
The War, Love, & Harmony Series: Book 4

The Sheik's Angry Bride

By Elizabeth Lennox

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Excerpt from The Sheik's Angry Bride, Book 4 in The War, Love, and Harmony Series

Layla smoothed the long, black gloves up over her arms and elbows, ignoring the pains in her stomach. She would not give in to the nausea. This is what she had been trained for. This moment, this role...all her life she'd been told that this was her purpose. Everything she'd trained for her whole life was for this moment. All details of the contract negotiated, each aspect of the agreement argued about and finalized, every line of the contract ultimately signed by the appropriate people. Not by her, of course! No, she hadn't been called into any office to sign the agreement. But that didn't matter. This moment represented everything she'd been trained for since birth.

She took a deep breath and focused all of her attention on ensuring that there were no wrinkles in her dress or her gloves, that the diamond bracelet on her wrist didn't show the clasp and refused to contemplate what was about to happen. Her gloved hand reached up and smoothed her hair, then stopped. There was so much hairspray on her right now, the friction of touching it in any way might light her head on fire.

Layla might have smiled at the idea if she weren't so terrified inside. That didn't stop the image from forming though. She could just picture her fiancé's face when he walked into this meeting room only to discover a ball of flames instead of his fiancée. Of course, Layla would stand perfectly upright, a smile of greeting on her overly made up features as she bowed and tried not to let the flames from her hair touch any of the medals on her intended's immaculate and exalted chest. But that was what she'd been trained all of her life for – to look acceptable at every moment of the day and produce heirs. No other reason – just to adorn her husband's arm and act as a walking womb.

A burst of hysterical laughter threatened but she took a deep breath, trying hard to remain composed despite her mind's overly active imagination at work right at the moment.

It wouldn't do for her to be caught laughing when she met her future husband for the first timeF she thought and then cringed inwardly because even her inner dialogue now sounded like her mother, admonishing her for being silly. Regardless, she pulled her shoulders back and took a deep breath, trying to snap out of this terror she was feeling. No, it definitely wouldn't do to appear to be smiling. And laughing? Out of the question, she told herself mentally. A pleasant expression was all that was needed during this meeting. Anything more might offend, anything less my insult.

Over and over, this had been drilled into her throughout her life to the point where she now could breathe in, breathe out, and then look up with the perfectly serene expression on her face that she'd been forced to practice while growing up.

She was also painfully aware that smiling too brightly might cause her makeup to crack. Goodness, wouldn't that be silly? She could see the headlines tomorrow morning... "A chunk of the princess' face fell to the floor after she laughed!"

No, she mentally shook herself. That wouldn't do, either. Serenity, she chanted to herself. She'd practiced this look in the mirror so often, it should come naturally to her by now. Breathe in. Breathe out. Lift the chin. Hands calm. Spine straight. And don't throw up on the man! For goodness sake, don't throw up!

The doors at the other end of the hallway opened up and she pulled her shoulders back. Showtime, she thought, and suppressed the resentment that was welling up inside of her.

She waited patiently, her light blue eyes glancing across each man's face as he stepped through the doors, wondering if that was her future husband. She was relieved to be wearing the high necked, black satin sheath dress so that her pounding heart wouldn't be noticed. This was the night her hopes and dreams were to die. This was the night when all of her silly girl fantasies were obliterated.

This was the night when she met her new owner.

Garon stepped through the double doors just as his guards separated to the right and left. His eyes moved through the crowd of people standing inside the room, taking it all in. But his gaze skidded to a screeching halt as he took in the trembling beauty standing in the middle of the room. There was no way he could miss the fact that this was his bride. The other guests, including her mother and father, were all standing near the walls while this stunning beauty stood in the center watching him with her lovely fairy eyes and soft, full lips, a slender figure clad all in black from her neck right down to her dainty toes and her long fingers.

Two things occurred to him at that moment. The first was that his exquisite fiancée had come to their first meeting dressed for a funeral which amused him. He had no doubt that the message was intended.

But the other issue was this woman's beauty, which was quite startling. He'd seen formal pictures of her, of course. The negotiations for this marriage had taken place over the past several months so he had known what Layla Alfarsi looked like. But he was startled by the impact of her, which was not something he had anticipated. He wanted to be attracted to his wife, that was a given. What he hadn't foreseen were the other reactions that hit him like a punch in the gut.

This feeling, this instinctual predatory anticipation that surged up inside of him as he approached his future bride was not anticipated. And he wasn't sure it was welcome either.

The entire reason for this meeting was to get to know his bride before the wedding. Not to toss her over his shoulder so he could carry her away to a private place and have his way with her.

Reining in his near blinding need to possess this woman, he stopped directly in front of her. Looking down at her, he was surprised at how small she felt. According to the dossier he'd been given on Layla Alfarsi, she was supposed to be five feet, five inches tall. But this woman, even in heels, barely came to his shoulder. Her slight form, her willowy figure, probably made her appear smaller, he thought.

"Good evening, Layla," he started off. He reached down and took her hand, irritated with the long gloves. He wanted to rip them off of her, to feel her soft skin and explore those pink lips. But she might get offended by that, he supposed.

All in due time, he reminded himself. Very soon, this woman would be his. And he could explore all of that trembling courage at his leisure.

"Good evening, Your Highness," she replied, dipping into a curtsy and bowing her head.

Layla couldn't believe how hard it was to rise from that simple gesture but her legs were trembling and her heart pounding so hard, she was actually worried that she might fall onto the floor at this man's feet. He must have sensed her trepidation because his hand tightened on her fingers, helping her to rise out of the curtsy. When she was once more standing in front of him, she knew that the polite thing to do was to thank him silently but she simply couldn't look up at him. Not this man!

He was too...everything! Shock waves rocketed throughout her body as the heat from his hand seemed to be melting the silk of her black gloves where he continued to touch her. She'd tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn't release her fingers.

Layla felt trapped by this man. He was barely touching her but there was something about him, a sense deep inside of her that told her she should run as fast and as hard as she could away from him.

But her training kicked in once more and she straightened her shoulders. Waiting. And waiting. In fact, everyone in the room seemed to be silent, waiting.

"We will stand here all night, my beauty, until you look at me," he told her in a voice that only she could hear.

Layla's heart, already pounding fast, went into triple time with his words. Look at him? She wanted to run away! She wanted to hide behind the enormous plant in the

corner. She wanted to whip her hand out from his grasp and step backwards so there was more space between the two of them. She absolutely did not want to look up at him.

But this was her duty. He'd commanded, she must obey. Gritting her teeth, she forced her eyes higher. And higher! Goodness, he was tall!

When her blue eyes finally met his, that horrible trembling increased even more. His black gaze looked down at her and that need to flee, to hide, intensified. But something else also rose up. Something that saved her from making a fool of herself and bringing dishonor upon her family.

Anger!

Oh, the wonderful, heat-encouraging, bubbling anger was her saving grace. Gritting her teeth, she stared right back at this man, daring him to...to do whatever it was he might do! She had no idea of his intentions, nor was she going to ask. She simply waited for him, challenging him with her blue eyes as they fought a battle of wills.

Garon's stomach muscles clenched and his body reacted to that angry gaze. Until a few months ago, he'd never really contemplated his wife and the traits he might want in that woman. Nor had there been any discussion during the negotiations about Layla's preferences, her temperament. He was simply assured that she had been raised to know her duty, her responsibilities. Testing had been done to ensure her fertility and that was the end of that conversation. All the negotiations from that point on were monetary and political. The exchange of this woman from her family to his would be a boon to both sides of the negotiating table.

Every feral and predatory cell in his body reacted to her challenge, to those striking, blue eyes glaring up at him. He wanted to both subdue her rebellion while at the same time, set her passion free. The unexpected pleasure he found in just looking at her shot through him and he had to stop himself from ordering everyone out of the room but this one woman.

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Excerpt from The Sheik's Blackmailed Bride, Book 5 in The War, Love, and Harmony Series

Chapter 1

“Have you contacted Faris and put my proposal to her?” Sheik Dassar bin Sarook asked, his eyes snapping while he walked to his next meeting. Faris was his current mistress, a beautiful woman who would be an adequate wife. He wasn’t sure about mother, but he could always hire someone to act as nanny after children were born.

Hasif, the sheik’s harried chief advisor, hustled to keep up with his employer’s longer stride. Hasif was shorter by a foot and severely overweight, but he was a brilliant man when it came to details, allowing Dassar to focus on the bigger picture for Altair. After the seemingly relentless ten-year war, there was so much to do in order to bring prosperity back to Altair, and Dassar was not going to make his people suffer any more than they had to. Already, the economy was starting to come back to life and people were becoming more secure in their future.

The peace treaty with his former adversaries was a good one and Dassar was determined to put the final requirements into place as quickly as possible. Marry and secure succession with an heir. That was the plan for all four of them and Dassar wanted to finalize that issue as quickly as possible so his people knew what to expect. He knew that both Zahir and Garon had found women that were both beautiful and generous of spirit. He didn’t think he would be that lucky and just wanted to find a wife that would fulfill the role. Someone outside of Altair and the other three countries so that the possibility of war breaking out wouldn’t happen again.

“If I might be so bold,” Hasif put in, huffing a bit as they rounded the corner of the palace. “Perhaps there might be a better answer to the need than the lovely Faris.” Hasif had to bite the side of his lip to keep himself from cringing as he said the next words about the most selfish woman he’d ever met in his life. “I know she would be eminently eligible for the role of your wife, but I’m just putting an idea out there that perhaps there might be a better solution.”

Dassar stopped and looked down at his advisor, causing the man to almost run into him with the unexpected stop. “Better solution? Faris is beautiful and composed, exactly what Altair needs.” And he wouldn’t fall in love with her, he thought. Exactly what *he* needed for a queen.

Hasif took pains to keep his expression blank. Any sort of disagreement might push this hard and tough man to do the opposite. “I agree, Your Highness,” he replied,

treading carefully since they were speaking about the man's current mistress. But Dassar went through women like some men changed ties. It wasn't that he was promiscuous, although he certainly had a way with the ladies. Charm and harsh good looks, not to mention extreme wealth and absolute power in his country were potent aphrodisiacs. The women flocked to him. Just by raising his finger, women almost ran to him, eager to warm his bed.

Hasif would admit that the woman in question was indeed lovely, but Faris was also cold and self-centered. She was spiteful to the palace staff and more intent on spending as much of her lover's massive wealth as she possibly could. When she wasn't catering to Dassar's every need in the bedroom, she was barking orders at the palace staff, interfering with Altair policy and being one of the most demanding, rude, inconsiderate women Hasif had ever had the misfortune to endure. The only break from this treatment was when the woman flew in Dassar's personal jet to one of the clothing capitals of the world to spend his money.

Hasif had worked hard to come up with an alternative for Dassar's marriage problem, and he hoped he'd found a good solution.

"Although Faris is indeed lovely, I'm not sure that she would be accepted by your people with open arms." He said that carefully, not sure how close Dassar was to the woman. If history had repeated itself, the lovely and evil Faris should have been on her way out the door a month ago. Hasif suspected that the only reason Dassar hadn't grown bored with her was because of the mutual agreement with the other three countries for each of their leaders to marry quickly and produce that heir. Since two of those rulers were already happily married, the pressure was on to do the same in Altair.

Hasif suspected that Faris knew about the marriage requirement as well, which was why she was so confident about her current role. And also why she'd become extra demanding lately.

The woman was pure evil, Hasif thought. It was imperative that Dassar find a woman with a heart inside of her chest and not just a cash register. After all the years of war, all the sacrifices his ruler made in order to protect the interests of Altair, Dassar deserved someone who would love him with all of her heart. Hasif was of the opinion that Faris, no matter how lovely she might be, could only love herself and the things she could earn from her time in Dassar's bed. And Hasif seriously doubted that Faris would trouble herself to bear Dassar an heir. The woman would manipulate events so that her outstanding figure remained intact – not destroyed by the potential ravages of pregnancy and birth.

And so he'd come up with another option.

“Why do you think she won’t be accepted?” Dassar demanded, irritated that the issue had not been resolved already. He had too many things to do with his time; worrying about his marriage was not something he wanted to waste any time on.

Again, Hasif chose his words carefully. “She might be a bit harsh until one gets to know her softer side,” Hasif said carefully, not mentioning that there wasn’t a softer side to that horrible woman. “But I have another option. I have a woman who might be a better fit for this role. Someone a bit more docile and who...”

“Who is she?” Dassar demanded. If Hasif was doubtful that Faris could fulfill the role of his queen, then there was a legitimate reason for caution and looking at other possible candidates.

Hasif handed Dassar a file. “Read through this information, Your Highness. I think that this woman might be a perfect option.”

Dassar took the file but didn’t open it. “Fine. I’ll read through it later. What’s going on with the refinery in the south?” he asked, moving again towards his next meeting. And just that quickly, his marriage was pushed aside so that he could concentrate on more important issues.

The next meeting was just as tedious as the previous one and Dassar grew impatient with the arguing over the oil revenue. “Enough!” he called out. He opened the file in front of him, thinking that it was the file that contained the list of options for the refinery. But instead, his eyes were captured by a set of startling blue eyes surrounded by a cloud of platinum-blond hair. The lighting caused the blond tresses to look almost white and sharpened the contrast to the blue eyes. Her skin was pale with rosy cheeks, bringing to mind the image of a soft, English rose with blush colors and a pale center.

His eyes skimmed through the information, quickly absorbing the details. Hasif had done an excellent job of gathering intel on the woman and Dassar couldn’t deny that he was intrigued. His initial reaction was to reject the idea. This woman, Dassar looked at the top of the page for her name, this Luna Montgomery, was too soft, too tender. She’d never make it in this world. Altair was a beautiful country and in another ten years, he would ensure that it was peaceful and economically stable. But the war had destroyed a great deal of the country’s infrastructure. It was a difficult life here and there was a great deal to rebuild. Palace politics and intrigue alone could do in the average woman with a sensitive heart.

This Luna woman was only twenty-four years old. Not old enough, he thought and flipped the page. Reading through the letter she’d sent, he shook his head. She was pleading with him for a six-month reprieve for her little town in Central Virginia. Apparently, the recent recession had hurt the shopkeepers and most, if not all of them,

were unable to make payments on their loans, loans which he owned since he owned the bank as well. He had to give her credit though. Not many people had figured out that he was the owner of that particular bank. It wasn't as if he kept it a secret, but it wasn't advertised either.

She herself owned the ten-room inn and, although she'd kept up with her loan payments, he read between the lines and knew that she was having a hard time as well. He flipped to the next page and, sure enough, a report on her financials was right there. Hasif was thorough. Dassar once again had to give his chief advisor credit for knowing all of the details Dassar would require for his plan to work.

He flipped through some other pages, reading about her volunteer work, the animals she kept as pets and even the herbs she grew in her garden which were used in the recipes she baked for her small bed and breakfast inn. The woman was creative and had grown her business over the years. Unfortunately, she'd extensively renovated and expanded her inn's kitchen right before the recession hit. Although the economy was coming back and guests were starting to patronize her business once again, they weren't coming back fast enough for her to keep up with the hefty payment schedule.

She was beautiful, he thought, his thumb rubbing along the picture as if it were actually her skin.

But not for him, he thought and snapped the file closed. Looking up at the men waiting expectantly at the conference room table, he nodded, pretending that he hadn't just completely lost the thread of the conversation while reading through a profile on a stunningly beautiful woman. Clearing his head of the crazy idea of making such a soft, lovely and gentle woman his bride, he abruptly said, "Send me the list and we'll break down the top five." With that, he walked out of the conference room, holding onto both the file as well as the list of priorities for the revenues discussed in that meeting.

"Set up a meeting," he told Hasif, tucking the file underneath his arm. That statement in itself was surprising since he'd just rejected the idea because the woman seemed too soft and delicate. But his next words shocked even himself. "We'll fly out this weekend to finalize the issue. Ensure that extra guards are brought up to my training standards so that she has adequate protection after the wedding."

With that, Dassar moved on to the next issue on his day's agenda, once again pushing the issue of his impending nuptials out of his mind.

He was oblivious to the glee that briefly shone on his chief advisor's normally bland features with the dramatic decision.

Hasif moved off in the opposite direction, eager to tell the palace staff to pack up Faris' belongings. He was going to tell her as soon as he could find her that the sheik no longer had need of her services.

Chapter 2

"It isn't going to work," Barry said, handing her a bag of chicken feed.

"Of course it's going to work," Luna replied, accepting the bag and lugging it over her shoulder out of the shed. "The man isn't going to shut down the entire town."

"No, but he's probably going to sell off the assets so he can recoup his money." Barry walked behind her, wishing the Lovely Luna, as he referred to her in his mind, would let him do the heavy lifting for her. She was too slender, too slight of build to be lugging around those forty-pound bags of chicken feed.

Barry watched, unaware of the devotion that was shining through his eyes as he watched Luna spread the chicken feed out across the yard. She was sweet and wonderful and if she would only come out to dinner with him, he was sure he could prove to her that they could make it work.

"The whole town is gathering tonight to discuss the issue. It just doesn't make sense that he would evict an entire town, Barry." Luna bit her lip, hoping that her thinking was on target. She'd argued with everyone at last month's town meeting, telling them to at least give her plan a chance. Now she just had to prove that there was good in the world. She had to prove that this sheik guy was more than just a leader of a war-torn country. She knew that, deep down inside, everyone had a heart. Sometimes, it was just buried too deeply for a person to recognize that heart. This town had shown her that. Every person around this small town had taken her in and given her shelter in one way or another when she'd arrived here nine years ago. Ms. Prescott helped her catch up on all the math she'd missed, Barry's father had helped her with her readings skills, which were severely lacking because...well, because she'd fallen far behind in school back in New York.

Even her place here at the inn was because of the two ladies who had basically adopted her, watched over her, helped her heal. She'd come to this town broken and every person around had helped her to heal. So she wasn't going to give in until she gave back to them a little of what they'd done for her. She'd lost hope when she'd heard that her mother was gone. They'd given her a home, food, clothing and, most of all, hope. Hope in the goodness of the world.

The bank manager had already rejected her request. But she'd gone above him, only to be turned down by the odiously rude bank director. Never one to give up, she'd discovered that some sheik guy from that crazy country that had been at war for the past ten years actually owned the bank. So she'd tried one more time. So far, she hadn't received a rejection, so Luna was hopeful that there might be good news soon. No news meant no rejection, so she wasn't giving up hope.

"I don't have time to worry about it today though. Tonight is soon enough. I have a full house over the next few days," she told him. Turning to smile at Barry, she poured the rest of the bag of feed into the container, which would keep the chickens out but make tomorrow's feeding a bit easier. "And I'll make sure to encourage everyone to make their way to your art studio. Okay? See?" she said as she locked the bin and headed towards the kitchens again. "Everything is going to work out. A full house, lots of baked goods to sell, great art in your windows and even Mary Ann has doubled her chocolate goods for the weekend. Even she's optimistic that it will all work out. So why are you worrying?"

Barry shook his head as he watched Luna take off her boots, placing them carefully by the kitchen doorway. "You're just not realistic about how business works, Luna. I mean, why would the guy give us another chance?"

Luna was trying very hard not to lose patience with Barry's doom and gloom attitude, but it was growing tiresome. The man really was a worry-wart. Things worked out. They always worked out! She was living proof that things worked out when goodness and kindness prevailed. "Why wouldn't he? He's a businessman, right?"

"That is correct," a deep voice said from the kitchen doorway.

Luna spun around, a smile of greeting on her face. Which immediately froze when she caught sight of the man. He wasn't so much as standing in her doorway as overwhelming that limited space with his enormous size! She'd never seen a man as large and muscular as this man. Or as overtly terrifying either!

"Oh wow!" she whispered, taking in the tall, gorgeous man with shoulders that stretched across the expanse of the doorway. He actually had to duck as he walked into the room so that his head wouldn't smack into the top. And those eyes! Goodness, she looked up into those eyes and felt her heart beat faster. They were dark and mysterious and something just shot right through her. She could lose herself in those eyes, she thought.

Something nudged her arm but she didn't think anything of it, too amazed at the male specimen walking closer to her. But when Barry nudged her harder, she swung around to glare at him. Barry, in turn, looked at her pointedly.

Guests! “Oh! Right!” she gasped and snapped back to attention. “Right. Welcome!” she gushed. “I’m Luna Montgomery and welcome to the Moonside Inn,” she told him. “Do you have reservations?” She gasped, “Oh, no! I hope you have reservations because otherwise, I might have to...” she shook her head. “No. I’m sure that everyone won’t show up. We’ll figure something out.”

“We have reservations,” the man standing in front of her said smoothly.

Dassar looked down at the blond woman and thought she was even more lovely in person. He hadn’t thought that reality could live up to that picture of her smiling into the sunshine, but he had been wrong. This woman with her bright, blue eyes and platinum hair, she was simply beautiful. Her cheeks were the perfect color of a pink rose, a color which was only enhanced when she realized she’d been staring at him.

“Yes. Right!” she said again, receiving yet another nudge from Barry. “Stop that,” she whispered furiously and stepped out of Barry’s range so he couldn’t nudge her again. “Anyway,” she said, smiling up at the man. He really was amazingly attractive. That thin nose didn’t detract from his looks in any way, she thought. And his hard jawline only made him look tougher in some way. Not at all like a male model. In fact, those pretty boys couldn’t even come close to this man’s raw, masculine appeal. Yes, they could take lessons from this man on how to appear manly.

“Luna!”

Luna jumped and turned to glare at Barry once again. “What?” she hissed.

“Stop staring,” he admonished openly, the jealousy he was feeling hard to hide. Even Barry knew that he couldn’t compare to this behemoth in the masculinity department, so he was eager for his Lovely Luna to get down to business so that the man would get out of her kitchen.

“I wasn’t...” she looked up at the man, then blushed as she noticed he was still standing there, waiting for her to greet him correctly. “Oh. Well, so I am,” she said out loud. “Anyway, yes...right. You have reservations.” She wiped her hands on her jeans, wishing she was wearing something prettier, nicer, to greet this man. Or at least shoes, she thought and padded in her socks. She’d taken her boots off by the kitchen doorway, not wanting to track mud through her nice, clean kitchen. “This way,” she told him and tried to slip past him. But he was too big and she had to halt, her eyes glancing up at him once again. “I can’t get by,” she whispered, her pulse pounding in her chest as her knees started to wobble. And it was all this man’s fault!

Dassar looked down at the lovely woman, amusement shining out of his eyes. She was delightful, he thought. So innocent and naïve. Every thought was right there in her eyes and those blushes gave away her emotions too easily. No, this was not a good idea,

he told himself. So why was he shifting slightly, giving her room to move into the receiving area of the inn?

She hesitated because he hadn't moved enough. And he should be a gentleman and give her more space, but he wanted to feel her softness just once before he left. She smelled good, he realized as she squeezed by him in the close confines of the kitchen doorway. She smelled like fresh air and...lemons.

Luna tried very hard not to touch this man, but it was impossible not to feel the hard power under her fingers as she slipped by him, her hands automatically shifting out to balance herself as she moved past him. "If you'll follow me, I'll get..." she looked around, startled by the large group of men standing in her receiving area. They all wore serious expressions, all were dressed in dark suits, although none looked as perfectly tailored as the tall man's suit, but they all looked very...manly.

"Right, I'll just get everyone checked in. You're under one reservation?" she asked, not sure what was going on. She was getting a dangerous vibe and wasn't sure what to make of it. Normally she trusted her instincts even though they'd led her astray on some occasions.

But in this instance, with the tall, sexy man right behind her, she was too flustered to listen to her instincts. She was actually too flustered to hold the pen she tried to pick up, but she finally managed to wrap her fingers around the pen, only to realize that she needed to check everyone in through the computer on the front desk. Dropping the pen, she pressed several buttons. It took her a few painful moments because her fingers had suddenly turned into all thumbs and she'd double hit one key and completely missed the key she was aiming for. It was all terribly embarrassing since normally, she was quite efficient. It was only because the enormous man was crowding her, standing so closely behind her that she could actually feel the heat of his body through the sweatshirt she was wearing. And she had absolutely no idea how to politely ask him to move away.

She pulled up the information for this weekend's guest reservations. "Um...Mr. Smith?" she asked, looking up.

A short, chubby man with merry eyes and a ready smile stepped forward. "That would be all of us. I made the reservation under that name to protect our identities."

Luna blinked, not sure what to make of that statement. "Okay. Well, I can keep a secret," she told the man. "Did you want to..." she thought quickly. Then smiled. "I'm sorry, but this is a bit clandestine. Normally people who want to hide their identities are trying to..." she looked around, about to make a teasing joke about how people come to hotels under the name "Smith" in order to have affairs. But as she took in the stern, intimidating expressions on each of the men's faces, she thought better of it. "Never

mind,” she told the man. Pressing a few more buttons. “I just need a credit card to cover incidentals,” she told him. “And you’ve booked all ten rooms, is that correct?”

“That’s correct,” the man said, handing her a credit card under the name John Smith.

Luna looked at the card, immediately becoming suspicious. But she rang the card through and, sure enough, it came up as clear. Since all of the rooms had been paid for in advance, she wasn’t sure what to say. “Okay then, here are the keys,” she said, looking around. “Do you know who will be staying in each of the rooms?”

“We’ll sort it out,” he said. “Which is the best room?” he asked.

Luna blinked, berating herself for not pointing that out before she’d handed the man all of the keys. Her only excuse was that she was too flustered with the gorgeous guy behind her. She could feel his eyes on her, suspected that he knew she was wearing her Bugs Bunny underwear and wished she’d worn her black lace. But those things itched and Bugs was more fun.

Ugh! Concentrate, she told herself.

Her fingers shook as she pulled the appropriate key out of the stack. “This is the King’s room,” she explained. “It has a beautiful four poster bed, a fireplace and a separate sitting room. It’s really lovely.” She went on to explain the other rooms and their advantages and locations before the man bowed and stepped back.

“You have been very helpful.”

She smiled gratefully. Breathing a sigh of relief that the check in process was finally over. “Dinner will be served starting at six o’clock across the street. There is a bar over to your left if you’d like drinks or coffee, tea, hot chocolate,” she finished that one, feeling silly for saying that. These men definitely didn’t drink hot chocolate. And she was pretty sure that none would enjoy the marshmallows that she kept on hand for anyone who really did like hot chocolate. She might be the only one in the room right now who would partake of that particular treat.

Taking a deep breath, she fought to keep her voice positive even though she’d very much like to duck under the front desk and wait until the big guy behind her had decided to move away and torment his next victim with his brooding x-ray vision. “Breakfast will be served tomorrow morning from seven until eleven and there are cookies and scones for an afternoon treat.” She smiled brightly, feeling better now that she was on firmer territory. Who didn’t like cookies and scones? Everyone loved them!

She brightened her smile, trying to appear professional and polite, despite her wobbly knees. “And if there is anything that you need, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

The men disappeared, some going upstairs swiftly, others moving towards the back of the inn and several more moved outside. She saw the outside men fan out and it looked suspiciously like they were looking for criminals. In her yard? The worst they might find was Dorothy, her lazy hound dog or Lucifer, the cat that came and went whenever he wanted food. This was a small town with only a few people living and working here. If one were to drive a couple of miles down the road, they would come to a bigger commercial area filled with all of the big box stores. But this town was small and they worked hard to keep it that way. There was an old-time feel to the shops that were enhanced by their location close to the various historical sites around the area.

It took less than three minutes for the room to clear out, but Luna knew that the man who had never been far from her mind was still behind her. Still staring at her butt. Darn it, she should have worn the black lace no matter how itchy they were.

“How long are you going to ignore me?” the man asked, amusement apparent in his deep voice.

Luna sighed and turned around, her hands clutching the front desk behind her for support. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be rude. It’s just that...” she wasn’t sure what to say. “You are the sexiest thing that has ever crossed my path” just didn’t seem like such a sophisticated thing to utter. This man looked like he ate monsters for breakfast, he was just that tough looking.

“Have a drink with me,” he commanded and took her hand, leading her into the small sitting room. At one end of the room was a wooden bar, but it was closed since it was only eleven o’clock in the morning. But there was a coffee and tea service sitting out and she walked over to it, pouring him a cup of coffee. “How do you take it?” she asked, setting the delicate cup and saucer down on the tray table because the cup was clattering from her nervousness.

“You’re nervous,” he said and took the coffee urn, pouring her a cup and handing it to her. “Why?” he asked when they were both sitting down.

Luna didn’t have the heart to tell him that she didn’t drink coffee. She’d always found the taste too harsh. Bitter almost. So she set the cup on the small table beside her chair and rested her hands in her lap. “I’m sorry,” she replied. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It isn’t like I haven’t had men in the house before,” she said, then stopped, looking across the small expanse at him, shocked at what she’d just said. “I mean...of course I haven’t *been* with a man in the house...” her eyes closed and she shook her head. “I mean...” she wasn’t sure what she meant any longer and when his laughter hit her, she just stopped talking.

When his laughter died down, he looked at her with amusement still shining through his dark eyes. “I suspect that I know what you mean, but I’m glad to hear that you don’t normally carry on with men who stay at this beautiful inn. There must be ample opportunities for you to socialize though.”

Luna breathed a sigh of relief, glad that he was letting her off the hook even though she was flubbing her lame attempt at sophisticated conversation. She simply wasn’t a sophisticated kind of woman. She was just down to earth, what-you-see-is-what-you-get type of person. “No. Not really. The inn takes up a great deal of my time.”

Dassar couldn’t believe that this woman, with her silver hair and her bright, eager eyes with the slanting, cat-like glance, hadn’t been propositioned by numerous men over the years. She was too beautiful, too enticing. “But the other guests who come to stay overnight, surely some have been interested.”

She shook her head. “No. This is an out of the way location. Anyone coming here is staying for a romantic getaway with their significant other,” she smiled. “So the men are mostly taken.”

“Good to know. And what about your boyfriend?” he asked, probing mercilessly but unconcerned with how he was perceived. This was to be his wife, his queen and he wanted to know more about her. Everything was telling him that she wouldn’t work out, that he should turn and walk away. He needed a woman who could be strong under pressure, who would be able to handle herself with him. He knew that he wasn’t the easiest man to live with. But his wife would have to be faithful.

Luna shook her head. “I’m not seeing anyone,” she said but not sure why she was admitting all of this to this stranger. She suddenly realized that she didn’t even know his name. How could she have revealed so much to a stranger? But for some reason, he didn’t feel like a stranger. As she looked into his dark eyes, she sensed that this tall, intimidating man was just as lonely in his high-pressure occupation as she was despite both of them being surrounded by people almost constantly.

How crazy was that, she thought? A man as gorgeous and sexy as this man couldn’t possibly be lonely. But still....

“What about the man in the kitchen? The one who kept punching you.”

Luna laughed, the idea of her and Barry as a couple was ludicrous. “Barry? Oh goodness, he’s just a friend.” She was watching the man under her lashes and thought she sensed a relaxing in his shoulders with her statement. But that was impossible.

“So you are the owner here,” he stated with a change of subject. Dassar was satisfied that she was relatively innocent, although he suspected she wasn’t a virgin. No woman who looked like she did and was as open and honest as she was could remain

untouched. He didn't like it, but he definitely liked her. "Tell me what it is like to own a small inn like this?"

"Oh, the cleaning and early mornings are a bit of a problem for me, since I love sleeping in and I absolutely hate doing laundry." She smiled even as she crinkled up her nose at the confession. "But I love cooking, which compensates for the rest of the chores. Just wait until you try my scones. They're really amazing," she told him.

"I will anticipate that experience with relish," he replied. He was truly enchanted by her enthusiasm, but hated the idea of this woman cleaning. Looking down, he realized that her hands were red, obviously used to the harsh chemicals needed to freshen up a hotel room after guests had stayed overnight. He'd have to speak to Hasif about getting her some help. He didn't like the idea of this little woman with her soft, beautiful skin, having to clean up after guests.

No, he couldn't marry this woman, but he could definitely make her life easier, he thought.

He stood up, determined to find Hasif and tell him they could leave. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to have dinner with me tonight?" Those words surprised even him, but the look on the lovely woman's face told him that she was surprised as well.

Luna stood as well, preferring not to look up at him quite so much. But the man was so tall that even standing still caused her to have to tilt her head back. "I'm so sorry," she gushed sincerely. "But I already have a big meeting with some people tonight and I can't miss it."

Dassar bowed slightly. "Another time then," and he walked out of the room. She was wrong for him, he thought again as he ascended the stairs. But she was beautiful and she stirred something inside of him that he hadn't felt in a long time. Actually, never, he realized. There was lust, absolutely, but there was something more, something that he couldn't quite define because he wasn't familiar with the sensation.

Surely it wasn't protectiveness, he thought. No, that was ridiculous.

He went upstairs and spoke to Hasif about other matters, the issue of the lovely Luna spinning around in his mind. In the end, he shook his head.

"I can't marry the woman," he told his chief advisor.

Hasif had recognized the signs in this man. He was interested in the woman. More than interested. And from the small bit of interaction he'd witnessed, Luna Montgomery was exactly what this man, and Altair, needed. She would bring life and happiness to this man. She was filled with hope and optimism. She was perfect.

But he had to be careful.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said and started gathering up the papers he and Dassar had been working on moments ago. “Another man might be better suited to marry her.”

Hasif wasn't looking, but he could feel the rise in tension. After only a few minutes in the woman's company, Dassar was smitten. And his ruler certainly wouldn't like the idea of another man touching what Hasif suspected Dassar already considered his woman. Moments later, his suspicions were confirmed.

“This is a good place to relax and get some of the issues worked out,” he announced. “So we will stay here for a few days and work on the details of that construction plan and the military bases.”

Hasif didn't even crack a smile. He simply gathered up the papers and bowed out of the room. “Yes, Your Highness.”

List of Elizabeth Lennox Books

The Texas Tycoon's Temptation

The Royal Cordova Trilogy

Escaping a Royal Wedding
The Man's Outrageous Demands
Mistress to the Prince

The Attracelli Family Series

Never Dare A Tycoon
Falling For The Boss
Risky Negotiations
Proposal To Love
Love's Not Terrifying
Romantic Acquisition

The Billionaire's Terms: Prison Or Passion

The Sheik's Love Child
The Sheik's Unfinished Business
The Greek Tycoon's Lover
The Sheik's Sensuous Trap
The Greek's Baby Bargain
The Italian's Bedroom Deal
The Billionaire's Gamble
The Tycoon's Seduction Plan
The Sheik's Rebellious Mistress
The Sheik's Missing Bride
Blackmailed By The Billionaire
The Billionaire's Runaway Bride
The Billionaire's Elusive Lover
The Intimate, Intricate Rescue

The Sisterhood Trilogy

The Sheik's Virgin Lover
The Billionaire's Impulsive Lover
The Russian's Tender Lover
The Billionaire's Gentle Rescue

The Tycoon's Toddler Surprise
The Tycoon's Tender Triumph

The Friends Forever Series

The Sheik's Mysterious Mistress
The Duke's Willful Wife
The Tycoon's Marriage Exchange
The Sheik's Secret Twins
The Russian's Furious Fiancée
The Tycoon's Misunderstood Bride

Love By Accident Series

The Sheik's Pregnant Lover
The Sheik's Furious Bride
The Duke's Runaway Princess

The Russian's Pregnant Mistress

The Lovers Exchange Series

The Earl's Outrageous Lover
The Tycoon's Resistant Lover

The Sheik's Reluctant Lover
The Spanish Tycoon's Temptress

The Berutelli Escape

Resisting The Tycoon's Seduction

The Billionaire's Secretive Enchantress

The Billionaire's Pregnant Lover

The Sheik's Rediscovered Lover

The Tycoon's Defiant Southern Belle

The Sheik's Dangerous Lover (Novella)

The Thorpe Brothers

His Captive Lover

His Unexpected Lover

His Secretive Lover

His Challenging Lover

The Sheik's Defiant Fiancée (Novella)

The Prince's Resistant Lover (Novella)

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The Russian's Dangerous Game

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His Reluctant Lover

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Her Tender Tyrant
Releasing the Billionaire's Passion (Novella)
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The Sheik's Intimate Proposition (Novella)

The Hart Sisters Trilogy
The Billionaire's Secret Marriage
The Italian's Twin Surprise
The Forbidden Russian Lover

The War, Love, and Harmony Series – April-August 2015

Fighting with the Infuriating Prince (Novella)
Dancing with the Dangerous Prince (Novella)
The Sheik's Secret Bride
The Sheik's Angry Bride
The Sheik's Blackmailed Bride
The Sheik's Convenient Bride