

[PDF] Blink Of An Eye (Playaway Adult Fiction)

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Description:

About the Author Ted Dekker is known for novels that combine adrenaline-laced stories with unexpected plot twists, unforgettable characters, and incredible confrontations between good and evil. Ted lives in Austin with his wife LeeAnn and their four children. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Chapter One

Miriam swept the purple velvet drape to one side and gazed through the window to the courtyard.

The marble palace had been completed just last year and was easily the grandest of her father's residences. She hadn't visited all of them, but she didn't need to. Prince Salman bin Fahd had four wives, and he'd built each of them three palaces, two in Riyadh, and one in Jidda. All four wives had identical dwellings in each location, although to say his wives had the palaces was misleading. Father had the palaces, and he had wives for each.

This, Salman's thirteenth palace, he'd built solely for special events such as today's, the wedding of Sita, one of Miriam's closest friends.

Outside, the sun glinted off a spewing fountain in the center of a large pond. Bright red petals from two hundred dozen roses flown in from Holland blanketed the water. Evidently the groom, Hatam bin Hazat, had heard that his young bride liked red roses. Upon seeing the extravagant display two days earlier, Sita vowed never to look upon another red rose in her life.

Dozens of Filipino servants crossed the lawn, carrying silver trays stacked high with every imaginable food, prepared by eighteen chefs brought in from Egypt. Roast almond duck, curried beef rolled in lamb flanks, liver-stuffed lobster--Miriam had never seen such an extravagant display. And this for the women only. As at many Saudi weddings, the male guests would never actually see the women. Custom required two separate ceremonies for the simple reason that women attended weddings unveiled. The traditional path of the Wahhabi sect forbade a man from seeing the face of a woman unless she was a family member or tied closely to his family.

Sounds of music and drums and gaiety drifted through the window. The world mistook the prevailing cultural practices in the Arabian Peninsula as unfair to women, Miriam often thought. She'd studied at the University of Berkeley in California for three months two summers ago and had first heard there the misconception that a Saudi woman dies three times during her span on earth.

It was said that she dies on the day of her first menses, when she is forced to don the black veil and slip into obscurity; she dies on the day of her wedding, when she is given as a possession to a stranger; and she dies when she finally passes on. She'd been tempted to slap the woman who uttered the words.

Perhaps if the Americans knew Saudi history better, they would hold their tongues. True enough, a woman was traditionally forbidden from some of the activities accepted by the West--driving, for example. Or giving testimony in a dispute. Or walking about freely with her face uncovered. But all of these practices advanced Saudi culture in ways the West did not see. Saudis understood the value of strong families, for example. Of loyalty to God and his word. Of respect for an order that supported both families and God.

Miriam let her mind drift over the events that had placed her and her friend Sita here, in this magnificent palace, where they awaited the ceremony that would change Sita's life as she knew it.

The kingdom's first king, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, conquered Riyadh in 1902. He was in his early twenties then. The four kings who had ruled since his death in 1953 were all his sons. But when Miriam looked down history's foggy halls, she decided it was the first king's women, not his sons, who shaped the country. He'd taken over three hundred wives, and it was these women who gave him so many sons.

"I can't believe it's actually happening," Sita said from the sofa.

Miriam let the curtain fall back in place and turned around. Sita sat like a small doll dressed in lace and pink. At weddings, all the women, from bride to servants, shed their black abayas and veils for colorful dresses. Her eyes were round and dark--so very insecure. Miriam and Sultana had rescued

Sita from a flock of aunts busying her for the final ceremony and brought her here, to this room they'd dubbed the piano room for the white grand piano sitting to their right. The carpet, a thick Persian weave with a lion embroidered at the center, swallowed their feet. Evidently the designer Salman hired liked big cats; the walls of the room formed a virtual zoo of cat paintings.

Sita's lips trembled. "I'm frightened."

Sultana, the third in the inseparable trio, ran her hand over the younger girl's hair. " Sh, sh. It won't be the end of the world. At least he's wealthy. Better to marry into palaces than into the gutter."

"He's old enough to be my grandfather."

"He's younger than my sister's husband," Miriam said. "Sara's husband was sixty-two when he took her. I understand that Hatam is no older than fifty-five."

"And I'm fifteen!" Sita said.

"And Sara was fifteen too," Miriam said. "And what about my new mother, Haya?"

That got silence from both of them. A year earlier, Miriam's father had taken Haya as a bride when Miriam's biological mother died. Haya was only thirteen at the time. As was customary, the girl took over the duties of the wife in their household, even though she was younger than those under her charge. Miriam had been nineteen then.

At first Miriam resented the child. But one look at Haya's nervous eyes after the wedding changed her heart. Haya slipped into her role of submissive wife with surprising grace.

But Sita was not Haya.

Miriam looked at her friend's frightened face. Sita was still a child too. A small part of Miriam wanted to cry. But she could never cry, especially not now, just minutes before the ceremony.

Sultana looked out the window. Of the three, she was perhaps the boldest. She was twenty-three and barren. But she was married to a good man who treated her well and turned a blind eye when she spoke out against the marriage of young girls. Sultana's frequent trips to Europe had given her a somewhat Western perspective on that particular practice.

"Haya was two years younger than you," Miriam said.

"I saw him," Sita said softly.

Miriam glanced up. It was unusual for anyone to see her betrothed before the actual wedding.

"You saw the groom?" Sultana asked. "You saw Hatam?"

Sita nodded.

"How?" Miriam asked. "What's he like?"

"Two weeks ago, at the souk." She looked up and her eyes flashed. "He's very large. He'll kill me."

Miriam knew she should say something, but words escaped her. Though she'd made inquiries, she'd been able to learn only that Hatam was a wealthy oil mogul from Dammam on the Persian Gulf.

Sita sniffed and wiped her nose with a frail, shaky hand. She spoke quietly. "I make a vow," she said. "I make a vow today to refuse my husband. He will not touch me while I am alive."

Miriam reached out a hand. "Please, Sita, he'll be kind. Today you'll find your life enriched beyond words, you'll see."

Sita rose to her feet, red in the face. "I'm not ready to marry!" She trembled, a child about to have a tantrum. Miriam felt her stomach turn.

"I swear it," Sita said, and Miriam did not doubt her. "You're almost twenty-one and you're still not married. And you have this secret love with Samir. I hate you for it!" She turned away.

"You don't hate me, Sita. You better not hate me, because you're like a sister to me, and I love you dearly."

Twenty and not married. Rumor had it that dozens of suitors had approached Father for Miriam's hand, and he'd turned them all away. His denial was a sore subject for her.

Sultana placed a silencing hand on Miriam's shoulder. "You can't know how she feels. Salman protects you."

Heat flashed across Miriam's cheeks.

"Both Haya and Sara were married--"

The door flew open and they turned as one. "Sita!" Sita's mother stood in the doorway, white as the desert sand. "Where have you been? They are ready!"

Then she saw Sita's tears and she hurried in, her face softening. "Please, don't cry, child. I know you are frightened, but we all grow up, don't we?" She smoothed Sita's hair and looked at her lovingly.

"I'm afraid, Mother," Sita said.

"Of course. But you must think beyond the uncertainty that you feel and consider the wonderful privileges that await you as the wife of a powerful man." She kissed her daughter's forehead. "He's a wealthy man, Sita. He will give you a good life, and you'll bear him many children. What else could a woman ask?"

"I don't want to bear his children."

"Don't be silly! It will be a great honor to bear his children. You'll see." She paused and studied her daughter tenderly. "God knows how much I love you, Sita. I am so proud of you. Just yesterday you were still a child, playing with your dolls. Now look, you've grown into a beautiful young woman." She kissed her again. "Now, come along. The drummers are waiting."

She slipped Sita's veil over her face. And with that Sita's fears were hidden.

Miriam joined a thousand women in the great hall and watched as the drums announced the groom's arrival. The only men present were the bride's father, the groom (whose father was dead of old age), and the religious man who would perform the marriage.

Hatam walked out alone, and Miriam nearly gasped aloud. Blubber sat like a bloated tube around his stomach, sloshing with each step under a tent of a tunic. The fat under his chin hung like a reservoir of water. To say the man was large would be a horrible miscalculation. He was an obese mountain.

Beside Miriam, Sultana groaned softly. Several women glanced at her, but she ignored them.

The drums beat again. Sita's mother and her aunt led the bride out. Hatam smiled and lifted her veil. Sita stared at him, and in her cloaked defiance, she looked more beautiful than Miriam could remember.

The ceremony lasted only a few minutes. The actual marriage had been performed hours earlier, first with the bride and then with the groom, separately, signing ... --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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