



Captured by the Sheikh (Rivals to the Crown of Kadar)

By Kate Hewitt

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Queen Elena Karras of Thallia was prepared for a cold, mutually convenient marriage. Instead she is carried off into the sands, where the virgin queen soon discovers an unexpected desire for her sinfully sexy captor that leaves her craving more....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Hewitt has worked a variety of different jobs, from drama teacher to editorial assistant to youth worker, but writing romance is the best one yet. She also writes women's fiction and all her stories celebrate the healing and redemptive power of love. Kate lives in a tiny village in the English Cotswolds with her husband, five children, and an overly affectionate Golden Retriever.

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'Something's wrong—'

Elena Karras, Queen of Thallia, had barely registered the voice of the royal steward behind her when a man in a dark suit, his face harsh-looking and his expression inscrutable, met her at the bottom of the steps that led from the royal jet to this bleak stretch of desert.

'Queen Elena. Welcome to Kadar.'

'Thank you.'

He bowed and then indicated one of three armoured SUVs waiting by the airstrip. 'Please accompany us to our destination,' he said, his voice clipped yet courteous. He stepped aside so she could move forward, and Elena threw back her shoulders and lifted her chin as she walked towards the waiting cars.

She hadn't expected fanfare upon her arrival to marry Sheikh Aziz al Bakir, but she supposed she'd thought she'd have a little more than a few security guards and blacked-out cars.

Then she reminded herself that Sheikh Aziz wanted to keep her arrival quiet, because of the instability within Kadar. Ever since he'd taken the throne just over a month ago there had been, according to Aziz, some minor insurgent activity. At their last meeting, he'd assured her it was taken care of, but she supposed a few security measures were a necessary precaution.

Just like the Sheikh, she needed this marriage to succeed. She barely knew the man, had only met him a few times, but she needed a husband just as he needed a wife. Desperately.

'This way, Your Highness.'

The man who'd first greeted her had been walking beside her from the airstrip to the SUV, the desert endlessly dark all around them, the night-time air possessing a decided chill. He opened the door of the vehicle and Elena tipped her head up to the inky sky, gazing at the countless stars glittering so coldly above them.

'Queen Elena'

She stiffened at the sound of the panicked voice, recognising it as that of the steward from the Kadaran royal jet. The man's earlier words belatedly registered: *something's wrong*.

She started to turn and felt a hand press into the small of her back, staying her.

'Get in the car, Your Highness.'

An icy sweat broke out between her shoulder blades. The man's voice was low and grim with purpose—not the way he'd sounded earlier, with his clipped yet courteous welcome. And she knew, with a sickening certainty, that she did not want to get in that car.

'Just a moment,' she murmured, and reached down to adjust her shoe, buy a few seconds. Her mind buzzed with panic, static she silenced by sheer force of will. She needed to *think*. Somehow something had gone wrong. Aziz's people hadn't met her as expected. This stranger had and, whoever he was, she knew she needed to get away from him. To plan an escape—and in the next few seconds.

She felt a cold sense of purpose come over her, clearing her mind even as she fought a feeling of unreality. *This was happening. Again, the worst was happening.*

She knew all about dangerous situations. She knew what it felt like to stare death in the face—and survive.

And she knew, if she got in the car, escape would become no more than a remote possibility.

She fiddled with her shoe, her mind racing. If she kicked off her heels she could sprint back to the jet. The steward was obviously loyal to Aziz; if they managed to close the door before this man came after her...

It was a better option than running into the dark desert. It was her only option.

'Your Highness.' Impatience sharpened the man's voice. His hand pressed insistently against her back. Taking a deep breath, Elena kicked off her heels and ran.

The wind streamed past her and whipped sand into her face as she streaked towards the jet. She heard a sound behind her and then a firm hand came round her waist, lifting her clear off the ground.

Even then she fought. She kicked at the solid form behind her; the man's body now felt like a stone wall. She bent forward, baring her teeth, trying to find some exposed skin to bite, anything to gain her freedom.

Her heel connected with the man's kneecap and she kicked again, harder, then hooked her leg around his and kicked the back of his knee so the man's leg buckled. They both fell to the ground.

The fall winded her but she was up within seconds, scrambling on the sand. The man sprang forward and covered her with his body, effectively trapping her under him.

'I admire your courage, Your Highness,' he said in her ear, his voice a husky murmur. 'As well as your tenacity. But I'm afraid both are misplaced.'

Elena blinked through the sand that stung her eyes and clung to her cheeks. The jet was still a hundred yards away. How far had she managed to run? Ten feet? Twenty?

The man flipped her over so she was on her back, his arms braced on either side of her head. She gazed up at him, her heart thudding against her ribs, her breath coming in little pants. He was poised above her like a panther, his eyes the bewitching amber of a cat's, his face all chiselled planes and harsh angles. Elena could

feel his heat, sense his strength. This man radiated power. Authority. *Danger*.

'You would never have made it back to the plane,' he told her, his voice treacherously soft. 'And, even if you had, the men on it are loyal to me.'

'My guards—'

'Bribed.'

'The steward—' 'Powerless.'

She stared at him, trying to force down her fear. 'Who *are* you?' she choked.

He bared his teeth in a feral smile. 'I'm the future ruler of Kadar.'

In one fluid movement he rolled off her, pulling her up by a hand that had closed around her wrist like a manacle. Still holding her arm, he led her back to the cars, where two other men waited, dark-suited and blank-faced. One of them opened the rear door and with mocking courtesy her arrogant captor, whoever he really was, sketched an elaborate bow.

'After you, Your Highness.'

Elena stared at the yawning darkness of the SUV's interior. She *couldn't* get in that car. As soon as she did the doors would lock and she'd be this man's prisoner.

But she already was his prisoner, she acknowledged sickly, and she'd just blown her best bid for freedom. Perhaps if she pretended compliance now, or even fear, she'd find another opportunity for escape. She wouldn't even have to pretend all that much; terror had begun to claw at her senses.

She looked at the man who was watching her with cold amusement, as if he'd already guessed the nature of her thoughts.

'Tell me who you really are.'

'I already did, Your Highness, and you are trying my patience. Now, get in the car.' He spoke politely enough, but Elena still felt the threat. The danger. She saw that cold, knowing amusement in the man's amber eyes, but no pity, no spark of compassion at all, and she knew she was out of options.

Swallowing hard, she got in the car.

The man slid in beside her and the doors closed, the automated lock a loud click in the taut silence. He tossed her shoes onto her lap.

'You might want those.' His voice was low, unaccented, and yet he was clearly Arabic. Kadaran. His skin was a deep bronze, his hair as dark as ink. The edge of his cheekbone looked as sharp as a blade.

Swallowing again, the taste of fear metallic on her tongue, Elena slipped them on. Her hair was a mess, one knee was scraped and the skirt of her staid navy blue suit was torn.

Taking a deep breath, she tucked her hair behind her ears and wiped the traces of sand from her face. She looked out of the window, trying to find some clue as to where they were going, but she could barely see out of the tinted glass. What she could see was nothing more than the jagged black shapes of rocks in the darkness, Kadar's infamously bleak desert terrain. It was a small country nestled on the Arabian Peninsula, its borders containing both magnificent coastline and deadly rock-strewn desert.

She sneaked a sideways glance at her captor. He sat with his hands resting lightly on his thighs, looking relaxed and assured, yet also alert. Who was he? Why had he kidnapped her?

And how was she going to get free?

Think, she told herself. Rational thought was the antidote to panic. The man must be one of the rebel insurgents Aziz had mentioned. He'd said he was the future ruler of Kadar, which meant he wanted Aziz's throne. He must have kidnapped her to prevent their marriage—unless he wasn't aware of the stipulations set out in Aziz's father's will?

Elena had only learned of them when she'd met Aziz a few weeks ago at a diplomatic function. His father, Sheikh Hashem, had just died and Aziz had made some sardonic joke about now needing a wife. Elena hadn't been sure whether to take him seriously or not, but then she'd seen a bleakness in his eyes. She'd felt it in herself.

Her Head of Council, Andreas Markos, was determined to depose her. He claimed a young, inexperienced woman such as herself was unfit to rule, and had threatened to call for a vote to abolish the monarchy at the next convening of the Thallian Council. But if she were married by then...if she had a husband and Prince Consort...then Markos couldn't argue she was unfit to rule.

And the people loved a wedding, wanted a royal marriage. She was popular with the Thallian people; it was why Markos hadn't already tried to depose her in the four turbulent years of her reign. Adding to that popularity with a royal wedding would make her position even stronger.

It was a desperate solution, but Elena had felt desperate. She loved her country, her people, and she wanted to remain their queen—for their sake, and for her father's sake, who had given his life so she could be monarch.

The next morning Elena had sent a letter to Aziz, suggesting they meet. He'd agreed and, with a candour borne of urgency, they'd laid out their respective positions. Elena needed a husband to satisfy her Council; Aziz needed to marry within six weeks of his father's death or he forfeited his title. They'd agreed to wed. They'd agreed to a convenient and loveless union that would give them the spouses they needed and children as heirs, one for Kadar, one for Thallia.

It was a mercenary approach to both marriage and parenthood and, if she'd been an ordinary woman, or even an ordinary queen, she would have wanted something different for her life. But she was a queen hanging onto her kingdom by a mere thread, and marriage to Aziz al Bakir had felt like the only way to keep clinging.

But for that to happen, she had to get married. And to get married, she had to escape.

She couldn't get out of the car, so she needed to wait. Watch. Learn her enemy.

'What is your name?' she asked. The man didn't even look at her.

'My name is Khalil.'

'Why have you taken me?'

He slid her a single, fathomless glance. 'We're almost at our destination, Your Highness. Your questions will be answered there, after we are both refreshed.'

Fine. She'd wait. She'd stay calm and in control and look for the next opportunity to gain her freedom. Even so terror caught her by the throat and held on. She'd felt this terrible, numbing fear before, as if the world were sliding by in slow motion, everything slipping away from her as she waited, frozen, disbelieving that this was actually happening.

No, this was not the same as before. She wouldn't let it be. She was queen of a country, even if her throne was all too shaky a seat. She was resourceful, courageous, *strong*.

She would get out of this. Somehow. She refused to let some rebel insurgent wreck her marriage...or end her reign as queen.

Khalil al Bakir glanced again at the woman by his side. She sat straight and tall, her chin lifted proudly, her pupils dilated with fear.

Admiration for the young queen flickered reluctantly through him. Her attempt at escape had been reckless and laughable, but also brave, and he felt an unexpected sympathy for her. He knew what it was like to feel both trapped and defiant. Hadn't he, as a boy, tried to escape from his captor, Abdul-Hafiz, as often as he could, even though he'd known how fruitless such attempts would be? Deep in the desert, there had been no place for a young boy to run or hide. Yet still he'd tried, because to try was to fight, and to fight was to remind yourself you were alive and had something to fight for. The scars on his back were testament to his many failed attempts.

Queen Elena would have no such scars. He would not be accused of ill-treating his guest, no matter what the frightened monarch might think. He intended to keep her for only four days, until the six weeks had passed and Aziz would be forced to relinquish his claim to the throne and call a national referendum to decide who the next sheikh would be.

Khalil intended to be that man.

Until that moment, when the vote had been called and he sat on the throne that was rightfully his, he would not rest easy. But then, he'd never rested easy, not since the day when he'd been all of seven years old and his father had dragged him out of his lesson with his tutor, thrown him onto the sharp stones in front of the Kadaran palace and spat in his face.

'You are not my son.'

It was the last time he'd ever seen him, his mother, or his home.

Khalil closed his eyes against the memories that still made his fists clench and bile rise in his throat. He would not think of those dark days now. He would not remember the look of disgust and even hatred on the face of the father he'd adored, or the anguished cries of his mother as she'd been dragged away, only to die just a few months later from a simple case of the flu because she'd been denied adequate medical care. He

wouldn't think of the terror he'd felt when he'd been shoved in the back of a van and driven to a bleak desert outpost, or the look of cruel satisfaction on Abdul-Hafiz's face when he'd been thrown at his feet like a sack of rubbish.

No, he wouldn't think of any of that. He'd think of the future, the very promising future, when he, the son his father had rejected in favour of his mistress's bastard, would sit on the throne of the kingdom he'd been born to rule.

Next to him, he felt Queen Elena tremble.

Twenty taut minutes later the SUV pulled up at the makeshift camp Khalil had called home for the last six months, ever since he'd returned to Kadar. He opened the door and turned to Elena, who glared at him in challenge.

'Where have you taken me?'

He gave her a cold smile. 'Why don't you come out and see for yourself?' Without waiting for an answer, he took hold of her wrist. Her skin was soft and cold and she let out a muffled gasp as he drew her from the car.

Users Review

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Billy Simpson:

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