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SANDRA MARTON

Sheikh Without a Heart



Sandra Marton

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«HarperCollins»

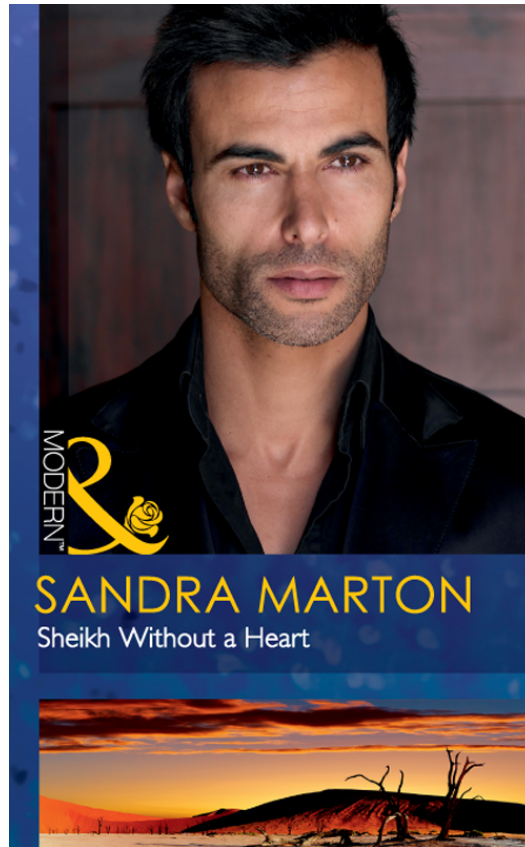
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From the bright lights of Las Vegas... Dressed only in a skimpy sequin-studded bikini is not the way Rachel Donnelly wants to meet Sheikh Karim al Safir. Especially when he is so devastatingly handsome – and fully clothed! ...to the glittering jewels of the desert Karim is horrified that this is the mother of his newly discovered nephew. His raging pulse at the sight of Rachel's barely dressed body belies his reputation as the Sheikh with no heart, but he'll live up to it to ensure that the heir to the throne is raised in Alcantar!

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“I am not getting on a plane!”

“Yes,” he said, in a quiet voice that resonated with command, “you are.”

“No!”

“We’re flying to New York.”

“*You’re* flying to New York! I’m going home.”

“Home?” His tone changed, became hard. “Really? Is that why you came out the door with a suitcase?” There was a gate ahead; he slowed the car as they approached it. “I told you not to take me for a fool, Rachel. When you came down those steps your only thought was to run. I’d bet you didn’t even have a destination. Well, now you do.”

“Get this through your head, Your Highness. There’s not a way in hell I’m flying to New York or anyplace else with you. If you think you can—you can pick up where you left off in my apartment—”

He looked at her, his eyes cold. Then he swung the wheel to the right and pulled onto the shoulder of the road.

“I assure you, Ms. Donnelly, I’m not the least bit interested in you sexually.”

“If that’s your idea of an apology—”

“It’s a statement of fact. What happened earlier was a mistake.”

About the Author

SANDRA MARTON wrote her first novel while she was still in primary school. Her doting parents told her she'd be a writer some day, and Sandra believed them. In secondary school and college she wrote dark poetry nobody but her boyfriend understood—though, looking back, she suspects he was just being kind. As a wife and mother she wrote murky short stories in what little spare time she could manage, but not even her boyfriend-turned-husband could pretend to understand those. Sandra tried her hand at other things, among them teaching and serving on the Board of Education in her home town, but the dream of becoming a writer was always in her heart.

At last Sandra realised she wanted to write books about what all women hope to find: love with that one special man, love that's rich with fire and passion, love that lasts for ever. She wrote a novel, her very first, and sold it to Mills & Boon® Modern™ Romance. Since then she's written more than sixty books, all of them featuring sexy, gorgeous, larger-than-life heroes. A four-time RITA® Award finalist, she's also received five *RT Book Reviews* magazine awards, and has been honoured with *RT's* Career Achievement Award for Series Romance. Sandra lives with her very own sexy, gorgeous, larger-than-life hero in a sun-filled house on a quiet country lane in the north-eastern United States.

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Sheikh Without a Heart

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS the kind of night that made a man long to ride his favorite stallion across a sea of desert sand.

Black silk sky. Stars as brilliant as bonfires. An ivory moon that cast a milky glow over the endless sea of sand.

But there was no horse beneath Sheikh Karim al Safir. Not on this night. His Royal Highness the Prince of Alcantar, heir to its Ancient and Honorable throne, was twenty-five thousand feet above the desert, soaring through the darkness in the cabin of his private jet. A rapidly-cooling cup of coffee stood on a small glass-topped table beside him; his leather attaché case lay open on the next seat.

Minutes ago he'd started to go through its contents until he'd suddenly thought, what the hell was the point?

He knew what was in the case.

He'd gone through the contents endlessly during the last two weeks and then again tonight, flying from the British West Indies toward his final destination, as if doing so would somehow make more sense of things when he knew damned well that was not going to happen.

Karim reached for the cup of coffee and brought it to his lips. The black liquid had gone from cool to chilly.

He drank it anyway.

He needed it. The bitterness, the punch of caffeine. He needed something, God knew, to keep him going. He was exhausted. In body. In mind.

In spirit.

If only he could walk to the cockpit, tell his pilot to put the plane down. Here. Right now. On the desert below.

Crazy, of course.

It was just that he ached for the few moments of tranquility he might find if he could take only one long, deep breath of desert air.

Karim snorted. His head was full of crazy thoughts tonight.

For all he knew, there would never be a sense of peace to be drawn from this land.

This was not the desert of his childhood. Alcantar was thousands of miles away and its endless miles of gently undulating sand ended at the turquoise waters of the Persian Sea.

The desert over which his plane was flying ended at the eye-popping neon lights of Las Vegas.

Karim drank more cold coffee.

Las Vegas.

He had been there once. An acquaintance had tried to convince him to invest in a hotel being built there. He'd flown to McCarran field early in the morning—

And flown back to New York that same night.

He had not put his money into the hotel—or, rather, his fund's money. And he'd never returned to Vegas.

He'd found the city tawdry. Seedy. Even its much-hyped glamour had struck him as false, like a whore trying to pass herself off as a courtesan by applying garish layers of make-up.

So, no. Las Vegas was not a city for him—but it had been one for his brother.

Rami had spent almost three months there, longer than he'd spent anywhere else the past few years. He'd have been drawn to it like a moth to flame.

Karim sat back in his leather seat.

Knowing all he now knew about his brother, that came as no surprise.

He'd finally had to face the truth about him. Tying up the loose ends of his dead brother's life had torn away the final illusions.

Tying up loose ends, Karim thought.

His mouth twisted.

That was his father's phrase. What he was really doing was cleaning up the messes Rami had left behind, but then, his father didn't know about those. The King believed his younger son had simply been unable or unwilling to settle down, that he'd traveled from place to place in an endless search to find himself.

The first time his father had said those words Karim had almost pointed out that finding oneself was a luxury denied princes. They had duties to assume, obligations to keep from childhood on.

Except Rami had been exempted from such things. He'd always had a wild streak, always found ways to evade responsibility.

"You're the heir, brother," he used to tell Karim, a grin on his handsome face. "I'm only the spare."

Perhaps adherence to a code of duty and honor would have kept Rami from such an early and ugly death, but it was too late for speculation. He was gone, his throat slit on a frigid Moscow street.

When the news had come, Karim had felt an almost unbearable grief. He'd hoped that "tying up the loose ends" of his brother's life would provide some kind of meaning to it and, thus, closure.

He drew a long breath, then let it out.

Now, the best he could do was hope that he had somehow removed the stain from his brother's name, that those Rami had cheated would no longer speak that name with disgust ...

Cheated?

Karim almost laughed.

His brother had gambled. Whored. He'd ingested a pharmacopoeia's worth of illicit drugs. He'd borrowed money and never repaid it. He'd given chits to casinos around the world, walked out on huge hotel bills.

The bottom line was that he'd left behind staggering debts in half a dozen cities. Singapore. Moscow. Paris. Rio. Jamaica. Las Vegas.

All those debts had to be settled—if not for legal reasons then for moral ones.

Duty. Obligation. Responsibility.

All the things Rami had scoffed at were now Karim's burden.

So he had embarked on a pilgrimage, if you could use such a word to describe this unholy journey. He had handed over checks to bankers, to casino managers, to boutique owners. He'd paid out obscene amounts of cash to oily men in grimy rooms. He'd heard things about his brother, seen things that he suspected he would never forget, no matter how he tried.

Now, with most of the "loose ends" gone, his ugly journey through Rami's life was almost over.

Two days in Vegas. Three at the most. It was why he was flying in at night. Why waste part of tomorrow on travel when he could, instead, spend it doing the remaining cleanup chores?

After that he would return to Alcantar, assure his father that Rami's affairs were all in order without ever divulging the details. Then, at last, he could go back to his own life, to New York, to his responsibilities as head of the Alcantar Foundation.

He could put all this behind him, the reminders of a brother he'd once loved, a brother who'd lost his way—

"Your Highness?"

Karim bit back a groan. His flight crew was small and efficient. Two pilots, one flight attendant—but this attendant was new and still visibly thrilled to be on the royal staff.

She knew only what everyone else knew: that the duty of settling his brother's affairs had fallen to him. He assumed she misread his tight-lipped silence for grief when the truth was that his pain warred with rage.

It was difficult to know which emotion had the upper hand.

"Sir?"

As if all that weren't enough, she couldn't seem to absorb the fact that he hated being hovered over.

"Yes, Miss Sterling?"

"It's Moira, sir, and we'll be landing within the hour."

"Thank you," he said politely.

"Is there anything I can do for you before then?"

Could she turn back the calendar and return his brother to life so he could shake some sense into him?

Better still, could she bring back the carefree, laughing Rami from their childhood?

"Thank you, I'm fine."

"Yes, Your Highness—but if you should change your mind—"

"I'll ring."

The girl did a little knee-bob that was not quite the curtsy he was sure his chief of staff had warned her against.

"Most certainly, Your Highness."

Another dip of the knee and then, mercifully, she walked back up the aisle and disappeared into the galley.

He'd have to remember to have his chief of staff remind her that the world was long past the time when people bowed to royalty.

Hell.

Karim laid his head back against the head-rest.

The girl was only doing what she saw as her duty. He, better than anyone, understood that.

He had been raised to honor his obligations. His father and mother had instilled that in him from childhood on.

His father had been and still was a stern man, a king first and a father second.

His mother had been a sometime movie-star-*cum*-Boston-debutante with great beauty, impeccable manners and, ultimately, a burning need to spend her life as far from her husband and sons as possible.

She'd hated Alcantar. The hot days, the cool nights, the wind that could whip the sea of sand into a blinding froth ...

She'd despised it all.

In some of his earliest memories of her he stood clutching a nanny's hand, holding back tears because a prince was not permitted to cry, watching as his beautiful mother drove off in a limousine.

Rami had looked just like her. Tall. Fair-haired. Intense blue eyes.

Karim, on the other hand, was an amalgam of both his parents.

In him, his mother's blue eyes and his father's brown ones had somehow morphed into ice-gray. He had her high cheekbones and firmly-sculpted mouth, but his build—broad shoulders, long legs, hard, leanly muscled body—he owed to his father.

Rami had favored her in other ways. He hadn't hated Alcantar but he'd always preferred places of sybaritic comfort.

Karim, on the other hand, could not remember a time he had not loved his desert homeland.

He'd grown up in his father's palace, built on a huge oasis at the foot of the Great Wilderness Mountains. His companions were Rami and the sons of his father's ministers and advisors.

By the age of seven he'd been able to ride a horse bareback, start a fire with kindling and flint, sleep as contentedly under the cold fire of the stars as if he were in the elaborate palace nursery.

Even then, twenty-six years ago, only a handful of Alcantaran tribesmen had still lived that kind of life, but the King had deemed it vital to understand and respect it.

"One day," he would say to Karim, "you will rule our people and they must know that you understand the old ways." Always there would be a pause, and then he would look at Rami and say,

not unkindly, “You must respect the people and the old ways as well, my son, even though you will not sit on the throne.”

Had that been the turning point for his brother? Karim wondered. Or had it come when their mother died and their father, mourning her even though she had spent most of her time far from him and her children, had thrown himself ever deeper into the business of governance and sent his sons away?

He sent them to the United States, to be educated, he said, as their mother would have wished.

With terrifying suddenness the brothers had found themselves in what seemed an alien culture. They’d both been brutally homesick, though for different reasons.

Rami had longed for the luxuries of the palace.

Karim had longed for the endless sky of the desert.

Rami had coped by cutting classes and taking up with a bunch of kids who went from one scrape to another. He’d barely made it through prep school and had been admitted to a small college in California where he’d majored in women and cards, and in promises that he never kept.

Karim had coped by burying himself in his studies. He’d finished preparatory school with honors and had been admitted to Yale, where he’d majored in finance and law. At twenty-six he’d created a private investment fund for the benefit of his people and managed it himself instead of turning it over to a slick-talking Wall Street wizard.

Rami had taken a job in Hollywood. Assistant to a B-list producer, assistant to this and assistant that—all of it dependent upon his looks, his glib line of patter and his title.

At thirty, when he’d come into a trust left him by their mother, he’d given up any pretense at work and instead had done what she had done.

He’d traveled the world.

Karim had tried to talk to him. Not once. Not twice. Many, many times. He’d spoken of responsibility. Of duty. Of honor.

Rami’s reply had always been the same, and always delivered with a grin.

“Not me,” he’d say. “I’m just the spare, not the heir.”

After a while they hadn’t seen much of each other. And now—

Now Rami was dead.

Dead, Karim thought.

His belly knotted.

His brother’s body had been flown home from Moscow and laid to rest with all the panoply befitting a prince.

Their father had stood stiffly at his grave.

“How did he die?” he’d asked Karim.

And Karim, seeing how fragile the older man had become, had lied.

“An automobile accident,” he’d told him.

It was almost true.

All he’d left out was that Rami had evidently met with his cocaine dealer, something had gone wrong, the man had slit his throat and a dying Rami had wandered into the path of an oncoming car.

And why go over it again? The death was old news. Soon “tying up loose ends” would be old news, too.

One last stop. A handful of things to sort out—

A dull rumble vibrated through the plane. The landing gear was being deployed. As if on signal, the flight attendant materialized at the front of the cabin.

Karim waved her off. He wasn’t in the mood for her misplaced look of compassion. All he wanted was to put this mess behind him.

Moments later, they landed.

He rose to his feet and reached for his attaché case. Inside it was what he thought of as the final folder. It held letters from three hotels, expressing sympathy on Rami's death and reminders that he had run up considerable bills in their casinos and shops.

There was also a small envelope that contained a key and a slip of paper with an address scrawled on it in Rami's hand.

Had he considered putting down some kind of roots here?

Not that it mattered, Karim thought grimly. It was too late for roots or anything else that might have resembled a normal life.

He'd get an early start tomorrow, pay his brother's bills, then locate the place that went with the key, pay whatever was due—because surely the rent was in arrears despite the lack of a dunning letter.

And then all this would be behind him.

His chief of staff had arranged for a rental car and for a suite at one of the city's big hotels.

The car had a GPS; Karim selected the name of the hotel from a long list and drove toward the city.

It was close to one in the morning, but when he reached the Las Vegas Strip it blazed with light. Shops were open; people were everywhere. There was a frenzy to the place, a kind of circus atmosphere of gaiety Karim didn't quite buy into.

At the hotel, a valet took his car. Karim handed the kid a twenty-dollar bill, said he was fine with carrying his own things, and headed into the lobby.

The metallic sounds of slot machines assaulted his ears.

He made his way to the reception desk through a crowd of shrieking and laughing revelers. The clerk who greeted him was pleasant and efficient, and soon Karim was in an elevator, on his way to the tenth floor along with two women and a man. The man stood with an arm around each of the women; one had her hand on his chest, the other had her tongue in his ear.

The elevator doors whisked open. Karim stepped out.

The sooner he finished his business here, the better.

His suite, at least, was big and surprisingly attractive.

Within minutes he'd stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. He let the hot water beat down on his neck and shoulders, hoping that would drive away some of the weariness.

It didn't.

Okay. What he needed was sleep.

But sleep didn't come. No surprise. After two weeks of coming into cities he knew would hold yet additional ugly truths about his brother, sleep had become more and more elusive.

After a while, he gave up.

He had to do something. Take a walk. A drive. Check out the hotels where Rami had run up enormous bills—this place, he had made certain, was not one of them. Maybe he'd drive by the flat his brother had leased. He could even stop, go inside, take a quick look around.

Not that he expected to find anything worth keeping, but if there was something personal, a memento that said something good about Rami's wasted life, their father might want it.

Karim put on jeans, a black T-shirt, sneakers and a soft black leather bomber jacket. Deserts were cold at night, even ones that arched into the heart of a city whose glow could be seen for miles.

He opened his attaché case, grabbed the key and noted the scribbled address. A tag that read "4B" hung from the key itself. An apartment number, obviously.

The valet brought him his car. Karim handed him another twenty. Then he entered the address into the GPS and followed its directions.

Fifteen minutes later, he reached his destination.

It was a nondescript building in a part of the city that was as different from the Las Vegas he'd so far seen as night from day.

The area was bleak and shabby, as was the building itself ...

Karim frowned. He'd connected to global positioning satellites often enough to know that when they worked they were great and when they didn't you could end up in the middle of nowhere.

Yes, but this was the correct address.

Had Rami run out of the ability to talk himself into the best hotels at some point during his time here?

There was only one way to find out.

Karim got out of the car, locked it, and headed toward the building.

The outside door was unlocked. The vestibule stank. The stairs creaked; he stepped in something sticky and tried not to think about what it might be.

One flight. Two. Three, and there it was, straight ahead. Apartment 4B, even though the "4" hung drunkenly to the side and the "B" was upside down.

Karim hesitated.

Did he really want to do this tonight? Was he up to what was surely going to be a dirty hovel? He remembered the time he'd flown out to the coast to visit Rami when he was in school. Dirty dishes in the sink and all over the counters. Spoiled food in the refrigerator. Clothes spilling out of the hamper.

"Goddammit," he said, under his breath.

The truth was, he didn't give a crap about the apartment being dirty. What mattered was that it would be filled with Rami's things. The hotel rooms had not been; the hotels had all removed his brother's clothes, his toiletries, and put them in storage.

This would be different.

And he was a coward.

"A damned coward," he said, and he stepped purposefully forward, stabbed the key into the lock, turned it—

The door swung open.

The first thing he noticed was the smell—not of dirt but of something pleasant. Sugar? Cookies?

Milk?

The second thing was that he wasn't alone. There was someone standing maybe ten feet away ...

Not someone.

A woman. She stood with her back to him, tall and slender and—

And naked.

His eyes swept over her. Her hair was a spill of pale gold down her shoulders; her spine was long and graceful. She had a narrow waist that emphasized the curve of her hips and incredibly long legs.

Legs as long as sin.

Hell. Wrong building. Wrong apartment. Wrong—

The woman spun around. She wasn't naked. She wore a thing that was barely a bra, covered in spangles. And a thong—a tiny triangle of glittery silver.

It was a cheap outfit that made the most of a beautiful body, though her face was even more beautiful ...

And what did that matter at moment like this, when he had obviously wandered into the wrong place ... and, dammit, her eyes were wide with terror?

Karim held up his hands.

"It's all right," he said quickly. "I made a mistake. I thought—"

"I know precisely what you thought, you—you pervert," the woman said, and before he could react she flew at him, a blur of motion with something in her hand.

It was a shoe. A shoe with a heel as long and sharp as a stiletto.

"Hey!" Karim danced back. "Listen to me. I'm trying to tell you some—"

She slammed the shoe against him, aiming for his face, but he moved fast; the blow caught him in the shoulder. He grabbed her wrist and dragged her hand to her side.

“Will you wait a minute? Just one damned minute—”

“Wait?” Rachel Donnelly said. “*Wait?*” The perv from the lounge wanted her to wait? Wait so he could rape her? “The hell I will,” she snarled, and she wrenched her hand free of his, swung hard ...

This time, the heel of the shoe flashed by his face.

That was the good news.

The bad was that he muttered something and now he wasn’t defending himself; he was coming straight for her.

Panting, she reacted with all her strength, but he was too big, too strong, too determined. A second later he had both her wrists in his hands and she was pinned against the wall.

“Dammit, woman! Will you listen to me?”

“There’s nothing to listen to. I know what you want. You were in the lounge tonight. I brought you drink after drink and I knew you were going to be trouble and I was right, here you are, and—and—”

Her breath caught.

Wrong.

This wasn’t the guy who’d undressed her with his eyes.

That perv had been bald with squinty eyes behind Coke-bottle lenses.

This guy had a full head of dark hair and eyes the cool gray of winter ice.

Not that it mattered. He’d broken into her apartment. He was male. She was female. After three years in Vegas she knew what that—

“You’re wrong.”

She blinked. Either she’d spoken aloud or he was a mind-reader.

“I’m not here to hurt you.”

“Then turn around and go away. Right now. I won’t scream, I won’t call the cops—”

“Will you listen? One of us is in the wrong apartment.”

Despite everything, she choked out a laugh. The man scowled and tightened his hold on her wrists.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that I didn’t expect anyone to be here. I thought this was my brother’s apartment.”

“Well, it isn’t. This apartment is—is—” She stared at him. “What brother?”

“My brother. Rami.”

The floor seemed to shift under Rachel’s feet. She felt the blood drain from her face. The man saw it; those cold gray eyes narrowed.

“You know of him?”

She knew. Of course she knew. And if this was Rami’s brother—if this was Karim of Alcantar, the all-powerful, stone-hearted, ruthless prince ...

“I’m going to let go of you,” he said. “If you scream, you will regret it. Is that clear?”

Rachel swallowed hard. “Yes.”

Slowly, carefully, his eyes locked to hers, he took his hands from her.

“Obviously,” he said, “I was correct. This place *is* my brother’s.”

“I—I—”

“You—you, what?” he growled with imperial impatience. “What are you doing here? This apartment belongs to Rami.”

It didn’t. It never had. It was hers and always had been—though that hadn’t stopped first Suki and then Suki’s lover from moving in.

Now, thank goodness, they were both gone. She lived alone ...

Oh, God!

Her heart, already racing, went into overdrive.

She didn’t. She didn’t live here alone—

“Who are you?” the man growled.

Who, indeed? Her head was spinning. She should have known this would happen, that, sooner or later someone would come.

His hand shot out and manacled her wrist.

“Answer the question! Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I—I’m a friend,” Rachel said. And then, because she had no idea what this man knew or didn’t know or, most of all, what he wanted, she said, “I’m Rami’s friend. His very good friend.”

CHAPTER TWO

KARIM'S mouth thinned.

Friend, hell.

She'd been Rami's woman.

His mistress. His girlfriend. Whatever she'd been, for once in his life Rami had apparently fallen for a woman who wasn't his usual type.

He'd been into flash. This woman's costume, whatever you called it, was flashy, and yet somehow or other she was not. There was something removed about her, something in those dark blue eyes that said, *Be careful how you deal with me.*

Perhaps that had appealed to Rami. The challenge of getting past the invisible barricade around her. Maybe that had made up for the fact that she didn't speak in breathy little sentences or flutter her lashes.

Rami had been a sucker for nonsense like that.

Karim couldn't imagine this woman doing either.

She was tough. Hell, she was fearless.

Any other woman would have screamed for help. Run shrieking into the night. Or, at the very least, begged an intruder for mercy.

She'd come at him with a weapon.

A rather unusual weapon, he thought with wry amusement.

The stiletto-heeled shoe lay on the floor next to him; its mate lay a few feet away. The thing could have done real damage, considering that the heels had to be four or five inches high.

"Stilettos are torture," a mistress had once admitted, but she'd worn them anyway.

He knew the reason.

Women wore them because they knew damned well that men loved the look those high, thin heels gave to a female body: the slight forward tilt of the pelvis, the added length of leg.

Not that Rami's woman needed anything to make her legs look longer.

Even now, they seemed endless.

She had stockings on. Hose. Whatever you called sheer black mesh that drew his eyes up and up to where the mesh disappeared beneath that thong.

With stilettos or without them she was a fantastic sight. Sleek. Sexy. All woman.

Why deny it?

She was beautiful, and he was sure it was natural. He'd seen enough women who'd been surgically and chemically enhanced until they were little more than mannequins.

Cheekbones implanted. Lips injected. Foreheads all but immobilized and, worst of all, breasts that looked and felt like balloons instead of soft, warm flesh.

This woman's breasts would feel just right in a man's hands. The nipples would taste sweet on his tongue ...

Karim felt his body stir.

Hell. He'd been too long without sex. Why else would he react to her? She was beautiful, but she was—she had been Rami's.

Besides, he liked his women to be ... well, at least somewhat demure.

He was a sheikh from an ancient kingdom, a culture still learning to accept some modern concepts about women, but he was also a man of the twenty-first century. He had been educated in the west.

He believed in male-female equality, yes, but some degree of diffidence was still a good thing in a woman. He doubted if this particular woman would even understand the concept.

Karim frowned.

What did any of that matter? Rami was dead. And it was time to get down to business. Tell her that her lover was gone—and that she had until the end of the month to vacate the flat.

She'd said it was hers, but surely only by default. She was here; Rami wasn't.

Still, he'd write her a generous check. It was the right thing to do. Then, tomorrow—today, he thought, glancing at his watch and seeing that it was past six in the morning—he'd make good on the rest of his brother's Las Vegas debts.

With luck, he'd be in Alcantar by the weekend. Then he'd return to Manhattan and get on with his life—

“Well?” the woman said sharply. “Say something. If you're really Rami's brother, what's your name? And what are you doing here?”

Karim blinked.

Indeed, that was the big question.

Did she know about her lover's death? He didn't think so. She spoke of him in the present tense.

Then what was the best way to tell her? Break it to her gently? Or just state the facts?

That might be the best way. Be direct. Get it over with.

For all her feminine looks—the mouth that reminded him of a rose petal, the up-thrust breasts, the gently curved hips—for all that, he couldn't imagine there was anything fragile about her.

She was still the picture of defiance, dark blue eyes flashing, chin raised, ready to fight.

He could change that in a heartbeat.

All he had to do was remind her that he held the upper hand.

And there was an easy way to do that.

He'd pull her into his arms, plunge one hand deep into that mass of silky gold hair, lift her face to his and take her mouth. She'd fight him, but only for a few seconds.

Then her skin would flush with desire. Her lips would part. She'd moan and surrender to him, and it wouldn't matter if her surrender was real or if she was playing a part because he'd carry her to the sofa, strip away the bra, the thong, the spiderweb stockings, and by then her moans would be not a lie because he would make her want him, open for him, move under him ...

Dammit!

Karim turned away, pretended to study the wall, the floor, anything at all while he got his traitorous body under control.

No wonder Rami had kept this one, he thought as he swung toward her again.

“What is your name?” he said sharply.

“I asked first.”

He almost laughed. She sounded like a kid squaring off for a schoolyard fight.

“Is it really that difficult to tell me who you are?”

He could almost hear her considering his request. Then she tossed her head.

“Rachel. Rachel Donnelly.”

“Well, Rachel Donnelly, I am Karim.” He folded his arms over his chest. “Perhaps Rami mentioned me.”

Rachel struggled to hide her distress.

Her unwanted visitor had confirmed her worst fear.

Rami had, indeed, mentioned Karim. Not to her. He'd never said more than “hello” and “goodbye” to her—unless you counted the times he'd brushed past her and whispered how much he wanted to take her to bed.

Suki had told her all about Rami's brother.

Her sister had hated him, sight unseen.

Karim, Suki said, was the reason Rami had no money, the reason he would never be treated properly by their father, the King.

It was all because of him.

Karim.

Karim the Greedy. Karim the Arrogant. Karim the Prince, who had deliberately driven a wedge between Rami and his father. Karim the Prince, with no concern for anyone but himself, no greater wish than to stop anyone else from possibly inheriting even a piece of their father's fortune.

Karim, the Sheikh with no heart.

Rachel had not paid much attention to any of it until Rami and then Suki had taken off.

Rami had left first. No warning, no goodbye. One day he was here and the next he and his things were gone.

Suki, no surprise, had hung in as long as she had to. And when it had been okay for her to take off, she had.

All she'd left behind was a stack of unwashed clothes, a wisp of cheap perfume—

And the one thing that had never mattered to Rami or even Suki but only to Rachel.

After that, Rachel had begun to think about the man she'd never laid eyes on.

About what he knew. Or didn't know. About how he'd react if he ever learned of what Suki had left behind.

Still, she'd never expected him to turn up on her doorstep without warning.

From all Rami had told Suki, his brother traveled with a staff of sycophants and bodyguards ... but here he was.

Alone.

And treating her with barely concealed contempt when he wasn't looking at her with lust in his wintry eyes.

Rachel knew that look.

A woman who wore an outfit like this, who served drinks in a casino, was fair game.

She hated everything about her job. The customers. The atmosphere. The clink of the chips.

This awful costume.

She'd balked at wearing it until her boss said, "You want the job? Do what you're told and stop bitching."

The girls she worked with were even more direct.

"You wanna be Miss High and Mighty," one of them told her, "go pick up dirty dishes at the all-the-pigs-can-eat buffet."

Rachel had already done a turn like that. You couldn't pay the rent and support Suki—because Suki certainly hadn't supported herself—you couldn't pay the rent or anything else with what she'd earned clearing tables.

So each day she gritted her teeth, hid herself inside this sleazy costume and went to work where men pretty much figured she was available for lots more than taking their drink orders.

She hated it, but then, that was how men were. No big surprise there.

Then Rami had moved in. After a few months, when she couldn't stand living with either him or Suki anymore, Rachel had confronted her sister and demanded she and her boyfriend find a place of their own.

Suki had burst into tears and said she couldn't do that. She was in trouble ...

That "trouble" had changed everything.

Rachel could no more have tossed Suki out than she could have flown to the moon, and—and—"Have you lost the ability to speak, Rachel Donnelly? I have no time to waste."

No time, Rachel thought, no time ...

Oh, God!

She'd been so caught up in what was happening that she'd almost forgotten the hour.

The wall clock read six-fifteen.

She'd gotten off work two hours ago, same as always. Which meant that the reason she'd stayed in Vegas was going to turn up at the door in forty-five minutes.

She'd never been sure what she was going to do if and when this moment came.

She was sure now.

She was sure of something else, too.

Rami's brother knew nothing.

If he had, he'd have already demanded his rights to that which he surely would have seen as his.

"Such a fuss over wanting to know my name."

Rachel looked up. The Sheikh stood with his arms folded, a big, hard-faced, hard-bodied, cold-as-ice piece of work who just happened to look like a god.

Unfortunately for him she knew the truth: that he was a cold-hearted SOB who was an expert at manipulating people to see him as he wanted to be seen.

"Such a fuss," he said, his tone ripe with sarcasm, "and now you have nothing to say."

She squared her shoulders.

The thing to do was face him down and get him out of here.

"Actually, I just wanted to be sure. I'd already figured it out myself."

"Really?" he purred.

"Rami described you pretty accurately. Self-important. Arrogant. A despot. Yes, he got it right."

A hit. She saw a flush rise over those high cheekbones.

"You're a sheikh, aren't you? From Alashazam. Or Alcatraz. Something like that."

The imprints of color deepened. He took a step forward. Rachel fought the desire to retreat.

"Something like that," he said coldly.

"Well, Rami isn't here."

That brought a thin smile to his lips. Had she said something amusing?

"But I'll be sure and tell him you called. Now, Sheikh-Whatever-You're-Called, I'm busy. And —"

"I am called Prince Karim," Karim said stiffly. "Or Your Highness. Or I am addressed as Sheikh."

Damn. Was he actually saying this stuff? If there was anything he despised, it was the use of these outmoded titles, but this Rachel Donnelly brought out the worst in him.

"Yes, well, your Sheikhhiness, I'll give Rami your message. Anything else?"

The way she'd combined his titles was an obviously deliberate insult. He wanted to grab her and shake her—

Or grab her and wipe that little smirk off her lips in a very different way—one that would change her demeanor altogether.

For all he knew, that was the reason she'd taunted him. A woman who looked like this would surely use sex to gain the upper hand.

He wasn't fool enough to let it happen.

"No?" she said brightly. "Is that it? Well, in that case, goodbye, good luck, and on your way out don't let the door slam you in the—"

"Rami is dead."

He had not intended to give her the news that abruptly but, dammit, she'd driven him to it. Well, it was too late to call back his brusque words. He could only hope he'd assessed her correctly: that she was too tough to faint or—

"Dead?"

He'd guessed right. She wasn't the fainting type. Evidently she wasn't the weepy type, either. Her only reaction, as far as he could tell, was a slight widening of her eyes.

He was willing to be generous.

Perhaps she was in shock.

Karim nodded. "Yes. He died last month. An accident in—"

“Then why are you here?”

He had not really had the time to consider all her possible reactions to his news, but if he had, this—this removed curiosity would not have been on the list.

“That’s it? I tell you your lover is dead and all you can say is, ‘Why are you here?’”

“My lover?”

“The man who kept you,” he said coldly. “Is that a better way to put it?”

“But Rami ...”

Her voice trailed away. He could see her reassessing. Of course. She was trying to process the situation, determine what would do her the most good now that Rami was gone.

And he had been gone for a while.

She hadn’t known he was dead but it had happened weeks ago, making that casual “I’ll be sure and tell him you called” remark an obvious lie.

Why?

“But Rami ... what?” Karim said coldly.

She shook her head. “Nothing. I mean, I just— I just—”

“He left you.”

Rachel’s mind was whirling and that blunt statement of fact only added to her confusion.

Rami was dead.

Did that make things worse? Did it make them better?

No. It changed nothing except to give her all the more reason to stay the course until she heard from Suki.

She gasped as Karim’s hands closed on her arms.

“Why lie to me, Ms. Donnelly? We both know that my brother left you weeks ago.”

Rachel looked up. She had never seen eyes more filled with contempt.

“Why ask me a question if you already know the answer?”

“What I know,” Karim said, his mouth twisting, ‘is that you don’t give a damn that he’s dead.”

“You’re hurting me!”

“How long did it take you to find his successor?”

She stared at him. “His—?”

“Another fool who’d keep you. Pay your bills. Buy what you’re selling.”

Her eyes flashed.

“Get out of my home!”

“Your home?” Karim raised her to her toes. “Rami paid the bills here. All you did was have the good fortune to warm his bed.”

“If warming your brother’s bed was an example of good fortune, heaven help us all!”

God, he wanted to shake her until she was dizzy!

Once, a very long time ago, he had loved his brother with all his heart.

They’d played together, told each other the secrets boys tell; they’d wept together at the news of their mother’s death, bolstered each other’s spirits the first weeks at boarding school in a strange new land.

That boy was only a memory ... A memory that suddenly raised a storm of emotion Karim had kept hidden even from himself.

Now that emotion flooded through him, set loose by the coldness of a woman his brother had once cared for.

Karim had seen people show more sorrow at the sight of a deer dead on the road than Rachel Donnelly was showing now.

“Damn you,” he growled. “Have you no feelings?”

Her eyes glittered with a burst of blue light.

“What a question, coming from a man like you!”

There was a red haze in front of his eyes. Karim cursed; his hands tightened on her.

“Let go of me!”

She slammed a fist against his shoulder. He caught both hands in one of his, immobilized them against his chest.

“Is that how you dealt with Rami?” he growled. “Did you drive him crazy, too?”

Mercilessly, he dragged her closer. Clapped her face in one big hand. Lowered his head toward hers ...

And stopped.

What was he doing?

This was not him.

He was not the kind of man who’d force himself on a woman. Sex had nothing to do with anger.

No matter that she’d brought him to this, or that she was a grasping, heartless schemer. It didn’t give him the right to treat her this way.

He let go of her. Took a step back. Cleared his throat.

“Miss Donnelly,” he said carefully, “Rachel—”

“Get out!” Her voice shook; her eyes were enormous. “Did you hear me? Get out, get out, get—”

“Rachel?”

Karim swung toward the door. A woman, middle-aged, plump, pleasant-faced, looked from Rachel to him, then at Rachel again.

“Honey, is everything all right?”

Rachel didn’t answer. Karim turned toward her. She’d gone pale; he could see the swift rise and fall of her breasts.

“Mrs. Grey.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper. She looked at Karim, then at the woman in the doorway. “Mrs. Grey. If you could just—if you could just come back a little later—”

“I thought it was him at first,” Mrs. Grey said, frowning. “Wrong hair color but same height, same way of standin’. You know who I mean? That foreigner. Randy. Raymond. Rasi. Whatever his name is.”

“No.” Rachel shook her head. “It isn’t. Look, I hate to ask, but if you would—”

“Just as well, if you ask me. Good-lookin’ man, but any fool could see right through him.”

“Mrs. Grey.” Rachel’s voice was unnaturally high. “This—this gentleman and I have some business to conclude and then I’ll—”

“Sorry, honey, but I’m runnin’ late. Brought my daughter along today. She’s gonna work the mornin’ shift and I have to drop her off after I leave here. Save her takin’ the bus, you know, and ...” Her eyes over to Karim again. “This a new friend?”

“No,” Karim said coldly, “I am not Miss Donnelly’s friend.”

“Too bad. You look a nice sort. Not like that Rasi.” The woman shook her head. “Still, you’d think he’d come back, do the right thing by—”

“Momma? Honestly, you move too fast for me. You was up these stairs before I was half-started,” a woman’s voice said with a little laugh.

A younger version of Mrs. Grey appeared beside her.

She had something in her arms.

A blanket? A bundle?

Karim’s breath caught.

It was a child. An infant—and it reminded him of someone. Someone from long, long ago.

“You’d think a man would want to do right for his very own son and his mama, wouldn’t you?”

Mrs. Grey said to Karim.

Rachel Donnelly, who had shown no emotion at all at the news of Rami’s death, made a little sound. Karim tore his eyes from the baby and looked at her.

She was trembling.

Carefully, he reached for the child. Thanked the two women. Said something polite. Closed the door.

Stared down at the baby in his arms.

And saw perfectly miniaturized replicas of his brother's eyes. His brother's nose.

And Rachel Donnelly's mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

THE world stood still.

Such a trite phrase, Karim knew, but it took a conscious effort to draw air into his lungs.

What he was thinking was impossible.

This child had nothing to do with his brother.

Eye color. The shape of a nose. So what? There were only so many shades of blue in the world and only so many kinds of noses.

He took a deep breath.

Okay.

He'd been at this too long. That was the problem. He had certain routines. Rami had teased him unmercifully about how boring his life must be, but a routine was what kept a man grounded.

Up at six, half an hour in his private gym, shower, dress, coffee and toast at seven, at his desk by eight.

He'd been away from that schedule for too long, flying almost non-stop from city to city, seeing all the unpleasant details of his brother's life unfold.

It was having an effect.

If Rami had fathered a child, he'd have known.

They were brothers. Out of touch, but surely a man would not keep something like that to himself ...

"Blaa," the baby said, "blaa-blaa-blaa."

Karim stared down at the child.

Blah, indeed.

Of course Rami would have kept it to himself—the same as he'd never mentioned his gambling debts.

You didn't talk about your mistakes—and the birth of a child out of wedlock was a mistake.

Rami had scoffed at convention, but under it all he'd known he was the son of a king and, after Karim, next in line to the throne.

There were certain rules of behavior that applied, even to him.

News of an illegitimate child would have resulted in a scandal back home. Their father might have completely cut off his younger son, even banished him from the kingdom.

So, yes. The child was Rami's, and it was illegitimate. There had not been a marriage certificate among his brother's papers. There'd been lots of other stuff. Expired drivers' licenses. Outdated checkbooks. Scribbled notes and, of course, endless bills and IOUs.

Nothing that even hinted at a wife.

Rachel Donnelly stood before him, as frozen as a marble statue, her eyes locked on the child in his arms.

No. Rami had not married her. Drunk or not, he surely would have known better than to tie himself permanently to a woman like this.

She was a woman a man bedded, not wedded, Karim thought, without even a hint of humor. Beautiful.

Fiery.

Tough as nails.

His brother might have found all that spirit and defiance sexy.

He did not and would not. But this wasn't about him.

"Give me the baby."

Her voice was low, a little thready, but the color had come back into her face. She was regaining her composure.

Why had she reacted with such distress?

If this was Rami's child, this could be a golden opportunity. Her lover's child and her lover's brother, coming face to face ...

"Give me the baby!"

He wondered why she hadn't tried to contact him before this. Well, that was obvious. She'd thought Rami would come back to her.

Was this the reason he'd left her? Because she'd become pregnant?

It was an ugly thought, that his brother would have abandoned his own child, but nothing about Rami surprised him anymore.

Assuming, of course, the child was his.

How had his brother let this happen? Drunk or sober, how could he have forgotten to use a condom?

Had the woman seduced him into forgetting? That was always a possibility.

Karim wasn't naïve. A man who was born to a title and a fortune learned early how things went.

Women set snares; his own mother had been pregnant with him before his father had married her.

He wasn't supposed to know that, but any fool could count. And once he'd figured it out he'd had a better idea of why his parents' marriage had failed.

You chose a wife—especially if you had the responsibilities of a prince—because she met certain criteria. Common interests and backgrounds. Common goals and expectations.

You *chose* her; you didn't put yourself in a position where fate or expediency or, even worse, a foolish night of passion became the deciding factor—

A small fist hit his shoulder. Karim blinked in surprise. The woman had moved right up to him. Her eyes flashed with anger.

"Are you deaf? Give—me—the—baby!"

The child made an unhappy sound. Its mouth, that mouth that was the image of hers, began to tremble.

Karim narrowed his eyes.

"Whose child is this?"

"What is this? An interrogation? Give Ethan to me and then get the hell out!"

"Ethan?"

Dammit, Rachel thought, she hadn't intended to give him anything—not even the baby's name.

"Yes. And he's wary of strangers."

Karim's mouth twisted. "Was he wary of my brother?"

"I'd tell you that you've overstayed your welcome, Your Sheikhiess, but you were not welcome here in the first place."

"Do not," Karim said grimly, "call me that."

He regretted the words even as he said them. It was a mistake to let her know she was annoying him because that was damned well what she wanted to do.

"I'll ask you again," he said, struggling to control his temper. "Who does this child belong to?"

"He belongs to himself. Unlike you and your countrymen, Americans don't believe people can be owned like property."

"A charming speech. I'm sure it will win applause on your Fourth of July holiday. But it hasn't got a damned thing to do with my question. Once again, then. Whose child is this?"

Rachel chewed on her lip.

Whose, indeed?

Suki and Rami had created Ethan.

But from the very beginning he'd been hers.

For Suki, the bump in her belly had been a nine-month annoyance, especially once she'd realized she couldn't use her pregnancy to convince Rami to marry her.

He'd packed his things and taken off well before Ethan's birth.

It had been Rachel who'd held Suki's hand during labor, Rachel who'd cut the baby's umbilical cord.

When Suki and her son had come home from the hospital, the baby had cried endlessly. He'd been hungry; Suki had refused to nurse him.

"What," she'd said in horror, "and ruin my boobs?"

The formula hadn't agreed with him. He'd kept spitting up; his tiny diaper had always been full and foul-smelling. Suki had shuddered, and left his care to Rachel.

Rachel had been fine with that.

She'd changed his formula. Changed his diapers. The baby thrived.

And Rachel adored him.

She'd loved him even before he was born. It was she who'd come up with a name, who'd bought a crib and baby clothes. He was hers, not Suki's. And when Suki had finally left, Rachel was almost ashamed to admit she'd been happy to see her go.

Now everything was falling apart.

She had never worried that Rami might return and claim his son—even if he had, she'd sensed that he was a coward underneath the charm and good looks.

She could have faced him down.

But if this arrogant bully wanted Ethan ...

"Ms. Donnelly. I asked a simple question."

The baby began to whimper.

"That's it," Rachel said. "Raise your voice. Terrify the baby. Is that your specialty? Walking into places you aren't welcome? Scaring small children?"

"I asked you a simple question, and you will answer it! Whose child is he?"

"You," Rachel said, stalling for time, "you are an awful man!"

His teeth showed in a wolfish grin.

"I'm heartbroken to hear it."

"What will it take to get you out of here?"

"The truth," he snapped. "Whose baby is this?"

Rachel looked straight into his cold eyes.

"Mine," she said, without hesitation, forcing the lie through a suddenly constricted throat, because Ethan *was* hers.

It was just that she hadn't given birth to him.

"Don't play games with me, madam. You know what I'm asking. Who is the father?"

There.

They'd reached the impasse she'd been dreading. Now what? She should have known he wouldn't be satisfied with her answer.

The Sheikh, the Prince, whatever you were supposed to call him, was not a fool.

Ethan looked like his parents. He had Rami's coloring and eyes, Suki's chin and mouth. Well, hers, too, because she and Suki resembled each other, but the Sheikh wouldn't know that.

He didn't even know Suki existed.

And she had to keep it that way.

"Answer me!"

"Lower your voice. You keep yelling—"

"You think I'm yelling?" the Sheikh yelled.

Predictably, Ethan began to cry.

The mighty Prince looked stunned. Evidently not even infants were permitted to interrupt a royal tirade.

“Now see what you’ve done,” Rachel snapped, and scooped Ethan into her arms.

His cries became wails; his little body shook with outrage. The look on the Sheikh’s face was priceless.

Under other circumstances she’d have laughed, but there was nothing to laugh at in this situation.

Instead, she walked slowly around the small living room, cooing to the baby, stroking his back, pressing kisses to his forehead.

His cries lessened, became soft sobs.

“Good baby,” she whispered.

She felt Karim’s eyes following her.

No way was he going to stop peppering her with questions. With *one* question.

Was Rami her baby’s father?

And, yes, Ethan was hers. He always would be. She’d made the baby that promise the day Suki left.

Now that could change in a heartbeat.

Once she acknowledged what the Sheikh surely already suspected, her life, and Ethan’s, would be in his hands.

He would surely decide to claim his brother’s son. He was cold, yes. Heartless, absolutely. Rami had said so, and the last hour had proved it, and she could not imagine he’d feel anything for anyone, not even a baby.

Nevertheless, he’d never leave Ethan with her.

There was that whole royal bloodlines thing. Rachel had heard Rami whine about it to Suki. The fact that you were a royal was what set the path of your existence.

The Sheikh would demand custody and he’d get it.

He had money. Power. Access to lawyers and politicians and judges—people she couldn’t even envision.

She had nothing.

This dark little apartment. Maybe four hundred dollars in the bank. A job she despised and, yes, she could just see how “Occupation: half-dressed cocktail waitress” would stack up against “Occupation: powerful prince who spends the days counting his money.”

The answer was inevitable.

He’d take Ethan from her.

Raise him as Rami had told Suki he’d been raised.

No love. No affection. Nothing but discipline and criticism and the harsh words and impossible demands of an imperious father and now, for Ethan, the demands of a heartless uncle.

A lump rose in Rachel’s throat.

She couldn’t let that happen. She *wouldn’t* let it happen.

She’d do whatever was necessary to keep her baby—and there was only one way to accomplish that.

Show the Sheikh that he couldn’t intimidate her, get him out the door—then pack a suitcase and run.

The baby’s cries had faded to wet snuffles. Rachel took a breath and turned toward the Sheikh.

“He needs a new diaper.”

“And I need answers.”

“Fine. You’ll get them when I have time. I’ll meet you later. Say, four o’clock in front of the Dancing Waters at the ... What’s so amusing?”

“Did you really think I’d fall for such a stupidly transparent lie?” His smile vanished. “Change the child’s diaper. I’ll wait.”

“Don’t try to give me orders in my own home.”

“It was my brother’s home, not yours. You lived here with him. You were his mistress.”

“Wrong on both counts. This apartment is mine.”

“And my brother just happened to have the key.”

His tone was snide and self-confident, and if it weren’t for Ethan, she’d have slapped it off his all-too-handsome face.

“My mistake for giving him one. He moved in with me, not me with him. And, for the record, I’ve never been anybody’s mistress. I’ve always supported myself and I damned well always will.”

There it was again. Fire. Spirit. Absolute defiance. Her eyes were snapping with anger even as she kept her voice low for the baby’s sake, kept stroking her hand gently down his back.

Karim watched that slow-moving hand.

The feel of it would soothe anyone. A child. A beast.

A man.

Without thinking, he reached out and touched the baby. His fingers brushed accidentally against the curve of the Donnelly woman’s breast.

She caught her breath. Their eyes met. Color rushed into her face.

“The boy is asleep,” Karim said softly.

“Yes. He is.” She swallowed hard. He could see her throat arch. “I—I’m going to take him into the bedroom, change his diaper and put him down for a nap.”

“Fine,” he said briskly.

He watched her walk away with the dignity of a queen, back straight, only the slightest sway of her hips.

He wanted to laugh.

What an act! The personification of dignity in a cheap costume.

It was an act, wasn’t it? The way she held herself. The love she seemed to show the baby. Her adamant refusal to name Rami as the child’s father, as if she suspected what Karim’s next move would be.

She wasn’t stupid; far from it. Surely, she knew he would demand custody of the boy.

And he would get it. A DNA test, quickly performed, would settle things.

She was—whatever she was. A dancer. A stripper. She was broke or close to it, judging by where she lived.

And he was a prince.

There was no doubt which of them would win in a court of law—if this ever got that far.

But there was no need for that to happen.

Rachel Donnelly would not give up the child without a fuss. If he were generous, he’d say it was because she cared for the boy but he was not feeling generous. He was feeling deceived. By Rami. By fate. And now, for all he knew, by a woman who was an excellent actress, making a show of being a caring mother.

Whatever her motive, she could not be permitted to keep the boy.

That was out of the question.

He would not leave the child to be raised in squalid surroundings by a woman who, at best, might euphemistically be called a dancer.

With him, the boy—Ethan—would have everything Rami could have given him. A comfortable home. The best possible education. The knowledge of his ancient and honorable past.

He would not have a mother but Rami had not had one, either. For that matter, neither had he, and he was none the worse for it today.

Karim looked at the closed bedroom door and frowned. What was taking her so long? Changing a diaper could not be a complicated procedure.

Did she expect him to stand here, cooling his heels?

He had things to do. Settling Rami's debts, of course. And now he'd have to make arrangements for taking the child to Alcantar. What would he need? Clothes? Formula? The boy's birth certificate?

Not really.

He had diplomatic status. Only the State department had the authority to question him, and they would not do so.

What else would he require?

Of course.

A nanny.

That was the primary requirement. A woman who'd be capable of knowing a baby's needs. She could care for the boy from now until Karim had him back home, where he could make more permanent arrangements.

Relatively simple, all of it.

Assuming Rachel Donnelly didn't cause trouble—but why would she? He would write her a handsome check and if she balked he'd make her see how much better off her son would be in his new life as a prince in his father's kingdom.

He might even agree to permitting her to visit a couple of times a year—

And, dammit, he was wasting time!

Karim strode to the closed door and rapped his knuckles against it.

"Miss Donnelly?"

Nothing.

"Miss Donnelly, I cannot spend the entire morning waiting for you. I have other business to conduct."

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