



Zarif's Convenient Queen (The Legacies of Powerful Men)

By Lynne Graham

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lynne Graham lives in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. Happily married, Lynne has five children. Her eldest is her only natural child. Her other children, who are every bit as dear to her heart, are adopted. The family has a variety of pets, and Lynne loves gardening, cooking, collecting allsorts and is crazy about every aspect of Christmas.

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Zarif was bored. The opulent attractions of his creamy-skinned and highly sophisticated mistress had palled. Right at that minute she was posed on the bed, entranced by her reflection in the mirror as she adjusted the glowing ruby pendant now encircling her throat. 'It's so beautiful,' she told him, wide-eyed with avid admiration. 'Thank you. You've been very generous.'

Lena was shrewd. She knew the pendant was a goodbye gift and that she would vacate his lavish Dubai apartment without argument and cruise off in search of another rich man. Sex, Zarif had discovered, was no big deal. He preferred amateurs to professionals in the bedroom but had few illusions about the morals of the women he took as lovers. He gave them the means to enjoy the good things in life while they gave him a necessary outlet for his highly charged sex drive. Such women understood the need for discretion and appreciated that approaching the media would be a seriously unwise career move.

And Zarif had more need than most men to conserve his public image. At the age of twelve he had become the King of Vashir with his uncle acting as Regent until Zarif attained his majority. He was the latest in a long line of feudal rulers to occupy the Emerald throne in the old palace. Vashir was oil-rich, but very conservative, and whenever Zarif tried to drag the country into the twenty-first century the old guard on his advisory council—composed of twelve tribal sheiks all over the age of sixty—panicked and pleaded with him to reconsider.

'Are you getting married?' Lena shot the question at him abruptly and then gave him a discomfited glance. 'Sorry, I know it's none of my business.'

'Not yet but soon,' Zarif responded flatly, straightening the tailored jacket of his business suit and turning on his heel.

'Good luck,' Lena breathed. 'She'll be a lucky woman.'

Zarif was still frowning as he entered the lift. When it came to marriage or children, luck didn't feature much in his family tree. Historically the love matches had fared as badly as the practical alliances and very few children had been born. Zarif had grown up an only child and he could no longer withstand the pressure on him at home to marry and provide an heir. He had only got to reach the age of twenty-nine single because he was, in fact, a widower, whose wife, Azel, and infant son, Firas, had died in a car crash seven years earlier.

At the time, Zarif had thought he would never recover from such an indescribable loss. Everyone had respected his right to grieve but even so he was well aware that he could not ignore his obligations indefinitely. Preserving the continuity of his bloodline to ensure stability in the country that he loved was his most basic duty. In truth, however, he didn't want a wife at all and he felt guilty about that. But he *liked*

being alone; he *liked* his life just as it was.

A sleek private jet returned Zarif to Vashir. Before disembarking he donned the long white tunic, beige cloak and rope-bound headdress required for him to attend the ceremonial opening of a new museum in the city centre. Only after that appearance had been made would he be free to return to the old palace, a rambling property set in lush perfumed gardens. It had long since been surpassed by the giant shiny new palace built on the other side of the city, which now functioned as the official centre of government. Zarif, however, had grown up at the old palace and was strongly attached to the ancient building.

It was also where his beloved uncle, Halim, was spending the last months of his terminal illness and Zarif was making the most of the time the older man had left. In many ways, Halim had been the father whom Zarif had never known, a gentle, quiet man, who had taught Zarif everything he had needed to know about negotiation, self-discipline and statesmanship.

Zarif's business manager, Yaman, awaited him in the room Zarif used as an office. 'What brings you here?' Zarif asked in surprise for the older man rarely made such visits.

Unlike his brothers, Nik and Cristo, who had both made names in the financial world, Zarif had little interest in his business affairs. Vashir had become oil-rich long before he was born and he had grown up wrapped in the golden cocoon of his family's fabulous wealth. Yaman and his highly professional team presided over that fortune and conserved it.

'There is a matter which I felt I should bring to your personal attention,' Yaman informed him gravely.

'Of course. What is this matter?' Zarif asked, resting back against the edge of his desk, his dark eyes enquiring in his lean bronzed features.

The middle-aged accountant's air of discomfiture increased. 'It relates to a personal loan you made to a friend three years ago... Jason Gilchrist.'

Disconcerted by the mention of that name, Zarif stiffened. Yet it was not his one-time friend's face that he pictured, it was that of Jason's sister, Eleonora. An image of a young woman with a honey-blonde fall of silky curls, gentian-blue eyes and the legs of a gazelle flashed in his mind's eye. Zarif froze into angry defensiveness at the speed of his own unwelcome response and the unwelcome remembrance of the staccato delivery of insults he had never forgotten:

We 're both far too young to get married.

I'm British. I couldn't live in a culture where women are second-class citizens.

I'm not cut out to be a queen.

'What has happened?' he asked Yaman with his customary quietness, only the charge of sudden flaring energy lighting his dark gaze to amber belying his outer façade of cool.

Ella walked into the silent house. She was so tired that only will power was keeping her upright.

A light was burning below the living-room door: Jason was still up. She walked past quietly, unable to face another clash with her hot-tempered brother, and went into the kitchen. The room was a disaster area with

abandoned plates of food still resting on the table. The chairs were still pushed back from the day before, when they had each leapt out of their seats as Jason broke his devastating news of their financial ruin during a family meal. Straightening her shoulders and reluctant to recall that dreadful lunch, Ella began to clear up, knowing that she would only feel worse if she had to face the mess in the morning.

The house didn't feel like home without her parents. Distressing images of her mother lying still, frail and newly old in her hospital bed, and her father sobbing uncontrollably, filled Ella's mind. Hot tears stung her eyes and she blinked them away fiercely because giving rein to self-pity and sadness wouldn't change anything that had happened.

The horrors of the past forty-eight hours had piled up like a multiple-car road crash. The nightmare had begun when Jason admitted that the family accountancy firm was on the brink of bankruptcy and that her parents' comfortable home, where they all lived together, was mortgaged to the hilt. Only just returned from the Mediterranean cruise that Jason had persuaded his parents to take while he looked after the business, her father had been irate and incredulous that matters could have been brought to such a desperate pass in so short a time period. Gerald Gilchrist had rushed off to the office to check the firm's books and then consult his bank manager for advice while Jason stayed behind to explain the situation in greater detail to their mother.

Initially, Jennifer Gilchrist had remained calm, seemingly convinced that her clever, successful son would naturally be able to sort out whatever problems there were and ensure his family's continuing prosperity. Unlike her husband she had not angrily condemned Jason for his dishonesty in forging his parents' signatures on the document used to remortgage their home. Indeed she had forgivingly assumed that Jason had merely been trying to protect his parents from needless financial worry.

But then Jason had, from birth, been the adored centre of her parents' world, Ella conceded wryly. Excuses had always been made when Jason lied or cheated and forgiveness and instant understanding had been offered to him on many occasions. Born both brainy and athletic, Jason had shone in every sphere and her parents' pride in him had known no bounds. Yet her brother had always had a darker side to his character combined with a disturbing lack of concern for the well-being of others. Her parents had scrimped and saved to send Jason to an elite private school and when he had won a place at Oxford University they had been overjoyed by his achievement.

At university, Jason had made friends with much wealthier students. Was that when her sibling had begun to succumb to the kind of driving ambition and greed that would only lead him into trouble? Or had that change taken place only after Jason had become a high-flying banker with a Porsche and a strong sense of entitlement? Whatever it was, Ella thought with newly learned bitterness, Jason had always wanted *more* and almost inevitably that craving for easily acquired riches had tempted him down the wrong path in life. But what she would never be able to forgive her brother for was dragging their parents down with him into the mire of debt and despair.

The worst had already happened though, Ella told herself in urgent consolation. Nothing could equal the horror of her mother's collapse. Once the shock of their disastrous financial situation had finally kicked in, her mother had suffered a heart attack. Rushed into hospital the day before, Jennifer Gilchrist had had emergency surgery and was now mercifully in the recovery ward. Her father had tried hard to adjust to his sudden change in circumstances but, ultimately, it had been too much for him once he appreciated that he would not even be able to pay his staff the wages they were owed. Shock and shame had then overwhelmed him and he had broken down in the hospital waiting room and cried in his daughter's arms, while blaming himself for not keeping a closer eye on his son's activities within the firm.

A slight noise sent Ella's head whipping round. Her brother, who had the thickset build of a rugby player and the portly outline of a man who wasted little time keeping fit, stood in the kitchen doorway nursing a glass of whisky. 'How's Mother?' he asked gruffly.

'Holding her own. The prognosis is good,' Ella told him quietly and she turned back to the sink, keen to keep busy rather than dwell on the disquieting fact that her brother had neither accompanied her to the hospital nor made the effort to visit their mother since.

'It's not my fault she had the heart attack,' Jason declared in a belligerent tone.

'I didn't say it was,' Ella responded, determined not to get into an argument with her sibling, who even as a child would have argued twenty-four hours straight sooner than yield a point. 'I'm not looking to blame anyone.'

'I mean...Mother could've had an attack at any time and at least the way it happened we were here to deal with it and ensure she got to hospital quickly,' Jason pointed out glibly.

'Yes,' Ella agreed soothingly for the sake of peace and she paused before continuing, 'I wanted to ask you...that massive loan that you said you took out three years ago.'

'What about it?' Jason prompted with a harshness that suggested that he was in no mood to answer her questions.

'Which bank was it with?'

'No bank would've given me that amount of cash without collateral,' Jason countered with a look that scorned her ignorance of such matters. 'Zarif gave me the money.'

When he spoke that name out loud, the sink brush fell from Ella's hand as her fingers lost their grip and she whirled round from the sink in shock. '*Zarif?*' she repeated in disbelief, her voice breaking on the syllables.

'After I was made redundant at the bank, Zarif offered me the cash to start up my own business. An interest-free loan, no repayments to be made for the first three years,' Jason explained grudgingly. 'Only an idiot would have refused to take advantage of such a sweet deal.'

'That was very...kind of him,' Ella remarked tightly, her lovely face pale and tight with control while she battled the far more powerful feelings struggling inside her. Reactions she had learned to suppress during three long years of fierce self-discipline, never ever allowing herself to look back to what had been the most agonising experience of her entire life. 'But you didn't start up your own business...you became Dad's partner instead.'

'Well, home's where the heart is, or so they say,' her brother quipped without shame. 'The family firm was going nowhere until I stepped in.'

Ella bit back an angry rejoinder and compressed her lips in resolute silence. She wished Jason had chosen to set up his own business. Instead he had bankrupted a stable firm that had brought in a good, if not spectacular, income. 'I can't believe you accepted money from Zarif.'

'When a billionaire flashes his cash in my direction, I'd be a fool to do otherwise,' Jason informed her in a

patronising tone. 'Of course Zarif only offered the loan in the first place because he thought you were going to marry him and an unemployed brother-in-law would have been a serious embarrassment to him.'

The muscles in Ella's slender back stretched taut as her brother voiced that unsettling claim. 'If that's true, you should've given the money back to him when we broke up.'

'You didn't break up, Ella,' Jason interrupted scornfully. 'You *inexplicably* refused to marry the catch of the century. Zarif was hardly going to come back and visit us after a slap in the face like that. So, if you're looking for someone to blame for this mess, look at the part *you* played in setting us all up for this fall!'

Blue eyes flying wide with dismay, her delicate cheekbones flushed, Ella spun round again. 'Are you trying to suggest that I'm in some way responsible for what's happened?'

Bitter resentment flared in her brother's bloodshot blue eyes. 'You made an entirely selfish decision to reject Zarif, which not only offended him but also destroyed *my* friendship with him... I mean, he never contacted me again!'

Ella lowered her pounding head, loose waves of thick honey-coloured blonde hair concealing her discomfited face and deeply troubled eyes. Her brother's friendship with Zarif *had* to all intents and purposes died the same day that Ella had refused Zarif's proposal of marriage and she could not deny that fact. 'I may have turned him down but it wasn't a selfish decision—we weren't right for each other,' she declared awkwardly, staring at a hole in the tiled floor.

'When I accepted that money from Zarif, I naturally assumed you were going to marry him and I had no worries about repaying it,' Jason argued vehemently, tossing back another unappreciative slug of his father's best whisky. 'Obviously it's *your* fault that we're in trouble now. After all you've had your share of Zarif's money too!'

Ella frowned, sharply disconcerted by that sudden accusation coming at her out of nowhere. 'What money? I never touched Zarif's money.'

'Oh, yes, you did,' Jason told her with galling satisfaction. 'When you needed the cash to go into partnership with Cathy on the shop, where do you think *I* got it from?'

Ella studied her big brother in horror. 'You told me it was your money, *your* savings!' she protested strickenly. 'Are you saying that the money came from Zarif's loan?'

'Where would I have got savings from?' Jason demanded with vicious derision. 'I was in debt to my eyeballs when I was made redundant. I had car loans, bank loans, a massive mortgage on my apartment.'

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