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# LYNN RAYE HARRIS

Marriage Behind the Façade



Lynn Harris

**Marriage Behind the Façade**

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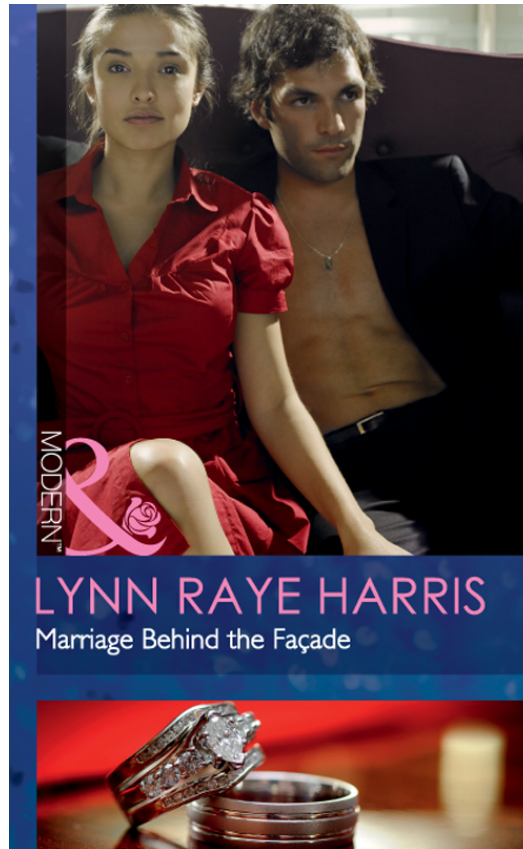
Summoned to the desert sands Sydney Reed dreamed of being a princess in a faraway land, and couldn't believe that smoulderingly sexy Sheikh Malik of Jahfar would marry plain old her – even out of convenience. But the dream has ended and she's back to reality with a thud! Now Sydney needs his signature on the divorce papers – Malik, however, has other ideas. Jahfaran law requires that they spend forty days together as man and wife before Sydney can be free of him for ever. Out in the scorching desert Malik holds all the power – he'll make sure their forty nights are more than worth it...

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## Содержание

About the Author	6
CHAPTER ONE	7
CHAPTER TWO	14
CHAPTER THREE	18
CHAPTER FOUR	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27



**“There is no marriage, Malik. Sign the papers and it’s done.”**

His smile was not quite a smile. “Ah, but it’s not so easy as that. I am a Jahfaran prince. There is a protocol to follow.”

Sydney reached for the doorframe to steady herself. A bad feeling settled into her stomach, making the tension in her body spool tighter and tighter. Her knees felt weak, making her suddenly unstable on her tall designer pumps. “What protocol?”

He speared her with a long look. A pitying look?

By the time he spoke her nerves were at snapping point.

“We must go to Jahfar—”

“What?”

“—and we must live as man and wife for a period of forty days ...”

Dying. She was dying inside. And he was so controlled, as always. “No,” she whispered, but he didn’t hear—or he didn’t care. His eyes were flat, unfeeling.

“Only then can we apply to my brother, the King, for a divorce.”

## About the Author

**LYNN RAYE HARRIS** read her first Mills & Boon® romance when her grandmother carted home a box from a yard sale. She didn't know she wanted to be a writer then, but she definitely knew she wanted to marry a sheikh or a prince and live the glamorous life she read about in the pages. Instead, she married a military man and moved around the world. These days she makes her home in North Alabama, with her handsome husband and two crazy cats. Writing for Harlequin Mills & Boon is a dream come true. You can visit her at [www.lynnrayeharris.com](http://www.lynnrayeharris.com)

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Marriage

Behind The

Façade

**Lynn Raye Harris**



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## CHAPTER ONE

IT was done. Sydney Reed dropped the pen and stared at the documents she'd just signed. Divorce papers.

Her heart hammered in her throat, her palms sweated. Her stomach cramped. She felt as if someone had taken away the last shred of happiness she would ever, ever know.

But that was absurd. Because there was no happiness where Prince Malik ibn Najib Al Dhakir was concerned. There was only heartache and confusion.

Though it irritated her, just thinking his name still had the power to send a shiver tiptoeing down her spine. Her exotic sheikh. Her perfect lover. Her husband.

*Ex-husband.*

Sydney shoved the papers into the waiting envelope and buzzed her assistant, Zoe. Why was this so hard? It shouldn't be. Malik had never cared for her. She'd been the one who'd felt everything. But it wasn't enough. One person couldn't feel enough emotion for two. No matter how hard she tried, Malik was never going to love her. He simply wasn't capable of it. Though he was a generous and giving lover, his heart never engaged.

*Of course it didn't.* Sydney frowned. It wasn't that he *couldn't* love—he just couldn't love *her*. She was not the right woman for him. She never had been.

Zoe appeared in the door, her expression all business.

"Call the courier. I need these delivered right away," Sydney said before she could change her mind.

Zoe didn't even acknowledge the tremble in Sydney's fingers as she handed over the thick sheaf of papers. "Yes, Miss Reed."

*Miss Reed.* Not Princess Al Dhakir.

Never Princess Al Dhakir again.

Sydney nodded, because she didn't trust herself to speak, and turned back to her computer. The screen was a little blurry, but she resolutely clenched her jaw and got on with the business of selecting property listings to show the new client she was meeting with later.

She'd been such a fool. She'd met Malik over a year ago when someone on his staff had called her parents' real estate firm to arrange for an agent to show him a few properties. She hadn't known who Malik was, but she'd quickly familiarized herself with his background before their appointment.

Prince of Jahfar. Brother to a king. Sheikh of his own territory. Unmarried. Obscenely wealthy. International playboy. Heartbreaker. There had even been a photo of a sobbing actress who claimed she'd fallen in love with Prince Malik, but he'd left her for another woman.

Sydney had gone to the appointment armed with information and, yes, even a dose of disdain for the entitled sheikh who broke hearts so carelessly. Not that she thought he could ever be interested in her. She wasn't glamorous or movie star gorgeous or anything even remotely interesting to a playboy sheikh.

But oh, the joke was on her, wasn't it?

Malik was so charming, so suave. So unlike any man she'd ever met before.

When he'd turned his singular attention on her, she'd been helpless to resist him. She hadn't wanted to resist. She'd been flattered by his interest.

He'd made her feel beautiful, accomplished, special—all the things she definitely was not. A dart of pain lodged beneath her heart. Malik's special gift was making a woman feel as if she were the center of his universe; as long as it lasted, it was bliss.

Her mouth compressing into a grim line, Sydney grabbed the listings from the printer and shoved them into her briefcase. Then she shrugged into the white cotton blazer hanging on the back of her chair. She refused to feel sorry for herself a moment longer. That part of her life was over.

Malik had been happy to be rid of her—and now she was taking the final step and cutting him from her life permanently. She'd half expected him to do it in the year since she'd left him in Paris, but he clearly didn't care enough to make the effort. Whatever the reason, Malik's heart was encased in ice—and she was not the one who could thaw it.

Sydney let Zoe know she was leaving, stopped by her mother's office to say good night and headed out to her car. It took over an hour in traffic to reach the first house in Malibu. She parked in the large circular drive and glanced at her watch. The client would be here in fifteen minutes.

Sydney gripped the steering wheel and forced herself to breathe calmly for a couple of minutes. She felt disjointed, unsettled, but there was nothing she could do about it now. She'd sent the papers; it was the end.

Time to move on.

She went inside the house, turning on lights, opening heavy curtains to reveal the stunning views. She moved as if on autopilot, fluffing the throw pillows on the furniture, spraying cinnamon air freshener and finding a soft jazzy station on the home entertainment system.

Then she walked out onto the terrace and scrolled through the email on her phone while she waited. At precisely seven-thirty, the doorbell rang.

*Show time.*

She took a deep breath before marching to the door and pasting a giant smile on her face. *Always greet the client with warm enthusiasm.* Her mother's first rule of engagement. Sydney might not be the best salesperson the Reed Team had, but she worked the hardest at it. She had to.

Sydney was the odd duck in the Reed family of swans, the disappointing daughter. The one who made her parents shake their heads and smile politely when what they really wanted to do was ask her why she couldn't be more like her perfect sister.

The only thing she'd ever done that had made them so proud they'd nearly popped was to marry a prince. But she'd failed at that, too, hadn't she? They didn't say anything, but she knew they were disappointed in her.

Sydney pulled the door open, her smile cracking apart the instant her gaze collided with the man's standing on the threshold.

"Hello, Sydney."

For a minute she couldn't move, couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. She was mesmerized by the dark glitter of those burning, burning eyes. A bird sang in a nearby tree, the sound oddly distorted as all her attention focused on the man standing before her.

The man she hadn't seen, other than in photos in the papers or video clips on television, in over a year.

He was still spectacular, damn him. He was the desert. He was harsh and hard and beautiful. He'd been hers once.

*No, he had not. It had been nothing more than an illusion. Malik belonged to no one but himself.*

"What are you doing here?" she forced herself to ask.

"Isn't that obvious?" Malik responded, one dark brow lifting sardonically. "I'm looking for a house."

"You have a house," she said inanely. "I sold it to you last year."

"Yes, but I've never liked it."

"Then why did you buy it?" she snapped, her pulse roaring in her veins.

His dark eyes glittered hotly. She almost took a step back, but held her ground beneath the onslaught of his gaze. My God, Malik was all man. There had never been anyone like him in her life. So tall and dark and powerful. Malik walked into a room and owned it. There was never any question who was in charge when Malik was around.

And she had been just as vulnerable to his power as anyone.



He'd *owned* her. He would own her still, had she not realized how destructive a life with him would be. Had she not decided she couldn't give herself so utterly and completely to a man and still mean so little to him.

Pain rolled into a hard knot in her belly.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a grin, though there was no humor in his expression. "I bought it because you wanted me to, *habibti*."

Sydney's feet were stuck to the floor. Her stomach churned with emotion, and her eyes stung. So much pain and anger in seeing him again. She'd tried to inure herself to his presence in the world by reading every article about him she could find, even when they stabbed her in the heart with tales of his latest conquests. She'd told herself it would only be a matter of time before he returned to L.A. and that if she ran into him again, she would sniff haughtily and act like an ice princess.

And wasn't she doing a fine job of that now?

Sydney stepped away from the door, determined to cloak herself in disdain. She did not need him. She'd never needed him. She'd only thought she had.

*Riiiiight ...*

Inside, she was a mess. Outside, she was cool. As cool as he was. "And you always do what people want you to do, don't you?" she said.

Malik walked inside and shut the door behind him. "Only if it amuses me."

He took up all the space in the foyer, made it seem far too intimate. She could smell his soap, that special blend he had made in Paris. Her eyes skimmed over him. His suit was custom made, of course. Pale grey. The powder blue shirt beneath his jacket was unbuttoned just enough to show the hollow of his throat.

She knew what that spot tasted like, how it felt beneath her tongue.

Sydney pivoted, moved toward the floor to ceiling windows across the room. Her heart beat triple time. Her pulse throbbed. Her skin felt tight. "Then perhaps it would amuse you to buy a house with such a gorgeous view. I could use the commission."

"If you need money, Sydney, you only have to ask." He sounded so cool, so logical, so detached, as if he were telling his valet that he didn't care whether it was the red tie or the maroon today.

Bitterness flooded her. So typical of him. Nothing engaged Malik's emotions, not really. Her mistake had been in thinking she was different somehow.

*Ha. Joke's on you, girlfriend.*

She turned back to him. "I don't want your money, Malik. Now why don't you get out before my real client arrives? If you have anything to say to me, you can say it through my lawyer."

The heat in his eyes didn't waver. Her stomach clenched. Was it anger or a different kind of heat she saw there?

"Ah yes, the divorce," he said disdainfully, as if he were talking to a naughty child.

Anger, then. He wasn't accustomed to her fighting back. Because she never had before.

Not until today, when she'd slid her pen across that signature line.

Sydney crossed her arms over her chest. She knew it was a defensive gesture, but she didn't care. "I didn't ask you for anything. Just your signature on those papers."

"So you have signed them finally." There wasn't the least trace of sorrow or surprise in his voice.

Always so calm and cool, her desert lord. It infuriated her that he could be so unaffected.

Her blood felt thick in her veins. Heavy. "Isn't that why you're here?"

It had only been a little over an hour since she'd given the papers to Zoe. It was possible they'd been delivered to Malik in that time—but even if they had, how had he found where she was and gotten here so quickly?

She'd just assumed that was why he'd come. Comprehension unfurled. She felt stupid for not realizing it sooner. He must have known she'd been having the papers drawn up. Though why it mattered to him, she wasn't sure. "There is no client, is there? You set this up."

It was precisely like him to do so. Malik orchestrated things. If he didn't like something, he had it changed. If he wanted something, he got it. He spoke the words, and things happened as if by magic. It was the kind of power that most people would never possess.

He inclined his head. "It seemed the best way to meet with you. Less likely to cause a scene for the paparazzi."

Hot anger threatened to scorch her from the inside out. And something else as well. Something hot and dark and secret. Something she recalled from the sultry nights with him, the hours spent tangled together in silken sheets, his body entwining with hers, thrusting into hers, caressing hers.

Why could she never look at this man without thinking of it?

It was the one place where he'd been raw and open with her—or so she'd thought. She knew better now.

Sydney closed her eyes, swallowed. Her skin was moist with perspiration, so she went to the terrace doors, flinging them open to let in the clean ocean breeze. It was always too hot when Malik was near.

She didn't have to turn to know he was right behind her. He vibrated with an energy that she'd never been able to ignore. When Malik walked into a room, she knew it. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Her blood hummed. Part of her wanted to turn and go into his arms, wanted to feel the extraordinary bliss of a night in his bed at least one more time.

She despised that part of herself. She wasn't that weak anymore, damn it! She was strong, capable of resisting the animal part of her that wanted this man without reason. Without sense.

But she had to resist—or pay the price.

Sydney whirled, taking a step back when she realized he was closer than she'd thought. "You never bothered to get in touch with me," she said, her voice cracking in spite of her determination. "You let all these months go by, and you never once tried to contact me. So why are you here now?"

His eyes flashed, his lean jaw hardening. He was so very, very beautiful. It wasn't an incongruous word when applied to a man who looked like Malik did. Jet dark hair, chiseled features, honed body, bronzed skin that looked as if he'd been dusted in gold. The most sensuous lips God had ever created. Lips that knew how to bring her to the brink of screaming pleasure again and again.

A tiny shiver crawled down her spine. She should have known a man like him could never truly be interested in her.

"Why would I chase you down, Sydney?" he demanded, ignoring her question. "You chose to leave. You could have chosen to come back."

She drew herself up. Of course he would think that way! Because he hadn't been affected by her going. "I had no choice."

Malik snorted. "Really? Someone made you walk out on our marriage? Someone forced you to run from Paris in the middle of the night with one suitcase and a note left on the counter? I'd like to meet this someone with such power over you."

She stiffened. He made her sound so ridiculous. So childish. "Don't pretend you were devastated by it. We both know the truth."

He brushed past her to stand in the open door and look at the ocean while her heart died just a little with each passing second as she hoped, ridiculously, that he might contradict her.

Why did a small part of her always insist on that rosy naiveté where he was concerned?

"Of course not," he stated matter-of-factly. Then he turned and speared her with an angry look, his voice turning harsh. "But I am an Al Dhakir and you are my *wife*. Did you not consider for one moment the embarrassment this would cause me? Would cause my family?"

Anger and disappointment simmered together in her belly. She'd hoped he might have missed her just a little bit, but of course he had not. Malik didn't need anyone or anything. He was a force of nature all his own.

She'd never understood him. That was only part of the problem between them, but it was a big part. He'd been everything exotic and wonderful and he'd swept her off her feet.

She still remembered the moment she'd realized she was in love with him. And she'd thought he must feel the same since she was the only woman he'd ever wanted to marry.

How wrong she'd been. It hadn't taken very long for her naive hopes to be ground to bits beneath his custom soles. Her eyes filled with angry tears, but she refused to let them fall. She'd had a year to analyze her actions and berate herself for not demanding more from him.

From *life*.

"That's why you're here? Because *you're* embarrassed?" Sydney drew in a trembling breath. Adrenaline surged in her blood, but she was determined to maintain her cool. "My, my, it certainly took you a long time to get worked up."

He took a step toward her. Sydney thrust her chin out, uncowed. Abruptly, he stopped and shoved his hands into his pockets. The haughty prince assumed control once more as he looked down his refined nose at her. "We could live apart, Sydney. That is practically expected, though usually after there is an heir or two. But divorce is another thing altogether."

"So you're embarrassed about the divorce, not about me leaving," she stated. As if she would ever consider having children with him. So he could leave her to raise the kids while he dallied with mistresses?

No way. She'd been such a fool to think their lives could be normal when they came from such diverse backgrounds. He was a prince of the desert. She was plain Sydney Reed from Santa Monica, California. It was laughable how deluded she had been.

"I've let you have your space," he continued. "But enough is enough."

Sydney felt her eyes widening. A bubble of anger popped, sending fresh heat rushing through her. "You *let* me have my space? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

His eyes flashed. "Is that any way for a princess to talk?"

"I'm not a princess, Malik." Though technically his wife *was* a princess, she'd never felt like one, even when she'd still been happily married to him. He'd never taken her to Jahfar; she'd never seen his homeland or been welcomed by his family.

She'd never even *met* his family.

That should have been her first clue.

Shame flooded her, made her skin hot once more. How naive she'd been. When he'd married her, she'd thought he'd loved her. She'd had no idea she was simply an instrument of his rebellion. He'd married her because she'd been unsuitable, no other reason. He'd *wanted* to shock his family.

She'd simply been the flavor of the moment, the woman warming his bed when the idea occurred to him.

"You are still my wife, Sydney," he growled. "Until such time as you are not, you will act with the decorum your position deserves."

Sydney's stomach was doing flips. She clenched her fists at her sides, willing herself not to explode. What good would it do?

"Not for much longer, Malik. Sign the papers and you won't have to worry about me embarrassing you ever again." Or that she wasn't good enough for his family's refined taste.

He closed the distance between them slowly ... so slowly that she felt as if she were being hunted. Her instinct was to escape, but she refused to give him the satisfaction. She stood her ground as the ocean crashed on the beach outside, as her heartbeat swelled to a crescendo, as he came so close she could smell the scent of his skin, could feel his breath on her face.

His fingers snaked along her jaw, so lightly she might have imagined it. His eyes were hooded, his expression unreadable. She fought the desire to close her eyes, to tilt her face up to his. To feel his lips on hers once more.

She was not that desperate. Not that stupid.

She'd learned. She might have been blindly, ignorantly in love with him once—but she knew better now.

His voice was a deep rumble, an exotic siren call. “You still want me, Sydney.”

“I don’t.” She said it firmly, coldly. Her legs trembled beneath her, her nerve endings shivering with anticipation. Her heart would beat right out of her chest if he kept touching her.

But she would not tell him to stop. Because she would not admit she was affected.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

And then his head dipped, his mouth fitting over hers. For a moment she softened; for a moment she let his lips press against hers. For a moment, she was lost in time, flung back to another day, another house, another kiss.

An arrow of pain shot through her breastbone, lodged somewhere in the vicinity of her heart. Was she always destined to hurt because of him?

Sydney pressed her hands against the expensive fabric of his jacket, clenched her fingers in his lapels—and then pushed hard.

Malik stepped back, breaking the brief kiss. His nostrils flared. His face was a set of sharp angles and chiseled features, the waning light from the sunset hollowing out his cheeks, making him seem harder and harsher than she remembered.

Sadder, in a way.

Except that Malik wasn’t sad. How could he be? He didn’t care about her. Never had. She’d been convenient, a means to an end. Impressionable and fresh in a way his usual women had not been.

The slow burn of embarrassment was still a hot fire inside, even after a year. She’d been so thoroughly duped by his charm.

“You never used to push me away,” he said bemusedly.

“I never thought I needed to,” she responded.

“And now you do.”

“Don’t I? What’s the point, Malik? Do you wish to prove your mastery over me one last time? Prove that you’re still irresistible?”

He tilted his head to one side. “Am I irresistible?”

“Hardly.”

“That’s too bad,” he said.

“Not for me, it isn’t.” Her head was beginning to throb from too much adrenaline, too much anger.

He pushed a hand through his hair. “It changes nothing,” he said. “Though it might make it more difficult.”

Sydney blinked. “Make what more difficult?”

“Our marriage, *habibti*.”

He was a cruel, cruel man. “There is no marriage, Malik. Sign the papers and it’s done.”

His smile was not quite a smile. “Ah, but it’s not so easy as that. I am a Jahfaran prince. There is a protocol to follow.”

Sydney reached for the door frame to steady herself. A bad feeling settled into her stomach, making the tension in her body spool tighter and tighter. Her knees felt weak, making her suddenly unstable on her tall designer pumps. “What protocol?”

He speared her with a long look. A pitying look?

By the time he spoke, her nerves were at the snapping point.

“We must go to Jahfar—”

“What?”

“And we must live as man and wife for a period of forty days ...”

Dying. She was dying inside. And he was so controlled, as always. “No,” she whispered, but he didn’t hear—or he didn’t care. His eyes were flat, unfeeling.

“Only then can we apply to my brother the king for a divorce.”

## CHAPTER TWO

SYDNEY slipped out the door and sank heavily onto a nearby deck chair. Beyond, the Pacific Ocean rolled relentlessly to shore. The surf roiled and foamed, the sound a muted roar as the power of the water hit the beach.

That was Malik's power, she thought wildly. The power to rush over her, to drag her with him, to obliterate what she wanted. That had been part of the reason she'd left, because she'd somehow let her sense of self be pulled under the wave that was Malik. It had frightened her.

That and hearing what his true feelings for her had been. Sydney shuddered.

Finally, she pulled her gaze from the water, which was now turning orange with the sun's setting rays. Malik stood beside her chair. His jaw seemed hard in the waning light, as if he, too, were trapped and trying to make the best of it.

"Tell me it's a joke," she finally said, squeezing her hands together over her stomach.

His gaze flickered to her. His handsome face was so serious, so stark. Even now she felt a twinge of something, some deep feeling, as she looked at him. She refused to examine what that feeling might be; she simply didn't want to know. She wanted to be done with him, finished.

Forever.

"It is not a joke. I am bound by Jahfaran law."

"But we weren't married there!" She laughed wildly. "I've never even *seen* Jahfar, except on a map. How can I possibly be bound by some crazy foreign law?"

He stiffened, but she didn't really care if she'd insulted him. How dare he show up here after all this time and tell her they would remain married until she lived with him for forty days—in the desert, no less! It was like something only Hollywood could think up.

The irony made her laugh. Malik looked at her curiously, but didn't seem to mistake the laugh for real humor. At least he could tell that much. Maybe forty days wouldn't be so bad after all.

Who was she kidding?

"I won't do it," she said, drawing in a deep breath heavy with salt and sea. "I'm not bound by Jahfaran law. Sign the papers and as far as I'm concerned, we're through."

He shifted beside her chair. "You might think it's that easy, but I assure you it is not. You married a foreign prince, *habibti*."

"We were married in Paris." Quickly, by an official at the Jahfaran embassy. As if Malik were afraid he might change his mind if it didn't happen fast. Bitterness ate at her.

That was precisely what he'd been thinking.

"Where we were married matters not," Malik said in that smooth, deep voice of his that still had the power to make her shudder deep inside. "But it does matter by *whom*. We were married under Jahfaran law, Sydney. If you ever wish to be free of me, you will come to Jahfar and follow the protocol."

Sydney tilted her head up to look at him. He was gazing down at her, his expression indecipherable. Anger surged in her veins. "Surely we can find a way to fake it. Your brother is the king!"

"Which is precisely *why* we cannot fake it, as you so charmingly say. My brother takes his duty as king very seriously. He will hold me to the letter of the law. If you wish to be divorced, you will do this."

Sydney closed her eyes and leaned back against the cushion. Dear God. It was a nightmare. A giant, ironic joke from the cosmos. She'd married Malik hurriedly, secretly. There'd been no royal wedding, no fairy tale day with music and beautiful clothes and pageantry.

There'd been the two of them in a registry office at the embassy. A fawning official who called Malik *Your Royal Highness* and bowed a lot. A wide-eyed woman, Sydney remembered, who'd registered the marriage and asked them to sign.

She'd almost felt as if it weren't real, but then the newspapers had picked up on it and suddenly she and Malik were splashed across the tabloids. The attention hadn't died by the time she'd left. And then it followed her back to L.A., finally disappearing a few weeks later when she'd refused to talk to anyone.

Oh, she knew her picture had appeared a few times over the last year, but the paparazzi were far more interested in Malik than they were in her. He was the news. She was a casualty.

And not even a very interesting one.

The last thing she wanted was to remain tied to him, to have the media take a renewed interest in her down the road because Malik caused an international stir of some sort and they wanted to know how his poor wife was handling it. Or, worse, what happened when Malik found someone else he wanted to marry, and he needed her to go to Jahfar for a divorce when he had a current lover in tow?

No. Way. In. Hell.

"Fine," Sydney sniffed. "If that's what it takes, I'll go."

A shiver dripped into her veins. She could get through forty days, if that's what it took to officially end this. Because there was nothing left between them, no danger to her heart any longer. The damage had already been done. There was an iron cage where her heart had once been.

"We can leave tonight. My plane is ready."

Goose bumps crawled across her skin. What had she just agreed to? Panic spread inside until she was quivering with it. "I can't be ready that fast. I need time to put things in order."

The last time she'd dashed off with Malik she'd left her life in disarray. This time, she was putting everything in order before going anywhere. Because this time she would be stepping back into her life without the pain and disorientation of last time.

She'd gone without much thought, because he'd asked her to, and then when he'd asked her to stay, to marry him, she'd impulsively agreed. She'd given no thought to her life back in Los Angeles. A fact that her family never mentioned, but that she knew was very much on their minds whenever they looked at her. She was the impulsive one, the artistic one—the one who could leap without looking but then paid the price later.

And what a price it had been. She'd been a wreck. She'd asked herself in the early days after her return home if she'd been too hasty, if she should have stayed and confronted him, but she always came back to the same thing: Malik regretted marrying her. He'd said so. What was there left to say after that?

She might have loved him, but she would not be anyone's cross to bear. And she'd definitely felt like a burden in the week after his confession. He'd changed, and she simply hadn't been able to take it anymore. She'd never thought a year would pass without any contact between them, but that had only proven he did not want her in his life any longer.

"How much time do you need?" he asked, his voice tight.

"At least a week," she answered automatically, though in fact she knew no such thing. But she wanted to be in control this time. Needed to be in control. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Impossible. Two days."

Sydney bristled. "Really? Is there a timeline, Malik? A celestial clock somewhere that insists we must do this on a specific timetable? I need a week. I have to make arrangements at work."

And she had to check with her lawyer, just in case she could find some sort of legal loophole that would change everything.

Malik gazed down at her, his dark eyes gleaming hotly. Intensely. She waited almost breathlessly for his answer. Malik was proud, haughty. Aristocratic and used to getting his way. If only she'd

told him no when he'd suggested she marry him—but it had never crossed her mind. She'd been too awestruck, and far too much in love with the man she'd thought he was.

Though it was a little late, she would not blindly accept his decrees ever again.

"Fine," he said, his voice clipped. "One week."

Sydney nodded her agreement, her heart pounding as if she'd just run a marathon. "Very well. One week then."

He turned to gaze out at the ocean again. Then he nodded. "I'll take it."

She blinked. "Take what?"

"The house."

"You haven't really seen it," she exclaimed. It was a gorgeous house, one that she only wished she could afford in her wildest dreams, with spacious rooms and breathtaking ocean views. It was the kind of house where she could be inspired to paint, she thought wistfully.

But Malik had only seen the exterior, the main living space, and this terrace. For all he knew, the bedrooms were tiny closets, the bathrooms a 1970s throwback with mustard and orange tiles and psychedelic black fixtures.

Malik shrugged. "It is a house. With a view. It will do."

Inexplicably, a current of anger uncoiled inside her. He was careless when he wanted something. Accustomed to getting whatever he wanted when he wanted it.

Like *her*.

In Malik's world, there were no consequences. No price to be paid when things didn't work out the way you expected. There was only the next house, the next deal.

The next woman.

Dark anger pumped into her. "I'm afraid that's impossible," she said. "There's already an offer."

Malik was unfazed. "Add twenty-five percent. The owner will not turn that kind of money down."

"I think they've already accepted the offer," she said primly. But guilt swelled inside her as soon as she voiced the lie. The owners were entitled to the sale. Her anger at Malik was no excuse to deprive them of it. "But if you'll give me a moment, I can call and see if there's a chance."

Malik's dark eyes burned into her. "Do it."

Sydney turned away and walked across the terrace. She called the listing broker just to make sure there were no offers, and then strolled back to Malik when she finished. "Good news," she said, though it galled her to do so. "If you can come up half a million, the property is yours."

Because he was too smug, too careless, and she couldn't let him ride roughshod over her. It was a rebellion of a sort to jack up the price. She refused to feel guilty. In fact, she would donate her portion of the commission to charity. At least Malik's money could do someone some good.

"Fine," he murmured. "Whatever it requires."

Bitterness swelled in her veins. "And will you be happy here, Malik? Or will you regret this purchase, too?"

She didn't say what she was really thinking—that he regretted her—but it was implied.

"I never regret my actions, *habibti*. If I change my mind later, I will simply get rid of the property."

"Of course," she said stiffly, shame pounding through her. "Because that is easiest."

Malik could discard whatever he wanted, whatever he no longer needed or desired. He'd spent a lifetime doing so.

His expression didn't change. He looked so haughty, so superior. "Precisely. You will write up the papers, yes?"

"Of course."

"Get them now and I will sign them."

"You don't want to read them first?"



He shrugged. “Why?”

“What if I increase the price another million?”

“Then I would pay it,” he said.

Sydney opened her briefcase and jerked a blank offer form from inside. As much as she despised him in that moment, as much as she despised his arrogance and nonchalance, she couldn’t succumb to the temptation to take him for a spectacular ride. She quickly wrote in the price, and then shoved the papers at him.

“Sign here,” she said, pointing.

He did so without hesitation. She couldn’t decide if he was simply arrogant and uncaring or stupidly trusting. A split second later he looked up at her, his eyes sharp and hard, and she knew that stupidly trusting was not the correct choice.

This man not only knew what the fair market price of the property was, he also knew that she’d inflated the price—and he was willing to pay it.

“One week, Sydney,” he said, his voice sending a shiver through her body. “And then you are mine.”

“Hardly, Your Highness,” she said, though her voice shook in spite of her determination not to let it. “It’s simply another business arrangement. Forty days in Jahfar in exchange for a lifetime of freedom.”

He bowed his head in acknowledgment. “Of course,” he said. “You are quite correct.”

And yet, as he walked out and left her standing alone with the ocean crashing in the background, she had the sinking feeling that everything about this arrangement was going to be far more complicated than she wanted it to be.

At least for her.

## CHAPTER THREE

IT took a week and half to get her life organized, and then to board a flight for Jahfar. Malik was not happy, as his messages indicated more than once, but Sydney refused to feel a moment's worry about it. After he'd left her in the Malibu home—*his* Malibu home now—she'd quickly phoned her lawyer.

Jillian had tried to help, but in the end there was nothing she could do. An American divorce wouldn't do the trick. When she'd originally drawn up the papers, she'd warned Sydney it might not be enough. Sydney had just hoped against hope that it would be. Even if it hadn't been, she hadn't expected an archaic law like the one mandating she live with Malik in Jahfar for forty days.

Forty days. My God.

Sydney sipped the champagne a flight attendant had brought for her. Her first class seat was comfortable, though the flight was full and she certainly wasn't alone. She could have flown on Malik's private plane, but she'd chosen to fly commercial instead. He'd been furious, but she'd held fast to her determination to do so. In the end, he'd gone to Jahfar a few days ahead of her.

Her stomach tightened nervously, and she took another sip of the champagne.

*Jahfar*. What would she find when she arrived? What would she feel?

It was Malik's home, and she would in some ways be at his mercy. But she was determined to maintain as much control over her life as possible, which was why she'd insisted on making her own arrangements. Yes, it would have been easier to fly with Malik and let him take care of everything.

But she refused to give him that much control.

The plane touched down in Jahfar a couple of hours after dawn. The moment they taxied to the gate, Sydney realized how foolish her thoughts had been. Because nothing was under her control any longer. A flight attendant hurried to her side, hands clutched together in front of her body. The woman seemed nervous, afraid. And then she bowed deeply.

A heavy feeling settled in the pit of Sydney's stomach.

"Princess Al Dhakir, please forgive us for not realizing you were aboard."

"I ..." Sydney blinked, her skin heating with embarrassment. "No, that's fine," she said, recovering herself though her heart throbbed painfully. "I didn't wish it to be known."

She felt so pretentious, but what else could she say? There was no explaining, no telling these people not to refer to her as a princess. They wouldn't understand.

The woman bowed again before a man came forward and collected Sydney's carry-on bag from the overhead compartment. Everyone else remained seated as she exited the plane first, her cheeks burning hot. She had an overwhelming urge to strangle Malik when next she saw him.

Which proved to be far sooner than she expected.

The international airport in Port Jahfar teemed with people clothed in both Jahfaran and Western dress, but they fell away like water from a ship's bow as a man and his entourage cleaved through them. The man was tall, dressed in the flowing white *dishdasha* and traditional headdress of Jahfar. At his waist was a curved dagger with a jeweled hilt—surprising in an airport, and yet not so much considering where they were.

And who he was. She realized with a shock that the magnificent man in traditional clothing was actually her husband. Heat softened her bones, flooded her core. She'd never seen Malik in Jahfaran clothing. The effect was ... extraordinary.

He was every inch a sheikh. Exotic, dark, handsome.

Magnificent.

Malik strode toward her with that arrogant gait of his, his dark eyes burning into her from afar so that she felt the urge to shrink inside herself and disappear. She looked like hell—felt like hell—after so many hours in the air.

And he was like something out of a fairy tale.

Oh, if only she could turn time back an hour or so and change clothes, fix her hair, her makeup.

*Why, Sydney? What would be the point in that?*

Malik might have made love to her again and again over the two months they were together, but he'd clearly been slumming for his own purposes. Supermodels and beauty queens were more to his taste.

Sydney thrust her chin out. She would not cower or hide. She would not be ashamed.

There was nothing to be ashamed of.

Malik came to a halt before her, his entourage carefully surrounding them both, protecting them, without coming too close.

Her throat felt as dry as sand as his gaze slid over her. "Here I am," she said somewhat inanely. "As promised."

Immediately, she wished she hadn't been the first to speak. It was as if she'd given away some slice of invisible ground in their war with each other, as if she'd arrayed her forces on this particular field of battle and then failed because of something so obvious such as not arming them with weapons.

But it was because of him, because he was making her nervous as he studied her. No doubt he was regretting his impulse to inform anyone she was his wife. She was too casual in her white cotton tank, navy jacket, jeans and ballet flats. A princess should look more polished, like a movie star. She should be sporting Louboutins on her feet, carrying an Yves St. Laurent handbag and wearing the latest Milan fashions.

Well, she wasn't truly a princess and there was little point in pretending to be one for the next month and ten days.

One dark eyebrow arched as he studied her. "Yes, here you are."

Sydney's heart skipped several beats at once, making her feel momentarily light-headed. She splayed her hand over her chest, breathing deeply to regulate the rhythm.

Malik looked alarmed. "What is wrong? Do you need a doctor?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Just a few skips. Happens sometimes, usually when I'm tired. It's nothing."

Before she had time to do more than squeak a protest, he swept her off her feet and into his arms, cradling her against his chest as he turned and barked orders to the men surrounding them.

"Malik, for God's sake, put me down! I'm not hurt," she cried.

He didn't listen. She considered kicking her legs and fighting, showing him just how strong she was, but decided that bringing them both to the ground with a struggle was counterproductive.

"Please put me down," she begged as he began to move. "This is embarrassing."

People were staring at them, pointing, whispering. Malik seemed not to care. It was stunning to be held against him after so much time. Like plunging into a swimming pool with all your clothes on. He was hard, strong, and the heat of his body reminded her of another kind of heat they'd once shared.

He glanced down at her, his handsome features stark against the dark red background of the headress framing his face. No one would ever mistake this man for anything other than a prince, she thought wildly. He was so sure of himself, so full of life and heat and passion.

She'd missed that.

*No.*

No, she was *not* going there. She didn't miss Malik. She didn't miss a single thing about him.

"We are not going far," he said. "I will put you down as soon as we are somewhere quiet, so you may rest."

She turned her head away as his long strides ate up the distance. The entourage hurried along with them, in front of them, their passage through the airport like the ripple of a giant wave. Soon, they were passing between sliding glass doors and into a quiet suite with plush chairs, tables and a

bar at one end. Soft music played to the empty room. The lights in here were low, the air cool against her heated skin.

Malik set her down in one of the chairs. A glass of cold fizzy water appeared before she'd even blinked.

"Drink," he ordered, settling into the chair beside her and picking up the glass.

"I've had plenty to drink," she said, pushing his hand away. "Anything else, and I'll explode."

He looked doubtful. "Jahfar is hot, *habibti*. It can sneak up on you before you realize it."

"Water is not my problem, Malik," she insisted. "I've just flown all the way from L.A. I'm tired. I'm stressed. I want a bed and six hours of uninterrupted sleep."

She'd slept a little on the plane, but not enough. She'd been too nervous.

And with good reason. The man staring back at her now, this hard, hawklike being who seemed so remote and unapproachable—so regal—could make a lion nervous. Were they really married? Had she ever shared a tender moment with this intimidating man?

"Then you shall have it," he said. He nodded to a man who turned and disappeared through another door. A few minutes later, he took her hand—as she tried desperately to block the prickling heat of skin on skin—and led her out the same door and into an elevator. Then they were exiting the airport through a private entrance and climbing into a Mercedes limousine.

It was almost like the past, only Malik was dressed in white robes and a headdress instead of a tuxedo. He looked so cool and exotic while she felt frumpy and hot. She tugged at her jacket, drawing it off and laying it on the seat beside her.

Malik's eyes dropped to her chest, lingered. She felt his gaze as a caress, felt her body responding, her nipples tightening inside her bra. Lightning sizzled in her core. She crossed her arms and turned to look out the window.

"Where are we going?" she asked as the limo slid into traffic. In front of them, a police car with whirling lights blazed a trail. The windows were tinted dark, but the light outside them was still so bright. It would be blinding, she realized, were she out in it. And hot, as he'd said.

"I have a home in Port Jahfar. It is only a few minutes away, on the coast. You will like it."

Sydney leaned her head against the window. It was odd to be here, and exciting in a way she hadn't anticipated. In the distance, stark sandstone mountains rose against the backdrop of the brilliant sky. Date palms dotted the landscape as they rode into the sprawling city. The buildings were a mix of modern concrete, glass and sandstone.

She realized that the hills in the opposite direction weren't actually hills, but sand dunes. Undulating red sand dunes. Along their base, a camel train trod single file toward the city. It was the most singularly foreign moment she'd ever experienced.

The car soon left the stark landscape behind as they passed deeper into the city. Eventually they turned—and suddenly the sea was there, on her right. They rode a short distance along the coast, with the turquoise water sparkling like diamonds in the sun, and then they were turning into a gated complex.

Malik helped her from the car and ushered her inside a courtyard cooled with tiny jets spraying mist that evaporated before it hit her skin. The air was thick, hot. It wasn't unexpected, or even anything she'd never experienced before—and yet it was different in its own way.

Or maybe she was just too tired.

A woman in a cotton *abaya* appeared, bowing and speaking to Malik in Arabic. And then he was turning to her as the woman melted back into the shadows from whence she'd come.

"Hala says that your room is prepared, *habibti*. You may sleep as long as you wish."

She'd expected that a servant would show her the way, but Malik took her elbow—no matter how lightly he touched her, she still burned—and guided her into a huge sunken living area and down a hallway that led to a small suite. The outer room had cushions arrayed around a central table, a rosewood desk in one corner and two low-slung couches that faced each other across a fluffy white

goat-hair rug. The bedroom featured a tall bed covered in crisp white cotton linens that beckoned seductively.

"I need my bags," she said, realizing suddenly that she had nothing to change into. They'd left the airport without collecting her luggage.

"They are on the way. In the meantime, you will find all you need in the bathing room." He gestured to another door. Sydney walked into the spacious bath, marveling at the sunken tub, a shaft of sunlight coming from high up in the ceiling and illuminating the marble. The light picked out the red and gold veins of the stone, sparkled in the glass mosaic tiles surrounding the tub.

"I trust it meets with your approval."

Sydney whirled, his voice startling her, though it shouldn't have. She'd known he was behind her, watching her from the door.

"It's lovely," she said, swallowing hard. Why did it feel so surreal to be here like this? She'd agreed to come, known it was necessary, and yet she felt off balance, out of her element in a way she hadn't expected.

*And why not? This is Jahfar, not Paris, she told herself. Not Los Angeles.*

Malik crossed to her, cupped her face in his hands while her heart thundered in her ears.

She meant to protest, she really did, but her voice froze in her throat.

"There is nothing to fear, Sydney," he said. "We will get through this."

When he lowered his head, her eyelids fluttered closed automatically. Because she was tired, of course. No other reason.

He chuckled softly, his lips brushing her forehead while her pulse throbbed. The sound speared into her heart, reminded her of a different time when she still believed in a fairy tale ending with the handsome prince.

"Don't," she choked out as his lips moved to her temple.

An instant later, he released her and took a step backward. "Of course," he said, his voice thicker than it had been only a moment ago. "As you wish."

Sydney put a shaking hand to her throat, dropping it again when she realized how frightened and helpless it made her seem. She was neither of those things, though she was most definitely nervous. She'd loved him. She'd been through hell because of him. This situation was strange, unnatural.

For them both, she thought. He would probably prefer to be with his current mistress instead of her, the wife he'd thought he was rid of.

"I think it's best if we don't ... touch," she said.

He arched an elegant brow. "You are afraid of a little touch, Sydney? And here I thought I was resistible."

He was mocking her. Naturally. She lifted her head. "There is no purpose to our touching, Malik. We aren't happily married. We are nothing to each other. Not anymore. I realize I'm an inconvenience to you, but I just want to get this over with. You don't have to pretend otherwise to make me feel more comfortable."

His dark eyes flashed with emotion. "I see. How wise you have grown, Sydney. How very jaded."

"I always thought you liked jaded women," she retorted—and felt instantly contrite. If she were trying to make him believe they could behave with cool civility for forty days, she'd just failed abominably.

He leaned against the door frame, but she didn't make the mistake of thinking him relaxed. No, he was carefully—and tightly—controlled. It had been one of the things that had driven her the most insane about him, that ability to shut down his emotions and rein them in so hard that he was nearly inhuman.

"I did not realize you cared," he said softly. Mockingly, still.

Sydney flicked her hand as if brushing away a fly. "I don't."

He straightened to his full height. “Let us not descend into games, *habibti*. You have had a long night of travel. Bathe, rest. I will see you when you are prepared to be reasonable.”

Her temper spiked at the condescension in his tone. “I’m not playing games, Malik. I came, didn’t I? I’m here because I want this over with. Because I want to be free of you forever.” She flung the last at him, unable to stop herself from saying the words.

His jaw hardened, his eyes flashing hot once more. “You will get your wish,” he growled. “But first I will get mine.”

Her stomach flipped. “Wh-what do you mean?”

He looked so menacing. “Scared, Sydney? Afraid of what I will exact from you now that you are here?”

She swallowed, her throat thick with emotion. “Of course not.”

His gaze slid down her body, back up, his eyes hot on hers. His voice came out as a sensual drawl that made heat flare in her core. “Then perhaps you should be.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

MALIK was in a bad mood. He sat in his study, working on minute details that were mind-numbing and boring and meant to distract him. They did not.

He shoved back from the computer and turned his head until he could see the sparkle of the sea beyond the windows.

She was here. His errant wife. The one woman he'd thought might be different, might make him happy—but who, instead, had run away from him. He was not accustomed to women running away from him.

It had been a singular moment when he'd realized she'd truly gone.

He'd raged. He'd made plans. He'd sworn to go after her and drag her back by force if necessary. And then he'd thought, *no*.

She'd walked out. Let her be the one to come back. Instead, she'd started divorce proceedings.

Yet he still wanted her. His body desired hers, regardless of his wishing otherwise. From the moment she'd opened the door to the house in Malibu, he'd wanted her with a fierceness that surprised him after so much time.

Especially considering how very angry he still was with her.

But she'd looked so virginal, so pure, in her white jacket and pale pink dress. Her long legs had been displayed to perfection, enhanced by the nude-colored high heels she'd worn. He'd imagined those legs wrapped around him as he thrust into her body.

It had taken every ounce of control he'd possessed not to press her. Because he'd known that she still wanted him every bit as much as he wanted her.

Her body wanted him, but her heart did not. And that was what had stopped him, both then and today.

He squeezed the pen he held until it cracked, its jagged edge slicing into his finger. A drop of blood welled on the tip. He grabbed a tissue from the box sitting on his desk and swiped the blood away.

Sydney Reed—Sydney Al Dhakir, he corrected—was so beautiful, so very luscious, so bad for his control. From the first minute he'd seen her, he'd wanted her. She'd been aloof ... but only at first. When he'd finally gotten her into his arms, she'd burned so hot he'd known that once with her wasn't enough.

She probably wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever known, but he couldn't actually remember another being more compelling to him. Her skin was as pale as milk, her hair the color of the red dunes of the Jahfaran desert. Her eyes were like a rain-gray sky, the kind of sky one often found hanging over Paris in winter.

While others might find rain depressing, he found it unbearably lovely.

Especially when it was reflected in her eyes.

Malik swore softly. He'd known, when he'd impulsively married her, that it could not last. Because he'd married her for all the wrong reasons, not least the utter dismay it would cause his family. That, and he'd wanted her with a fierceness that had shocked him.

The phone clanged into the stillness, making him jump. Though he could let his secretary get it, he preferred the distraction to his chaotic thoughts.

"Yes?" he barked into the receiver.

"I hear that your wife arrived today," his brother Adan said.

"That's correct," Malik replied somewhat stiffly. "She is here."

He'd kept her away from Jahfar for a reason. Now that she was here, he had no choice but to share her with his family. Though he'd thought there might be a bit more time before that happened. Malik frowned. His brothers would be polite, but his mother certainly would not.

“And do you plan on bringing her to the palace?”

Malik ground his teeth. He hadn’t told Adan why Sydney was here. He hadn’t told anyone. “Perhaps in a few days. Or not. I have business in Al Na’ir.”

“Surely you can spare an evening. I wish to meet her, Malik.”

“Is that a command?”

There was no pause whatsoever. “It is.”

How very easily Adan had slipped into power. He hadn’t been the heir to the throne, just as Malik had not been a part of the ruling family, until their cousin had died in a boating accident and Adan suddenly found himself the heir to their uncle. When their uncle died a year later, Adan had ascended the throne as king.

He’d been a good king. A just king.

“Then I will bring her. Though not today. She is tired from the journey.”

“Of course,” Adan replied. “We will see you for dinner tomorrow night. Isabella looks forward to it.”

“Tomorrow night then.”

Their goodbyes were stiff, formal, but Malik had expected nothing different. They’d had such a barren childhood, with nannies and a kind of rigid formality that was not conducive to warmth between them. Oh, Malik loved his brothers—and his sister—but theirs was not an easy relationship.

He wasn’t quite sure why. There’d been no huge trauma, no major falling out. Just a quiet distance that seemed impossible to breach. The more time moved on, the wider the chasm.

Perhaps that was why he’d been so drawn to Sydney. She’d made him feel less alone, and he’d been addicted to that feeling. But that was before she’d betrayed him, before she’d proven she was no different than anyone else in his life.

Malik checked his watch. It had been over six hours since he’d brought her here. He debated calling Hala to check on her, but decided he would do so instead. He would not hide from her, would not shrink from the raw emotions still rolling between them like a storm-tossed sea.

He found her on the small terrace off her room, her long hair loose and flowing down her back, the wind from the sea ruffling the auburn strands. She’d put on a fluid cream-colored dress that skimmed her form. It was slightly darker than the milk of her skin, but it made her look ethereal. Like an angel.

She turned her head as he approached, setting down the coffee she’d been cupping in both hands. Her expression went carefully blank, but not before he saw the yearning there.

It gutted him, that yearning.

“Are you feeling refreshed?” he asked.

“I am, thank you,” she replied, glancing away again.

He pulled out the chair opposite her, setting it at an angle so he could view the sea and her face at once if he so chose. “Your luggage is intact, I take it?”

“Yes. Everything arrived.”

She picked up the coffee again, her long fingers shaking as she threaded them on either side of the cup. He did that to her, he realized. Made her as skittish as a newborn foal.

It reminded him of the first time they’d made love. She hadn’t been a virgin, but she hadn’t been terribly experienced, either. Everything he did to her had been a revelation. Soon, she’d been bold and eager for more.

His body hardened instantly.

This was the problem, he thought, with no small measure of anger. This need that flared every time he was with her. He’d ceased trying to understand it long ago. He’d never been the sort of man to be ruled by his penis—until Sydney came along and turned everything upside down.

He blew out a disgusted breath and turned to stare at the container ship gliding into port in the distance. It wasn’t simply the physical that drew him to her.



No, he'd been dissolute long before Sydney came along. He'd indulged every appetite, every whim. It had been great fun.

At first.

But in the last couple of years, the more he'd pushed the envelope, the emptier he'd felt.

And she seemed to fill that emptiness somehow.

"I'm going to need internet access," she said, cutting through his thoughts. "I have work to do while I'm here."

"There is Wi-Fi," he told her. "I will have someone give you the password."

"Thank you." Her fingers drummed against the side of the cup. He heard her draw breath, as if she was planning to speak, but she said nothing. Several more times she tried, until he finally speared her with a look, pinning her into place.

"Say it, *habibti*."

She was looking at him with those big grey eyes, her long lashes sweeping to her cheeks and back up again as she let her doubts war with her desire to speak.

Then she bit her lip, and he forced himself not to turn away. Forced himself to deal with the slice of pain that shafted into him, the flood of desire that pooled low in his groin.

He would conquer this ridiculous need.

She was a woman, like any other. She was not special, or different. She possessed nothing that he couldn't obtain elsewhere. Whatever pull she had on him, whatever imagined void she seemed to fill ... she was not irreplaceable. No woman was. He knew that better than most.

Her expression changed by degrees, turned fierce, and he knew she'd made up her mind. He relished her fierceness. It was far better than wide-eyed defeat.

"I want to know why you never brought me here," she burst out, gesturing at him, her hand encompassing his entire body as she swept it up and down. "This is who you are—the clothes, the desert—but you never let me see it."

She leaned toward him then, her eyes stormy. "Did I embarrass you *that* much?"

There, she'd said it. She'd finally put voice to the pain that had been nagging her since the moment she'd arrived and seen him dressed in traditional clothing. This was who he was. This was his life, his heritage, and he'd never allowed her to be a part of it.

She *knew* why, but she wanted to hear him say it. She wanted him to admit to her that he'd regretted taking her for his wife. Her heart thundered, her pulse throbbed and her breath razored in and out of her chest. She *needed* to hear him say it.

To her face this time.

Not that she was in any danger of forgetting, of succumbing to his considerable charm, but she wanted the pain front and center so long as she was here. If she kept it there, it would act as a shield.

He'd removed the headdress between the time she'd seen him earlier and now. His dark hair was wavy, thick, and she remembered threading her hands into it, pulling his mouth down to hers as she lay beneath him in their bed.

Her heart turned over at the thought. Warmth gathered in her belly. A knot of something she dared not name tightened in her core.

No. Those memories had nothing to do with now.

"You did not embarrass me." Malik's handsome face was carefully blank, and though the words were what she wanted to hear, she did not believe them. He was too stoic, too detached. "We would have come here eventually."

"Eventually," she repeated, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. He would not tell her the truth, even now. Had she truly expected it?

"What do you wish me to say, Sydney?" he demanded. "It was not foremost on my mind, I have to admit. I was more concerned with how long I had to wait until the next time I could get you naked."

Sydney set the coffee cup down, grateful that she didn't clang it into the saucer. "Why can't you just admit the truth?"

His dark eyes flashed, his expression hardening. "Why don't you tell me what this truth is and stop beating around the bush, as you Americans say?"

"You know what it is. You just won't say it."

He got to his feet, gazed down at her with that cool disdain she'd come to hate. He'd always shut down whenever she'd pressed him about anything. And she'd been so blinded by love that she hadn't seen it for the warning sign it was.

"If this is how you plan to spend the next forty days, we will never be divorced," he said.

She lifted her chin. She'd never really confronted him about anything. They hadn't been together long enough to truly argue, and she wasn't a confrontational person. But she was feeling so frustrated, so disoriented being here with him now, and she was fed up. Fed up with hiding behind a mask, with worrying that she didn't fit in or that she was embarrassing to those she cared about. She'd been trying to fit in since she was a child, and she was suddenly unwilling to do it with him for even a moment longer.

"Why is it suddenly my fault? Why am I the one causing the problem? You're the one who can't admit to the truth."

"I don't do drama, Sydney," he growled. "Either say what you so desperately want to say, or be quiet."

Fury roiled in her belly like a living thing. She pushed her chair back and stood, unwilling to allow him to stare down at her. Or to stare down at her from so great a height, she amended, since he was still taller than she was.

Fine, he wanted to hear it, she was not holding back a moment longer. She'd already held back for far too long. Time hadn't eased the pain, but it had at least allowed her to come to terms with it.

"I think you *were* ashamed of me," she accused him. "And I think you didn't want to bring me here because you regretted marrying me."

His laugh was bitter. "And this is why you left me? Why you walked out in the middle of the night? Because of your own insecurities?"

"I left a note," she said, and felt suddenly ridiculous. A note? She'd packed her suitcase and fled because she'd been hurt, confused and suddenly so unsure of herself. She'd needed time to think, time to process everything. She'd never thought, never believed for a moment, that an entire year would pass without any communication from him. She'd been impulsive, reckless.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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