on their saucers.

A man was standing by the window, staring out over the bleak view of the moors. For a few seconds her heart seemed to stop beating, and she understood what Alice had meant when she'd said she had thought she seen Faisal's ghost. The stranger's profile was achingly familiar, as was his silky black hair and olive-gold skin. But then he turned his head—and common sense replaced her wild flight of imagination.

This man was no spectre, he was very much alive. And his resemblance to Faisal was simply due to his dark colouring and exotic looks, she told herself impatiently. He was wearing a superbly tailored dark grey suit that accentuated his lean, hard body, and Erin was immediately struck by his height, estimating that he must be five or six inches over six feet tall. Impressive broad shoulders indicated an awesome degree of strength and power, but it was his face that trapped her gaze and caused her heart to thud painfully beneath her ribcage.

His hair was cropped uncompromisingly short, and his eyes were as dark as midnight beneath heavy black brows. His nose was slightly hooked, but that did not detract from the perfection of his sculpted face with its sharply delineated cheekbones and square, determined jaw. He was the epitome of masculine beauty, she thought helplessly, her breath catching in her throat. He was so gorgeous he was almost unreal, as if he had been airbrushed to perfection—but he wasn't an image from a magazine. He was a flesh-and-blood man, and she was startled by the effect he had on her.

The man subjected her to a long, cool stare and Erin felt herself blush. 'Hello, I've brought some tea. You're probably freezing. The central heating system here at Ingledean is antiquated.'

Black eyebrows winged upwards and her cheeks burned hotter. The man's resemblance to Faisal could not be denied—but her feelings for Faisal had been based on friendship and affection. Neither he nor any other man had ever evoked this shocking, wildfire sexual desire that was coursing through her veins. She felt unnerved by the stranger's raw masculinity, and she realised that she was gaping at him. Forcing herself to breathe normally, she walked across to the d...

Users Review

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