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By Lynne Graham

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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King Jaul, who had recently acceded to the throne of Marwan on the death of his father, Lut, glanced across the date-palm-filled courtyard beyond his office. A beautiful brunette was playing ball there with her niece and nephew. Her name was Zaliha. Educated, elegant and as sweet-natured as she was well-born, she would make a wonderful queen, he knew. So why hadn't he broached the subject yet? he asked himself grimly.

Marwan was a Gulf state, small but oil-rich and deeply conservative. A single king was not expected to remain single for long. Government officials had made no secret of their eagerness for him to take a bride. A royal dynasty was not seen as secure until there was another heir in the offing and Jaul was an only child, the son of a man who had been an only child.

The newspapers were full of constant speculation. He could not be seen even talking to a young woman without rousing suspicions. His wide, sensual mouth compressed, uneasy memories surfacing of the wilder and more hot-headed young male he had once been. If he was honest with himself, he knew exactly why he was being indecisive about getting married. Moreover he was well aware that beautiful though Zaliha was, there was not the smallest spark of chemistry between them. But shouldn't that be what he wanted now? A marriage shorn of the wild attraction and excitement that had once led to his downfall?

A measured knock sounded on the door heralding the arrival of Bandar, who served as the royal family's senior legal adviser.

'My apologies if I'm a little early,' the little man with the balding head said earnestly, bowing with solemn dignity.

Jaul invited him to sit down and lounged back against his desk, restless at the prospect of an in-depth discussion of some obscure piece of constitutional law, which fascinated Bandar much more than it fascinated anyone else.

'This is a very delicate matter,' Bandar informed him uneasily. 'But it is my duty as your adviser to broach it with you.'

Wondering what on earth the older man could be referring to, Jaul studied him with unsullied assurance. 'There is nothing we cannot discuss—'

'Yet this is a matter which I first raised eighteen months ago with my predecessor, Yusuf, and he instructed me never to mention it again lest I caused offence,' Bandar told him awkwardly. 'If that is the case, please accept my apologies in advance.'

Yusuf had been his father's adviser and had retired after King Lut's passing, allowing Bandar to step into his

place. Jaul's fine black brows were now drawing together while a mixture of curiosity and dismay assailed him as he wondered what murky, dark secret of his father's was about to be unleashed on him. What else could this *very* delicate matter concern?

'I am not easily offended and your role is to protect me from legal issues,' Jaul responded. 'Naturally I respect that responsibility.'

'Then I will begin,' Bandar murmured ruefully. 'Two years ago, you married a young Englishwoman and, although that fact is known to very few people, it is surely past time that that situation is dealt with in the appropriate manner.'

It took a lot to silence Jaul, whose stubborn, passionate and outspoken nature was well known within palace circles, but that little speech seriously shook him. 'But there *was* no actual marriage,' Jaul countered tautly. 'I was informed that the ceremony was illegal because I did not obtain my father's permission beforehand.'

'I'm afraid that was a case of wishful thinking on your father's part. He wished the marriage to be illegal and Yusuf did not have the courage to tell him that it *was* legal...'

Jaul had lost colour beneath his healthy olive-tinted complexion, his very dark, long-lashed eyes telegraphing his astonishment at that revelation. 'It *was* a legal marriage?' he repeated in disbelief.

'There is nothing in our constitutional law which prohibits a Marwani Crown Prince from marrying his own choice of bride. You were twenty-six years old, scarcely a teenager and that marriage still stands because you have done nothing since to sever that tie.'

Wide, strong shoulders now rigid beneath the long cream linen thobe he wore, Jaul frowned, trying to calculate the sheer immensity of the wrecking ball that had suddenly crashed into his marital plans. He was already a married man. Indeed he was *still* a married man. As he had only lived with his bride for a few weeks before parting from her, what Bandar was now telling him naturally came as a severe shock. 'I did nothing to sever the tie because I was informed that the marriage itself was illegal and, therefore, void. Like a bad contract,' he admitted.

'Unhappily that is not the case.' Bandar sighed. 'To be free of the marriage you require a divorce under UK law *and* Marwani law.'

Jaul stalked over to the window beyond which Zaliha could still be seen entertaining her niece and nephew, but he was no longer remotely conscious of that view. 'I had no suspicion of this. I should have been informed of this situation months ago—'

'As I mentioned, Yusuf was my superior and he refused to allow me to raise the subject—'

'It is three months since my father passed away,' Jaul reminded him stiffly.

'I had to ensure my facts were correct before I could raise this matter with you. I have now discovered that in spite of your separation your wife has not sought a divorce either—'

Jaul froze, his lean, darkly handsome features clenching hard. 'Please do not refer to her as my wife,' he murmured flatly.

'Should I refer to the lady concerned as your queen?' Bandar pressed with even less tact. 'Because that is what Chrissie Whitaker is, whether she knows it or not. The wife of the King of Marwan is *always* granted the status of Queen.'

Jaul snatched in a ragged breath of restraint, lean brown hands closing slowly into fists of innate aggression. He had made one serious mistake in his life and it had come back to haunt him in the worst possible way at the worst possible time. He had married a gold-digger who had deserted him the first chance she got in return for cold, hard cash.

'Naturally I respect the fact that your father did not approve of the young woman but perhaps *now*—:

'No, my father was correct in his assessment of her character. She was unsuitable to be either my wife or my queen,' Jaul acknowledged grittily, a faint flare of colour accentuating the line of his spectacular high cheekbones as he forced out the lowering admission that stung his pride. 'I was a rebellious son, Bandar...but I learnt my lesson.'

'The lessons of youth are often hard,' Bandar commented quietly, relieved that the current king was unlike his late parent, who had raged and taken umbrage at anyone who told him anything he did not want to hear.

Jaul was barely listening. In fact he was being bombarded by unwelcome memories that had escaped from the burial ground at the back of his mind where he kept such unsettling reminders firmly repressed. In his mind's eye he was seeing Chrissie walk away from him, her glorious silver-blonde hair blowing back in the breeze, her long, shapely legs fluid and graceful as a gazelle's.

But she had *always* been walking away from him, he recalled with cool cynicism. Right from the start, Chrissie had played a cool, clever, long-term game of seduction. Hot-blooded as he was and never before refused by a woman as he had been, she had challenged his ego with her much-vaunted indifference. It had taken a two-year-plus campaign for him to win her and she had only truly become his when he had surrendered and given her a wedding ring. Unsurprisingly during that long period of celibacy and frustration, Chrissie Whitaker had become a sexual obsession whose allure Jaul had not been able to withstand.

The payback for his weakness had not been long in coming. They had had a flaming row when he'd left Oxford to fly back to Marwan without her and, extraordinarily, he had never seen her again after that day. At that point and perhaps most fortunately for him, fate had intervened to cut him free of his fixation with her. Following a serious accident, Jaul had surfaced in a hospital bed to find his father seated like a sentry beside him, his aged features heavy with grief and apprehension.

Before he had broken the bad news, King Lut had reached for his son's hand in a clumsy gesture of comfort for the first time in his life. Chrissie, Lut had then confided heavily, would *not* be coming to visit Jaul during his recovery. His marriage, Lut had declared, was illegal and Chrissie had accepted a financial pay-off as the price of forgetting that Jaul had ever figured in her life. King Lut had purchased her silence and discretion with a large sum of money that had evidently compensated her for her supposed loss of a husband while providing her with support for the future.

For a split second, Jaul recalled one of the most insane fantasies that had gripped him while he lay helpless in that hospital bed. Aware of his diplomatic immunity within the UK, he had actually dreamt about kidnapping Chrissie. Now in the present he shook his proud dark head slowly, utterly astonished at the tricks his mind had played on him while he had struggled to come to terms with the daunting fact that, not only was his wife *not* his wife, but also that given generous enough financial compensation she had no longer *wanted* to be his

wife. Chrissie had been quite happy to ditch her Arab prince once she'd had the means to be rich without him. Only angry, bitter and vengeful thoughts had driven Jaul while he'd fought his injuries to get back on his feet.

'I need to know how you want this matter to be handled,' Bandar told him, shooting Jaul back to the present. 'With the assistance of our ambassador in London I have engaged the services of a highly placed legal firm to have divorce papers drawn up. After so long a separation they assure me that the divorce will be a mere formality. May I instruct the firm to make immediate contact with Chrissie Whitaker?'

'No...' Without warning, Jaul swung round, his lean bronzed features taut and forbidding. 'If she is not yet aware that we remain man and wife a third party should not be dealing with it. Informing her of that fact should be my responsibility.'

Bandar frowned, taken aback by that assurance. 'But, sir—'

'I owe her that much. After all, it was *my* father who misled her as to the legality of our marriage. Chrissie has a hot temper. I think a personal approach is more likely to lead to a speedy and successful conclusion. I will present her with the divorce papers.'

'I understand.' Bandar was nodding now, having followed his royal employer's reasoning. 'A diplomatic and discreet approach.'

'As you say,' Jaul conceded, marvelling at the tingle of the illicit thrill assailing him at the very thought of seeing Chrissie again. It felt neither diplomatic nor discreet. But then no woman had ever excited Jaul to that extent, either before or since. Of course now that he knew how mercenary and hard-hearted she was, that attraction would be absent, he reflected confidently. He was an intelligent man and no longer at the mercy of his hormones.

He had cracked down hard on that side of his nature as soon as he'd understood just how badly his libido could betray him. There had been a lesson writ large in that experience with Chrissie, a lesson Jaul had been quick to learn and put into practice. Never again would he place himself in a vulnerable position with a woman. This was the main reason he had decided to stop avoiding matrimony and take a wife as soon as possible.

His mood sobered by that acknowledgement and the impossibility of currently following through on that ambition, his lean dark features stiffened and his wide, sensual mouth curled with sudden distaste at the prospect of being forced to deal with Chrissie in a civilised manner. There was nothing remotely civilised about the way Chrissie made him feel... There never had been.

Her arms full of gifts and cards, Chrissie shouldered her way out of the front doors of the primary school where she taught the nursery class and walked to her car.

'Here, let me give you a hand...' A tall, well-built young man with brown hair and a ready smile moved to intercept her, lifting some of the presents from her arms to enable her to unlock her car. 'My word, you're popular with your class!'

'Didn't you get a load of stuff too?' Chrissie asked Danny, who taught Year Six and was in charge of games.

'Yes. Bottles of wine, designer cologne,' he proffered with amusement, flipping open her car boot so that she

could pile the gifts in. 'Here in this privileged corner of middle-class London, the last day of term is like winning in a game show.'

Involuntarily, Chrissie smiled, her lovely face full of animation, turquoise-blue eyes alight with answering laughter. 'The gift-giving *has* got out of hand,' she agreed ruefully. 'The parents spend far too much money.'

Danny slammed shut the boot lid and leant back against it. 'So, what are your plans for the rest of the summer?'

'I'll be staying with my sister...doing a bit of travelling,' she confided a shade awkwardly.

'That's the sister who's married to the rich Italian?' Danny checked.

'I only have the one sibling,' Chrissie admitted, shaking her car keys in the hope he would take the hint and move out of her way.

Danny frowned. 'You know, you're only young once. Don't you ever want to take a break from your family and do something more daring on your own?'

With difficulty, Chrissie kept her smile in place. Two years earlier, she had gone down the daring route and what a disaster that had turned out to be! Now she played safe, stayed sensible and worked to eradicate the damage she had done to her relationship with her sister. She adored Lizzie, the sister five years her senior, and when Chrissie's life had gone wrong, Lizzie's disappointment, Lizzie's conviction that somehow she was responsible for the poor decisions Chrissie had made, had filled Chrissie with a guilt she had never quite managed to shake off.

'Lizzie loves you...she only wants to see you happy,' her brother-in-law, Cesare, had said to her once. 'If you would just trust her enough to tell her the whole story it would make her feel better.'

But Chrissie had never told anyone the whole story of her downfall. It had been a stupid short-sighted decision she had made and which she was still paying for. It was bad enough living with her mistakes but it would be even worse if she had to share the truth of them with others and see their opinion of her intelligence dive-bomb.

'Obviously, I'll be in Cornwall,' Danny reminded her as if she didn't already know. Everyone in the staff-room had been listening to Danny talk about his summer surfing plans for months.

'I hope you have a great time.' Chrissie eased past him to open her car door.

Danny closed his hand round her slender wrist to hold her back and looked down at her ruefully. 'I would have a better time if you agreed to come with me,' he admitted. 'Just mates, no need to lay anything else on the line. Last chance, Chrissie. Why not live a little and give it a go?'

Blue eyes flaring with pained annoyance, Chrissie jerked her wrist free. 'As I said, I've other plans—'

'Some guy did a right number on you, didn't he?' Danny remarked, his face red with discomfiture as he moved away a step and thrust his hands into his pockets. 'But all cats are not grey in the dark, Chrissie. If you still want a life, you have to reach out and take it.'

Breathing fast, Chrissie slid into the driver's seat of her car and closed the door. She *had* wanted a life, an entirely different life from the one she now had. She had dreamt of climbing the academic ranks by pursuing a doctorate and of the freedom that would be hers once she was fully qualified. But life, Chrissie had discovered, had a habit of stabbing you in the back when you least expected it, of forcing a sudden rethink just when you were on the apparent brink of success. Now she was in no position to reach out and take anything because she had responsibilities that restricted her independence and her liberty. To her way of thinking the most shameful aspect was that she couldn't get by without taking advantage of her sister's generosity. Yet it could all have been so very different, *had* she only made the right decisions.

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