

MILLS & BOON®

Expecting the Sheikh's Baby

Kristi Gold



Vintage Desire

KRISTI GOLD

Expecting the Sheikh's Baby

«HarperCollins»

GOLD K.

Expecting the Sheikh's Baby / K. GOLD — «HarperCollins»,

Sheikh Ashraf ibn-Saalem's gorgeous face was unforgettable. But long-lost Barone cousin Karen Rawlins told herself she'd best not forget the terms of their marriage deal. They both wanted a child to love? she without gaining a controlling man, he without losing his heart. It was simple: Make a baby and stay together? platonically? just long enough to give their child a name. But nothing was simple after an Arabian night with this sexy sheikh. Even though Karen was now pregnant, she craved his kiss, yearned to share his bed. Was it only raging hormones or had Karen broken the golden rule of her in-name-only marriage? had she fallen in love with her husband?

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Imported full-bodied espresso

With his dark eyes, swarthy skin and sensuous mouth, Ashraf ibn-Saalem, Prince of Zhamyr, was one gorgeous sheikh. Rich, smart, worldly, sexy...and virile. Just the man to father Karen Rawlins's baby and give her child a heritage.

Chocolate Kisses

To seal their bargain, Ash insisted on a kiss. A rock-my-world kiss that left Karen's lips swollen, hot and wet. She knew his insistence on making a baby the conventional way would certainly be fun... but would it be wise?

Hot quick bread with vanilla ice cream

Despite a rushed wedding, their baby-making was anything but. The sheikh's slow exploration of her body was sweet torture. His hands and tongue ignited a trail of heat over her sensitive skin that left her parched as a desert and thirsty for more. But that wasn't part of the plan....

Buon appetito!

Dear Reader,

Welcome to another stellar month of stories from Silhouette Desire. We kick things off with our DYNASTIES: THE BARONES series as Kristi Gold brings us Expecting the Sheikh's Baby in which—yes, you guessed it!—a certain long-lost Barone cousin finds herself expecting a very special delivery.

Also this month: The fabulous Peggy Moreland launches a brand-new series with THE TANNERS OF TEXAS, about Five Brothers and a Baby, which will give you the giddy-up you've been craving. The wonderful Brenda Jackson is back with another story about her Westmoreland family. A Little Dare is full of many big surprises...including a wonderful secret-child story line. And Sleeping with the Boss by Maureen Child will have you on the edge of your seat—or boardroom table, whatever the case may be.

KING OF HEARTS, a new miniseries by Katherine Garbera, launches with In Bed with Beauty. The series focuses on an angel with some crooked wings who must do a lot of matchmaking in order to secure his entrance through the pearly gates. And Laura Wright is back with Ruling Passions, a very sensual royal-themed tale.

So, get ready for some scintillating storytelling as you settle in for six wonderful novels. And next month, watch for Diana Palmer's Man in Control.

More passion to you!



Melissa Jeglinski
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Expecting the Sheikh's Baby

Kristi Gold



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Acknowledgments

Special thanks to former Bostonite and honorary Texan

Sandy Blair for her incredible information and wonderful insight.

KRISTI GOLD

has always believed that love has remarkable healing powers and feels very fortunate to be able to weave stories of romance and commitment. As a bestselling author and a Romance Writers of America RITA® Award finalist, she's learned that although accolades are wonderful, the most cherished rewards come from the most unexpected places, namely from personal stories shared by readers. Kristi resides on a ranch in Central Texas with her husband and three children, along with various and sundry livestock. She loves to hear from readers and can be contacted at KGOLDAUTHOR@aol.com or P.O. Box 11292, Robinson, TX 76716.

DYNASTIES: THE BARONES

Meet the Barones of Boston—
an elite clan caught in a web of danger,
deceit...and desire!

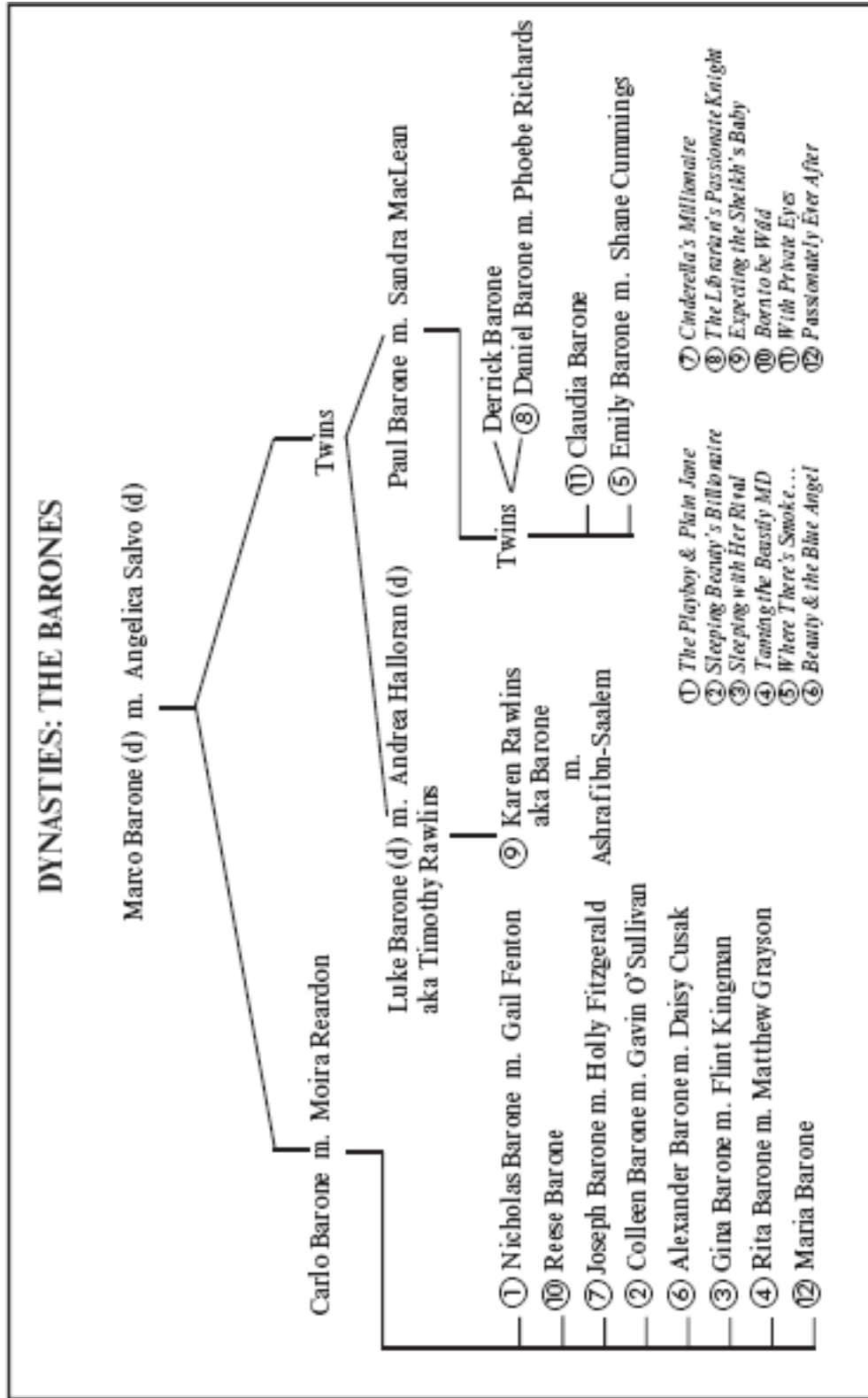
Who's Who in

EXPECTING THE SHEIKH'S BABY

Ashraf ibn-Saalem—After a painful betrayal, this Arabian sheikh has put his heart on ice, but not his libido. His shrewd, dark eyes appreciate women, but his hardened heart vows never to love again. But there is one thing he wants—a child.

Karen Rawlins—Some say this long-lost Barone cousin is unbendable, stubborn, unyielding. Karen says she's her own woman. At thirty-one, she hears her biological clock ticking and sees a child of her own in her nightly dreams. But she'd just as soon subtract the husband from the baby-making equation.

Maria Barone—More than anyone, she knows that no matter what you want, you can't run away from what fate has in store....



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Prologue

The man could be her father, but that was impossible.
Her father was dead.

Karen Rawlins touched her trembling fingertips to the photograph of Paul Barone included in the Boston newspaper along with a story covering the Barone family's latest reunion. The article also reported the tale of the unsolved mystery from years ago surrounding the abduction of Paul's twin brother, Luke, serving as confirmation of what Karen had recently learned from the yellowed pages of her grandmother's diary—her loving grandparents had lived a lie for over half a century.

Karen sat in the only home she had known, deep in the heart of Montana, while too many unanswered questions haunted her as keenly as her memories. Had her father known about the journal Karen had found among her grandmother's belongings? Had he learned of the deception before his untimely death? Had he known that he had been born to a wealthy Massachusetts family only to be kidnapped by the woman he had always considered his mother, and that his name was not Timothy Rawlins but Luke Barone?

Karen tossed the newspaper aside knowing she would never have all the answers she craved. Everyone who could fill in the blanks was gone. Her grandparents had died only months apart two years before in peaceful slumber, and her parents had been killed in a devastating car crash a year ago.

Dealing with the overwhelming loss and this new insight into her family tree might have been easier if Karen hadn't ended her engagement to Carl. But that had been a blessing. She preferred to live her life alone as long as she could live her life as she wanted. That had not been Carl's intent. Carl's intent had involved control. He'd wanted a wife who would hang her life on his whims, not a woman with dreams and opinions and career goals. She refused to mourn that ending.

Karen wrapped her hands around a mug of coffee, trying to absorb some warmth, though the July weather outside was warm and wonderful. Still she felt chilled to the marrow, even in the comfortable kitchen that smelled of cinnamon and radiated kindness, an ideal depiction of home and hearth. She also felt utterly alone.

Needless to say, it had not been a banner year for Karen Rawlins. It then occurred to her that she had no reason to stay in Silver Valley. The single-stoplight town had nothing to offer but bittersweet recollections and the realization that much of what she'd believed about her family, her legacy, was false—except for the fact that her parents and grandparents had loved her without reservation.

Perhaps Boston held more opportunities. Exciting opportunities. A place to regroup and grow. Karen decided then and there to seek out the Barones, to tell Paul what details she knew about his missing brother with the hope that the family would welcome her with open arms and open minds. She would find a good job and maybe one day establish her own interior design business. She would make a good life for herself. A new life. And in order to fill the empty space in her soul, Karen would attempt to have a child, someone to love her without conditions.

No, it had not been a banner year for Karen Rawlins, but it could be—would be—from this point forward. She would simply have to make it happen, and she would achieve all of her goals without the interference of a man.

One

Oh, heck, not him again.

From behind the marble counter of the Barone family's famed Baronessa Gelateria, Karen Rawlins knocked her elbow on the edge of the cash register and stifled a yelp that would surely drown out the rendition of "Santa Lucia" filtering from the overhead speakers. She also bit back a litany of mild curses directed at the lone man seated in the corner booth next to the windows. A man who stood out like a searchlight among the Barone family Italian ice-cream shop's simple, traditional decor.

Karen prided herself on having a designer's eye and this particular male was designed to perfection. His exotic good looks presented the perfect portrait of the consummate dark, mysterious stranger.

But Sheikh Ashraf Saalem was no stranger to Karen. She'd met him last month during the welcoming party given in her honor by the Barones. Yes, he had been somewhat charming, maybe even slightly charismatic—okay, more than slightly—but much too confident for Karen's comfort. As far as she was concerned, overt confidence denoted control. She didn't care for controlling men, even if they could give a woman the shakes with only a sultry look, and he'd given her plenty of those the last time she'd been in his company. She also hadn't been able to forget what else he had given her that night.

A kiss.

An earth-tilting, knock-me-over, make-me-tremble kiss. A kiss she hadn't been able to ignore.

But she had to ignore it, ignore him, especially now. Ignore his occasional glances, his eyes as dark as Baronessa's popular espresso. Not an easy task even though he had exchanged his traditional Arabian clothing for professional corporate attire—a beige silk suit and a turtleneck pullover as black as his silky thick hair. He looked like any businessman taking a break from the fast-paced corporate world of finance, yet he still exuded an authoritative aura. But he wasn't just any man, a fact that had become all too apparent from the moment Karen had met him—and kissed him.

After one more furtive glance, Karen went back to straightening the sundae bowls lined up beneath the counter. She had a job to do, a nice job working in the gelateria alongside her wonderful cousin, Maria. Almost a month ago, she'd been lovingly welcomed by her new family, had accepted the assistant manager position and in turn gained a whole slew of relatives as well as a nice apartment that had once belonged to her other cousin Gina. Now that her life was back on track, she certainly didn't have the time or desire to be distracted by a man, even if he happened to be a charismatic prince.

As if her will had left the building without her, Karen stole another quick glance. How could she possibly overlook his presence since the shop was practically deserted? No surprise the place was empty considering the post-lunch hour and that the earlier September deluge had now ended. Those who had taken refuge from the elements had made their way back into the Boston streets to resume their midafternoon activities.

Everyone except the sheikh. He was the only patron aside from another couple sequestered in the opposing corner booth, holding hands and talking in whispers while their gelato turned to fruity soup. What a waste of good ice cream, Karen thought. What a display of ridiculous sentimentality.

Karen mentally scolded herself for her cynical attitude. Who could say this particular couple wouldn't find forever happiness? Just because she had decided she wouldn't drape her dreams on a life partner didn't mean others couldn't find that proverbial soul mate.

"I see you have a visitor."

Karen's gaze snapped from the love duo to Maria's subtle smile and mischievous wide brown eyes. "Why didn't you tell me he'd come in?" She honestly hadn't meant to sound so irritable, but watching the young couple moon over each other had prompted Karen's less-than-jovial mood. So had Ashraf ibn-Saalem's surprise appearance.

“You were down in the basement when he arrived,” Maria said. “And I didn’t realize you would be so interested.”

“I’m not.” Karen slapped a rag across a counter that didn’t need cleaning, working it over with a vengeance. “As far as I’m concerned, he’s just another customer having his coffee.”

Maria moved to Karen’s side and sent a not-so-discreet glance in the sheikh’s direction. “My guess is he didn’t come in here to escape the rain or to have coffee or gelato.” She leaned closer to Karen and said in a whisper, “Considering the look he keeps giving you, I do believe he could be here for a different kind of dessert, if you know what I mean.”

Karen knew exactly what Maria had meant, and she wasn’t about to be the sheikh’s sweet, now or ever. Turning her back to the dining room, she leaned against the counter and shot a quick glance over her shoulder. “He’s not giving me any kind of look. He’s reading the newspaper.”

“He’s pretending to read the paper, but he’s much more intrigued by you.”

Karen pushed up the sleeves on her white blouse and checked her watch, more out of nervousness than real interest in the time, although she did have an impending appointment. A very important appointment. “Doesn’t he have a job?”

“Oh, yes. He’s very successful, or so Daniel tells me. Some sort of independent financial consultant. He travels all over the world.”

Daniel, another cousin, was the son of Karen’s father’s twin brother, Paul, and the reason why the sheikh had attended the welcome party. “That sounds fairly suspect to me.”

Maria propped her elbows on the counter and rested her cheeks on her palms. “Job or no job, he’s wealthy. And royalty.” She suddenly came to attention. “And he’s heading this way.”

Karen froze, as if adhered to the counter at her back by the icy apprehension traveling up and down her spine.

“May we help you, Sheikh Saalem?”

Staring straight ahead, Karen heard the creak of the counter stool yet still couldn’t force herself to turn around.

“It would help me greatly if you would call me Ash. In America, I prefer to dispose of the title, at least among friends. And I do consider the Barones to be my friends.”

“Of course,” Maria said. “Any friend of Daniel’s is certainly a friend of ours. Right, Karen?”

Karen flinched at the sudden jab of Maria’s elbow in her side. Realizing she had no room to run, she finally turned to face the sheikh. “Yes. Friends. Of course.”

As far as grins went, Karen would qualify Ash Saalem’s as awe-inspiring. Why did he have to be so annoyingly gorgeous?

“You’re looking well today, Ms. Rawlins,” he said in a voice as smooth and liquid as quicksilver.

He kept his eyes fixed on hers and Karen wanted to look away but decided to stand her ground. “Thank you.”

“Are you enjoying your work here, Karen?”

Karen couldn’t believe he had the audacity to call her by her first name. She couldn’t believe her pulse had the nerve to quicken over hearing him say it. Of course, he’d been bold enough to kiss her that night, so why not dispense with all formality? “As a matter of fact, I love working here. Very much.” She forced an overly sweet smile, yet her lips felt stiff with the effort. “Speaking of work, can I get you anything else?”

He leaned forward, bringing with him a trace of rich cologne and blatant self-assurance. “What do you have in mind?”

Oh, no you don’t. Karen was in no mood for playing the innuendo game. “Maybe some gelato. It’s very refreshing. Helps to cool one off.” Ice cream was the only thing she planned to offer him today, or any day for that matter.

“What if I asked for some of your time? Perhaps dinner once you are through with your duties?”

“I really don’t think—”

“Miss, I need some service over here.”

Karen glanced at the end of the counter where a middle-aged businessman sporting a cheap suit and an edgy expression waited impatiently. She visually searched the area for Maria, who had conveniently disappeared.

“Excuse me,” Karen said to the sheikh and headed to the customer. She took a pencil from the pocket of her apron along with the order pad. “What can I get for you, sir?”

The man’s expression was pickle-sour. “A cup of coffee.”

“Espresso, cappuccino or maybe—”

“Plain coffee, black, to go.”

“Certainly. I’ve just started a fresh pot to brewing.”

He released a gruff sigh. “I’m in a hurry.”

So was Karen. In a hurry to get out of there before she did something inane like actually agree to Ash’s offer of dinner. “It should only be a few more minutes.”

“You have yet to answer my question, Karen.”

Karen glanced at Ash then gave the grumpy guy her best smile. “Excuse me just a moment.” She sidestepped until she was again in front of the sheikh, feeling as if she were caught in a verbal volley. “I don’t have time for dinner. I have somewhere I have to be after work.”

“Somewhere important?”

More than he realized. “You could say that.”

“Then this is somewhere that I would not be welcome?”

Karen decided he would probably be more than welcome at the fertility clinic, at least to provide a donation. Who in their right mind would turn him down? Of course, she would. Not that she intended to reveal what she was about to do. “It’s an appointment. A doctor’s appointment.”

Concern called out from his dark eyes. “Are you ill?”

“Just a routine exam.” Not exactly a lie. “I’m fine.”

His frown dissolved into a stop-and-drop grin. “I would attest to that without the benefit of an examination, although I would not mind further investigation.”

“Is that coffee ready yet?” the sour man barked.

Karen welcomed the interruption on one level. On the other hand, she felt trapped between two persistent men intent on shredding her last nerve. She afforded the stranger a polite smile. “One more minute and the coffee should be done.”

He slapped his palm on the counter. “I don’t have another minute, so if you’ll quit talking to your boyfriend and get me my coffee, then I can get out of here. Some of us have jobs to do.”

Karen clenched her teeth and spoke through them. “I understand, sir, but the coffee’s not quite done yet. Could I get you a glass of water while you’re waiting?” Would you like to wear it? she wanted to say and would have except she’d been told the customer was always right. Even the fussy ones.

“I don’t want any damned water. I want my coffee.”

Ash had seemed unaffected by the jerk until that moment when a dangerous look came across his face. He took off his jacket, systematically laid it across the stool next to him and pushed up the sleeves of his shirt. Karen froze from fear that the sheikh was about to engage in fisticuffs with the irritable stranger. Instead, he walked around the counter, picked up a paper to-go cup, filled it with the last of the remaining lukewarm coffee from the previous pot, then turned and slid it in front of the man.

“This is in exchange for your absence,” he said in a low, menacing voice. “I realize there is no sign on the door indicating this establishment does not serve jackasses, but rest assured, that will be remedied after your departure.”

The man scowled. “You arrogant son of a—”

“My arrogance should not concern you. If you fail to leave the premises in thirty seconds, however, you should concern yourself with what I might do to encourage your departure.”

The man stormed out the door sans coffee, sending Karen and Ash an acid look through the window.

When Karen could finally speak, she turned and stood toe-to-toe with the prince. She would estimate him to be not more than six feet tall, but in the small space that separated them, he seemed as massive as the ancient oak in the backyard of her former Montana home. “Was that really necessary?”

“I refuse to tolerate insolence, particularly when a woman is the target of disrespect.”

Oh, good grief. “I really didn’t need to be rescued.”

His expression remained solemn. “My apologies. I tend to forget chivalry has lost its appeal in America.”

Karen felt somewhat remorseful since she realized he’d had honorable intentions. She also felt somewhat tense when he continued to survey her with his extreme dark eyes. The least she could do was thank him. “I appreciate your good intentions.”

His features softened into a look that could only be described as patently provocative. “You could show your gratitude by having dinner with me tonight.”

“I told you I don’t have the time.” She didn’t have the guts.

Maria suddenly appeared and eyed them both standing behind the counter, face-to-face. “Karen, did you hire the sheikh while I was downstairs?”

Karen reached under the counter and snatched up her car keys. “He was helping out with a rowdy customer.”

“How nice of you, Ash,” Maria said. “Wasn’t it nice of him, Karen?”

Karen’s stubborn gaze came to rest on Ashraf Saalem once more. Certain aspects of him were very nice. Nice and sexy. But she wouldn’t describe his eyes as nice. More like lethal in a most sensual sense.

She unhooked her gaze from the sheikh and addressed Maria. “Is Mimi here yet? I really need to go swoon.” Stupid, stupid mouth. “I mean I need to go soon. To my appointment.”

Maria grinned and flipped her hand toward the front door. “Go ahead. I can handle it until she gets here. We still have some slack time before the evening crush.”

Karen felt the pull of an inadvisable crush on an overbearing, arrogant, exotic prince. Stupid, stupid libido.

Keys in hand, she headed toward the door before Ash had another chance to knock her resistance out from under her.

“I will be in touch, Karen.”

Karen gripped the door handle, intending to exit, but halted at the sound of his enticing voice. She only hesitated for a moment before rushing to her car and speeding off before she was tempted to go back and accept his offer. Before she gave in to those magnetic eyes and that seriously sinful voice. Before she forgot that she had no desire to become involved with any man, especially a man who considered himself her protector.

Thank heavens she had managed a quick getaway.

Ashraf Saalem had no intention of letting Karen Rawlins get away. From the moment he’d laid eyes on her at the welcome soiree, from the instant he had spontaneously kissed her, he had wanted her. He still wanted her and he intended to have her, even if forced to practice the utmost in patience.

Ash was not known for his patience. He would never have gained his own fortune had it not been for persistence. He would have never left the security of his family’s business and come to America had he been willing to endure his father’s demands.

“Oh, darn.”

Maria Barone’s mild oath brought Ash’s attention to her. “A problem?”

She held up a black leather handbag. “Karen was in such a rush that she left her purse.”

Ash saw Karen’s carelessness as an opportunity to utilize a bit more strategy to convince her to see him again, this time alone. “I will be most happy to return it to her.”

“Now?”

“Yes. I would think she might need it since I assume it contains her driver’s license and any means she would have to pay for services.”

Maria looked hesitant, wary. “You have a point. But I’m not sure she’ll be too thrilled if I tell you where she’s going.”

“She mentioned a doctor’s appointment.”

“She did?”

Maria need not know that the revelation had come after some coercion on his part. “Do you know the whereabouts of the doctor’s office?”

A slight-of-frame, gray-haired woman breezed up to Maria and offered, “She asked me directions to Industrial Drive at Blakenship yesterday, the two hundred block, so I’m guessing that’s the location.”

Maria gave the waitress a scolding look. “Mimi, Karen might not like you passing on that information.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “She has to have her purse, doesn’t she? Besides, I don’t think he’s going to pilfer her credit cards.”

“I guess you’re right,” Maria said.

Ash held out his hand to Maria and she finally relinquished the bag to him. “You may trust that I will find Ms. Rawlins and deliver it safely.”

“Good luck,” Maria said.

Ash wasn’t one to rely on luck, but he would use his powers of persuasion. He gave the two women a polite nod. “I’m certain I will be back soon.”

The lady named Mimi favored him with a smile. “I’m sure you will since Karen works here. That missy is a looker, all right.”

Without responding, Ash left the building, unable to hold back his own smile over his good fortune. He had something Karen Rawlins needed, and she had something he wanted. Quite simply he wanted her. At least this was a beginning.

On that thought, Ash strode to the silver Rolls-Royce Corniche parked at the curb, slipped into the seat and drove away, his impatience escalating as he wove through heavy downtown traffic. After what seemed an interminable amount of time, he turned off onto the side street Maria had mentioned and approached a redbrick building that appeared to be a clinic.

Ash pulled into the parking lot and when he noticed the sign that read Milam Fertility Center, he assumed he’d come to the wrong place. Then, near the entrance, he caught sight of a blue compact car that resembled the one he’d seen Karen drive away in at Baronessa’s.

He took the first available space several rows away, grabbed her purse and left the car to take his place by the hood where he could still view her vehicle. Presuming she had already entered, he decided to wait until she came out even if it took several hours. He had many questions to ask Karen, the most important being why she had chosen a clinic that catered to those intending a pregnancy. Then the sedan’s door opened and Karen stepped from the car.

Ash saw his chance and strode across the parking lot, finding her bent halfway in, halfway out of the car. He paused a moment to study the bow of her hips and the pleasing shape of her legs extending from the skirt she wore as she conducted a search for, most likely, the handbag.

“Are you looking for this?”

She barely avoided bumping her head as she spun around to face him. “What are you doing here?” Her voice held a note of shock, as did her expression.

He dangled the purse before her. “I have come to return this to you.”

She snatched it from his hand. “Thank you. I didn’t realize I’d left it.”

Obviously. “Now it is your turn to answer a question.” He sent a direct look at the nearby sign. “What are you doing here?”

She worked the bag's strap round and round her slender fingers. "I told you I have—"

"An appointment, I know. But what business would you have at this establishment? Are you applying for employment?"

She looked almost alarmed. "Of course not." After closing the door with a thrust of her bottom, she leaned back against it, looking quite annoyed. "You shouldn't concern yourself with why I'm here."

Her guardedness frustrated Ash though he had no call to interrogate her. But he had to know why she was here. "I would greatly like to understand your purpose for being at this particular place."

"You don't need to understand. This is my business, not yours."

"It is my business if you are involved with someone with whom you plan to have a child, if that is your reason for being here."

"Why is that your business?"

"Because I would cease to insist that you see me socially. I would not want to intrude on another man's territory."

Her gold-green eyes turned to feminine fire. "For your information, Sheikh Saalem, I am no man's territory. In this day and time, a woman doesn't need a man to have a baby, at least not all of a man." By the discomfort in Karen's expression, Ash discerned that she regretted the revelation.

He streaked a hand over his jaw, not quite certain what to make of Karen's disclosure. "Then you plan to have a child on your own?"

She tipped up her chin in defiance. "Yes, I do. Artificial insemination."

That did not set well with Ash. He understood the need for the procedure in some instances, but not in this case. "Do you mean insemination with some stranger's sperm?"

A blush spread across her cheeks. "I don't care to discuss sperm with a sheikh."

"But you would consider having a child by a man you know nothing about?"

"Yes, and that's my prerogative. I'm thirty-one and I'm not getting any younger. It's the right time in my life to do this."

Ash pondered her words, her purpose. Yes, he definitely had something Karen needed. Services he no doubt would be willing to give her, with great pleasure. And she had something else he wanted as well. The ability to have a child, the means for him to settle into a permanent relationship with a woman whom he found both intelligent and alluring. He had waited many years to find that particular someone since his father had thwarted his first attempt.

"Perhaps I could assist you in the matter," he said.

Her eyes went wide. "You mean you're willing to make a donation for me to use?"

"I have no desire to share my affections with a plastic receptacle. I prefer making a child the way nature intended for a man and woman to procreate."

Karen shook her head. "No way. I'm not going to allow...well, allow...that."

Ash moved closer and brushed a lock of wavy brown hair from her shoulder. He suspected Karen enjoyed a challenge, much like him, and if he had to use that device, then so be it. "Are you afraid?"

The willful look she gave him verified his assumption. "Of course I'm not afraid. Why would I be?"

He braced a hand on the car and leaned forward. "Perhaps you fear what you might feel if you allowed me to make love to you. What we might experience together."

He heard a slight catch in her breath, the only sign she had been affected by his words. "It wouldn't be a good idea, that's all."

"It is an exceptional idea. For some time now I've considered having a family of my own. This would benefit us both."

Her sigh brimmed with impatience. "I only want a baby, not a relationship."

"A baby who would not know his father? I believe that if you search your soul, you would not want this for your child, considering what you have recently learned about your father's kidnapping."

Karen studied the toe of her functional black canvas shoes, avoiding his gaze. “I don’t have a choice. I want a baby more than anything.”

With a fingertip, Ash nudged her chin up until she looked at him. He saw only indecision in her eyes, not total refusal. Enough to propel him forward in his planning. “I am offering you a choice. I am willing to father your child.”

She eyed him with suspicion. “And exactly what would you expect in return?”

He had given his heart to a woman once, and only once. He had no more left to give in that respect. But he could give Karen the baby she desired and a comfortable home, a secure future. “I want to have you as my wife.”

She frowned. “That’s nuts. We don’t know each other.”

“What better way to become acquainted?”

“I don’t want to get married. I almost made that mistake not long ago.” Again she looked chagrined, as if she had revealed too much.

Ash had no call to be envious of another man who’d had Karen’s affections in the past, yet surprisingly he was. No matter. If given the chance, he would attempt to make her forget any former liaison, especially one that appeared to have caused her pain. He could personally relate to that concept.

In order to do that, he must convince her that marriage would be favorable for them both, even if it meant proposing terms that were anything but amenable. “Perhaps we should have an agreement. If you decide not to continue the marriage, you are under no obligation to uphold the arrangement. You would be free to leave after the birth of our child.”

“You mean divorce?”

The word sounded harsh in Ash’s ears. It went against everything he believed. “Yes.”

She worked her bottom lip between her teeth several times before saying, “I take it you would want to stay involved with the baby after the agreement ends.”

He would do everything in his power to make certain that there would be no need to discuss custody of their child. He would do everything humanly possible to prevent their marriage from ending. “Of course. Would you not want that?”

“I suppose that would be best.”

Ash sensed impending victory. “Then we are agreed?”

“No.” She straightened and slipped the purse’s strap over one thin shoulder. “I need to keep my appointment. Weigh all my options until I’ve reached a decision.”

Ash pushed away from the sedan and gestured toward the building’s entrance, not quite ready to concede defeat. “Go inside with my blessing, Karen. And while you are there, think of me.” He slipped his arms around her waist. “Think of us. Consider what I am offering you, a father your child will know. The means to create life through an act that will give us both pleasure.”

He pulled her closer and kissed her—a kiss meant to persuade, to tantalize, to keep him foremost in her mind. Her lips were firm against his, but with only slight coaxing, Karen finally opened to him and he took supreme advantage, slipping his tongue inside the soft, sweet heat of her mouth, but only once. A brief glimpse of how it could be between them.

With great effort, Ash stepped away from her, withdrew a business card from his pocket and pressed into her palm with an added stroke of his thumb over her wrist. “Here are the numbers where I can be reached when you make your decision. Decide wisely.”

Karen remained as still as a pillar as Ash walked away. Hopefully good judgment would reign and she would see the logic in his offer and agree to his proposal. If not right away, then he would simply have to try harder to persuade her.

Two

The man knew no shame.

Karen couldn't believe that Ash Saalem had kissed her in a wide-open parking lot that afternoon. She couldn't believe that he'd offered to father her child. She couldn't believe that she was actually considering his proposition.

After pouring a glass of Chianti, Karen strolled into the living room and slumped onto the sofa in hopes of clearing her mind. She loved the fourth-floor brownstone apartment generously provided by the Barones. Gina had decorated the place beautifully with Italian silk sofas, an antique writing table, Turkish rugs. But the elegant furnishings and accoutrements wouldn't fair well with an active toddler.

She was getting way ahead of herself. First she had to conceive, then she could decide on the living arrangements. At present the conception should be her top priority. That and Ash's offer, not his masterful mouth. She needed to get the kiss off her mind so she could think clearly, not a measly mission by any means. Neither was deciding the best option for having a baby.

She sipped the wine and thought about the day's events. During her appointment at the clinic, she had been instructed on what the procedure entailed and the possible cost, emotionally and physically, if she wasn't successfully inseminated after several attempts. She had sorted through some sample profiles of prospective donors, most too good to be true. She had watched several couples in the waiting room looking anxious and hopeful—and in love.

Maybe Ash was right. Did she really want to bring a baby into the world not knowing its heritage, considering she'd grown up not knowing the truth about hers? Could she really trust that the sperm donors were being completely honest? After all, she had recently learned that much of what she'd believed about her family lineage had been skewed by dishonesty.

Feeling emotionally drained, Karen set her wineglass on a coaster on the end table and stretched out on the sofa on her back. She'd eaten a light supper of pasta and vegetables but hadn't tasted much of anything. Too much to think about, too little time. If she decided to go through with the insemination, she needed to make the arrangements in less than three days since that would be right before the most fertile time during her cycle. The same held true if she decided to accept the sheikh's arrangement.

Just thinking about making love with Ash brought about a round of chills mixed with a flash-fire heat. She couldn't deny that the idea held some appeal. She also couldn't deny that his kiss had left its mark on her libido. Both kisses.

The doorbell buzzed, sending Karen off the sofa in a rush. She experienced a prickly surge of panic thinking Ash might have decided to pay her a visit expecting an answer she wasn't quite ready to give. It would be just like him to show up, unannounced, and come upon her wearing a threadbare gray sweatshirt and equally ragged black leggings. She would send him on his way—as long as he kept his mouth to himself.

As she looked through the peephole and saw Maria at her threshold, Karen was relieved and maybe just a teeny bit disappointed that Ash hadn't come by to convince her with more kisses. Absolutely ridiculous.

Karen opened the door to her cousin and smiled. "Hey, you. What brings you to the top floor this time of night?"

"Just wanted to visit," Maria said, her shoulders slumped as if she carried the obligations of the universe.

Karen was immediately concerned, considering Maria had looked incredibly tired of late. The gelateria required long hours and hard work, especially for Maria, its manager. A lot of responsibility

for a young woman, yet Maria, even at the tender age of twenty-three, handled it remarkably well. Or so Karen had believed until tonight.

“Come on in,” Karen said and gestured toward the sofa. “Take a load off. I was having a glass of wine. Join me.”

Maria dropped onto the sofa and tipped her head back. “No wine for me.”

“Maybe something else, then? I could fix us some tea.”

“No thanks.”

“Are you okay? You look exhausted.” And she sounded depressed.

She shrugged. “I took the stairs from my apartment instead of the elevator. I’m a little winded, but otherwise I’m fine.”

Maria always climbed the two flights to visit Karen on the fourth floor and she’d never even broken a minor sweat. Something was seriously wrong, and Karen aimed to get to the bottom of Maria’s distress.

Karen sat on the wing chair facing the sofa. “Okay, so what’s up?”

Maria managed a faint smile. “You go first. I want to hear about your baby-making appointment.”

“Not that much to tell, really. I had an interview, discussed financial terms, then I got a sneak preview of perspective sperm donors.”

“That must have been interesting.”

Not as interesting as Ash’s suggestion. Karen wasn’t sure she needed to burden Maria with her dilemma, but she had no one else to turn to. Maria had become a good friend to Karen, a confidante, and she always seemed so wise.

“I have another offer on the table,” Karen began. “In terms of a father for my child.”

Maria instantly perked up. “Really? That wouldn’t happen to have come from a handsome Arabian prince, would it?”

She eyed Maria suspiciously. “Did he tell you?”

“I promise he didn’t tell me anything. I only knew that he was bent on returning your purse to you.”

“So that’s how he knew where to find me.”

“I’m sorry, Karen.” Maria looked more than a tad contrite. “Actually, Mimi gave him the directions and I gave him the purse. He’s very persuasive.”

“No kidding,” Karen muttered.

“He’s also absolutely head over heels for you.”

“Good heavens, Maria. I barely know the man.” But if the sheikh had his way, that would be remedied shortly on a very intimate level.

“Exactly what did his offer entail?” Maria asked.

“He’s willing to father my child. The natural way.”

Laying a hand on her chest, Maria said, “Oh, my. That could be great fun.”

Exactly Karen’s current thought, and her quandary. “Fun, yes. Wise, I doubt it.”

“And he was serious?”

“Very serious. But he won’t do it unless we’re married. He did say that we could make it a conditional marriage and if I decide to end it, I can after the baby’s born.”

“Are you going to do it?”

Was she? The terms of the arrangement didn’t seem as absurd once she’d voiced them to Maria. “I don’t know. Part of me thinks that I would be a total fool to do it. Another part of me...well, that part—”

“Thinks you’d be a fool not to know the father considering the blank spaces in your own family. Not to mention, the sheikh probably has incredible genes and making a baby with him would be an out-of-this-world experience.”

Karen couldn't hold back her smile. "Yes, that's basically what that part of me is saying. The feminine part." She turned serious again. "But he's got that whole macho thing going. That was very apparent when he took it upon himself to come to my rescue today at the shop. I could have handled that guy myself."

"He was only concerned for your welfare."

"I understand that, to a point. But he's too in control and I couldn't tolerate living with someone who tries to keep a tight rein on me all the time."

Maria shifted on the couch, looking unquestionably uncomfortable. "That could be a problem only if you're not clear on what you expect from him. Who knows? It might even lead to a permanent relationship."

"Not likely. We're from two entirely different worlds."

Maria murmured, "Stranger things have happened." She pushed her dark, shoulder-length hair back with one hand. "Regardless, every child should know both its mother and father if at all possible. Family is everything."

Karen understood that all too well having recently lost the only family she'd ever known. And she also surmised that something was terribly wrong with Maria considering the hint of sadness in her voice. Feeling totally selfish, she said, "Your turn now, cousin dear. Tell me what's bothering you."

A steady stream of tears rolled down Maria's face, catching Karen off guard, inciting her concern. "Maria, what's wrong?"

"It's a long, painful story, Karen."

Karen moved from the chair and seated herself beside Maria on the sofa. "I have all night. Please tell me what's going on. I'm really worried about you."

Maria lifted her plain white blouse and rested a hand on her abdomen. "This is what's going on."

Karen noticed a prominent belly bulge beneath the waistband of Maria's black slacks. Realization suddenly dawned and it had nothing to do with her cousin putting on a few extra pounds from sneaking too much gelato. "Are you—"

"Pregnant? Yes. And no one knows. No one can know. At least no one except you."

More confused than ever, Karen let a few moments of silence pass between them while she allowed the shock to subside. "Who is he?"

Maria sighed. "Someone I've been secretly seeing since January."

"Secretly? Is he married, Maria?"

"Worse. He's a Conti."

Shock came calling again as Karen tried to assimilate the information. Her cousin had just told her that she was pregnant by a man who belonged to a family that had been sworn enemies of the Barones for decades. Both families—the Contis and the Barones—seemed determined to hang on to old recriminations. No wonder Maria didn't want anyone to know.

"His name is Steven," Maria continued. "He's beautiful and caring and I'm totally in love with him."

"He sounds wonderful, Maria. Other than the family thing, what's the problem?"

"The family thing is the problem. With so much going on of late—the gelato sabotage that happened right before you came, the warehouse fire—everything's in an uproar because some of the family think the Contis are behind it. They would never accept our relationship. It would only tear us and the families farther apart if they found out about us."

"Maybe your relationship and this baby will help settle the rift."

"I can't imagine that happening, at least not now. In fact, I'm not even up to dealing with it. I want to get away for a while, somewhere out of town. Think things through. And that's what I intend to do, right away, since I'm already starting to show."

"How far along are you?" Karen asked.

"Four months."

Another surprise to Karen. But come to think of it, Maria had started wearing her blouse over her slacks, something Karen hadn't given much thought until now. "If I can do something, just name it."

"I'll need you to handle the shop in my absence."

"Of course." Karen would do anything for Maria considering what Maria had done for her—made her feel welcome and wanted, as if she were a sister, not a long-lost cousin. "Does Steven know about your plans to leave?"

"He doesn't even know about the baby."

Stunned, Karen asked, "Why not?"

"It wouldn't be fair to lay this on him now. Not until I decide what I'm going to do."

"You're not considering giving up the baby, are you?"

Maria looked mortified. "No! I love this baby and even if it doesn't work out between Steven and me, I'll at least have a part of him with me always."

"Do you really have so little hope that you and Steven can make this work?"

"I want to hope, Karen. Really, I do, but I'm afraid the relationship is doomed. We have too many obstacles to overcome."

Karen's heart went out to Maria. Hopefully a little time away would clear her mind. "Where do you plan to go?"

"That's why I'm here. Do you still own your old house in Montana?"

"I've recently sold it to a friend of the family."

"Then I guess that's out."

Karen thought a moment and considered another option. The perfect place for a sabbatical. "I have two dear friends in Silver Valley, the Calderones. They have a wonderful ranch and I'm sure they would love to have you as a guest for as long as you'd like."

Maria's expression brightened. "Do you really think so?"

"I'm almost positive but I'll give them a call in the morning and run it past them."

Maria grasped Karen's hand. "You're a lifesaver, Karen. I'm so happy to have you in the family."

"I'm happy to be in the family." And Karen was. Only a few months before she had felt totally alone. Now she had her understanding cousin to lean on as well as other new friends. She also had... Ash? The sneaky sheikh once again had wriggled his way into her psyche.

Coming to her feet, Maria stretched with her hands on the small of her back. "Lately every muscle in my body protests if I stand or sit too long."

Karen rose. "You need to try and get some rest."

"I haven't been able to sleep well."

Karen doubted she would sleep all that well tonight either with so much weighing on her mind. "Take a hot bath and relax. Works for me. I'll let you know what the Calderones say, but you can probably consider it a done deal."

Maria gave Karen a quick, heartfelt hug. "Thanks for making the arrangements. I owe you one."

"Just come back soon. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you, too. But you have to promise me that no matter what, you can't tell Steven anything. Or the family. I don't want anyone to know why I've left."

"Won't everyone be worried about you?"

"I'll leave the family a note explaining I need some time away. Steven, too. And now that that's settled, what are you going to do about Ash's offer?"

"I have no idea. I have a lot to consider."

Maria walked to the door then faced Karen. "No matter what you decide, you know I'll support you. But I do hope you give the proposal some serious consideration. It would be so wonderful for your baby to have a relationship with its father."

Karen's heart ached for Maria who hadn't been able to openly share her joy with the father of her child or her family. Recalling the missing links to her own family chain, Karen could no longer deny the importance of having both parents actively involved. She also couldn't deny that Sheikh Ashraf Saalem would probably be a prime candidate for producing top-notch offspring. And she definitely couldn't deny that he would be the prime candidate for providing the utmost in pleasure, either. Annoyingly, that thought excited her.

Too much to think about, too little time.

"I've always known you to be a man of few words, Ash, but today you're quieter than usual."

Ash looked up from his half-eaten room service fare to find Daniel Barone scrutinizing him with unconcealed curiosity. "I have much on my mind at present." So much that food had lost all appeal.

"This mood of yours doesn't have anything to do with my investments, does it?"

His current state had nothing to do with monetary measures and everything to do with one particular woman. "I asked you here today solely for the sake of camaraderie, not business."

"Good. I was beginning to assume you were about to tell me I'm destined for poverty, the reason why we're eating in privacy instead of a restaurant."

Ash had asked Daniel to join him for lunch in his penthouse suite to make certain he was accessible should Karen call. To this point, it had yet to happen. The later the hour, the more concerned Ash had become that perhaps Karen had decided to utilize the fertility clinic. For all he knew, she could be there now, becoming impregnated by some stranger.

"As always, your investments are thriving," Ash assured his friend. "You will continue to be a very wealthy man."

Pushing back from the dining table, Daniel tossed his napkin aside, looking pleased. "That's great to know even though I have everything a man could need with my new wife."

Ash felt a little twinge of envy over his friend's good fortune in finding a suitable mate. "Then I can presume your honeymoon went well?"

Daniel presented a roguish grin. "Oh, yeah. Very well. But it's far from over. Just ask Phoebe. For such a quiet lady, she's certainly full of surprises."

Ash predicted that the not-so-quiet Karen could be full of pleasant surprises as well. If only he would be afforded the opportunity to find out. "I'm happy that you are pleased with your choice."

"And to think I tried to fix you and Phoebe up at Karen's party," Daniel said. "Good thing you didn't hit it off."

A very good thing, Ash decided, not that Phoebe wasn't an attractive woman. But that night Karen had garnered his complete attention. Admittedly, he had wanted her in a very elemental way. He still wanted her. Yet with each passing moment he saw his opportunity to have her dwindling.

"I am still surprised that you've married, considering your former habits," Ash said.

Daniel frowned. "If you're referring to previous women, you're a fine one to talk. You've had more than your share."

"True, but I have met someone who could possibly put that to an end."

"Someone special?"

"Your cousin Karen."

Daniel slapped his palm on the table, effectively rattling the silverware. "You know, Phoebe swore this was going to happen but I never thought it would go beyond the night you met. Karen didn't seem too happy when you kissed her in the reception line."

"It was a simple show of welcome."

"It was a simple come-on, if you ask me. So how long have you and Karen been an item?"

"I'm not certain I understand your meaning."

"How long have you been seeing each other?"

Ash was unsure how to respond. "We've been negotiating."

“Negotiating? That’s a weird term for dating.”

“Actually, we have gone beyond the dating phase.”

Daniel released a wry chuckle. “I have to hand it to you, Ash. You work fast.”

“I’ve asked her to be my wife.”

“Make that from zero to sixty in a matter of seconds. When did this all come about?”

“I’ve intended to marry for some time now. Karen is the perfect prospect.”

“Yeah, Karen’s a nice woman. Not too shabby in the looks department, either.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She’s very attractive.”

“I would have to agree with you in that respect.”

“So when’s the wedding?”

As far as Ash was concerned, today would not be soon enough. “Unfortunately she has yet to give me her answer. I’m not certain that she sees the mutual benefits that marriage will bring.”

Daniel scowled. “Well, hell, Ash, if that’s the way you proposed, it’s not surprising she hasn’t bothered to answer you.”

“It’s a bit more complex than a simple proposal. Karen and I have both expressed our desire to have a child. We’ve discussed having one together. I have insisted that we marry for the sake of that child.”

“Then this doesn’t have anything to do with love?”

Ash didn’t expect Daniel to fully understand. Why would he when he was so obviously in love with his wife? “I am very fond of Karen, and I have every intention of making a comfortable life for her and our child in a secure, permanent relationship.”

“You make it sound like a retirement fund.” Daniel shook his head. “I’m not sure how well this is going to work, putting the cart before the horse.”

When Ash showed his confusion with a frown, Daniel added, “Having the marriage and a baby before you have a commitment that involves two people who care about each other.”

“I’m a realist, Daniel. At times it is necessary to accept that the choices we make should be based on what is best for all concerned, not on emotions.”

“So you’re saying that all you expect is a continuing fondness for Karen?”

“I expect nothing beyond what I know to be true, that we will marry in order to produce a child. I can’t deny that I find Karen to be a very desirable, passionate woman. I plan to enjoy those aspects.”

Daniel’s expression reflected concern. “When the passion fades, I hope that something more exists. Otherwise, you might be in for a tough life together.”

Ash gave Daniel’s words some consideration, and though he found wisdom in them, he couldn’t allow himself to become entangled in emotions, especially if Karen decided that she wanted to dissolve the marriage after the birth of their child despite his efforts to dissuade her. Before he could concern himself with that, she must first agree to be his wife.

“And one more thing, Ash,” Daniel said. “The Barones take family very seriously. Karen has only been a member for a short time but she’s been completely accepted.”

“I understand.” And he did. Ash realized all too well the strength of family ties, or in his case, chains.

Daniel’s expression went stern. “And just so you know, you might be a good friend, but if you do anything to hurt her, you will have to answer not only to the rest of the family but to me as well.”

He had no intention of hurting Karen. He had no intention of allowing her to cause him pain, either. “You can rest assured that I will take very good care of her.”

“Speaking of family,” Daniel said, “what is yours going to think about you marrying an American?”

Ash saw no reason to tell them immediately. Perhaps later, after the birth of their child. Or perhaps he would call his father following the marriage ceremony if only to inform him that he had not been able to interfere this time.

Ash had waited thirty-six years for the moment when he could prove that the king of Zhamyr no longer had control over his son's life. "I no longer concern myself with my family's approval. And I have no obligations as heir since that duty falls on my eldest brother."

The phone rang and Daniel immediately rose in response. "I'll get it. I told Phoebe to call when she's ready for me to come home."

Ash couldn't hold back a cynical smile brought about by more envy. "I see she has you shackled."

Daniel turned with his hand on the phone. "We haven't tried shackles yet, but you never know." He answered with a brief hello, said, "Send her up," then dropped the receiver onto its cradle.

"I take it your wife has decided to personally escort you home," Ash said.

"It's not my wife who's on her way up here."

"Then who?"

"The woman you intend to make your wife."

Three

With every solitary ping of the elevator climbing to the top floor of the New Regents Hotel, Karen's heart beat double-time in her chest.

She was the lone occupant in the car with the exception of a starched and polished attendant who stood in the corner wearing a blue-tailored suit and a poker-faced expression. More than likely, he thought her to be one of the catering staff since she was dressed for work in a black skirt and tailored white blouse. Of course, she was about to meet with a prince who could very well expect her to cater to his every whim. But not if she could help it. She only had one goal in mind—a father for her child. And to conduct her own little interview to make sure that the sheikh fit the father bill.

Karen felt totally out of her element when the doors opened with quiet efficiency to a hallway covered in rich red carpet. She doubted it had been rolled out for her, simple Karen Rawlins from Nowhere, Montana.

The attendant stepped out and kept his hand on the door to prevent its closure. With his free hand, he indicated the entrance at the end of the corridor. "Sheikh Saalem's penthouse, madam."

She hoped he'd meant madam in a polite sense and didn't mistakenly believe she was there to service the sheikh. Surely not. Now if he knew she was wearing skimpy zebra-striped underwear—her one secret indulgence—she could understand where he might make that assumption. But unless he had X-ray vision, he had no way of knowing that.

The man cleared his throat and made a flicking motion on his chin. Did he expect a tip? Karen considered supplying a verbal one—lose the toupee.

Just when Karen reached into her bag for a few bucks, he said, "Mustard, miss."

Only then did Karen realize she was sporting the remnants of a sandwich she had consumed in record time during her drive to the hotel. Embarrassed, she used the oval mirror across the hall to remove the yellow chin smudge with a napkin she'd stuffed in her purse. While she was at it, she secured the clip holding her hair in a loose upsweep then checked her lipstick. Luckily it was still there, and so was the attendant. From the mirror's reflection, she noticed that he was ogling her. Ogling her legs, to be more accurate.

She rolled her eyes to the ornate ceiling, turned and forced a smile. "Thank you. That will be all."

He gave her a brusque nod, backed into the elevator and closed the doors. How nice that he'd immediately left with little effort on her part, Karen thought. Dismissed with nothing more than a simple command.

Standing before the double doors to the sheikh's suite, clutching her basic black bag to her chest, Karen acknowledged she could get used to saying "That will be all" like some demanding debutante, especially if it encouraged others to do her bidding.

She seriously doubted it would work on Ash Saalem. She also doubted she would be able to get any words out once she faced his high-voltage sensuality, live and in person. But last night, after weighing Maria's advice, she'd decided to go through with the arrangement—if Ash satisfactorily answered her questions.

Yes, I will marry you and have your baby. That will be all.

Slipping the strap of her purse over her shoulder, Karen pressed the buzzer and sucked in a deep breath, expecting to be met by Ash. She certainly didn't expect to be greeted by her cousin Daniel.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a remarkably calm tone despite her surprise.

Daniel stepped into the hall and gave her a wily grin. "Visiting with a friend. What are you doing here? Business or pleasure?"

Karen had no idea what Daniel had learned from Ash and frankly, she wasn't sure she wanted to know. From the moment she'd met him, Daniel had stepped into the role of the big brother Karen

had never had. A big brother who delighted in teasing her. She refused to provide fodder for the ridicule mill. "I'm here on business." Not exactly a fib.

Daniel rubbed his jaw and his grin deepened. "Is Ash going to check out your portfolio?"

"Something like that." As much as she cherished Daniel, she wanted him to leave. She was anxious enough without his prodding. "Tell Phoebe I said hi, will you?"

"Sure." Daniel leaned forward, lowered his voice and said, "Don't forget the Do Not Disturb sign."

That will be all. "It's business, Daniel."

"If you say so." Daniel departed, taking his skeptical grin with him, leaving Karen alone with the sheikh who now stood at the door looking calm and composed, and subtly sinful in his casual tan polo shirt and black slacks.

"Come in," he said with a sweeping gesture.

Karen passed by Ash while maintaining enough distance between them to prevent inadvertently touching him. The pleasant scent emanating from him teased her senses, a one-of-a-kind fragrance that smelled a lot like incense, exotic but not overbearing. It reminded her of the patchouli oil Sunrise Bowers, Silver Valley's lone hippie and video store manager, had bathed in. It had that certain kind of distinctiveness, and Karen imagined it bore some equally unique name. Arabian Nights, Desert Sunset, Sex in the Sand.

Good grief.

To avoid looking at Ash, Karen turned her attention to the suite's opulent living area. A row of French doors opening onto a verandah revealed the downtown Boston skyline and the still overcast skies.

To her right, she noted a cherry wood dining table littered with lunch remains, to her left a sitting area with tan leather-covered sofas and chairs surrounding a small redbrick fireplace. And straight ahead, an open door revealed a king-size bed covered in a gold brocade spread. Quite different from the particle-board furniture, thin bath towels and faulty A/C she'd encountered in the motels where she had stayed on previous trips. Very nice decor indeed. Especially the bedroom and she definitely needed to stop looking at that.

The front door closed behind Karen, startling her. She spun around and blurted, "Nice place. Do you come here often?"

What was she thinking? She sounded like some barfly executing a bad pick-up line, not a smart, sophisticated woman bent on a mission. But Ash had a knack for making her totally tongue-tied and thought-challenged.

Ash took a couple of steps toward her. "I reside here at the moment."

"Where do you normally live?"

"Wherever my business happens to take me. I have no permanent residence."

As if he were some sort of superpowered pulley, Karen moved toward him. She took her purse from her shoulder and hugged it again, as if it provided her some protection from his magnetism. "Really? That seems odd, not having a place to call home."

"I'm hoping to settle in Boston."

He shortened the space between them with another stride, bringing them almost as close as they'd been the previous day behind Baronessa's counter. Karen had no real desire to move back though she probably should.

"Why are you here, Karen?"

"I want to ask you a few questions."

Ash gestured toward the sofa. "Would you like to be seated first?"

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