

TERESA
SOUTHWICK

THE SHEIKH'S
RELUCTANT
BRIDE

Cherish

Teresa Southwick
The Sheikh's Reluctant Bride

Аннотация

Jessica Sterling has just discovered a life-changing secret. In the desert kingdom of Bha'Khar is the family she never knew she had! Little does she realize that includes the man she's been betrothed to since birth....Sheikh Kardahl Hourani is rich, gorgeous and just a tiny bit arrogant. He's happy to marry, but this brooding prince doesn't have love on his agenda. Can Jessica see the man behind the playboy persona and find her way into his guarded heart?

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The Sheikh's Reluctant Bride

Teresa Southwick



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To Susan Mallery, Maureen Child
and Chris Rimmer—the best plot group ever.

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CHAPTER ONE

“FEAR is my friend.”

As the plane touched down on Bha’Khar’s runway, Jessica Leigh Sterling prayed she spoke the truth. Except the statement was fundamentally flawed. Fearful flyers usually freaked out on takeoff, not so much on touchdown. But nothing about this flight was usual and she’d learned there were lots of ways to be afraid.

This wasn’t like when she was a girl and her mother had gotten so sick that Jess had been sent to the state home. This was scary like the hopeless romantic who finds out it might be possible to get what she’s wanted her whole life only to find out her dream really is hopeless.

She was afraid it was going to be like that old joke: everyone who has a family, step forward. Not so fast, Jessica. There are people who share your DNA, but they don’t want to know you so forget about them helping out if you need a kidney or bone marrow transplant.

Oh God, to be this close to meeting someone who’d known her mother, someone who might care about Jessica because of that connection. Might. But, maybe not. And she was still a little weirded out because the family she’d come to meet lived in a country halfway around the world from California. But the potential benefits trumped fear and, although important, matching kidneys and compatible bone marrow were not an

issue, thank goodness. It was the simple things she wanted to know—like where her brown hair and hazel eyes had come from.

And, just this once, couldn't life come down on the side of the hopeless romantic? That's what she was here to find out.

As the plane slowly turned toward a group of buildings, it hit her that this was really Bha'Khar, her mother's country—the country Jess had never known about while Mary Sterling was alive. The mounds of paperwork necessary to make this visit happen had made her eyes cross and—good lord—the king of Bha'Khar had sent an aide to cut through the red tape. Why had her mother kept secret her connection to royalty? Jessica never would have known if an attorney from the Department of Children and Families hadn't contacted her about the letter from her mother that he'd found in her old file.

The King had sent a plane, too. When it stopped, the captain turned off the Fasten Seat Belt sign and she released hers, then stood, stretching cramped muscles. She'd been told that someone would be here to meet her, but her nerves didn't seem to care. Then the curtains parted in the forward cabin and a tall man in a close-fitting and elegantly tailored navy-blue suit walked toward her. He looked familiar, but no way could she have ever met him.

He looked about thirty and moved with confidence, predatory grace and an air of controlled power. His thick black hair was long enough to scrape the crisp white collar of his dress shirt. The barest suggestion of arrogance mixed with the sensual curve of his mouth and his straight nose flared a little at the nostrils,

hinting at a depth of passion that could rock a girl's world. Only a vertical scar on his lip and a crescent-shaped one on his sharp cheekbone marred his male perfection. And mar was the wrong word. If anything, the imperfections enhanced his masculinity.

He stopped in front of her and smiled. "Jessica?"

That smile could start the average woman's world rocking, but she wasn't the average woman. His deep voice and attractive accent made her name sound like a caress.

"I'm Jessica."

"Welcome to Bha'Khar." He took her hand and bent over it.

Along with the plane ride, this was a first. Kids from the state home didn't grow up and rub shoulders with the sort of men who kissed women's hands. It made her feel awkward and ill at ease. Like that first night after being taken from her mother's hospital room to share a room with other girls who had no one. All the hopeless, empty, scary feelings came back in a rush.

Then his soft lips grazed her knuckles and the touch unleashed other feelings that had nothing to do with anxiety and everything to do with awareness.

"Th-thank you," she said.

Dark brown eyes assessed her. "Please forgive my boldness, but I am compelled to say that I did not expect that you would be so lovely."

English might be his second language, but certainly he was fluent in flattery. Could flirtation be far behind?

"Thank you," she said again.

It was the polite response to the man who'd probably been sent to take her to her relatives. But every single instinct she possessed elevated from alert-level-orange to run-don't-walk-away red. Suspicion was the by-product of a childhood spent watching alcohol destroy her mother's body as surely as the string of two-timing men through her life had destroyed her spirit. Jessica had learned to spot a player by the time she was ten years old and this guy was definitely a player.

But that wasn't her problem. He was probably another of the king's aides and she was nothing more than his job. After he connected her with family, his work would be done.

"I trust your journey was pleasant?" He continued to hold her hand and for some reason she continued to let him.

Pleasant? She glanced at the plush, customized interior of the royal jet. "There was some turbulence." Her heart had raced then, too. "But mostly the flight was smooth. Although I have nothing to compare it to. This was my first time."

A gleam stole into those dark eyes. "So... You are no longer a virgin—" Two beats later he added, "Flier."

That, too. She'd never slept with a man, either. Many had been willing to be her first, but she'd been unwilling to participate. She didn't believe there was a faithful guy out there, let alone one who could sweep her off her feet. An unfortunate characteristic of the hopeless romantic was the yearning to be swept away, which put her idealistic and rational selves in constant conflict. She wanted a completely romantic meltdown that would prohibit

logical thought and just let her feel. So far she'd come up empty on all counts.

Although the way her stomach had dropped when he'd kissed her hand made her feel like she was still in the air and the plane hit a downdraft. Imagine if he kissed her for real—on the mouth. Darned if her lips didn't tingle at the thought. This so wasn't the time to abandon logical thinking. What had he just asked? Her journey. Right.

Time to cleanse the virgin remark from the air and turn the conversation to the mundane. Make that nonpersonal because there was nothing ordinary about this guy or the royal jet. "This plane is amazing. It's like a flying living room."

"There is a bedroom as well," he said, suggestion in his tone adding to the gleam in his eyes.

So much for nonpersonal communication. "I noticed."

"You found the bed comfortable?"

More comfortable than the way he made her feel. It was like every nerve ending in her body had received a double dose of adrenaline.

"I found everything perfect."

"Excellent. There is a car waiting. I will escort you to the palace."

"The palace?" She knew her eyes grew wide, and tried to stop, but couldn't, what with her heart pounding so hard.

"Is there somewhere else you wish to go?"

Yes, she wanted to say. And no. "Going to the palace" didn't

fit into her frame of reference even after reading her mother's letter. She remembered the handwriting, as familiar as if it were the day's grocery list instead of the last thing her mother had written ten years ago. The words still made her heart hurt. I know I did everything else wrong, but it wasn't wrong the way I loved you. Since then, Jess had read the message over and over but still couldn't grasp that she was distantly related to Bha'Khar's royal family.

"I'm sure the palace is fine, but—" Fine? It so wasn't fine. She wasn't a palace kind of person. She was burgers and fries, sweatpants and sneakers.

"But?"

"I was sort of hoping I'd be meeting my family."

"And you will," he promised. "Arrangements are being made. In the meantime, permit me to make you comfortable."

Comfortable? What did that mean? And how could she be comfortable with strangers, however distantly related, who were royalty?

As he started to turn away, she put her hand on his arm and felt the material of his suit jacket. "Wait."

Concern that seemed to be genuine slid into his eyes. "Is there a problem?"

The problem was the material just felt like material to her. It was probably expensive material, but she had no frame of reference for that any more than she did for a palace. Most little girls grew up playing pretend princess, but the fantasy was usually

limited to the great gowns and a tiara or two. Not living under the same roof as the king and queen. This was a fear she'd never felt before.

"Maybe it would be better if I stayed at a hotel."

He looked puzzled. "The king and queen would be disappointed."

How did she explain this? "There's a saying in my country—it's better to look stupid than open your mouth and prove it. This is kind of like that."

"I like this saying. But you do not look stupid so I am unclear on your point."

"They're certain to be disappointed in me, but staying at the palace—I'm bound to do something that will let them down for sure," she explained.

He shook his head. "You need only be yourself."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"There is no cause for fear."

"Yeah, there kind of is. This is a perfect example." She held out a hand indicating the plush plane interior. "I grew up in a run-down, one-bedroom apartment on Stoner Street in Los Angeles. That was until the state of California took over. I wouldn't know a shrimp fork from a forklift."

"You are exaggerating."

"Yes. But you get my point."

"If it becomes necessary for you to know these things, just stay very close to me and follow my lead. I promise to protect you."

She studied the oh-so-sincere expression on his handsome face. “That sounds very much like ‘trust me.’”

“Exactly.”

“In my country when someone says that it’s usually a good idea not to.”

“You are most cynical,” he commented.

“I have good reasons.”

“I look forward to hearing them,” he said, probably just being polite.

He smiled, showing off straight white teeth, then he covered her hand with his own, a gesture meant to comfort but brought back the spiraling-plane-sensation.

“The king and queen are looking forward to meeting you, the daughter of their dear friends’ daughter, for whom they’ve been searching so many years.”

“They’ve been searching?” she asked, her gaze jumping to his.

In the letter, her mother had confessed that she’d become pregnant by a married diplomat and ran away because shame prevented her from going to her family. Jess had feared the same family would shun her and to find out they’d been looking gave her hope a double dose of adrenaline.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you—” Had he introduced himself? Was she so caught up in her nerves, skepticism and his charming flirtation that she’d forgotten? “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“My apologies. I have been remiss.” He bent slightly at the

waist. "I am Kardahl, son of King Amahl Hourani of Bha'Khar."

That name sounded familiar. Probably because he was part of the royal family. "So are we related?"

He shook his head. "Your lineage can be traced back to royalty, but the bloodlines split off over a hundred years ago."

There was no reason to feel relieved about that and yet she was, right up until she realized why the name sounded so familiar. And why she'd thought she'd seen him before. Because she had seen him in print. He was better looking in person. "You're the playboy prince." Did she say that out loud? Oh God, the look on his face told her she did.

His eyes narrowed. "You have been reading the tabloids."

"I don't buy them," she said. It was a minor distinction, but a distinction just the same. "But it's hard not to see them in the grocery store, the beauty salon, the doctor's waiting room."

"You might want to choose a physician who does not patronize disreputable publications," he said.

"I don't have a choice." This was proof that they could be living on different planets. He had no clue about her reality. "My kids go to doctors contracted with the state and we don't get a vote on the publications in the waiting room."

"You have children?" he asked, a flicker of surprise in those dark eyes.

"I've never given birth if that's what you're asking. I'm a social worker and kids in the state's care are my responsibility."

"I see."

“I doubt it. Probably you never had to worry about medical attention, or your next meal or a roof over your head since you grew up in a palace not a group home.” She made a mental note that irritation cancels out fear.

“You would be correct.”

Lucky him. “What should I call you? Your Highness? Your Worship?”

“He who rules the universe is my preferred title.”

She blinked. “I’m sorry. Were you being funny?”

“Apparently not.”

But he smiled, a charming smile that made her want to grab hold of the nearest chair. Another mental note: this playboy had a sense of humor and it packed more punch than his charm. She didn’t know whether to be grateful that her player radar was alive, well and functioning with one hundred percent accuracy or unsettled to have proof that she’d inherited from her mother the playboy-magnet gene. The thing was—she wanted to be swept away, but by someone who sincerely wanted her and men who were players didn’t do sincere.

She’d just confirmed that he was everything she didn’t want in a man. Not that he would hit on her. According to those questionable publications, his taste in women ran to models, actresses and world-famous beauties. She was not, not and so not.

“My friends and family call me Kardahl,” he was saying.

She nodded. “Kardahl it is. I’ll just get my bag—”

“It will be taken care of.” He rested his hand at the small of

her back.

She swore the heat of his fingers seeped through the material of her suit jacket and made her want to melt. Probably that was because he smelled really good. She'd read somewhere that sense of smell was a powerful weapon in the arsenal of seduction. Still, there was the whole willingness thing and he'd just kissed the hand of maybe the only woman on the planet who was immune to his tabloid-worthy charisma.

Kardahl did not miss the chill that slid into Jessica's large hazel eyes when he had introduced himself. Or the way she quite deliberately moved away from his touch now. Given their relationship, her reservations were puzzling.

He held out his hand, indicating that she precede him. "Let us go."

He settled her in the back of the limousine and supervised the removal of her luggage. There were only two pieces, a meager amount of belongings all things considered. It was his experience that women always brought more than necessary and she was moving her entire life. Strange, indeed.

Kardahl slid into the back of the car beside her and met her gaze. The scandal precipitating her arrival was entirely his doing. He'd lost the only woman he would ever love and when he had grown weary of being told life goes on, he had thrown himself into the business of living—with many women. And he was guilty of the abundant yet judicious use of flattery. But he

had told this woman the truth about being quite lovely. Her sun-streaked brown hair fell past her shoulders, with shorter strands framing a delicate face and cheekbones that revealed her noble heritage. She had also inherited lips that were full, well-formed, and quite frankly, the most kissable mouth he had ever seen.

“Tell me about yourself,” he said.

“I’m disappointed.”

“You have only to tell me who has done this and I will see that a high price is paid for the transgression.”

“Look in the mirror,” she said dryly. “Surely you can do better than ‘tell me about yourself.’ I’ve heard some of the world’s best pickup lines. For instance—‘here I am, what are your other two wishes.’ Or, ‘do you have a Band-Aid? I scraped my knees when I fell for you.’ Or, my personal favorite—‘Do you believe in love at first sight? Or should I go out and come in again?’”

“You do not believe that I sincerely wish to know you?”

She slid him an assessing glance. “How’s that uber-sincere line working for you?”

The puzzle of Jessica Sterling deepened. Revelation of his identity had altered the obvious female interest he had first recognized when her pulse raced and her hand trembled in his. Gone was the friendly, open woman he had first met. Now he found her prickly. Skeptical. And if he was not mistaken, suspicious. This was a reaction he had never before encountered from a woman. It was remarkably refreshing.

He smiled. “The line works quite well, actually. When I

politely and sincerely inquire to know more about a woman, she invariably rewards me with information about herself. Intimate information.”

“Okay. I’ll play along.”

“Play? This is a game?”

“What else?” she asked. “This is you.”

He nodded. “Then if you choose to treat it as a game, I will play along, too.”

“I figured you would,” she said.

“So, if you please, tell me about yourself.”

She blew out a long breath. “I was born in Los Angeles, California. My mother died when I was twelve. I grew up in the child welfare system. Went to college and received a degree in social work.” She shrugged. “Those are the highlights of my life.”

Kardahl did not believe that was so and only now recalled that his father had intended to have Jessica’s background investigated. Undoubtedly it had been done, but Kardahl’s indifference to the situation had prevented him from reading the report. He regretted that now.

As the car sped smoothly toward the palace, he looked at her. “I suspect there is more you are not saying.”

A frown marred the smooth skin of her forehead, then she turned to look out the window. There was tension in the line of her jaw, the length of her slender neck, the set of her shoulders. Her hands rested in her lap, fingers intertwined, but there was nothing restful about her as she rubbed one thumb over the other.

“There’s a lot I’m not saying, but it’s not important.” Finally she met his gaze. “Tell me about you.”

She did not wish to talk about herself, which made him all the more curious. But there was time to learn what he wanted to know. “I am the second in line of succession to the throne of Bha’Khar—”

“The spare heir?”

“Some would say.”

“So you’re like the equivalent of the vice president in my country.”

“I suppose that is true.”

“You’re so busy keeping women happy all over the world. When do you have time to get ready?”

“For what?”

“To rule the country. If you’re called on.”

He did have a reputation—some of it deserved, some embellished. But no one knew why he took pains to cultivate it. “I will do my duty should the need arise, but I pray it will not because my brother, Malik, will one day be king.”

“Of course. Tell me more.”

“What do you wish to know?”

“I wish to know how someone like you who was born with so many advantages and opportunities to do really good things can turn into a self-absorbed pleasure seeker who’s only interested in his next romantic conquest.”

Her tone was friendly, conversational. And because he

liberally used flattery, he recognized it in women. He was accustomed to it. He definitely did not see it now. “You have quite a low opinion of me.”

“It’s hard not to, what with all the stories printed about you and women who are equally self-absorbed and pleasure seeking.”

His emotions had shut down two years ago after burying his beloved Antonia and he almost didn’t recognize the prick of anger now. “Do you believe everything you read in those publications?”

“At the very least there has to be a grain of truth or they would be subject to accusations of slander followed by expensive lawsuits. And how many times have denials been issued only to find out the story was true? So, yes, I do believe a lot of what I read.” She met his gaze directly. “Although I have to say you look nothing like your pictures.”

“The paparazzi are not interested in taking favorable photographs. Their goal is to take infamous ones.” And they did not care who they hurt in the pursuit of that goal, he thought bitterly.

“And you certainly give them ample opportunity.”

“If you have such a low opinion of me, it begs the question. Why did you agree to come here?”

“You know why. The king’s representative promised to make it possible for me to meet my family.” She met his gaze. “After that, I’m going back home to my job with the department of social services—important, relevant work. Something you

probably wouldn't understand.”

“You would be wrong.” He was the minister of Finance and Defense. “I am quite social.”

She smiled. “No doubt about that, but the services you provide are questionable.”

She was making assumptions without knowing him and it was beginning to grate. It was as if she were trying to elicit emotion from him, even if that emotion was negative. If that was her objective, she was destined for more disappointment. The passion he had once felt was big and blazing, an entity with a life of its own and an excitement that had consumed him. When he lost that, he lost everything. He was empty inside. He had learned to go on by embracing that feeling of nothing and Jessica could not do or say anything to make him care.

This was about duty—in his case duty had been helped along by the unfortunate photographs of him with a certain still-married and much divorced actress. With negotiations in progress for Bha'Khar to join other nations in the Global Commerce Union, a scandal in the royal family would not be tolerated. As the public relations minister had pointed out—the only thing the media loved more than a salacious story was a salacious love story that included a wedding.

But that was not the real reason her presence in Bha'Khar had been expedited. The woman Kardahl had loved was dead, along with their unborn child and a part of him had died with them. Now one woman was the same as the next. It had ceased to matter

to him that the king had chosen his bride when Kardahl was just a boy. His heart had turned to stone.

But his confusion was increasing. What was this about her going back to a job? It would explain her scarcity of luggage, but created more questions.

Kardahl frowned. "One who takes vows so cavalierly should not be so swift to point accusing fingers."

"Vows?" Her smile disappeared. "What are you talking about? What vows?"

"The vows we took by proxy."

Her eyes widened. "I don't understand."

Neither did he. But this he knew for certain. "You are my bride."

CHAPTER TWO

THREE hours ago Jessica had been afraid the family she'd only just found might reject her because she was the result of her mother's out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Now she had bigger things to worry about, like marriage to a man who didn't know the meaning of the words vow, dedication and loyalty.

In his palace suite, she paced back and forth in front of the French doors that opened to a balcony overlooking the Arabian Sea while she waited for him to return and tell her it was all a big mistake. They'd have a laugh, then she could get on with the reason she'd come here.

At least she had a great view for her pacing and his suite wasn't bad, either. Not bad was a gross understatement. It was big. And while she was tempted to explore, she didn't want to lose her way and get caught snooping. What she could see right here was pretty awesome. Celery-green sofas done in a suedelike fabric faced each other in front of a white brick fireplace. Pictures, each with their own lighting, hung on the walls throughout the spacious living and dining rooms. She didn't know a darn thing about art but would bet each one cost more money than she made in a month because they were filled with difficult to identify body parts. And they were difficult to identify because they weren't where they were supposed to be. Kind of like the mess she now found herself in.

How could she be married and not know it? What about the white dress, flowers, rings and vows—preferably of the verbal kind. Her low-heeled pumps clicked on the mosaic tiles in the suite's foyer as she checked the door to make certain it wasn't locked, then peeked outside to see if anyone was standing guard there. No and no, she thought, closing the door.

That didn't mean she wasn't a victim in some bizarre sex slave ring. She'd seen stories. Granted it was far-fetched. When the royal family had taken her under their wing, she'd never suspected another agenda, but what did she know? She thought proxy marriages had gone out with horse-drawn buggies and hoop skirts.

While she was trying to decide whether or not her luggage would slow her down too much when she made a run for it, the door opened and Kardahl joined her in the living room.

"I have news," he said.

She tried to read his expression and when she couldn't, made a hopeful guess. "We're not married."

"On the contrary." He held out a piece of paper. "Is this your signature?"

She took it from him and stared at the familiar scrawl beneath the foreign words. "It looks like mine, but—"

"Were you coerced?" he interrupted.

"No. But I remember a stack of paperwork taller than me and —"

"Not such a very great stack of paperwork then," he

interrupted, looking her over from head to toe.

She was going to ignore that. “Not being fluent in the Bha’Kharian language, I couldn’t read this. The man who was supposed to be helping me said it was nothing important. That I was simply giving my permission to open records that would unite me with my family.”

Kardahl nodded as he took the paper she handed back and set it on the glass-topped coffee table. “In his overzealous desire to serve the king, he may have stretched the truth.”

“He lied?”

“Not exactly. Your signature gives your permission to access records, but it also bears witness to your agreement to the marriage by proxy.”

“That’s absurd. This is 2007. No one gets married by proxy.”

“I assure you it is quite real and legal.”

As yet, she wasn’t outraged to the point where she missed the irony of being this man’s bride. Nine out of ten women would be alternately doing the dance of joy and counting their lucky stars. But Kardahl got reluctant woman number ten. But irony worked both ways. She was apparently legally married to her worst nightmare. That kicked her outrage into overdrive.

She put her hands on her hips. “How do you know I’m not already married?”

“Do you not think someone would have checked that?”

“I never thought I’d be in a proxy-marriage situation. How did this happen?” she asked, pacing again. “Why did I draw the short

straw?” At his blank look she translated, “Why me?”

“Your mother’s lineage can be traced back to royalty and there is a long friendship between our families. Many years ago it was decided that her offspring would become the bride of the king’s second son—”

“What if she’d had a boy?” Jess demanded.

“But she didn’t,” he pointed out, far too calmly as his gaze lingered on her breasts. “So when your attorney made inquiries and you were located, plans for the union proceeded.”

This was wrong in so many ways, she didn’t know where to start. Actually that wasn’t entirely accurate. “Did you sign one of those papers, too?”

“Yes.”

“Voluntarily?”

“Yes,” he answered far too patiently.

The playboy prince signed a marriage agreement without a gun to his head? “Why?”

“It is my destiny. The spare heir is required to marry and produce children.”

Since when was he the poster boy for following the rules? “What if I’d never been found?” When he opened his mouth, she held up a finger to stop him. “Don’t you dare say ‘but you were.’”

The corners of his mouth curved up. “It is not necessary since you have said it for me.”

“Then I’ll rephrase—What prevented you from getting married before this? If I’d never turned up, would you never have

married?”

“A suitable bride would have been selected.” He shrugged. “When the time was right.”

“So the time was right now? Because I was located?”

“That—and other things.” He looked like a naughty little boy caught red-handed.

The expression was cute, she thought, before her outraged self scratched the observation and replaced it. He was no boy. The girly parts of her recognized and responded to his masculinity against her will and better judgment.

“What did you do?” she managed to ask.

“Why do you assume that I am at fault without really knowing me?”

She folded her arms over her chest and looked up. “How can you ask that with a straight face. This is you we’re talking about. The whole world knows about your romantic escapades. Of course you did something. What was it this time? I’m sure a woman is involved,” she guessed.

“She left her husband, although the separation is not yet legal.”

“That would make her a married woman. I guess the king wasn’t too happy with you.”

“Not me so much as it is the pictures of myself and the lady taken with the telephoto lens.” He shrugged, but his eyes narrowed. “My father and his advisers made it clear that this was an opportune time to—what is the expression—kill two birds with one stone.”

“Squash the scandal and do your duty?”

“Exactly,” he agreed.

So the king had one nerve left and Kardahl had gotten on it—and dragged her along with him. She put her hands on her hips. “There’s just one problem. I don’t want to be married.”

“May I ask why?”

“So many reasons, so little time,” she said. “And if I did decide to walk down the aisle—and I mean walk down the aisle, not sign a piece of paper and presto you’re hitched—you’re the last man on the face of the earth I would choose.”

Instead of irritation, amusement sparkled in his eyes. “Is that so?”

“Your behavior proves you’re not capable of commitment.” She waited for his expression to change and when it didn’t, she said, “Feel free to deny it and set the record straight. The basis for that opinion comes directly from the tabloids.”

“There is no need to deny it. You are correct.”

“Then why didn’t you refuse to go through with this proxy thing?”

The amusement finally disappeared, replaced by a dark look that made his eyes hard as granite. “It is the price of royal birth. This marriage is about duty.”

“That’s the thing. There is no marriage because I didn’t knowingly give my consent.” She never would have given it, especially if she’d known who she was marrying. “In case there’s any question, I am not happy about this.”

“That is understandable. You have been ill used.”

He was agreeing with her again. Why did he keep doing that?

“Come again?”

“You should have been apprised of all the facts of the situation. The aide responsible for this will be severely disciplined.”

“That’s a start. How severely?” she asked cautiously.

“How severely would you like?”

Good question. How did you chastise someone responsible for marrying you to the kind of man you’d avoided like the stomach flu?

She looked at him. “If the punishment were to fit the crime, he should be forced into a marriage with the last person on the planet he would choose.”

“He is already married.”

Laughter slid into Kardahl’s eyes indicating he got her drift and didn’t care that she’d slighted him. Why should he when the world was his playground and all the women in it his adoring toys.

“I see. And does he also have children?” she asked.

“Three.”

Ouch. She didn’t want to be responsible for the man losing his job when he had a wife and kids depending on him. “Maybe a severe talking to would be enough. Along with a warning not to play with people’s lives.”

“I will arrange it,” he said. He bowed slightly and smiled.

“Don’t do that.”

“It is a gesture of respect,” he explained.

“Not the bow. Don’t smile at me.”

He tilted his head as he studied her. “You would rather I frown?”

Yes, she thought. For many reasons. Not the least of which was the way his smile made breathing a challenge and threatened her equilibrium. “How can you smile when we still have a big problem? How are you going to get me out of this marriage?”

“It is possible to obtain an annulment,” he said.

“Okay,” she said nodding. “I’m almost smiling. What do I have to do?”

“You must not consummate the marriage.”

This must be hopeless romantic hell. She was discussing sex as if it were a business deal. So much for being swept away. “Okay then, start the paperwork. I promise not to seduce you and I’m quite sure you can’t seduce me.”

“Are you so very certain?” There was a gleam in his eyes. The glitter of competition, a challenge issued.

“Oh, please. I’m looking for a man who can put his heart and soul into a relationship. You’re not that man and we both know it.”

“Do we?” He looked at her for a long moment, then shrugged. “If you wish it, I will begin the process of dissolution.”

“I wish it very much.” Clearly he was being so agreeable because he didn’t want to be married. Then a thought struck her. “Is this going to get you in more trouble?”

“Do not worry about me. I will explain to the king and queen.”

“There won’t be more scandal?” she asked.

“My public relations staff will issue appropriate statements.

But—”

“What?”

“If I could prevail upon you to play the part of my wife—only in public,” he added, “until any hint of scandal has faded away. You would have my gratitude. And although my family has caused you some distress, they would be forever in your debt as well. And in the meantime, I will give you every possible assistance in meeting your family.”

Family. It’s why she’d come halfway around the world. Because she’d had no one after her mother died, she’d always longed to have the problems with relatives that others moaned about. She would cherish interference, being judged and unwanted advice if she gained unconditional love.

“It’s a deal,” she agreed. “As long as no one expects me to produce children.”

His only response was a smile and a look that reminded her of a large hunting cat selecting his prey.

As the limousine drove past the colorful booths of the open marketplace and continued toward the heart of Bha’Khar’s capital city, Jessica stared out the window shaking her head.

“Something is not to your liking?” Kardahl asked.

“Everything is fine.”

And that was an understatement. True to his promise, he had shown her to her own room and she'd spent the night—alone—in the most beautiful bedroom she'd ever seen with a closet as big as her whole apartment in L.A. The bed was so high, she'd half expected her nose to bleed. The bathroom vanity was marble and all the fixtures were gold. After a pleasant breakfast, Kardahl had told her his staff was contacting her family and while they were waiting for a response he offered to take her on a tour of the city. It was very sweet, but probably part of his scandal-suppressing charade. And she was okay with that.

What saddened her in a soul-deep way was that this lovely, graceful city with its white and pink stucco buildings and red-tile roofs had been her mother's birthplace and Jessica had never known. It was part of who she was and made her feel as if pieces of her heart were missing.

"Tell me what troubles you," he said, his voice deep and gentle.

The gentleness got her. That and the fact that he'd read her so right and wouldn't let her brush him off. "I can't believe that my mother never talked about her country and her family."

"It must have been a bitterly unhappy time for her."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

He shrugged. "It is a reasonable assumption. One tries to forget unhappy times. Talking of them would simply keep the pain fresh. In addition, the burden would be heavy enough without weighing down a child."

So he thought her mother was protecting her. He looked sincere and it made sense, although she hadn't expected such a depth of understanding from a man with his reputation for superficiality.

She smiled at him. "Whether or not you're right, I find that very comforting." When his cell phone rang, she looked out the window at the Arabian Sea. The sparkling blue expanse disappeared as they drove down a narrow street with fashionable shops on both sides.

He folded shut his phone and said, "That was my secretary."

He looked at her. "I waited until your arrival to confirm a visit to your family."

"When can I meet them?" she asked eagerly. "I don't know much about them."

"You have two aunts—"

"My mother had two sisters?" Duh. He'd just told her as much. What she'd meant was, she'd always wanted a sister, or a brother. She'd desperately wished for someone so she wouldn't be alone. Her mother had sisters and she'd walked away from that, never looking back. Why?

"One of your aunts," he continued, "is married to the ruler of Bha'Khar's desert people. The other is a doctor who lives in a city to the north of the capital. I have arranged for you to meet them both."

"That would be wonderful." She was almost afraid to ask. "And my grandparents?"

“They are on an extended diplomatic assignment at the request of the foreign service minister. They’ve been informed of your arrival and will return as soon as possible.”

“I see.” She sighed.

He frowned. “What is it?”

“I’m disappointed that I have to wait,” she admitted. “I’d hoped to spend as much time as possible getting to know them before I have to return to my job.”

“Can you not extend your leave of absence?”

“I suppose I’ll have to, but I hate to do that to the kids.”

“They are not being cared for while you are gone?”

“It’s not that simple. Getting kids to trust when they’ve lost everyone isn’t easy.” She knew from personal experience. In fact, she still never let herself believe in anyone with her whole heart. “It’s a leave of absence for me, but to them it’s one more rejection. One more person who abandoned them.”

“They must learn not to put their trust in a single person,” he said. “It is a lesson that will serve them well. Would they not be better off without you?”

She shook her head. “Everybody needs somebody sometime. If they don’t engage emotionally, they become isolated and antisocial.”

“Is not detachment more uncomplicated?”

She stared at him. “This from a man who attaches himself to anything in a skirt—” She pressed her lips together and sighed. “Never mind.”

“Do not misunderstand. I have great admiration for your devotion and the conviction that you can make a difference.” His tone said it was a waste of time.

“The world would be in sadder shape than it already is if no one tried.”

“I wish you luck in your efforts.”

This attitude was what she'd expected based on what she'd read about him. And if not for his insight moments ago she never would have questioned it. But she wondered how he could be so understanding and so jaded at the same time.

She was about to ask when she glanced out the window and realized they'd stopped. “Is the tour over?”

His smile was mysterious. “Yes. And now I have a surprise.” When the driver opened the door, Kardahl slid out, then held a hand out for her. She took it and he closed his fingers around hers, drawing her to her feet on the sidewalk in front of a dress shop. Then he slipped her hand into the bend of his arm and said, “Come with me.”

Inside, the perimeter of the store was lined with women's clothes—dresses, suits, full-length gowns. If one couldn't have a fairy godmother with a magic wand, shopping was the next best thing. But there was nothing magic about her budget and she was pretty sure it wouldn't withstand the prices in this place.

“Why are we here?” she asked.

Before he could answer, a saleswoman appeared, smiling broadly when she recognized Kardahl. “Your Highness, I was

delighted when you called. Please give the queen my regards. As you can see, I have canceled all other appointments and closed to the public as you requested. So this is your wife?"

"Jessica," he said.

"She is quite lovely. My congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you," he said, glancing down at her. "My wife is in need of some clothes. And there is a reception tomorrow night."

"There is—" Jess stopped, not wanting to blow his cover. But it would be helpful if he didn't spring stuff like that on her in public.

The next thing she knew, the woman had whipped out her tape measure and after taking measurements said, "She is a perfect size two. I have some lovely things that will be most flattering to Her Highness."

Jess wasn't anyone's "Highness," but she didn't quite know how to phrase it even if she could persuade someone to listen. Not to mention outing their marriage for the sham it was. The woman bustled around the room plucking a sage-green suit, black silk slacks and several coordinating blouses before disappearing, presumably to a fitting room. When she returned, Kardahl pointed to a slender, black evening gown. "I wish to see her in this."

The saleswoman smiled. "It is fortunate that the gown is her size. And Your Highness has excellent taste."

As well he should, Jess thought. His Highness was a notorious flirt and playboy who no doubt had intimate experience sizing

up women as he removed their clothes. The thought made her shiver and that was a problem. Jess's mind was saying no, no, no, while her body grew more curious. And her heart was telling her she'd have to be six feet under to not salivate at the chance to at least try on these clothes. But how could she tell the woman she was wasting her time?

When she disappeared with the evening gown, Jess turned to Kardahl. "Listen up. This isn't necessary. I don't need anything. We both know the annulment is coming. And—"

"And until then, the world will be watching my wife. There is the matter of the reception tomorrow evening." He smiled. "I saw your eyes light up as you looked at everything. It would please me to do this and the least I can do for the inconvenience imposed on you. At least try the things on. The woman would be disappointed if you do not."

"So you're playing the disappointment card again." She sighed. "Is that a royal order?"

"Would you like it to be?"

She sighed. "Yes. It has to be wrong to defy a royal order."

"Indeed," he said.

She heard the smile in his voice as she turned away and left to find the saleswoman. Around the corner was a fitting room with the clothes she recognized hanging on various hooks. Jessica figured she was probably a spineless slug, but what the heck? She was stuck and might as well enjoy the experience.

Everything fit as if made for her and her female heart was

full to bursting at the prospect of wearing such exquisite styles, such delicate, shiny fabrics that rustled when she moved. The saleswoman, Jasmine, bustled in and out, removing items as she brought in more. The black dress Kardahl had picked out was the last thing she tried on.

Jessica looked at herself in the full-length mirror and her eyes went wide. The neck was high and the sleeves long but the soft satin clung to every curve and revealed as much as it concealed. She turned and gasped at the flesh-baring back.

“It is perfect for you.” The woman ran her hands over the hips and waist. “His Royal Highness requested only to see you in this.”

“He did?”

The woman nodded. “He said to tell you it is a royal order.”

The downside of orders were the ones you didn’t want to obey. But her choices were to either suck it up, or cause a scene. As she left the dressing room, Jess held the skirt of the gown up to keep from tripping on the long hem. When she walked into the room where Kardahl waited, she held her breath. He stood and took her hand, helping her onto the dais in front of a bank of mirrors before stepping behind her.

Jess could see him in the mirror, the smoldering look in his eyes as his gaze took in every inch of her. Her feet had been on solid ground for twenty-four hours, but her stomach dropped as if she were taking off in the royal jet. The only explanation was emotional drought, she thought. She wasn’t used to men looking at her the way he was and it was like setting fire to the dry brush

of her romantic heart.

“I don’t think this suits me,” she said breathlessly.

“It suits me,” he said, his voice as deep and appealing as sin.

“We will take it with us,” he informed the saleswoman.

Jess said nothing because she wouldn’t embarrass the royal family in public. But elegant and costly clothes wouldn’t change anything. She might have been chosen for a prince, but she wasn’t raised as a princess. All she wanted to do was get to know her family, then go back to her life.

By the time she was dressed in her off-the-rack slacks and shirt, the dress was in a protective bag and Kardahl had arranged for the rest of the clothes to be delivered to the palace. When they stepped out of the store, the crowd gathered outside suddenly surged forward, flashbulbs exploding from every direction.

“Who’s the lady, Your Highness?” asked one reporter.

“Is she married, Your Highness?”

Someone shoved a microphone in Jessica’s face. “How did you and Prince Kardahl meet?”

Without comment, Kardahl pulled her to him, using his body to shield her from the cameras. Then he thrust her into the waiting limousine.

As she struggled to control her hammering heart, Jess looked at Kardahl. The expression of fury on his face was completely and utterly shocking. Something told her this reaction wasn’t about unauthorized pictures or unflattering photo angles. This was a deeply emotional response.

She wondered where the easygoing, charming flirt had gone when she didn't want to wonder about him at all.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW ironic to have a skirmish with the paparazzi only hours before this meeting with the king and queen. Kardahl had once hoped the woman he would be presenting to his parents as his wife would be another, but thanks to his father, that was never to be. Still, the time had come for introductions.

Now he sat beside Jessica on the sofa in his parents' living room. Faline and Amahl Hourani, made the side by side overstuffed chairs look like thrones as they studied their "daughter-in-law." They had once scrutinized the woman of his choice and found her wanting, but tonight they looked pleased. At least someone was, he thought.

His father's dark hair was flecked with gray on the sides, giving him what most thought a distinguished look. Kardahl had no feeling one way or the other. He only knew the king was a rigid and uncompromising man, difficult to please and stubborn. Kardahl would never forgive him for refusing to waive tradition so that he could marry the woman he wanted.

Unlike her husband, his dark-eyed mother would not permit a gray hair to invade her lustrous, shoulder-length hair. For a small woman, she possessed a strength of will and sense of humor that kept her husband both intrigued and in line. At one time, Kardahl had hoped to emulate their relationship. Those hopes had died with his beloved.

“Are you sure you will not join us in a brandy, Jessica?” his mother asked.

“Thank you, no. Coffee is fine.” Jessica set her china cup on the saucer resting on the side table.

She was casually dressed in black slacks and a coordinating silky black and white blouse. Her hair was pulled back into a loose bun at her nape, with numerous sun-kissed strands escaping the confinement to caress her graceful neck. The scent of her skin filled his head with the fragrance of sunshine and flowers as her shoulder brushed his own. She seemed unaffected by the nearness, but he was not so fortunate.

“I understand you had your first experience with reporters today, my dear,” the king was saying.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The king turned a displeased look on him. “How did this happen, Kardahl?”

He had wondered also and made inquiries of his security staff. “It seems there is a site on the Internet where the sighting of a high-profile individual can be posted practically as it is occurring.”

Jessica stared at him. “You mean anyone monitoring that site who happened to be in the area could walk up and shake your hand?”

“Yes,” he said grimly. “My guess is that the news media monitors the site.”

“But that’s practically stalking.”

“In a free society,” the king said, “it is the price we pay. Also part of the cost is minding one’s behavior. As Kardahl knows all too well.”

Jessica glanced up at him with what looked like sympathy in her eyes, then back to his father. “I can’t help feeling responsible. They found him because he surprised me with a detour to the dress shop—”

“You took her to Jasmine’s as I suggested?” his mother interrupted.

“I did,” he confirmed, sliding his arm along the top of the sofa, then resting his fingers close to Jessica’s shoulder.

Until that first meeting on the plane, Kardahl had been annoyed at the turn of events, but had subsequently learned that Jessica was even less pleased than he about the situation. She was an unwilling participant and unprepared for this life. And the look on her face when the paparazzi had besieged him had made him want to protect her. As he had been unable to protect Antonia.

“Those people are predators who feed off others,” he commented.

The queen sighed as she shook her head. “The press can be difficult.”

“I just wasn’t prepared for them,” Jessica said. “Up until today the most excitement I ever had shopping was when the clerk forgot to remove one of those security devices and I set off the alarm when I tried to leave the store.”

The king smiled indulgently. “My dear, if you would change your mind and stay with Kardahl here in Bha’Khar, you would be given instruction in dealing with the media.”

“Probably not by Kardahl,” Jessica said, glancing up at him with humor sparkling like jewels in her eyes. “Unless he used himself as a cautionary tale.”

His father laughed. “No. I think my son would not be the best instructor.” Then he turned serious as he met her gaze. “I urge you to change your mind about the annulment.”

“You’re very kind—”

“I hear a ‘but,’” the king interrupted. “Your grandparents are dear friends. They would be greatly pleased by a real marriage to join our families.”

“You’re very kind,” Jessica said again. “But, I’m not royal family material. In spite of the betrothal, circumstances intervened and I wasn’t raised to be the wife of a prince.”

Kardahl saw her fingers clasp and tighten until the knuckles turned white as she rubbed one thumb over the other. When he glanced at her face, the tension in her delicate jaw and shadows in her eyes did not escape his notice.

“You would have a staff to help and the queen and I would—”

“Enough.” Apparently Kardahl had to protect her from his father as well as the press. He rose. “Jessica has expressed her feelings and I will not permit you to pressure her.”

“Kardahl.” The queen frowned. “That is no way to speak to your father.”

“For the time being she is my wife and in this instance, it is precisely the way. I have promised her a tour of the palace. We are leaving now.”

Surprise flickered in Jessica’s expression when she looked up. Before she could expose his lie, he held out his hand. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” She put her fingers in his palm and stood up, then smiled at his parents. “Thank you for dinner.”

“You are most welcome,” his mother said. “We look forward to seeing you at the reception tomorrow evening.”

“And you as well, my son.” There was anger in the king’s order.

“I will be there.”

For Jessica. Kardahl led her to the elevator that would take them to the first floor. He was impervious to his father’s moods now. Once he had cared, but that ended when the king chose tradition over happiness. If Kardahl had been allowed to marry the woman he wanted, she might still...But that was something he would never know. His fingers clenched into a fist as the rage-fueled powerlessness blazed through him. He had learned it was preferable to the pain.

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