

The Sultan's Harem Bride (Desert Vows)

By Annie West

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Journalist Jacqui Fletcher jumped at the chance to write a history of the harem—not to become a sultan's plaything! But it's hard to remember her assignment when the sultan's sensuous caresses spark a fire she's never experienced before…

Asim is looking for a pliable princess for a marriage of duty. Brave, beautiful Jacqui couldn't be more wrong for him. So why does holding her feel so right?

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Annie West has devoted her life to an intensive study of tall, dark, charismatic heroes who cause the best kind of trouble in the lives of their heroines. As a sideline she’s also researched dreamy locations for romance, from vibrant cities to desert encampments and fairytale castles. Annie lives with her family at beautiful Lake Macquarie. She loves to hear from readers and you can contact her at www.annie-west.com or at PO Box 1041, Warners Bay, NSW2282, Australia.

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'Give it up, Jack. This is a wild goose chase.' Imran's voice came over the hubbub of vehicles, people and livestock thronging the pre-election cavalcade.

'No!' Jacqui shook her head. 'You'll see. It will be worth it.'

It *had* to be worth it. They had a chance to interview one of the world's most hard to meet opposition leaders, an inspirational reformer the authorities would do anything to silence. It was an opportunity not to be missed.

Yet uneasiness stirred. This jammed street was strangely familiar, as if she'd been here before. The pungent aromas of dust, sweat, spices and dung teased her nostrils. A disturbing sense of *déjà vu* made her pause.

Jacqui swung round, looking for Imran's familiar face.

Anxiety speared her. Her nape prickled. 'Imran?'

'Right here, Jack.' She spun round and there he was, large as life, his camera over one shoulder, his laughing eyes narrowed against the sun.

Relief thudded in her chest. For a moment Jacqui had feared… Feared what? Her train of thought dissolved.

'This is a long shot, despite the tip-off,' she said. 'If you'd rather go to the hotel, I'll try to locate him then call you.'

Imran's expression didn't change.

Had she spoken aloud or just thought about it? Confused, she lifted a hand to her hot forehead. Everything felt unreal, strangely distant. Even the faces of the people around them seemed blurred. All except Imran.

Jacqui blinked and tried to focus. The job. The lead. This would be their best story yet. Their news editor wouldn't believe it if they came in with this exclusive.

It was an opportunity to reveal the truth about this oppressive regime. Then world powers could no longer plead ignorance and turn a blind eye to the violence.

'Come on, Jack. Don't dawdle.' Imran strode ahead, forging easily through the packed street.

Jacqui tried to follow but her feet seemed stuck to the ground, her limbs weighted. With a supreme effort,

she struggled forward a pace. Just one. Around her the crowd slowed too, like a film moving frame by frame.

All except Imran, striding through the barely moving people. Each step took him further away.

Jacqui opened her mouth to call his name, urge him to stop. The *déjà vu* was back, stronger this time. Her flesh crawled in horrified premonition. Her throat constricted, silencing her strained vocal cords.

Helplessly she watched him meld into the crowd.

Then it came. The nameless thing she'd been expecting without knowing. A soundless judder of vibration on the air. A quake that made the ground beneath her feet shudder and heave.

Then the cataclysmic roar. A deafening well of sound, spiralling round her. So loud her ears rang and kept on ringing.

Finally her stasis broke. She ran, lungs pumping, breath tearing in her throat. Still she couldn't call out.

She slammed to a stop. Imran's camera lay on the ground, its shattered lens glinting in dusty sunlight. He held it fast, fingers clamped round it.

Jacqui knelt, her brain trying to make sense of the picture before her. The ungainly jumble of limbs, the shapes impossible to comprehend. An unholy cocktail of dust and brightred liquid spread all round her, soaking the ground, filling her nostrils.

She put out a hand to touch what had once been the man she knew better than anyone. A man fit, whole…

Finally she found her voice. It rose, filling the air, an anguished, wordless scream.

Asim stalked the empty corridor and out into a moonlit courtyard. Annoyance lengthened his stride and made the blood steam in his veins.

What had possessed his ambassador to suggest that woman as a possible bride? Or hint to the old Emir that he should bring his niece? This should have been a simple state visit to finalise an energy venture between their countries. Instead the Emir's visit to Jazeer was a potential diplomatic disaster.

Asim strode past the scented garden and into another passage. The sprawling old palace provided plenty of space to be alone with his impatience.

Not as good as the freedom of a four-wheel drive on the desert dunes but that luxury was denied him. Asim had to remain here to play host to the Emir and his unwanted niece in the morning. He'd need to soothe the Emir's pride but make it clear his choice of bride lay elsewhere.

He grimaced. If beauty were all he required, she might have been a contender. She was one of the most flagrantly gorgeous women he'd met.

That was saying something. In his youth, Asim had acquired a well-deserved reputation as a connoisseur of beautiful women. Blonde, brunette, redhead, slim, curvaceous, tall or petite. He'd enjoyed them all.

Did they believe he'd be so seduced by her charms he'd ignore her character? She'd been demure tonight. But

Asim knew that in the exclusive holiday hideaways of the mega-wealthy she had an unrivalled reputation for pleasure, for multiple lovers and chemical stimulants.

Only a fool could think he'd turn a blind eye to that!

The woman Asim married would become wife to the Sultan of Jazeer. She would be intelligent, beautiful and capable; a devoted mother. She would be a woman of dignity and self-control, of impeccable standards. Not the subject of salacious gossip.

His wife would be everything his mother hadn't been. Oh, she had been beautiful. And loving, in her own way. An icy finger tracked down Asim's spine. Fate preserve him from *love!*

That curse had destroyed his parents and now his sister. He had no intention of suffering a similar destiny.

He drew a slow breath. He'd hoped to keep his decision to acquire a wife quiet. Now speculation would be rife and he'd be bombarded with hopeful candidates.

A sharp cry brought Asim up short. He lifted his head, searching for its source.

It came again, an unearthly shriek on the still night air, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. It wasn't a peacock, or a wild dog beyond the city outskirts.

Asim strode down an arched passageway to an even older building, long disused. The cry sounded again as he emerged into a space wilder and less formal than the other gardens.

He knew this place. As a boy he'd listened to the old stories of tragedy and avidly watched for proof that the garden was, indeed, haunted.

Now, at thirty-five, Asim didn't consider the possibility of meeting a ghost. He was more concerned with the flesh and blood source of that scream.

It came again. High, anguished, wordless. Its tenor of distress catapulted him forward. As he neared the pavilion on the far side of the garden a glow caught his eye and adrenalin pumped hard in his blood.

Asim sprinted towards the light. Fire in the centuries-old building would be disastrous.

Yet there was no scent of smoke, no crackle of burning. Perhaps the flames hadn't taken hold.

He slammed through a wide entrance, past dark, empty rooms to a doorway spilling light.

He jerked to a stop, heart pounding. The peace of the scene before him, after the turmoil he'd expected, flummoxed him for a moment and he strove to take it in.

An old-fashioned hanging lamp sent shafts of multi-hued light across the wall murals and inlaid floor. The place was bare of furniture but for a small table, a carved chest and a bed.

It was the bed that caught his attention. He stared, disbelieving, at the woman who lay naked upon it.

Asim sucked in an astonished breath, his fingers curling around the door jamb.

Lamplight painted her bare flesh in delicate rainbow hues. Gold across her long, slim legs, lithe and restless. Rose at her hips, over her smooth, pale belly and the V of reddish-brown pubic hair. Lavender across the perfect swell of firm, high breasts that shook and trembled with her agitated breathing. Pale azure over her neat jaw, slender throat and contorting mouth.

Surprise, curiosity and a surge of raw masculine hunger warred within him at the enticing picture she presented.

With her arms raised high above her head on a satin cushion, she looked like some delectable feast laid out for his enjoyment—an invitation to touch and taste.

Sexual arousal slammed into him, congealing thought.

Asim swallowed as his groin tightened and his blood rushed faster. His gaze drifted from the swell of her dainty breasts to her shifting thighs.

Heaving an unsteady breath, he grappled back to sanity and strode forward.

Spikes of damp, tawny hair splayed over the pillow as she tossed her head. Her throat worked and a soft mew emerged from her lips. It had to be a sound of distress, yet some primitive part of him wondered if that was how she'd sound in the throes of passion.

Heat rose from her. Asim felt it as he stood beside her.

Deliberately he clasped his hands behind his back, conquering the base instinct that made him want to reach out.

He should comfort her. But the compulsion to touch sprang as much from the need to know if her creamy skin was as soft as it looked.

Asim scrubbed an unsteady palm over his face, forcing down impulses that could only be dishonourable. Who was this woman?

What was she doing in the most ancient part of his palace, alone and naked?

Despite the gravity of his royal position some women had gone to inordinate lengths to offer themselves to him.

Was she one of them? Was this her idea of a tantalising new twist on the age-old mating ritual?

His body's reaction showed she'd succeeded in piquing his interest.

In his wilder youth he might have been tempted by such a tactic. But it was a wife he sought now, not a one-night stand.

Inevitably his gaze was drawn back to her body. She was slim almost to the point of thinness. A model? She was tall enough. Yet she was completely unadorned—not even a ring or gold chain.

He didn't know a woman who didn't wear some jewellery, even if just stud earrings. She was so…bare.

Yet there was no mistaking the powerful tide of desire sweeping him. The dragging weight in his lower body. His heartbeat's thrum of anticipation. His rapid breathing.

Asim stretched out his arm. He opened his hand a metre above her and imagined he felt the scrape of one pebbled nipple tease his palm. A jolt of electricity rushed from his fingers, up his arm and straight to his groin. He fisted his hand against the urge to reach down and cup her *there.*

Abruptly she moved, scrabbling at the sides of the bed. Her head twisted. She drew an enormous breath that hollowed her belly and thrust her tip-tilted breasts towards him as a muffled sob broke from her lips.

Asim reared back, shame and disbelief scalding him. He'd been acting the voyeur!

'It's time to wake up,' he said, his voice assuming a familiar tone of firm command.

Asim's mouth twisted. If only he'd had such command over his own cruder impulses.

He opened his mouth to repeat the order when she gasped, writhed and screamed at the top of her lungs.

'It's time to wake…time to wake.' The words circled Jacqui's brain like a half-forgotten mantra. The ground shook again, heaving her up and down, a boneless rag doll. She didn't run. Where could she escape to? Why should she? She'd led Imran into danger and now he was dead. How could she even think about surviving herself?

Heat suffused her like an embrace, at odds with the chill in her bones. Still she clung to Imran's hand, wishing she could rewind time. For nothing, she knew, could bring him back from this.

But that voice was insistent, ordering her to pay attention, ordering her to…wake.

The deafening sound stopped abruptly. It took Jacqui a while to realise it was the sound of her own screams. Her throat was raw and her chest heaved. Fear clawed, though the worst panic began to subside.

She'd done this before. She knew what it meant. She'd had one of her dreams. Even as she told herself *this* was reality, this quiet, peaceful place, her brain buzzed anxiously.

'That's better.' It was the voice again. Low, soothing, so deep it shivered right to the core of her. 'You're awake now, aren't you?'

For a moment longer she could swear she grasped Imran's still-warm hand. Then the sensation faded.

He was gone. Grief scooped a hollow in her belly.

Tears flooded her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Stupid, helpless tears that came too easily now. She rubbed her hand across her face, smearing wetness, trying to scrub it away. A choking ball of emotion lodged in her throat and she swallowed clumsily, heedless of the pain.

Something shifted. The heat on her shoulders abated. Belatedly she realised it was the imprint of long fingers, the touch of hard palms.

The shreds of nightmare faded as realisation hit. Jacqui's eyes snapped open on a pulse of shock. *She wasn't*

alone.

Ebony eyes, deep set beneath slashing straight brows, met hers. They were so intent, so piercing, she saw nothing else as she gasped in astonishment.

A frown puckered his broad forehead and tiny lines clustered at the corners of his eyes, giving him the look of a man who spent time outdoors in the sun.

Jacqui blinked, unable to do more than digest the fact she was awake *with a total stranger.*

A stranger who transfixed her with his gleaming, dark gaze.

Yet even as she thought it a memory stirred, a hint of recognition. He seemed…familiar.

'You're all right now?' The concern in his voice was echoed in his scrutiny and the line of his compressed lips.

Or was that annoyance?

Muddled and disorientated from the nightmare, she nevertheless felt no fear, sensed no threat. Surely it had been his voice, that warm, deep rumble that had dragged her out of horror and back to reality? Hazily, she registered relief she wasn't alone in the dark.

Jacqui struggled to breathe deeply, gratefully dragging air into her lungs, anything to dispel the sharp, rusty tang of Im-ran's blood from her nostrils.

The man stood so close she inhaled the scent of his skin, like the deep notes of an expensive cologne, only real, not manufactured. It reminded her of exotic spice and hot, desert breezes.

His breath was warm on her brow and parted lips as she sucked in more air. Long lashes veiled his eyes as his gaze dropped to her mouth. Instantly heat shimmered across her skin and her bloodstream traced fire through her body as if someone had set a match to dry kindling. Her skin flushed and her bare breasts tightened.

Her reaction was so sudden, so shockingly unfamiliar, she simply stared back, stunned, her mind grappling to take in what it meant.

'Yes, thanks. I'm—' Awareness crashed upon her in a flurry of alarm. 'Naked!' she gasped, jack-knifing to sit up.

Dimly she was grateful he stepped back but her focus was on locating the cover she must have flung off. She *hoped* she'd flung it off. That it hadn't been dragged off her by a stranger.

Horror skated skeletal fingers down her spine as Jacqui grabbed for the lavishly embroidered throw that had slipped from the bed. She didn't *feel* like she'd been groped. She couldn't remember anything but the solid, calming warmth of broad hands on her shoulders. But how could she be sure?

Seconds later, with the cover wrapped tight around her overheated body, she swung to face him.

Never turn your back on danger.

The stranger was tall, imposingly tall, which was saying something given her lanky height. Few men made her feel petite. The effect of powerful height was emphasised by the breadth of straight shoulders that filled the doorway. Jacqui's first impression was of hard, lean masculinity. Her second, that he hid something.

His expression was closed, almost stern, yet his gaze belied the sombre attitude. Those eyes looked heavy-lidded and secretive. They remained fixed on her face, thankfully not dropping to where she fumbled, tucking a stray edge of fabric under her arm.

She'd never experienced such an instantaneous physical reaction to any man. That unsettled her almost as much as finding him here, leaning over her.

Jacqui hitched the material higher and set her jaw, trying to control the apprehension tightening her flesh. Even the innocent brush of fabric against her skin seemed evocative, reminding her of her nakedness.

In all her years of travel she'd got packing down to a fine art. It was a sign of her distraction that for the first time ever she'd forgotten to pack her ancient sleep shirt. It hadn't mattered two hours ago, but then she hadn't expected to wake and discover a hero from an *Arabian Nights* fantasy towering over her. Or was he a villain?

'Who are you?' Her voice emerged faint and husky. She hated the tremor in it. She cleared her throat. 'What are you doing here?'

He didn't move yet she had the impression he stood taller, more imposing, if that were possible.

'I believe that's my line.' He paused, brows raised, as if waiting for her to answer.

But Jacqui had learned never to show weakness or doubt. She had a perfect right to be here and she refused to cower as if she'd done something wrong. He was the one who'd invaded her privacy!

Before she could tell him so, he spoke again.

'Who are you and what are you doing in my harem?'

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