

# The Sheik's Secret Twins

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## Chapter 1

“No, Jacob, you can’t eat Sam’s fruit. It doesn’t count even if you are twins.” Glancing at her watch, Siri Michaels realized they were again running behind on their morning schedule. As she put the milk back in the refrigerator, she caught a suspicious movement out of the corner of her eye. “Sam, you can’t hide your fruit in your pockets. You did that last week and forgot about them. I found them when I was doing the laundry and it was disgusting.”

She almost rolled her eyes when her twin three year old boys laughed delightedly at rotting fruit in their jeans pockets. Were all boys fascinated by anything disgusting? Or were hers just abnormally enthralled?

“Come on guys. We need to hurry up. Just finish your milk and gobble up those apples.” She shoved the files she’d been working on the previous night into her computer bag and looked around, stepping over Legos and narrowly missing a toy fire truck. Thankfully, she was still in her slippers because if she’d changed into her heels for the work day, she’d have been a gonner. In the midst of making a path, she remembered one very important question. “Sam, did you put on underwear today?” Why she even had to ask was beyond her but the tike liked going as free as a bird.

She wasn’t looking at him but since there was no response, she glanced back and found two dark, curly heads bent close. As much as she loved these little guys, that pose was never good. And she’d learned the hard way that silence was bad. Generally, very bad.

“Sam,” she called out from three feet away and waited until she had his full attention. When he looked up, the guilt in his eyes told her she’d caught them doing something wrong, but the trick was figuring out what that “something” might be. Had it already occurred? Or was their mischief imminent? She had to maintain a straight face under these circumstances, otherwise, they would consider her humor as encouragement in whatever they had planned. “Sam, do you have underwear on?” she asked again.

She couldn’t help it when the chuckle escaped as he looked down and pulled his pants away to check. How could he not know? It seemed to her like underwear was an essential piece of clothing and the absence of that piece would be bothersome and uncomfortable.

Siri knew the answer to her question when he looked up with that devilish grin. “Go put some on,” she commanded.

The little guy scrambled off his chair before racing full speed to the bedroom and Siri was grateful that he was still at an age when he would obey her.

She couldn’t take a break to ponder the future at this point in the morning. With Sam out of the picture, that left Jacob alone. Together, the twins were as thick as thieves. Separate them though, and she could usually get one to confess. “What are you guys planning?” she asked, bending down so she was at eye level with Jacob. They were fraternal twins, but they looked so similar it was extremely difficult for strangers to tell them apart. Siri could because she knew them and loved every tiny freckle on their faces.

"We're not planning anything," Jacob whispered, and he placed a chubby hand on both sides of her face. "I promise, momma. We're innocent."

Siri knew she was in trouble then. "Jacob, if you let me in on the secret, maybe we can have ice cream for dessert tonight."

Jacob's eyes widened and he smiled excitedly, showing his tiny white toddler teeth with gaps in between because not all of his teeth were in. "Momma, Sam has a surprise for you."

Siri's stomach churned with those words. The last time Sam brought her a surprise, he was covered in mud and had two little kittens under each arm. He'd "rescued" the kittens from someone else's backyard. How he'd done that, she had no idea since her back yard was fenced in with a gate that only an adult could handle and there weren't any kittens, much less mud, in her backyard. It had taken a week and several lost kitten posters posted around the neighborhood before the original owners had been found and kittens returned. "Jacob, you know I love surprises," she lied and felt no remorse, "but I also know that sometimes Sam's surprises can be a bit scary. Can you give me a hint?"

Jacob was torn because he didn't want his mother to be scared, but he couldn't reveal the amazing surprise. "This won't scare you. I promise. It's a good surprise."

Sam was coming back down the hallway by that point so there wasn't anything else Siri could say to convince him at the moment. But she'd have to work on him a bit later, her stomach churning at the idea of whatever these two extremely intelligent children had devised. "Okay, don't tell him I know there's going to be a surprise, okay?" It would make it easier to work on Jacob if Sam didn't reinforce the "surprise" aspect of the treat they were creating for her. At least she hoped it was for her. The idea of her boys devising something for someone else, where she wasn't able to run interference, wasn't a scenario she relished.

Jacob nodded happily, then jumped down off his chair himself and caught up with his brother. She cringed when she saw their heads immediately bend towards each other.

"Get your shoes and coats on," she called out and looked at the news on her computer screen, surveying the headlines on the Chicago Tribune website. Elections coming, check. Jobs report getting better, check. Weather, rainy. Not check, not good." Put on your rain coats," she called out again. Oil prices down, for how long?

She started to put her computer to sleep, but something caught her eye. Oil prices down because...No! That simply wasn't possible!

In her panic, she couldn't even ensure that the boys were following her instructions. Her eyes skimmed the text, then re-read the first paragraph over again since her panic was diminishing her ability to absorb what the words were explaining. He's divorcing?

She sat down heavily in the kitchen chair and clicked on the screen to get the full article. As she read through the words, only the message that Sheik Malik bin Saqqaf was in the midst of a divorce and pressure was mounting for him to re-marry quickly in order to produce an heir, something that hadn't happened in his first marriage and his advisors were becoming worried about an end to the dynasty. A dynasty that had been extremely good for Duban.

Why was a divorce necessary? Why wasn't he just marrying another woman, she wondered? Couldn't he have several wives? The idea actually made her stomach ache so she slapped the computer shut and turned around, only to find several sets of eyes staring at her.

Sam and Jacob were in their rain coats and shoes, although Sam had his shoes on the wrong feet. To the left of Sam were their two dogs, "Rover" and "Boy", neither canine having a very celebrated parentage and to the right of Jacob was "Kitty", a white, short haired feline that loved shedding on Siri's black slacks. All three animals had not been her choice but had shown up at various stages in her sons' short lives and become part of the family. Sam was the animal lover and any creature that crossed his path needed to be adopted and "loved" by her adorable little son. He brought home animals even when they had owners, and she had to return them, sometimes with a very sad boy on her hands because, in his mind, no one could take care of animals and give them enough love like he could.

"What's wrong, momma?" Sam asked, his hand holding Rover's scraggly fur nervously. Jacob, sensing the same tension, leaned into Sam and both boys somehow figured out how to have as much of their bodies touching each other without lying on top of the other.

They didn't need to be concerned with her trauma, she told herself. All they needed in their lives right now was a secure home with lots of hugs, kisses, understanding and parameters. "Nothing is wrong, little guys," she said and pasted a bright smile on her face. "I just remembered that I needed to stop and get gas but I can do that after I drop you two off at school. I know you have your big day today, don't you?"

The boys relaxed slightly, but they kept close, not sure if they believed their mother or not. "Let's go," she said and herded the boys out to the car, kept the animals in the house with one foot while she closed and locked the door, all the while balancing their school bags on one shoulder, her computer bag in the other, her keys in her right hand and her coffee in the left. She refused to let her mind think about that man and his divorce as well as all the painful memories that were long gone and should never to be thought of again.

As she drove them the short distance to their preschool, she did her best to appear upbeat and unconcerned until she kissed each of them on their chubby cheeks moments before they each ran off to play with their friends. She watched them carefully for a few moments, noting that each other was their real best friend. The others in the play group were interesting, but Sam and Jacob were two halves of a whole.

When they were in elementary school, she'd have to separate them, encourage them to open up to others and diversify their lives, but for now, they were doing well. They were so smart it scared her sometimes. Would she be able to give them everything they needed as they grew up? Was she a good mother? Was she doing everything right?

She sighed as she exited the school, her mind whirling with questions and insecurities. How nice it would be if she could talk to someone, bounce her ideas off of them and have someone take a bit of the worry away. But she didn't have that. She was a single mother of twin boys who were always running around, always chasing something, curious about anything that moved, and if it didn't move, they wanted to know why. If she wasn't working to support

them, she was searching the internet to keep up with their questions. But no matter how exhausting it was, she loved them and knew she'd never give them up for anything or anyone.

Even a man who needed an heir, she thought angrily.

He'd walked out, he'd rejected her letter, he'd never called or checked in on her. He could just go on about his merry old way and raise oil prices or let them fall, whatever made his day. He'd never find out about her sons! She'd tried to let him know about their existence but he'd rejected that letter, hadn't even opened the letter since it was "returned to sender".

At the warehouse, she went to her office, smiling at the employees who were already on duty, chatting with several of them about deliveries and inventories, before moving on to her office. Once there, she closed her door, something she rarely did, and sat down in her chair to try and figure out what to do. She had to think through this latest news carefully, put it into perspective and then move on with her life. Malik's marriage or dissolution of his marriage had no bearing on her life. She was independent, she'd worked hard to build up her toy business and she had two wonderful boys that depended on her.

The days were always chaotic and she worked hard, proud of the company she'd built up four years ago. She'd built up this toy company from nothing, just an idea to distribute educational toys for kids, working hard over the years to ensure its success. There were several people who hadn't liked working for someone younger, but she'd quickly changed their minds as she'd grown the company, expanding and giving all of them more opportunities.

The idea for her company had come to her almost immediately after she'd discovered she was pregnant. She and her mother had been searching for toys that would be appropriate for what she'd thought would be her only child. What they'd been able to find had been some great toys, some bad ones and some mediocre, but nothing all in one spot. After a great deal of trial and error, she'd created a web site that consolidated all of the toys she thought were educational and beneficial to kids at various stages of their lives. The web site had taken off and she'd quickly expanded from her parents' dining room to a small store, and then to this warehouse that could hold a larger inventory so she could get the toys out to her customers more quickly as well as several other retail stores.

At lunch, her assistant placed a sandwich beside her elbow and Siri smiled her thanks. "Would you close the door again, Jane?" she asked as the woman was walking out. Jane was startled at the unprecedented request but complied and, as soon as she was alone, Siri put her head in her hands, closing her eyes and trying to push the memories at bay.

She didn't want to think about him but that article this morning had really gotten to her. She looked out her window at the drizzle that continued to fall, her mind traveling back to those halcyon days when everything was rosy and beautiful. And she hadn't known the pain of a man's betrayal.

## Chapter 2

### Four Years Ago

Siri glanced once more at her date for the night, wondering what in the world she possibly could have seen in him. She was in her second year of university and he was in his last so when he'd asked if she could accompany him on a dinner with his new boss, she'd eagerly accepted, thinking it would be nice to spend some time with people who might be intellectually stimulating.

Not to mention Gary was a very handsome man. She wouldn't mind getting to know him better, and maybe something could grow. They'd spent some time together at coffee shops and study groups although she'd been too intimidated by everyone else to speak up much.

As she listened to him now, she couldn't believe how stupid he was. If he mis-quoted one more philosopher, she might have to say something. Looking at their dinner companions, Gary's new boss and his extremely patient wife, she wasn't sure if they were just bored out of their minds by Gary's monologue on why he'd adopted various aspects of some philosophers' doctrines, discarding other parts as "superfluous" or "redundant". Or if they were thinking of something else just to keep their minds off of what Gary was saying.

When he once again ascribed Aristotle to the introduction of Forms to philosophy instead of Plato, Siri looked away, unwilling to see if their dinner companions, and Gary's future employer, agreed or were showing contempt at the man's blatant abuse of the great philosophers.

As she glanced to her right, her eyes collided with a pair of dark, amused ones. The man was exceptionally handsome with dark, wavy hair and a strong jaw, and a half smiling mouth that showed he too had overheard Gary's comments. This man, whoever he was, understood the differences between Plato and Aristotle and wasn't impressed with Siri's dinner companion.

Siri glanced away, feeling somewhat odd with that man's gaze. She placed a hand over her fluttery stomach and picked up her ice water, taking a long draw to cool herself down.

Trying hard to focus on the conversation, hoping she might be able to liven it up a bit, she waited for a break in Gary's diatribe about Durkheim. How had they gone from philosophy to sociology? She really must have missed a great deal of the conversation.

Their food arrived and she picked up her fork, hoping Gary would also take the hint and start eating. His boss appeared to be moving out of the bored range and into the irritated.

"Gary, that looks delicious. What did you order?" she asked, only to be polite.

It didn't work and Gary shifted back to philosophy after declaring emphatically that agnostics, like he claimed to be, shouldn't limit their world after rejecting the existence of a divine being.

Siri actually choked on her water with that one and her eyes went once more to the man at the next table. Sure enough, he was looking right back at her with an eyebrow raised in question. She tried very hard to smother the amusement at Gary's confusion with agnostics versus atheists, but she kept quiet and just prayed to the divine being that she sincerely believed

in, that this dinner would end quickly and their dinner companions were unaware of Gary's gaffes.

When the meal was finally over, Gary's exuberance over his performance was astounding. The four of them were walking out of the restaurant and Siri pulled her wrap closer around her. It wasn't that it was chilly so much as she didn't want Gary to touch her bare skin. She was so repulsed by his ignorance that she couldn't deal with any kind of affection from him.

She turned to the side and once again, she found herself caught up in the stranger's gaze. He was surrounded by his dinner companions, but he wasn't paying any attention to them, just as she was in an island that seemed to contain only herself and the man standing ten feet away. He was much taller than she'd originally have guessed and in the brighter light of the valet area, she could see that his eyes were genuinely a light grey and weren't a factor from the dim lighting of the restaurant. He was handsome, in an off-hand kind of way. It wasn't so much his looks though, but something that was alluring about his appearance, something that drew one's eyes towards him.

He wouldn't release her eyes and she felt captured, unable to look away, unable to hear anything that was going on around her and she wasn't sure if she was standing or sitting, just too transfixed to do anything other than stand there until he released her.

Fortunately, she didn't really mind the hold he had over her. This stranger's gaze was much more enjoyable than anything that was going on around her.

Until Gary realized that she wasn't paying attention to him. He grabbed her arm and nudged her. "Are you okay?" he asked in an almost angry tone.

Siri blinked and that seemed to break the magic. She looked away, noticed where she was, that three pairs of eyes were waiting on her expectantly. "I'm sorry, I dazed out for a moment. Did someone ask me a question?"

Gary puffed up like some angry cave man. "I asked if you knew that man over there."

Siri glanced back, but the tall man was getting into a large, black sport utility vehicle, disappearing from her sight.

"No. I've never met him before," she replied honestly. "He was sitting at the table next to ours during dinner."

"Then why were you staring at him like that?" he demanded.

Siri glanced away, feeling slightly guilty. "I apologize. He was just..." She shook her head, unable to explain what had gone on between herself and the stranger. She couldn't explain it in her mind, so putting words to her feelings and reactions wasn't really possible.

Gary cursed under his breath and turned back to his future boss. "I'm sorry, Mr. Meyers. Siri isn't usually this rude. I suppose I simply made the wrong choice in companions for the evening."

Siri looked at the man who had been boring her all evening, her mouth falling open in astonishment. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Gary replied, shaking his head in disdain. "You're rude and inconsiderate and I don't think we're going to work out well together."

Siri laughed and took a step back. Turning to the other couple, she smiled brightly. "Mr. Meyers, Ms. Meyers, I appreciate the dinner tonight. The food was exceptionally good. Unfortunately, the man you are considering hiring doesn't know the difference between Plato, who's primary doctrine was about Forms and their abstract meaning, to put a great mind in a nutshell," she said turning to glare at Gary, "and Aristotle, who was a student of Plato. And how on earth you thought Durkheim was a companion of Socrates is beyond me, since the man was born in France several centuries after Socrates died, over thirteen hundred miles from Athens, Greece. Not only that, Durkheim studied sociology." She was just about to turn away when she thought of one other subject. "Oh, and one other stupid comment? Atheists don't believe in a divine being. Agnostics accept the existence of a divine being is unknown. A subtle difference, but one your mind is too small to understand."

She turned to the other couple, surprised to see their amusement at her comments. "Well said," Mr. Meyers replied, the first time he revealed that he was fully aware of all the unintelligent comments Gary had mouthed during the dinner. "Please give me a call when you're ready for a job. I'd like to talk to you about possibilities," he said, handing her his business card. Looking back at Gary, "I don't think that position we discussed is going to work out after all. And please don't blame this young lady. I was going to tell you this in the morning, but since you pushed the envelope by speaking to her so poorly a few moments ago, I decided it was pointless to pull my punches since you set the tone."

Ms. Meyers was already nodding and tucking her hand into her husband's elbow. "Would you like a ride back to your apartment, Siri? I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you going back with this young man."

Siri glanced up at Gary and stepped back. "Thank you. That's very considerate of you." She thought about catching a cab back to her place, but Gary was red enough in the face to be a problem so it was probably better to get out of the area. Besides, she didn't really have the funds for a cab ride. The dress had cost her a great deal, not to mention the shoes that were biting into the tender flesh of her feet.

The valet arrived at that moment, handing keys to both Gary and Mr. Meyers. Siri followed the couple, slipping into their back seat and refusing to glance at Gary the whole time. She was relieved when the older couple pulled away from the curb, both of them chatting away at some of Gary's more idiotic comments during the meal.

The next day, Siri was in her tiny apartment that she shared with another student. Both of them were studying, relaxed on the battered sofa and chair that made up their den area. Both pieces of furniture had seen better days but were covered with blankets or sheets that hid the worst of their wear. Siri had gone to her two classes for the day already and was propped up on the chair with her legs hanging over the side, her brown, slightly curly hair piled on top of her head, held there with a couple of pencils and a pen. She had a highlighter in one hand and was flipping the pages of her Art History book, making notes in the margins with the pen and highlighting anything that might be pertinent in the text.

When the doorbell rang, her roommate, Linda, jumped up and answered the door, dumping her calculus book onto the floor eagerly. "Expecting someone? Maybe an agitated, unemployed idiot perhaps?" she joked, referring to Gary. Siri had told her all about the meal as soon as she'd gotten home last night, both of them laughing at some of Gary's comments.

"Not for me," Siri said, focusing on the history of Renaissance paintings.

In the back of her mind, Siri heard Linda answer the door, but the mumbled greetings didn't break her concentration.

"Uh, Siri?" Linda called out.

"Tell them I'm not here," she called back, knowing that whoever it was could hear her comments but still hoping they would be discouraged.

"Um...I'm not sure this guy is going to take no for an answer."

That got through to Siri and she glanced up from her book. When she saw the tall man in the dark suit standing in her kitchen, the only other area besides the den and the two bedrooms which were on opposite sides of the den, Siri jumped up, dumping her books and notes all over the orange, shag carpet.

"Oh!" she cried out and looked down at the papers, then back up at the gorgeous man who was looking at her with a blank expression on his face. He looked scarier, more intimidating, in the bright afternoon sunshine. And much, much taller!

She pulled the pen out of her hair, wishing she'd pulled on something better than leggings and an old tee shirt which had definitely seen better days and only came down to her waist. "Sorry," she said and grabbed Linda's boyfriend's shirt which was draped over the back of the only other chair in the apartment. "I wasn't expecting anyone today. We were just studying."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," the man replied with a slight accent which Siri couldn't place immediately. "I thought perhaps we might be formally introduced since we had such an amusing evening last night."

Siri had to laugh despite her nervousness at this extremely large man in her apartment. "It wasn't so funny towards the end, but he did serve as a good amusement factor, didn't he?"

Malik took a step forward, his eyes looking over her beautiful skin for signs of abuse. "He didn't hurt you, did he? I know that you confronted him at the end, and I apologize for not being there to stop him if things became physical."

She looked up at him curiously. "It wasn't your responsibility to ensure my safety, but I appreciate the thought. I can take care of myself," she claimed.

Malik stopped his laughter, but only just in time. This woman who barely reached his shoulder thought she could handle an angry man with his pride wounded in front of his future employer? "I'm glad to hear it." He stepped back and smiled. "I would like to take you out to dinner myself, if you have the time."

Siri was startled and not sure how to respond. She looked to Linda who was just as awestruck. Regrouping quickly so she didn't appear so ridiculous, she replied, "I'm flattered, but I really don't think that I'm in your league," she stated softly, wishing that she could be in his league. This man was hunk material, but also terrifying for some reason.

Linda really didn't like Siri's response and stepped forward. "She'd be delighted," she contradicted. "What time and where should she meet you?" she asked, already picking up a pen and notebook and writing something down on it.

Malik glanced at the cute redhead who interceded on his behalf, appreciating her efforts. "Eight o'clock, tomorrow night? I'll pick you up here."

Linda nodded, ignoring Siri's attempt to contradict her. "That sounds perfect," she said, nodding her head for emphasis. "Here's Siri's cell phone number in case anything comes up. And she'll be ready tomorrow at eight."

The tall, gorgeous man took the paper and bowed slightly, handing the paper to one of the large, bulky men behind him without even glancing at it. "I look forward to our evening. And I will work hard to ensure that I don't mistake my philosophers since you apparently are so well versed in their doctrines."

With that, he stepped out of the apartment and closed the door, leaving behind two stunned women who looked at each other as if they'd just been invited to a royal ball.

"Who was that man?" Linda asked, when she remembered to close her mouth, her whole body showing her excitement for Siri's new man.

Siri shrugged, still staring at the now closed door. "I have no idea. He was at the table next to ours last night and we looked at each other every time Gary said something stupid but I don't know his name. And I couldn't even guess where he's from since I couldn't place his accent."

Linda wasn't excited any longer. She was actually looking a bit worried now. "And you're going out with him? Is that safe?"

Siri turned to glare at her roommate, astonished that she was asking that question now after Linda had just accepted the date despite Siri's rejection. "Not really," she said with emphasis, raising an eyebrow. "But did I have a choice? Not really!"

Linda laughed and flopped back down on the sofa, her worry dissipating just as easily as it had appeared. "Well, it's about time you got out and explored a little. Have a bit of adventure tomorrow night with your mystery guy. He looks yummy, so enjoy it!"

"I might enjoy it more if I knew his name."

At that moment, her cell phone rang and she looked down at the tiny screen. It was an unknown number, but something told her to answer the call anyway. "Hello?" she answered warily.

"I think I forgot to tell you my name," a deep voice said over the phone.

"Yes, we were just mentioning that," she replied, glancing at Linda who was watching her eagerly.

"I'm Malik," he explained. "And I'm very glad to meet you, Siri."

She hesitated to ask, actually afraid of the answer but knowing she had to find out anyway. "How did you find out who I am?"

"I have a few resources."

"And how do you know where I live?"

“Same resources. I promise I’m not a stalker. Just consider me a man interested in getting to know a beautiful woman. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Siri glanced at her phone, then at Linda. “His name is Malik and he has ‘resources’,” she explained to her curious roommate.

“He has a lot more than resources,” Linda replied with a grin before once more diving back into her books.