



A Façade to Shatter (Harlequin Presents Sicily's Corretti Dynasty)

By Lynn Raye Harris

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For years the forgotten Corretti has hidden her pain behind a façade. So Lia recognizes the shadows in Zack's eyes. But there's nothing familiar about the hot heat of Zack as he traps her to him. Can she lower her guard long enough to let him see all of her?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author Lynn Raye Harris burst onto the scene when she won a writing contest held by Harlequin. The prize was an editor for a year -- but only six months later, Lynn sold her first novel. A former finalist for the Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart Award, Lynn lives in Alabama with her handsome husband and two crazy cats. Her stories have been called "exceptional and emotional," "intense," and "sizzling."

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Zach Scott didn't do parties. Not anymore.

Once, he'd been the life of the party. But everything had changed a little over a year ago. Zach shoved his hands into his tuxedo trouser pockets and frowned. He'd thought coming to Sicily with a friend, in order to attend a wedding, would be an easy thing to do. There'd been no wedding, it had turned out, but the reception was taking place anyway. And he stood on the edge of the ballroom, wondering where Taylor Carmichael had got to. Wondering if he could slip away and text his regrets to her.

His head was pounding after a rough night. He'd been dreaming again. Dreaming of guns and explosions and planes plummeting from the sky.

There was nothing like a fight for survival to rearrange a man's priorities. Since his plane had been shot down in enemy territory, the kinds of things he'd once done—fundraisers, public appearances, speeches, political dinners—were now a kind of torture he'd prefer to live without.

Except it was more impossible to get out of those things now than ever before. Not only was he Zachariah James Scott IV, son of an eminent United States senator and heir to a pharmaceuticals fortune, he was also a returning military hero.

Zach's frown deepened.

Since his rescue—in which every single marine sent to extract him had perished—he'd been in demand as a sort of all-American poster boy. The media couldn't get enough of him, and he knew a big part of that was his father's continual use of his story in his public appearances.

Zachariah J. Scott III wasn't about to let the story die. Not when it could do him a world of political good.

His son had done his duty when he could have chosen an easier path. *His* son had chosen to serve his country instead of himself. It was true that Zach could have sat on the Scott Pharmaceuticals board and moved mountains of money instead of flying jets into a war zone. But the jets were a part of him.

Or had been a part of him until the crash had left him with crushing, unpredictable headaches that made it too dangerous to fly.

Yes, everyone loved that he'd bravely gone to war and survived.

Except he didn't feel brave, and he damn sure didn't feel like he'd done anything extraordinary. He didn't want the attention, didn't deserve the accolades. He'd failed pretty spectacularly, in his opinion.

But he couldn't make them stop. So he stood stiffly and smiled for the cameras like a dutiful military man should, and he felt dead inside. And the deader he felt, the more interested the media seemed to get.

It wasn't all bad, though. He'd taken over the stewardship of the Scott Foundation, his family's charitable arm, and he worked tirelessly to promote military veterans' causes. They often came back with so little, and with their lives shattered. The government tried to take care of them, but it was a huge job—and sometimes they fell through the cracks.

It was Zach's goal to save as many of them as he could. He owed it to them, by God.

He made a visual sweep of the room. At least the media attention wasn't directed at him right now. The Sicilian media was far more interested in the fact the bride had jilted the groom at the altar. Zach was of no interest whatsoever to this crowd. That, at least, was a bonus.

It wasn't often he could move anonymously through a gathering like this one.

Still, he was on edge, as if he were being followed. He prowled the edges of the crowd in the darkened ballroom, his headache barely under control as he searched for Taylor. She wasn't answering his texts, and he was growing concerned. She'd been so worried about this trip, about her return to acting, and about the director's opinion of her.

But Taylor was tough, and he knew she would have gone into the press event with her head held high. She wanted this film badly, wanted the money and respectability for the veterans' clinic back in Washington, D.C., where she'd spent so much time working to help others. He thought of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines—most suffering the debilitating effects of posttraumatic stress—the clinic helped, thought of the constant need for funding, and knew that Taylor would have entered that room determined to succeed.

What he didn't know was how it had turned out.

He stepped into a quiet corner—if there was such a thing—and reached into his breast pocket for his phone. A small medal hanging from a ribbon came out with it, and he blinked as he realized what it was. The Distinguished Flying Cross he'd been awarded after returning from the high Afghan desert. Taylor must have put it in there when she'd picked up the tux from the cleaners for him. He fingered the starburst, squeezed it in his palm before putting it back into his pocket.

He hadn't wanted the medal, but he hadn't had a choice. There were other medals, too, which his father never failed to mention in his speeches, but Zach just wanted to forget them all.

Taylor insisted he had to realize he deserved them. She meant well, damn her, but she drove him crazier than any sister ever could have.

He dialed Taylor's number impatiently. No answer. Frustration hammered into him. He wanted to know she was all right, and he wanted to escape this room. The crowd was swelling—never let it be said that Sicilians let a chance to party go to waste—and the noise level was growing louder.

He was in no mood.

He turned toward the exit just as the DJ blared the first track and the crowd cheered. The lights went completely out and strobe lights flashed. Zach's heart began to thud painfully. Against his will, he shrank into the wall, breathing hard.

It's just a party, just a party. But the flashes didn't stop, people started to shout, and he couldn't fight the

panic dragging him down any longer.

No, no, no...

Suddenly he was back in the trench, in the pitch of night, the bursts of gunfire and explosives all around him, the thrumming of their bass boom ricocheting into his breastbone, making his body ache with the pressure. He closed his eyes, swallowed hard, his throat full of sand and dust and grit.

Violence and frustration bloomed inside his gut. He wanted to fight, wanted to surge upright and grab a gun, wanted to help the marines hold off the enemy. But they'd drugged him, because he'd broken his leg, and he couldn't move.

He lay helpless, his eyes squeezed tight—and then he felt a soft hand on his arm. The hand moved along his upper arm, ghosted over his cheek. The touch of skin on skin broke his paralysis.

He reacted with the instincts of a warrior, grabbing the hand and twisting it until the owner cried out. The cry was soft, feminine, not at all that of a terrorist bent on destroying him. Vaguely, he realized the body pressed against his was not rough. It was clad in something satiny that slid against the fabric of his own clothing.

He forced his eyes open after long moments. The lights still flashed, and his heart still pumped adrenaline into his body. He blinked and shook his head. Was he not in the desert? Was he not the last one alive in the trench?

The sounds began to separate themselves until he could pick out music, laughter and loud conversation. He focused on the elegant paneled wall in front of him—and realized he held a woman against it, her hand high up behind her back. He could hear her panting softly.

"Please," she said, her voice calmer than he expected it to be. "I don't think I am who you think I am."

Who he thought she was? Zach blinked. Who did he think she was?

A terrorist. Someone bent on killing him.

But she wasn't, was she? He was in Sicily, at the infamous Corretti wedding, and this woman was a guest. Her blue-green eyes were set in a pretty face. Dark hair was piled on top of her head, and her breasts strained against the fabric of her gown, threatening to pop free at any moment. He hadn't spun her around, but instead held her against the wall with his body practically wrapped around hers.

One hand held hers behind her back, nearly between her shoulder blades, while the other gripped her jaw and forced her head back against the paneling. Her soft curves melded against him, filling all the hard angles of his body in ways he hadn't experienced in a very long time.

He'd had no room for softness in his life since returning from the war. He'd viewed it as something of a regret, but a necessary one. Now, he found that he was starving for the contact. His body began to stir, the telltale thrum of blood in his groin taking him by surprise.

Zach let the woman go as if she'd burned him and took a hasty step backward. What the hell was wrong with him? This was why he didn't like public appearances anymore—what if he lost his mind the way he just had? What would the media say then?

Son of a bitch.

"Forgive me," he said tightly. "Are you all right?" she asked.

It was such a normal question, in response to an abnormal situation, and yet he couldn't formulate an answer. He simply wanted to escape. For once, instead of standing stoically and enduring whatever was flung at him, he wanted out.

There was no one here to stop him, no reporters or cameras, no duty pressing him to remain where he was and endure.

He turned blindly, seeking an exit. Somehow, he found a door and burst through it, into the cool and quiet hallway. Behind him, he heard movement. He didn't know why he turned, but he did.

She was there, watching him. Her hair was dark red and her dress a shocking shade of pink that looked as if it was about to split across her generous breasts.

"Are you all right?" she asked again.

"Fine," he replied in crisp Italian. "I apologize. You startled me."

She came forward then, hesitantly, her hands clasped together in front of her. She was lovely, he decided, in spite of the horrible dress. Her shape was imprinted on his mind, her curves still burning into his body. His hands itched to explore her, but he kept them clenched into fists at his sides. He used to take whatever women offered him, as often as they offered it, but that man had ceased to exist in the months after he'd returned from the war.

At first, he'd indulged in sex because he'd thought it would help him forget. It hadn't. It had only sharpened the contrast between life and death, only made him feel worse instead of better.

Now, denying himself was a matter of routine. Not to mention safer for all involved. His dreams were too unpredictable to sleep with a woman at his side.

Worse, they seemed to be sliding into his waking life if what had just happened was any indication.

The woman was still looking at him. Blue-green eyes fringed in dark lashes blinked up at him as a line formed on her forehead. "You really don't look well."

He glanced down at her hands, at the way she rubbed the thumb of one hand into her wrist. He'd hurt her, and it sickened him. What kind of man had he become? He was coming unglued inside, and no one could help him.

"I'm fine," he clipped out. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Her eyes dropped. "You didn't really. You just surprised me."

"You're lying," he said, and her head snapped up, her eyes searching his. Something in those eyes called to him, but he shut it off and backed away.

"You don't know that," she replied, her chin lifting. "You don't know me."

He almost believed her. But her lip trembled, ruining her brave facade, and Zach loathed himself. "You should go," he said. "Walk away. It's safer."

She blinked. "Safer? Are you so dangerous, then?"

He swallowed. "Perhaps."

Her gaze was steady. Penetrating. "I'm not afraid," she said softly. "And I don't think you're dangerous to anyone but yourself."

Her words hit him like a punch to the gut. No one had ever said that to him before. The truth of it was sharper than any blade.

More frightening.

Anger and despair flowed over him in waves. He wanted to be normal again, wanted to be what he'd once been. But he couldn't seem to dig out of the morass, and he hated himself for it. He simply didn't know what normal was anymore.

"I'm sorry," he said again, because there was nothing else he could say. And then he turned and strode away.

Lia Corretti sucked in a disappointed breath as she watched the tall, dark American striding down the hall away from her. Something fell from his hand and bounced on the plush carpet. Lia hurried forward, calling to him.

He did not turn back. She stooped to pick up the small object on the floor. It was some kind of military medal suspended from a red, white and blue ribbon. She clutched it in her hand and looked down the long corridor at his retreating back. He walked so precisely, so stiffly, with the bearing of a soldier.

Of course he did.

She looked at the medal again. He'd dropped it on purpose. She did not doubt that. She'd seen his fingers open, seen the shiny object tumble to the floor, but he hadn't stopped to retrieve it.

Why?

Her wrist still smarted where he'd twisted it behind her back. She didn't think he'd been aware of what he'd been doing. He'd seemed...distant, as if he were somewhere else. It's what had made her go to him, what had made her touch him and ask if he was all right. He'd been plastered against that wall, his eyes squeezed tight shut, and she'd thought he'd been ill.

Lia closed her fingers around the medal. It was warm from his skin, and her heart skipped. She could still see the raw look on his face when he'd realized what he was doing to her.

She knew that look. It was one of self-loathing, one of relief and one of confusion all rolled into one. She knew it because she'd lived with those feelings her entire life.

In that moment, she'd felt a kinship with him. It was so strange. After a lifetime of isolation, one moment of looking into a stranger's eyes had made her feel less alone than she'd ever felt before.

She turned to go back into the ballroom, though she'd rather be anywhere else, and caught a glimpse of her reflection in one of the full-length mirrors lining the corridor. Revulsion shuddered through her.

No wonder he'd wanted to get away.

She was a whale. A giant pink whale bursting at the seams. She'd been so excited when she'd been asked to be a bridesmaid. She'd finally thought she might be accepted by the sleek, beautiful Corretti family, but instead she'd been forced into a blazing pink dress at least two sizes too small for her bust. Carmela Corretti had laughed when she'd walked out of the fitting room, but she'd promised to have the dress fixed.

She hadn't, of course.

Lia's grandmother was the only one who'd seemed to sympathize. When Lia put the dress on today, despair and humiliation rolling through her in giant waves, her grandmother had hugged her tight and told her she was beautiful.

Users Review

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