2 in 1 GREAT VALUE

SAVED BY THE SHEIKH!

Tessa Radley

MILLION-DOLLAR MARRIAGE MERGER

Charlene Sands



Desire™

Charlene Sands

Saved by the Sheikh! / Million-Dollar Marriage Merger: Saved by the Sheikh! / Million-Dollar Marriage Merger

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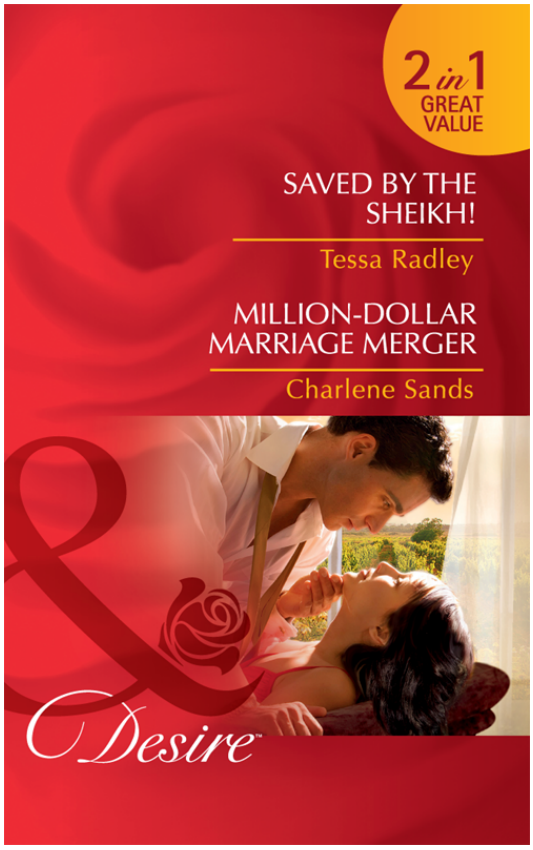
Saved by the Sheikh! / Million-Dollar Marriage Merger: Saved by the Sheikh! / Million-Dollar Marriage Merger / C. Sands — «HarperCollins»,

Be swept away by passion… with intense drama and compelling plots, these emotionally powerful reads will keep you captivated from beginning to end.Saved by the Sheikh!Practically penniless, Tiffany Smith had nowhere to turn except to the gorgeous billionaire who offered his help. Dashing banker Rafiq Al Dhahara did not believe she was an innocent fallen on hard times. Still, his distrust didn't stop her from falling for his charms…and into his bed for one passionate night.Million-Dollar Marriage MergerHe'd kept a promise to marry his best friend's widow. But nothing could diminish the hunger vintner Tony Carlino still felt for Rena Montgomery. Rena married Tony only for the safety his name – and money – would give her, her winery…and her unborn child. Never would she allow herself to reveal the desire she felt for her new husband. For their marriage was meant to be only about business.

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Содержание

SAVED BY 6
MILLION-DOLLAR 7
SAVED BY 8
About the Author 9
One 10
Two 17
Three 26
Four 33
Five 40
Six 43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 45


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SAVED BY THE SHEIKH!

TESSA RADLEY

A blaze of possessiveness roared through him, the need to stake his claim, to mark her as his, now and forever.

He was aware of the fine tremors that shimmered through her, of the way his thigh fitted between hers and how the cradle of her hips rocked against him. The intoxicating scent and taste of her filled his senses.

He was aware of everything about her. Only her. The rest of the world receded.

He was so far gone that he didn't care about control, about leashing it, about the fact that someone might walk back into the office and discover him alone with her, kissing her. There was just Tiffany … and him.

And she was going to marry him.

Only him.

About the Author

TESSA RADLEY loves traveling, reading and watching the world around her. As a teen Tessa wanted to be an intrepid foreign correspondent. But after completing a bachelor of arts degree and marrying her sweetheart, she became fascinated by law and ended up studying further and practicing as a lawyer in a city firm.

A six-month break traveling through Australia with her family reawoke the yen to write. And life as a writer suits her perfectly—traveling and reading count as research, and as for analyzing the world … well, she can think "what if?" all day long. When she's not reading, traveling or thinking about writing, she's spending time with her husband, her two sons or her zany and wonderful friends.

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to the desert kingdom of Dhahara. If you read *The Untamed Sheikh* you would've got to know Shafir and would've met his brothers, Rafiq and Khalid. Part of the challenge I faced in this book was finding a heroine to match Rafiq. Megan was so popular with readers that I knew this heroine would have to be pretty unique.

So, for *Saved by the Sheikh!* I started off by searching for a name no one I knew owned. I came up with Tiffany. Hints of *Breakfast at Tiffany's.* The glamour of Tiffany's, the jeweler. I adored the softness and vulnerability the name also seems to possess. Utterly feminine and exquisitely beautiful.

Despite never having met a Tiffany in my life, within months of starting to write the story, I'd met three Tiffanys. The first was an aspiring writer who won a breakfast at the RWA Conference in Washington, DC, with myself and author Abby Gaines. The second was Tiffany Clare—who by some coincidence I met a day or so later also in DC—and whose debut historical romance, *The Surrender of a Lady,* has recently been released. The third Tiffany has the most wonderful name of all: Tiffany Light. When I told her that her name, without question, belonged to a romance heroine, Tiffany told me that her middle initial is D … Tiffany D. Light. Naturally, I wished I'd thought that up myself!

It's moments like these that add so much fun and wonder to the world of being a writer. You never quite know what will happen next …

I hope you enjoy Tiffany and Rafiq's story. Right now I'm thinking about who I'm going to match Khalid up with … and that promises to be a whole lot of fun.

Happy reading!

Tessa Radley

This is for the readers who wrote asking about
the fate of Shafir's brothers, Rafiq and Khalid.
Rafiq's story is for you. Enjoy!

One

A male hand beckoned through the swirling silvery wisps generated by a smoke machine.

Tiffany Smith squinted and located Renate leaning against the white marble bar flanked by two men. Relief kicked in. The Hong Kong club was crowded—and a lot busier than Tiffany had expected. The harsh, beating music and flashing strobe lights had disoriented her. And the spike of vulnerability she had experienced in the aftermath of having her bag snatched yesterday with her passport, credit card, traveler's checks and cash returned full blast.

Picking up two cocktail menus, Tiffany headed through the mist for the trio. The older man was vaguely familiar. But it was the younger of the two men who watched her approach, his dark eyes cool, assessing—even critical. Tiffany switched her attention to him. He wore a dark formal suit and had a distant manner. Taking in the high cheekbones and bladed nose that gave his face an arrogant cast, she lifted her chin to stare boldly back at him.

"I'm not sure what Rafiq wants but Sir Julian would like a gin and tonic," Renate said, smiling at the older man who must have been at least three inches shorter than she. "And I'll have a champagne cocktail—the Hot Sex version."

Sir Julian. Of course! That would make him Sir Julian Carling, owner of Carling Hotels. If this was the kind of clientele Le Club attracted, tips would be good.

"Sure I can't get you something a little more adventurous?" *Expensive,* Tiffany appended silently as she passed the men the cocktail menus with her sweetest smile.

Not for the first time she thanked her lucky stars for the chance meeting with Renate when she'd checked into the hostel yesterday after her return from the police station and the embassy. Last night's accommodation had used up her last twenty Hong Kong dollars.

This morning Renate had generously shared her breakfast cereal with Tiffany and offered to bring her along to Le Club tonight to make some quick cash as a hostess serving drinks.

It had been Renate who had showed her where the trays of "champagne cocktails" were kept. Lemonade. *Cheap* lemonade. For the hostesses. Geared at getting the well-heeled patrons to order and imbibe more of the elaborate, expensive cocktails with outrageously sexy names for which Le Club was apparently famed—as well as billing them for the hostesses' over-priced lemonade cocktails. Tiffany had silenced her scruples. Renate had done her a favor. Anyway, Sir Julian seemed untroubled at the prospect of footing the bill for Renate's bogus champagne cocktails.

It was none of her business, Tiffany told herself. She would keep her mouth shut and do as ordered. She was only here for the tips. For that she would smile until her face hurt. She glanced at the younger man, about to give him a glittering grin but his expression deterred her. His eyes were hooded, revealing none of his thoughts. Even in the crush of the club he seemed to create a ring of space around him. A no-go area.

She dismissed the thought as fanciful and forced a smile. "What can I get you to drink?"

"I'll stick with the gin and tonic." Sir Julian gave her a smile and passed back the cocktail menu.

"A Coca-Cola. Cold, please. With ice—if there's any that hasn't melted yet." The man Renate had called Rafiq curved his lips upward, lighting up the harsh features and giving him a devastating charm that had Tiffany catching her breath in surprise.

He was gorgeous.

"Sh-sure, I'll be right back," she stuttered.

"We'll be in one of the back booths," said Renate.

Tiffany found them easily enough a few minutes later. She handed Renate and Sir Julian their drinks before turning to the man seated on the other side of the booth.

Rafiq, Renate had called him. It suited him. Foreign. Exotic. Quintessentially male. Wordlessly Tiffany passed him the soda, and the ice he'd requested rattled against the glass.

"Thank you." He inclined his head.

For one wild moment Tiffany got the impression that she was expected to genuflect.

Renate leaned forward, breaking her train of thought. "Here."

Tiffany took the cell phone Renate offered, and gazed at the other woman in puzzlement. With two hands Renate mimicked taking a photo, and realization dawned. Tiffany studied the phone's settings. Easy enough. By the time Tiffany glanced up, Renate had draped herself over Sir Julian, so Tiffany raised the phone and clicked off a couple of shots.

At the flash, Sir Julian came to life, waving his hands in front of his face. "No photos."

"Sorry." Tiffany colored and fumbled with the phone.

"Are they deleted?" Rafiq's voice was sharp.

"Yes, yes." Tiffany shoved the phone behind the wide leather belt that cinched in her waist, vowing to check that the dratted images were gone the next time she went to get a round of drinks.

"Good girl." Sir Julian gave her an approving smile, and Tiffany breathed a little easier. She wasn't about to get fired before she'd even been paid.

"Sit down, Tiff, next to Rafiq."

The younger man sat opposite—alone—that ring of space clearly demarcated. Pity about the grim reserve, otherwise he would certainly have fitted the tall, dark and handsome label.

"Um … I think I'll go see if anyone else wants a cocktail."

"Sit down, Tiffany." This time Renate's tone brooked no argument.

Tiffany threw a desperate look at the surrounding booths. Several of the hostesses Renate had introduced her to earlier sat talking to patrons, sipping sham champagne cocktails. No one looked like they needed assistance.

Giving in, Tiffany perched herself on the edge of the padded velvet beside Rafiq, and tried to convince herself that it was only the gloom back here in the booths that made him look so … disapproving. He had no reason to be looking down his nose at her.

"They should put brighter lights back here," Tiffany blurted out.

Rafiq raised a dark eyebrow. "Brighter lights? That would defeat the purpose."

Puzzled, Tiffany frowned at him. "What purpose?"

"To talk, of course." Renate's laugh was light and frothy. "No one talks when the lights are bright. It's too much like an interrogation room."

"I would've thought the music was too loud to talk." Tiffany fell silent. Now that she thought about it, it wasn't quite so loud back here.

Rafiq was studying her, and Tiffany moved restlessly under that intense scrutiny. "I'm going to get myself something to drink."

"Have a champagne cocktail—they're great." Renate raised her glass and downed it. "You can bring me another—and Sir Julian needs his gin and tonic topped up."

Rafiq's mouth kicked up at the side, giving him a sardonic, world-weary look.

He knew. Tiffany wasn't sure precisely *what* he knew. That the hostesses' drinks were fake? Or that the patrons would be billed full price for them? But something in his dark visage warned her to tread warily around him.

She edged out of the booth, away from those all-seeing eyes.

It was ten minutes before Tiffany could steel herself to return with a tray of drinks.

"What took so long?" Renate glanced up from where she was snuggled up against Sir Julian. "Jules is parched."

Jules?

Tiffany did a double take. In the time that she'd been gone Sir Julian Carling had become Jules? And Renate had become positively kittenish, curled up against the hotelier, all but purring. Tiffany slid back into the booth beside Rafiq and thanked the heavens for that wall of ice that surrounded him. No one would get close enough to cuddle this man.

"That surely can't be a champagne cocktail?" Rafiq commented.

She slid him a startled glance. Was he calling her on Le Club's shady ploy to overcharge patrons?

"It's water."

That expressive eyebrow lifted again. "So where's the Perrier bottle?"

"Water out of the tap." Although on second thought, perhaps it might've been more sensible to drink bottled water. "I'm thirsty."

"So you chose tap water?"

Was that disbelief in his voice? Tiffany swallowed, suddenly certain that this man was acutely aware of everything that happened around him.

"Why not champagne?"

She could hardly confess that she was reluctant to engage in the establishment's scam, so she replied evasively, "I don't drink champagne."

"You don't?" Rafiq sounded incredulous.

"I've never acquired the taste."

More accurately she'd lost the taste for the drink that her mother and father offered by the gallon in their society home. The headache it left her with came from the tension that invariably followed her parents' parties rather than the beverage itself.

An inexplicable wave of loneliness swamped her.

Those parties were a thing of the past ….

Yesterday she'd tamped down the fury that had engulfed her after speaking to her mother, and called her father. To have him wire her some money—even though the thought of asking him for anything stuck in her throat—and to give him a roasting for what she'd learned from her mother.

This time he'd broken her mother's heart. He'd been tearing strips off that mutilated organ for years, but taking off with Imogen was different from the brief affairs. Imogen was no starlet with her eye on a bit part in a Taylor Smith film; Imogen had been her father's business manager for years.

Tiffany *liked* Imogen. She *trusted* Imogen. By running off with Imogen, her father had sunk to a new low in her estimation.

But Taylor Smith could not be found. No one knew where he—and Imogen—had gone. Holed up in a resort someplace, enjoying a faux honeymoon, no doubt. Tiffany had given up trying to reach her father.

"What else don't you like?" Rafiq's voice broke into her unpleasant thoughts. For the first time he was starting to look approachable—even amused.

What would he say if she responded that she didn't like arrogant men who thought they were God's gift to womankind?

The diamond-cutter gaze warned her against the reckless urge to put him down. Instead she gave him a fake smile and said in dulcet tones, "There's not much I don't like."

"I should have guessed." His mouth flattened, and without moving away, he managed to give the impression that he'd retreated onto another planet.

Had there been a subtle jibe in there somewhere that she'd missed? Tiffany took a sip of water and thought about what he might've construed from her careless words. *Not much that I don't like.* Perhaps she'd imagined the edge in his voice.

Across the booth Renate whispered something to Sir Julian, who laughed and pulled her onto his lap.

Conscious of the flush of embarrassment creeping over her cheeks, Tiffany slid a glance at Rafiq. He, too, was watching the antics of the other couple, his face tight.

What in heaven's name was Renate up to?

The rising heat resulting from the crush of bodies in Le Club and the sight of Renate wriggling all over Sir Julian compounded to make Tiffany feel … uncomfortable … unclean.

She downed the rest of the water. "I need the bathroom," she said in desperation.

In the relative safety of the bathroom, Tiffany opened the cold water tap. Cupping her hands, she allowed the cool water to pool between her palms. She bent her head and splashed her face. The door hissed open behind her.

"Don't." Renate's hand caught at hers. "You'll ruin your makeup."

"I'm hot." And starting to fear that she was way out of her depth.

"Now we'll have to do your face again." Renate sounded exasperated.

Tiffany held her hands up to ward Renate off. She didn't want another thick layer of foundation caked onto her skin. "It was too hot. My face doesn't matter. I'm not here to find a date," she said pointedly.

"But you need cash," Renate responded, her makeup bag already open on the vanity counter. "Jules says that Rafiq is a business acquaintance—he must have a fat wallet if he's associated with Jules."

"Fat wallet? You mean I should steal from him?"

Disbelief spiked in Tiffany. She turned to look at her newfound friend. Was Renate crazy? Tiffany was certain that Rafiq's retribution would be swift and relentless. She was feeling less and less comfortable about Renate's idea of easy money. "I could never do that."

Renate rolled her eyes. "Don't be dumb. I don't rip them off. You don't want to get arrested for theft. Especially not here."

"Certainly not here—or anywhere," Tiffany said with heartfelt fervor. As desperate as she was, the idea of a Hong Kong jail terrified her witless. "Yesterday's visit to the police station was more than enough."

She'd had her fill of bureaucracy after spending the entire day yesterday and most of today reporting the loss of her purse to the police, followed by hours queuing at the embassy, trying to secure a temporary passport … and a living allowance for the weekend. All hope of cash assistance from the embassy had been quashed once the official had realized who her father was. A father who was nowhere to be found.

On Monday a shiny new credit card would be couriered to her by her bank back home. And her temporary travel documents would be ready, too. For the first time since leaving home, Tiffany almost wished she had access to the allowance her father had cut off when she had chosen to do this trip with a friend against his wishes. What had started out as an exciting adventure was turning into a nightmare, costing much more than she'd ever dreamed.

But buying an air ticket home was Monday's worry. For now she only had to make it through the next two days.

Thank goodness for Renate.

Despite her sexual acrobatics in the booth, the other woman had saved Tiffany's skin by offering her this chance to earn some cash tonight. She owed her. "Renate, are you sure flirting with Sir Julian is a good idea? He's old enough to be your father."

"But he's rich."

Renate was fiddling in her purse, and Tiffany couldn't read her expression.

"That's what you want? A rich man? You think he'll marry you?" Concern made her say, "Oh, Renate, he's probably already married."

Renate drew out a lipstick tube and applied the glossy dark plum color then stood back to admire the dramatic effect against her pale skin and bleached-blond hair. "Of course he is."

"He is?" Shocked by Renate's nonchalance, Tiffany stared. "So why are you wasting your time on him?"

"He's a multimillionaire. Maybe even a billionaire. I recognized him the instant he arrived—he's been here before, but I've never gotten to—" Renate broke off and shot Tiffany a sidelong glance "—I never got to meet him. He's already promised to take me with him to the races later in the week."

Tiffany thought of the aching hurt she'd detected in her mother's voice yesterday when her mom had blurted out that Dad had taken off with Imogen.

"But what about his wife, Renate? How do you think she'll feel?"

Renate shrugged a careless shoulder. "She's probably too busy socializing with her country-club friends to notice. Tennis. Champagne breakfasts. Fancy fundraisers. Why should she care?"

Tiffany was prepared to stake her life on it that Sir Julian's wife did care. Speechlessly, she stared at Renate.

"The last girl he met here got a trip to Phuket and a wardrobe of designer dresses. I'd love that." She met Tiffany's appalled gaze in the mirror. "Don't knock it—maybe Rafiq is a millionaire, too. He might be worth cultivating."

Cultivating? An image of Rafiq's disdainful expression flashed before Tiffany's vision. He was so not her type. Too remote. Too arrogant. And way too full of his own importance. She didn't need a gazillionaire, much less one who had a wife tucked back in a desert somewhere.

All she wanted was someone normal. Ordinary. A man with whom she could be herself—no facades, no pretence. Just Tiffany. Someone who would learn to love her without drama and histrionics. Someone with a family that was real … not dysfunctional.

"Tiff, you need money." Renate flashed a sly look over her shoulder as she turned away to a soap dispenser set against the tiled wall. "What could be wrong with getting to know Rafiq a little better?"

Getting to know Rafiq a little better? Could Renate possibly mean that in the sense it had come across? Surely not.

"Here." Renate pressed something into her palm.

Tiffany glanced down—and despite the cloying heat, she turned cold. "What in heaven's name do I need a condom for?"

But she knew, even as Renate flipped back her short blond hair and laughed. "Tiffany, Tiffany. You can't be that innocent. Look at you. Big velvety eyes, peachy skin, long legs. You're gorgeous. And I'll bet Rafiq is very, very aware of it."

"I couldn't—"

Renate took both her hands, and brought her face up against Tiffany's. "Honey, listen to me. The quickest way to make some cash is to be as nice to Rafiq as he wants. You'll be well rewarded. He's a man—a rich one judging by that handmade thousand-dollar suit. He came here, to Le Club, tonight. He knows the score."

Horror surged through Tiffany. "What are you saying?"

"The men who come to Le Club are looking for a companion for the night. The whole night."

"Oh, God, no." She wrenched her hands free from Renate's hold and covered her face. The clues had been there lurking under what she'd seen as Renate's friendliness. *You can borrow my minidress, Tiff, it does great things for your legs. Your mouth is so sexy, a red lipstick will bring out the pout. Be nice, Tiff—you'll get more tips.* How had she missed them?

Stupid!

She'd been so grateful for what she'd seen as Renate's friendship … her help ….

Tiffany dropped her hands away from her face.

Renate's features softened a trifle. "Tiff, the first time is the worst. It'll be easier next time."

"Next time?" She felt absolutely and utterly chilled. And infinitely wiser than she had been even an hour ago. Renate was no well-meaning friend; she'd misled Tiffany. Purposefully. A sense of betrayal spread through her.

"There won't be a next time." Tiffany had no intention of ever setting a foot back in this place.

Renate picked Tiffany's tiny beaded purse off the vanity slab and slid the condom inside. "Don't be so sure."

Tiffany snatched her purse up and looped the strap around her wrist. "I'm leaving."

"First shift ends at ten," Renate pointed out. "If you leave before that, you won't get paid for the hours you've worked. Work another shift and you'll earn even more."

Tiffany glanced at her watch. Nine-thirty. She had to last another thirty minutes. She needed that cash to pay for her bed at the hostel. But another shift was more than she could manage. She met Renate's gaze. "I'll wait it out."

"Think about what I said. It's no big deal after the first time—I promise." For a moment something suspiciously akin to vulnerability glimmered in Renate's eyes. "Everyone does it—there's a lot of demand for young foreign female tourists." Renate shrugged one shoulder. "Rafiq is good-looking. It won't be too bad. Would you rather be broke and desperate?"

"Yes!" Tiffany shivered. Rafiq's disdain suddenly made sense. He thought—

Her hand froze on the door handle.

God. Surely he didn't intend … No, he hadn't even exhibited any interest in her. She'd only served him a drink—there'd been no hint of anything more. "At least Rafiq isn't expecting to sleep with me."

"Of course he is." The look Renate gave her was full of superiority. "Although sleeping will have little to do with it—and he will undoubtedly pay well."

The chill that had been spreading through Tiffany froze into a solid block of ice. It took effort to release the door handle she was clutching. "I'd rather starve!"

"You won't starve—not if you do what he wants."

"No!" Tiffany clenched her fists, a steely determination filling her. "And I won't starve, either." She'd foolishly trusted Renate. But she intended to make the best of the situation. "I'm only a waitress tonight—and he still owes me a tip."

Right now that tip meant tomorrow's food, and when she walked out of there at ten o'clock with her shift money, it would be with a generous tip, too.

Rafiq found himself blocking out Julian Carling's overloud voice as he focused on the archway to the right side of the bar where Tiffany and Renate had reappeared.

Tiffany wasn't the kind of woman Rafiq would ever have expected to meet at a place like Le Club. Her face had a deceptive freshness … an innocence … at odds with the scarlet lipstick and the frilly, short black dress. He snorted in derision. It only went to show the ingenue act was exactly that—an act.

Yet as she neared the booth, Rafiq could've have sworn he saw her gulp.

She handed him a tall iced soda and stared at him with wary eyes.

"Thank you." Rafiq's body grew tight. He wasn't accustomed to evoking that kind of look on a woman's face. Usually there was admiration, a yearning for the worldly goods he could bestow. And a healthy dose of desire, too.

But Tiffany wore none of the too-familiar expressions.

Instead her pupils had dilated and transformed her eyes to dark holes in a face where her skin had lost its lotus-petal luminescence.

Apprehension. That's what it was. A touch of fear. As though someone had told her he trafficked in human beings—or worse.

He switched his narrowed gaze to Renate. Had *she* told Tiffany something to result in that pinched expression?

While the statuesque blonde had instantly identified Sir Julian, who was something of a celebrity in Hong Kong, much to Rafiq's relief she had not recognized him. Rafiq had wryly concluded that royal sheikhs didn't have the same cachet as hoteliers. In fact, he'd been ready to call it a night as soon as he'd realized what kind of a place Le Club was. One celebratory drink with Julian out of politeness to seal the first stages of the proposal they'd put together for a hotel in his home country of Dhahara, and he'd intended to leave.

Then Tiffany had chosen water over fake champagne cocktails and he'd been intrigued enough to want to find out what kind of game she was playing.

Flicking his gaze back to her, he took in the stiff way she held herself. Only the tilt of her chin showed something of the woman he'd glimpsed before, the woman who had demanded more light in this tacky made-for-seduction booth.

Rafiq intended to find out what had disturbed her. Shifting a little farther into the booth to give her space to sit, he patted the seat beside him. She ignored the velvet upholstered expanse, and fixed him with the same dazed stare of a rabbit confronted by a hunting hawk.

His frown deepened.

She swallowed, visibly uneasy.

"Sit down," he growled. "Contrary to popular opinion, I don't bite."

Her gaze skated away from his—and she blanched. He turned his head to see what had caused such an extreme reaction.

Renate was stroking a finger over Julian's fleshy lips and the hotelier was nibbling lasciviously at the pad of her thumb. Even as they watched, Sir Julian took it into his mouth and sucked it suggestively.

Rafiq compressed his lips into a tight line. Only yesterday he'd been invited to Sir Julian's home for dinner. The hotel magnate had proudly introduced his wife of almost three decades as the love of his life … and produced a daughter with whom he'd tried to match Rafiq.

"Nor do I devour thumbs," he murmured to Tiffany. To his surprise, relief lightened her eyes. Surely a sucked thumb was tame for a place like Le Club?

For the first time he saw that her eyes were brown with gold streaks. Until now it had been her hair and peachy skin that had snagged his attention. Not that he'd been looking—he wasn't interested in a woman who earned her living the way Tiffany did.

Abruptly, he asked, "Why do you choose to work here?"

"Tonight is my first time. Renate brought me—she said it was a good place to make cash."

He withdrew imperceptibly at her confession. She'd come prepared to barter her body for cash? "You want money so desperately?" When she failed to respond, disappointment filtered through him like hot desert sand winnowing through his fingers, until nothing remained save emptiness. "You should leave," he said.

A flush crept along her cheekbones. She looked down at the table and started to draw patterns on the white linen tablecloth with her index finger.

Rafiq looked away.

Across from them Julian's hand had weaseled its way under the neckline of Renate's dress, and Rafiq could see the ridges under the stretchy electric blue fabric where the other man's fingers groped at her rounded breasts. Renate giggled.

This was what Tiffany was contemplating?

"Will it be worth it?" he asked her.

She didn't answer.

He glanced down at her. Her attention was riveted on the couple on the other side of the table. She looked distinctly queasy.

"You'd let a man paw you for money?" He sounded harsher than he'd intended. "In front of a roomful of strangers?"

"I think I need the bathroom again."

She looked as if she were about to throw up as she bolted from the booth. Good. His deliberate crudity had shaken her. She'd said tonight was her first night. Maybe he could still talk sense into her. Perhaps there was still a chance to lure her away from such a recklessly destructive course of action.

His mouth tight with distaste, Rafiq threw a hundreddollar note down on the table and rose to his feet to follow her.

Two

Rafiq was leaning against the wall when Tiffany emerged from the bathroom, his body lean and supple in the dark, well-fitting suit. He straightened and came toward her like a panther, sleek and sinuous.

Tiffany fervently hoped she wasn't the prey he intended hunting. There were dark qualities to this man that she had no wish to explore further.

"I'm going to call you a cab."

"Now?" Panic jostled her. "I can't leave. My shift isn't over yet."

"I'll tell whoever is in charge around here that you're leaving with me. No one will argue."

She assessed him. The hard eyes, the hawk-like features, the lean, whipcord strength. The way he had of appearing to own all the space around him. Yes, he was right. No one would argue with him.

Except her. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Something flared in those unfathomable eyes. "I wasn't intending to take you anywhere … only to call for a cab."

"I can't afford one," she said bluntly.

"I'll pay for your damned cab."

Tiffany started to protest, and then hesitated. Why shouldn't he pay for her fare? He'd never coughed up the service tip she needed. Though the disquieting discussion with Renate had made it clear that tips in this place required more service than just a little company over drinks. Renate was clearly going to end up in Sir Julian's bed tonight. For what? A visit to the races tomorrow … and a wad of cash?

Tiffany had no intention of following suit. She'd rather have her self-respect.

Yet she couldn't afford to be too proud. She needed every cent she could lay her hands on. For food and accommodation until Monday. If Rafiq gave her the fare for a cab, she could sneak out the back while he was organizing it and hurry to her lodgings on foot. It wouldn't be dishonest, she assured herself. She'd earned the tip he'd never paid.

"Thanks." The word almost choked her.

He was suddenly—unexpectedly—close. Too close. Tiffany edged away and suppressed the impulse to tell him to stick his money. Reality set in. The cab fare, together with the miserly rate for tonight's work, which she'd be able to collect in less than ten minutes, meant she'd be able to pay for her accommodation and buy food for the weekend.

Relief swept through her.

All her problems would be solved.

Until Monday …

Over the weekend, she'd keep trying her father. Surely he'd check his e-mail, his phone messages, sooner or later? Of course, it would mean listening to him tell her he'd been right from the outset, that she wasn't taking care of herself in the big, bad world. But at least he'd advance her the money to rebook her flights and she'd be able to get back to help her mom.

"I'd appreciate it," she said, suddenly subdued. Tiffany halted, waiting for him produce his wallet.

"Let's go."

His hand came down on the small of her back and the contact electrified her. It was the humidity in the club, not his touch that had caused the flash of heat, she told herself as she tried to marshal her suddenly chaotic thoughts.

Her money.

"Wait—"

Before she could finish objecting he'd propelled her past the bar, through the spectacular mirrored lobby and out into the oppressive heat of the night. Of course there was a cab waiting. For a men like Rafiq there always were.

"Hang on—"

Ignoring her, Rafiq opened the door and ushered her in and all of the sudden he was overwhelming in the confined space.

"Where to?" he asked.

He'd never intended to hand her cash. And she hadn't had the opportunity to collect her earnings, either.

"I didn't get my money," she wailed. Then it struck her that he shouldn't be sitting next to her with his thigh pressed against hers. "You said you weren't coming with me."

"I changed my mind."

His smile didn't reach his midnight-dark eyes. Then he closed the door, dousing the interior light. Tiffany didn't know whether to be relieved or disturbed by the sudden cloak of darkness. So she scooted across the seat, out of his reach, trying to ignore his sheer, overwhelming physical presence by focusing on everything she'd been cheated of. Food. Lodgings. Survival.

She could *survive* without food until Monday. It wouldn't kill her. When she went back to the embassy she wouldn't let pride stop her begging for a handout for a meal. But she needed a roof over her head.

"I'm not going to be able to get that money back." She hadn't worked out her shift. "I doubt they'll take me back tomorrow now." There were strict rules about telling the management when you were leaving—and with whom. Tiffany had thought it was for the hostess's protection.

"You don't want to work there—find somewhere else." Rafiq murmured something to the cabdriver and the vehicle started to move.

Tiffany didn't bother to explain that she didn't have a visa to work in Hong Kong, that she'd only turned up at Le Club for the night as a casual waitress. Worry tugged at her stomach. "I *need* the money for those hours I spent there tonight."

"A pittance," he said dismissively.

Anger splintered through her. "It might be a pittance to you but it's *my* pittance. I worked for that money."

"And for what do you so desperately need cash? An overloaded credit card after frequenting the boutique stores at Harbor City's Ocean Terminal?"

His drawling cynicism made her want to smack him. Instead she tried to ignore him and huddled down into the corner as far away from him as she could get in the backseat. He was *so* overbearing. So certain that he was right about everything. Assuming she was a shopaholic airhead. Making decisions for her about where she should work, about when she should go home.

God help any woman silly enough to marry him—he'd be a dictator. Maybe he was already married. The thought caused a bolt of shock.

What did she care whether he was married?

That fierce, dark gaze clashed with hers. "I'm waiting."

Trying frantically to regroup, she said, "For what?"

"For you to tell me why you're so desperate for money."

Tiffany cringed at the idea of telling him. "It makes me sound stupid."

He arched an eyebrow. "More stupid than working at Le Club?"

She supposed he was right. So she hauled in a deep breath and said reluctantly, "I was mugged yesterday morning. My passport was stolen *and* my credit cards *and* my cash."

It was mortifying. How many times had she been told to keep one card and a copy of her itinerary and travel insurance separate from the rest? How she wished she had. It would have saved a

lot of grief. And a host of I-told-you-you-wouldn't-survive-alones from her father, when she finally managed to locate him.

"All that I had left was twenty Hong Kong dollars that I had in my pocket and I used that for last night's accommodation."

"How convenient."

The mocking note in his voice made it clear Mr. Arrogant Know-all thought she was lying.

"You don't believe me."

The seat gave as he shrugged. "It's hardly an original story. Although I prefer it to a fabricated tale about an ailing grandfather or a brother with leukemia."

He thought she was angling for sympathy. She stared across the backseat in disbelief. "Good grief, but you're cynical. I hope I never become like you."

In the flash of passing lights she glimpsed a flare of emotion in his eyes. Then it vanished as darkness closed around them again. "And I hope, for your sake, that you are not as naive as you pretend to be."

"I'm not naive," Tiffany said, annoyed by the nerve he'd unwittingly struck. He sounded exactly like her father.

"Then come up with a better story."

"It's true. Do you think I'd voluntarily make myself look like such an airhead?"

"The helpless, stranded tourist might work on some."

She glared at him under the cover of night.

His voice dropped to a rasp. "Perhaps I'm the fool. I find myself actually considering this silly tale—against my better judgment."

"Well, thanks." Her tone dripped affront.

Unexpectedly he laughed aloud. "My pleasure."

The sound was warm and full of joy. The cab pulled up at a well-lit intersection and the handsome features were flooded with light. Tiffany caught her breath at the sudden, startling charm that warmed his face, and somewhere deep in the pit of her stomach liquid heat melted. For a heady fragment of time she almost allowed herself smile, too, and laugh at the ridiculousness of her plight.

Then she came to her senses.

"It's not funny," she said with more than a hint of rebellion.

Rafiq moved his weight on the seat beside her. "No, I don't suppose it would be—if your story were true."

Rafiq's brooding gaze settled on the woman bundled up against the door. If she moved any farther away from him, she'd be in serious danger of falling out. Was she telling the truth? Or was it all an elaborate charade?

The lights changed and the vehicle pulled away from the intersection. "Don't you have anyone you can borrow money from?"

She turned her head and looked out into the night. "No."

Frowning now, Rafiq stared at the dark shape of her head and pale curve of her cheek that was all he could see from this perspective, highlighted every few seconds by flashes from passing neon signs.

"What about your friend Renate? Can't she help you out?"

She gave a strangled laugh. "Hardly a friend. I only met her today. She lodges at the hostel I'm staying at."

Aah. He started to see the light. "There's no one else?"

She shook her head. "Not someone I can ask for money."

Rafiq waited for a heartbeat. For two. Then three. But the expected plea never came.

"You're traveling by yourself." It was a statement. And it explained so much, Rafiq decided, the reluctant urge to believe her growing stronger by the minute.

Tiffany shifted, and he sensed her uneasy glance before she turned back to the window.

She'd be a fool to tell him if she was. Or perhaps this was part of an act designed to make him feel more sympathy for a young woman all alone and out of her depth.

Had he been hustled by an expert? To Rafiq's disquiet he wasn't certain. And he was not accustomed to being rendered uncertain, off-balance. Particularly not by a woman. A young, attractive woman.

He was far from being an impressionable youth.

Three times he'd been in love. Three times he'd been on the brink of proposing marriage. And each time, much to his father's fury, he'd pulled away. At the last moment Rafiq had discovered that the desire, the sparkle, had burnt out under the weight of family expectation.

Rafiq himself didn't understand how something that started with so much hope and promise could fizzle out so disappointingly as soon as his father started to talk marriage settlements.

"So how much money do you need?" He directed the question to the sliver of sculpted cheek that was all he could see of her face.

This should establish whether he was being hustled.

A modest request for only a few dollars to cover necessities and shelter until she could arrange for her bank to put her back in funds would make it easier to swallow her tale.

"Enough to cover my bed and food until Monday."

Rafiq released the breath that he hadn't even been aware of holding.

As head of the Royal Bank of Dhahara he was familiar with all kinds of fraud, from the simplest ploys that emptied the pockets of soft-hearted elders to complex Internet frauds. Tiffany would not be seeing him again, so this was her only opportunity to try stripping him of a substantial amount of money and she had not taken it. She was in genuine need. All she wanted—and she hadn't even directly asked him for it yet—was a small amount of cash to tide her over.

This was not a scam.

The first whisper of real concern for the situation in which she found herself sounded inside his head. He had a cousin who was as close to him as a sister. He'd hate for Zara to be in the position that Tiffany was in, with no one to turn to for help. Rafiq knew he would make sure Tiffany would be looked after. "Tell me more."

"Except …" Her voice trailed away.

Every muscle in his body contracted as he tensed, praying that his instincts had not played him false.

"Except … what?" he prompted.

She averted her face. Even in the dark, he caught the movement as her pale fingers fiddled with the hem of the short, flirty dress. "I'm not sure that I'm going to have enough available on my credit card to pay for the changes to my flight."

"How much?"

Here it was. Rafiq forced his gaze up from the distraction of those fingers. She'd just hit him with the big sum—a drop in the ocean to him if she'd but known it—and he couldn't even see her face to read her eyes as his hopes that she was the real deal faded into oblivion. The tidal wave of anger that shook him was unexpected.

It shouldn't have mattered that she was a beautiful little schemer.

But it did.

Rafiq told himself it was because he wasn't often wrong about people, that he'd considered himself too wily to be taken in by a pretty face. *That* was why he was angry ….

Because of his own foolishness.

Not because he'd hoped against all odds—

She turned her head toward him, and her gaze connected with his in the murky darkness of the backseat. He almost convinced himself that he sensed real desperation in her glistening eyes.

Anger overpowered him. Damn her. She was good. So good, she belonged in Hollywood.

How nearly had she hooked him with her air of innocence and lonely despair?

And so much smarter than Renate. He would never have fallen for the platinum blonde's sexual promise of a one-night stand … but this woman … By Allah, he'd nearly bought everything she'd sold him. With her wide waif's eyes, her hesitant smile … she'd suckered him. Like Scheherazade, she was a consummate teller of tales.

Rage licked at his gut like hot flames. He was wise to her now.

He would not be deceived again.

No one made a fool of him. *No one.* And he hadn't fallen into her trap—he'd been fortunate enough to realize the truth before it was too late. No, not fortunate, he admitted, shamed. He'd almost been duped. A slip of a female had drawn him so close to the claws of her honeyed trap, and proven that he was not as wise as he liked to believe. He could still be taken in by a pair of heavily lashed eyes.

Tiffany had been a little too confident. The mistake she'd made had lain in her eagerness to reel him in too quickly.

"Where are we?"

The cab had slowed. Rafiq glanced away from her profile to the imposing marble facade lit up by pale gold light. "At my hotel."

"I never agreed to come here." Her voice was breathy, suddenly hesitant. Earlier he might have considered it uncertainty—even apprehension; now he knew it was nothing more than pretence.

"You never gave me any address when I asked." He opened his door and hid his anger behind a slow smile as he consciously summoned every reserve of charm he possessed. "Come, you will tell me your problems and I will buy you a drink, and perhaps I can find a way to help you."

This was the final test.

If she'd been telling him the truth, she would refuse. But if she was only after the money, she would interpret that smile as weakness, and she would accept.

Rafiq couldn't figure why it was so important to give her a last chance when she'd already revealed her true colors.

She hesitated for a fleeting moment and gave him a tremulous smile designed to melt the hardest heart. Just as he was about to surrender his cynicism, she followed him out of the cab.

The taste inside his mouth was decidedly bitter as she joined him on the sidewalk. Rafiq hadn't realized that he'd still had any illusions left to lose.

Inside the hotel, he headed for the bank of elevators. "There's an open pool deck upstairs that offers views over the city," he said over his shoulder as she hesitated.

Once in the elevator, Rafiq activated it with the key card to his presidential suite.

He brooded while he watched the floors light up as the car shot upward. A sweetly seductive fragrance surrounded him—a mix of fresh green notes and heady gardenia—and to his disgust his body stirred.

Rafiq told himself he wasn't going to take her up on what she was so clearly here for—he only wanted to see how far she was prepared to go.

Yet the urge to teach Tiffany a lesson she would never forget pressed down on him even as the sweet, intoxicating scent of her filled his nostrils. When the elevator finally came to rest, he placed his hand on the small of her back and gently ushered her out.

Balmy night air embraced Tiffany as she stepped through frosted-glass sliding doors into the intimate darkness of the hotel's deserted pool deck.

Overhead the moon hung in the sky, a perfectly shaped crescent, while far below the harbor gleamed like black satin beyond lights that sparkled like sprinklings of fairy dust.

Tiffany made for a group of chairs beside a surprisingly small pool, a row of lamps reflecting off the smooth surface like half a dozen full moons. She sank into a luxuriously padded armchair, nerve-rackingly conscious of the man who stood with his back to her, hands on hips, staring over

the city … thinking God knew what. Because he was back in that remote space that he allowed no one else to inhabit.

When he wheeled about and shrugged off his suit jacket, her pulse leaped uncontrollably. He dropped into the chair beside her, and suddenly the air became thick and cloying.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked as a waiter appeared, as if that slice of time when he'd become so inaccessible had never been.

Tiffany rather fancied she needed a clear head. But she also had no intention of showing him how much he intimidated her. Her chin inched higher. "Vodka with lots of ice and orange." She'd sip it. Make it last.

Casting a somewhat mocking smile at her, Rafiq ordered Perrier for himself. And Tiffany wished she'd thought of that herself.

By some magic, the waiter was back in seconds with the drinks, and then Rafiq dismissed him.

She shivered as the sudden silence, the silken heat of the night and the sheer imposing presence of the man beside her all closed in on her senses. They were alone. How had this happened? He'd offered to buy her a drink … to lend a sympathetic ear. She'd imagined a busy bar and a little kindness.

Not this.

He turned his head. The trickle of awareness grew to a torrent as she fell into the enigmatic depths of his dark eyes.

Tiffany let out a deep breath that she'd been unaware of holding, and told herself that Rafiq was only a man. *A man.* Her father was a well-known film director. She'd met some of the most sought-after men in the world; men who graced covers of glitzy magazines and were featured on lists of women's most secret fantasy lovers. So why on earth was this one intimidating her?

The only explanation that made any sense was that losing her passport, her money, had stripped away the comfort of her identity and put her at a disadvantage. No longer her parents' pampered princess, she was struggling to survive … and the unexpected reversal had disoriented her.

Of course, it wasn't *him.* It had nothing to do with him. Or with the tantalizing air of reserve that invited her to crash through it.

This was about *her.*

About her confusion. It was easy to see how he had become appealing, an unexpected pillar of strength in a world gone crazy.

The rationality of the conclusion comforted her and allowed her to smile up at him with hastily mustered composure, to say in a carefully modulated tone, "I'm sorry, I've been so tied up in talking about me. What brings you to Hong Kong?"

His reply was terse. "Business."

"With Sir Julian?"

A slight nod was the only response she got. And a renewed blast of that do-not-intrude-any-further reserve that he was so good at displaying. He might as well have worn a great, big sign with ten-foot-high red letters that read Danger: Keep Out.

"Hotel business?"

"Why do you think that?"

Tiffany took a sip of her drink. It was deliciously sweet and cool. "Because he's famous for his hotels—are you trying to develop a resort?"

"Do I look like a developer?"

She took in the angled cheekbones starkly highlighted by the lamplight; his white shirt with dark stripes that stood out in the darkness; his fingers clenching the glass that he held. Even though he should've appeared relaxed sitting there, he hummed with tension.

"I'm not sure what a developer is supposed to look like. People are individuals. Not one size fits all."

He inspected her silently until she shifted. “What do you do, Tiffany? What are you doing in Hong Kong?”

“Uh …” She had no intention of confessing that she didn’t do very much at all. She’d completed a degree in English literature and French … and found she still wasn’t sure what she wanted to do with her life. Nor did she have any intention of telling him about her abortive trip with her school friend, Sally. About how Sally had hooked up with a guy and how Tiffany had felt like a third wheel in their developing romance. She’d already revealed far too much; she certainly didn’t want Rafiq to know how naive she’d been. So she smiled brightly at him, took a sip of her drink and said casually, “Just traveling here and there.”

“Your family approve of this carefree existence?”

She prickled. “My family knows that I can look after myself.”

That was debatable. Tiffany doubted her father would ever believe she was capable of taking care of herself. Yet she also knew she had to tread carefully. She didn’t want Rafiq to know quite how isolated she was right now.

“I’ve been keeping in close touch with them.”

“By cell phone.”

It was a statement. She didn’t deny it, didn’t tell him that her cell phone had been in the stolen purse. Or that she didn’t even know where her father was right now. Or about her mother’s emotional devastation. Far safer to let him believe that she was only a text away from communicating with her family.

“Why don’t they send you money for the fare that you need?”

“They can’t afford to.”

It was true. Sort of. Tiffany thought about her mother’s tears when she’d called her yesterday to arrange exactly that. Linda Smith née Canning had been a B-grade actress before her marriage to Taylor Smith; she hadn’t worked for nearly two decades. The terms of her prenuptial agreement settled a house in Auckland on her, a far from liquid asset. It would take time to sell, and Mom needed her father’s consent to borrow against it. In the meantime there were groceries to buy, staff to pay, bills for the hired house in L.A…. and, according to her mother, not much money in the joint account. Add a husband who’d made sure he couldn’t be found, and Linda’s panic and distress had been palpable.

So, no, her mom was not in a position to help right now. She needed a lawyer—and Tiffany intended to arrange the best lawyer she could find as soon as she got back home. The more expensive, the better, she vowed darkly. Her father would pay those bills in due course.

But Rafiq wouldn’t be interested in any of that.

“How did we get back to talking about me?” she asked. “I’m not terribly interesting.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.” His voice was smoother than velvet.

Tiffany leaned a little closer and caught the glimmer of starlight in his dark eyes. A frisson of half fear, half anticipation feathered down her spine. She drew sharply back.

She must be mad ….

Sucking in a breath, she blurted out, “Sir Julian was born in New Zealand. He owns a historic home in Auckland that often appears in lifestyle magazines.” The change of subject seemed sudden, but at least it got them back onto neutral territory. “His father was English.”

Unexpectedly, Rafiq didn’t take the bait to find out more about his business acquaintance. “So you’re from New Zealand? I couldn’t place your accent.”

“Because of my father’s job, some of my schooling took place in the States, so that would make it even harder to identify.” Her parents had relocated her from an Auckland all-girl school while they’d tried to juggle family life with her father’s filming schedule. It had been awkward. Eventually, Tiffany and her mother had returned to live in Auckland. But her mother had frequently flown to Los Angeles to act as hostess for the lavish parties he threw at the opulent Malibu mansion he’d rented

—and to keep an eye on her father. Tiffany had been seventeen the first time she'd read about her father's affairs in a gossip magazine. Like the final piece in a puzzle, it had completed a picture she hadn't even known was missing an essential part.

"Your father was in the military?"

She didn't want to talk about Taylor Smith. "No—but he traveled a lot."

"Ah, like a salesman or something?"

"Something like that." She took another sip of her drink and set it down on a round glass-topped table. "What about you? Where do you live?"

He considered her. "I'm from Dhahara—it's a desert kingdom, near Oman."

"How fascinating!"

"Ah, you find me fascinating …."

Tiffany stared at him.

Then she detected the wry mockery glinting in his eyes. "Not you!" She gave a gurgle of laughter and relaxed a little. "Where you live fascinates me."

"Now you break my heart."

"Are you flirting with me?" she asked suspiciously.

"If you must ask, then I must be losing my touch." He stretched out his long legs and loosened his tie.

The gesture brought her attention to his hands. In the reflected glow of the lamplight his fingers were lean and square-tipped, and dark against the white of his shirt. The gold of a signet ring winked in the light. His hand had stilled. Under his fingertips his heart would be beating like—

"You might not think I'm fascinating but most women think I'm charming," he murmured, his eyes half-closed, his mood indecipherable.

She reared back. Did he know what was happening to her? Why her pulse had gone crazy? "You? Charming?"

"Absolutely."

Tiffany swallowed. "Most women must be mad."

A glint entered his eyes. "You think so?"

Danger! Danger! She recklessly ignored the warning, too caught up in the surge of adrenalin that provoking him brought. "I know so."

"You don't believe I could be charming?" He smiled, his teeth startlingly white in the darkening night, and a bolt of metallic heat shot through Tiffany's belly.

"Never!" she said fiercely.

"Well then, I'll have to convince you otherwise."

He bent his head. Slowly, oh, far too slowly. Her heart started to pound. There was plenty of time for her to duck away, to smack his face as she'd earlier in the cab told herself he richly deserved. But she didn't. Instead she waited, holding her breath, watching his mouth—why hadn't she noticed how beautiful it was?—come closer and closer, until it finally settled on hers.

And then she sighed.

A soft whisper of sound.

He kissed with mastery. His lips pressed against hers, moving along the seam, playing. tantalizing, never demanding more than she was prepared to give. No other part of him touched her. After an age Tiffany let her lips part. He didn't take advantage. Instead he continued to taste her with playful kisses until she groaned in frustration.

He needed no further invitation. He plundered her mouth, hungrily seeking out secrets she hadn't known existed. Passion seized her. Quickly followed by a rush of hunger. His hand came up and cupped the back of her neck. The heat of his touch sent quivers along undiscovered nerve endings.

Tiffany swayed, eyes closed beneath the sensory onslaught.

At last, an eternity later, he lifted his head and gazed down at her with hooded eyes.

"So," he said with some satisfaction, his fingertips rubbing in soft circles against the sensitized nape of her neck, "you will agree that most women are right. You are charmed."

Tiffany reeled under the deluge of what could only be cool calculation.

"*I* think that you are the most arrogant and conceited *playboy*—" she spat that out "—I have ever met."

For an instant he stared at her, and she steeled herself for retaliation … of a sexual kind.

He threw his head back and laughed.

"Thank you," Rafiq said when he was finally through laughing, bowing his head with mock grace, his eyes still gleaming with hilarity. "I am honored."

And Tiffany wished with wild regret that she'd smacked his face until her hand stung while she'd had the chance. Through lips that still burned from his kiss, she said, "You don't charm me."

Three

His amusement instantly evaporated.

Rafiq suppressed the flare of annoyance and studied her dispassionately. Her hostility surprised him. He'd thought she'd leap at the opportunity to seduce him. Had she gauged he was not easily swayed? Intrigued by the idea, he assessed her. Was the taunt a ploy to capture his attention? Was it possible that she'd known exactly who he was? Researched him?

He shook off the sudden concern.

No, she might be street-smart. But she was a nobody—an insignificant foreign girl illegally working in a dubious club in the backstreets of Hong Kong. He dismissed his apprehension.

"Don't look at me like that, you arrogant jerk."

No one talked to him like that. Certainly not a woman like her. With a growl he grabbed her hand and yanked her toward him. She made a little squeaking sound as she landed in his lap. Rafiq softened his hold, stroking his fingers in long sweeps along her spine. Bending his head, he nuzzled the soft skin of her neck, murmuring sweet words. Her gasp quickly turned to a moan of delight. He marshaled every seductive trick he knew. She responded like a moonflower opening, overwhelming him with her sweet response.

Rafiq fought against the intoxicating pleasure her soft body unlocked. Told himself he was still in control. After all, he'd only teased her … flirted with her … kissed her to determine how far Tiffany was prepared to take this scam.

It was a test.

He told himself she'd failed. Dismally. Even as she'd kissed him like angel. He should've been thrilled he'd been proved right.

Instead he drowned in her unresisting softness.

When she shoved at his chest, he blinked rapidly in surprise and shook his head to clear it. "What?"

She scrambled to her feet, her breathing unsteady, her eyes blazing. "You misled me. I didn't come here for this. I'm not so desperate for a place to sleep."

Before she could spin away, he caught her arm.

"Tiffany, wait. You insult both of us. You might think I'm a jerk but I never assumed you came with me to find a bed for the night." Although perhaps the possibility should've occurred to him.

There was something about her that made him want to believe she wasn't like that. Maybe it was her wide brown eyes that gave her such an air of sincerity. Or the baby-soft skin beneath his fingertips …

He brushed the observation aside. She was a woman—of course her skin was soft. It made her no different from a million other women.

Time to get rid of her, before she had him believing the tales she'd spun. He dropped her arm and drew his wallet from the back of his pants, flipping it open to extract a five-hundred-dollar bill. To his surprise his fingers still shook from the aftershocks of the kiss. "Here, this is your tip for serving me drinks—that should help cover your accommodation for a couple of nights." If indeed, that story was true.

Bowing her head, Tiffany mumbled, "I can't take that."

"Why not?" By Allah, she drove him mad. What did she want from him? "I always intended to give you something to tide you over."

Rafiq tried to figure out her agenda. He still wasn't sure what she was after. She was such a curious mix of sophistication and spontaneity. On the one hand she'd almost convinced him her purse and passport had been stolen and all she wanted was a few dollars for a couple of nights' budget

accommodation. Hah, he was even ready to give it to her. In the next breath she'd told him she couldn't afford the airfare home, leaving him certain that he was being manipulated by an expert.

He couldn't work out whether she was simply a victim or extremely smart.

But his conscience wouldn't allow him to leave her homeless in case she really had been the victim of petty crime. He thought of his cousin Zara, of his brother's wife, Megan. What if it had been one of the women of his family in such a predicament? He would hope that someone would come to their aid.

"Take it, please."

She stared down at the note in his hand. "It's too much. After that kiss it would feel … wrong," she mumbled, her hair blocking him from seeing her face.

He couldn't help noticing the catch in her voice.

"Okay." Growing impatient with himself, for being so aware of the woman, he opened the billfold again and extracted a twenty and a ten before shoving the other note back. "Take this then—it's not as good a tip as you deserve, but at least you won't suspect my motives."

She tilted her head back and stared at him for a long moment. "Thank you for understanding."

Tears glimmered in her eyes.

"Oh, don't cry," he said roughly.

"I can't help it." She sniffed and wiped her fingers across her eyes. "I'm sorry for calling you a jerk."

Rafiq found himself smiling. She enchanted him, this woman whom he couldn't get a fix on. One minute he had her down as the cleverest schemer he'd ever met, the next she appeared as sweetly innocent as his cousin Zara.

She leaned forward. The scent of gardenias surrounded him. She rested her palm against his chest, her hand warm through the fine cotton of his shirt. Rafiq's breath caught in his throat.

But the hunger he felt for Tiffany bore no resemblance to the sisterly love he showered on Zara.

By the time Tiffany rose on tiptoes and pressed soft lips against his cheek, he was rigid with reaction.

"Thank you, you've saved my life."

She smelled so sweet, the body brushing against him so feminine, that Rafiq couldn't stop his arms from encircling her. He drew her up against him. "Oh, Tiffany, what am I supposed to make of you?"

"I'm not very complicated at all—what you see is what you get," she muttered against his shirt front.

He felt her smile against his thundering heart, heard her breath quicken as his arms tightened convulsively around her … and was lost.

A long time seemed to pass before Rafiq lifted his lips from hers.

As Tiffany's fingers crept up his shirt and hooked into his loosened tie, Rafiq forgot that he'd started this driven by perverse curiosity and affronted male pride, to see if Tiffany would kiss him when she'd vowed that she wasn't affected by his brand of charm.

It had all changed.

His tightly leashed control was in shreds.

All he could think about was tasting her again … and again.

Her fingers froze. "What are we doing?" She sounded as befuddled as he felt. "Anyone could walk in on us through those sliding doors."

"No." He shook his head. "That's not true. This private pool and deck are part of my suite—my key card activated the entry doors onto the deck."

Her breath caught—an audible sound. "Your suite? You said we'd have a drink…. I would never have entered your suite."

She'd withdrawn. Her eyes had grown dark and distrustful. Rafiq gathered she was making unfavorable assumptions about his motives. He couldn't blame her. "The bar downstairs is noisy—and full of inebriated men at this time of night. We wouldn't have been able to hear ourselves think." Much less talk.

"Oh …"

Unable to help himself he stroked a finger along the curve of her jaw. Soft curls trailed over the back of his hand. "You are very beautiful, do you know that?"

"Not beautiful." She sounded distracted.

He stilled his fingers, and cupped the side of her face. Tilting it up, he looked down into her wide eyes. "Beautiful."

She shook her head. "Not me. Pretty, maybe, at a stretch. But in this light you wouldn't even be able to tell."

No one could call her vain. "My eyes are not the only senses attuned to you. I don't need bright intrusive light to remember that your eyes are the haunting tawny-brown shade of the desert sands streaked with the burnished gold of the setting sun. I don't need light to feel." Gently he rubbed her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. "Your mouth is the crushed red of the satiny petals in the rose gardens of Qasr Al-Ward." His fingers explored her cheeks. "Your skin is softer than an almond blossom. Your cheekbones are carefully sculpted by a masterful hand to ensure that as you grow older you will only grow more beautiful."

Tiffany felt herself color.

A beat of time elapsed. Tiffany tried to summon the anger that had scorched her only a moment before when she'd discovered he'd brought her to his suite, but it had vanished. His touch, the heat of his lean body, the force of his soft words had overwhelmed her. She couldn't think of a single thing to say. She'd never met anyone remotely like him. He was way out her league.

Finally she gave up trying to understand the emotion that flooded her. Linking her fingers behind his neck, she pulled his mouth back to hers, his hair thick and silken under her fingers. His thigh moved against her hip, making her aware of the hard, muscled strength of him. When the kiss ended, Tiffany discovered that her heart was pounding.

Tilting her head back, she looked up into his face. His eyes glowed, he'd warmed, he was a long way from being the remote, distant stranger. A heady sense of being on a precipice of discovery overtook her.

Before she could speak, Rafiq grasped her hand. "Come."

He led her through a pair of French doors into a darkened room. A flick of a switch and dim lighting washed the room, revealing a king-size bed in a sumptuously decorated room.

Tiffany hesitated for a microsecond as Rafiq shrugged off his shirt. Then he turned her in his arms and the moment of cool analysis was gone.

Her wide, elasticized belt gave…. She heard something fall, and dismissed it. The zip on the back of her borrowed dress rasped down. His hands closed over the shoulder straps and eased them down her arms along with the tiny, dainty bag looped around her wrist. She didn't have any time to feel exposed … or naked. Only relief that the tight dress was gone. Rafiq drew her against his bare torso, his skin smooth and warm against hers.

His fingers tangled in her hair, before moving in small circles down her back, setting flame to each inch of flesh he massaged.

Tiffany flung her head back. A moan escaped. Desire flared uncontrollably within her and her nipples peaked beneath the modest black bra she wore. She didn't even feel Rafiq loosen the back before the plain bra gave and he removed it, tossing it over the bed end. Then he was on his knees in front of her, easing her heels off, sliding the cotton briefs down her legs, his touch trailing fire down the insides of her thighs.

She started to shake.

The explosive hunger that consumed her was unfamiliar. Powerful. Incredible. A new experience. He buried his face in her belly. Goose bumps broke out over her skin as sensation shook her to her soul. Her hands clutched at his hair, the texture rough as she closed her fingers over the short strands.

"I'm going to pleasure you—but we're not going to make love," he murmured.

Relief, instantly followed by a crazy kind of disappointment spread through her. "Why won't we make love?"

Did he think he was too good for her?

"I'm not … equipped."

"Equipped?" Then it struck her what he meant. "Oh."

The next thought was that if he didn't carry condoms around with him, then he didn't do casual sex, either. It made her almost start to like the man who had her in such a sweat.

Perversely, it made her want him to make love to her.

Tiffany reached for the puddle of her dress on the floor and found her bag. Opening it she extracted the condom that Renate had stuck in. "I only have one."

"Better than nothing," he growled.

Then he had her on the bed and everything started to move very fast. She closed her eyes as his mouth teased her nipple, arousing sensations she'd never experienced. A wild, keening sound broke from her throat as his teeth teased her burgeoning flesh. His hands were everywhere…. He knew exactly what to do to reduce her to a state of quivering arousal. Her body turned fluid. It seemed to know exactly what he wanted … how to respond to his every move.

When he finally moved over her, her legs parted. Opening her eyes, she glimpsed the tense line of his jaw, the fullness of a bottom lip softened by passion. He shifted into the space between her legs, his body so male, so unfamiliar against her own. He moved his hips, and Tiffany tensed, fighting the instinct to resist.

The pressure. Her breath caught in the back of her throat. He wasn't going to fit. Staring at the mouth that had wreaked so much pleasure, she waited uncertainly. Suddenly her body gave, and the pressure eased. The shudders subsided. Her heart expanded as he sank forward. A glow of warmth swept her. Her hands fluttered along the indent of his spine as a powerful, primal emotion swept her.

Tiffany thought she was going to cry with joy, at the beauty of it all.

The warmth spiraled into a fierce, desperate heat as he moved within her. As the friction built, she could feel herself straining to reach a place she'd never been. Her body tightened, no longer hers, taken over by the passion that ripped through her.

"Relax," he whispered in her ear. "Let it happen."

She didn't know what he was talking about. Yet the warmth of his breath against her ear caused a fresh wave of shivers to race up and down her spine, spreading out along every inch of her skin.

This time she didn't fight the sensation. She allowed it to sweep her away. Pleasure soared.

He grew still. Then he moved, his body driving in quick thrusts into hers, his breath fast.

A cry of shock caught in her throat as her body convulsed. Waves of heat broke, rippling through her, a tide of inexorable sensation that left her limp.

Tiffany opened her eyes and blinked against bright sunlight.

Disorientation was quickly followed by a suffocating sense of dread. *What had she done?* Slowly, she turned her head against the plump oversized pillow.

The space beside her in the giant king-size bed was empty. Rafiq was already awake … and out of the bed. With any luck he'd stay closeted in the bathroom until she could escape. Except she could hear no sound. Perhaps he'd gone to have breakfast … a swim … to work out. Anything.

Tiffany didn't care so long as she didn't have to confront him.

A movement drew her gaze to the floor-to-ceiling windows where the drapes had already been thrown back. Squinting against the gauze-filtered sunlight, Tiffany made out the dark shadow of a backlit figure.

Rafiq.

She shifted and he must've heard the movement, because he wheeled around and spoke. "You're awake."

Too late to squeeze her eyelids shut and fake sleep.

"Yes." She offered him a tremulous smile, and tried to read his expression, but bright light behind him frustrated her attempt.

"Good."

Was it? She wasn't so sure. He moved closer and came into focus. The passionate lover from last night's dark, delicious world had vanished. Replaced by the aloof man she'd met—was it only the evening before?

Tiffany shuddered.

"You're already dressed." Did she have to sound so plaintive?

He shrugged. "I have a busy day planned."

And it was time for her to make herself scarce.

He didn't need to speak the words out loud. It was painfully obvious.

But she had no intention of getting out of bed with him standing less than three feet away. She was naked under the sheet. And he was impeccably, immaculately dressed. She'd exposed more of herself than she'd ever intended, and she had no one but herself to blame. He would not see another inch of her body. A fresh flush of humiliation scorched her at the memory of what had passed between them last night.

Tiffany raised her chin and bravely met his granite gaze. "So why are you still here?"

"I've been waiting for you to awaken."

The harsh features that had been aflame with desire last night had reverted to keep-out coldness. Any hope that he'd wanted to tell her something momentous withered. Her stomach balled into a tight knot.

"Why?"

He reached into his jacket pocket.

His fist uncurled. A cell phone lay there—slim and silent.

Tiffany frowned, trying to make sense of the tension that vibrated from him. And what it had to do with her. "That's Renate's phone. I slipped it into my belt—"

"You took pictures last night."

Oh. Darn. She'd forgotten all about that. "I meant to delete—"

"Yes." His mouth curled. It was not a nice smile. "I'm sure you meant to. But you didn't. And you assured Sir Julian that you already had deleted the images."

She'd been scared of losing her job—now she'd been caught in a lie. She wriggled under the sheet, trying to think of how to explain. In the end she decided she'd probably be better off remaining silent, before she dug herself into a deeper hole. What a mess.

"Nothing to say?"

"Why do you care?"

"Oh, I care." He brandished the phone at her. "One of the photos is of me with Sir Julian—and enough of Renate to make sure the viewer knows exactly what kind of relationship she's contemplating with him."

"I didn't mean—"

"Of course, you didn't." He sneered. "You were very interested in talking about Sir Julian Carling last night, too."

"I was making conversation." Tiffany was utterly bewildered by the turn the conversation had taken. "So what?"

His eyes darkened. "So what? That's all you have to say for yourself?"

Tiffany drew the top sheet more securely around herself. What had possessed her to let this daunting stranger get so close last night?

"You are wise to be nervous."

"I'm not nervous," she lied. "I'm confused."

The silence swelled. Tiffany *was* growing decidedly nervous. Her gaze flitted toward the door. Even if she made it out the room, she wouldn't get very far without any clothes. And she doubted she'd have time to scoop up her dress and bag off the floor.

She turned her attention back to him and decided to brazen it out. "Why are you angry?"

His eyebrow shot up. "You expect me to believe you don't know? Come, come, it's enough now."

Tiffany decided it would probably be better to say nothing. It would only enrage him further. So she waited.

"There's a text message from your friend on her phone asking how your night went."

The expression of distaste on his face told her that he'd jumped to the conclusion that she'd discussed sleeping with him with Renate.

Damn Renate. "You're misunderstanding—"

He held up a hand. "I don't want to hear it. How much do you want?"

"What?"

"To forget that you ever saw me with Sir Julian."

Her mouth dropped open. He was delusional. Or paranoid. Or maybe just plain crazy. That was enough to make her say hastily, "Just delete the images—it's what I meant to do last night. I forgot … and then I forgot to give the phone back to Renate."

"How convenient."

Tiffany didn't like the way he said that.

"When you didn't respond, your friend's texts make it clear she's decided you must've stolen her phone." He smiled, but his eyes still smoldered like hot coals. "That you're planning to sell the images yourself."

"I wouldn't do that!"

He made a sound that sounded suspiciously like a snort. "Sell the images or steal her phone? Since when is there honor among thieves?"

What on earth was he getting at? She gave him a wary glance, and then said, "Just say what you mean."

"You and your friend intended to blackmail me and Sir Julian. Your friend has decided you've decided to proceed alone. I think she's right."

"Blackmail?"

He was definitely, certifiably crazy. Her eyes flickered toward the door again. Maybe, just maybe she could get out of here … and if she yanked the sheet along, she'd have cover.

"You're not going anywhere," he growled and sat down on the bed, pinning her under the sheet that she'd been planning to escape in, wrapped around her like a toga.

"I know." She gazed at him limpidly.

His eyes narrowed to slits. "That look won't work. I know you're no innocent."

If he only knew.

"Uh …" Tiffany's voice trailed away. No point telling him, he wouldn't believe her.

"So what were the two of you intending to do with the photos?"

"Nothing."

He shook his head. "You take me for a fool. Your friend was desperate to know whether you still had the phone and the photos. Someone was ready to buy them. You were in on the deal."

She wasn't going to argue with him. Not while he was looming over her, and she wasn't wearing a stitch under the scanty cover that the hotel's silk sheet provided. No way was she risking sparking the tension between them into something else … something infinitely more dangerous.

Panic filled her. "Get off me!"

He didn't budge. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to delete the images from the phone. Then I'm going to buy you the ticket that you were so desperate for last night. Then I never want to see or hear from you again. Do you understand?"

Tiffany nodded.

He sat back and she breathed again.

"I'm not going to give you the money you so badly want. I'm going to take you to the airport and pay whatever it takes to get that ticket changed—so I hope you really need a flight to Auckland."

"I do," she croaked.

He pushed himself away from her. "It will be waiting for you downstairs when you are ready to leave."

As he rose from the bed, her bravado returned. Her chin lifted. "I don't need you to take me to the airport—it won't help. My temporary travel documents will only be ready on Monday. I'll take a cab back to the hostel."

"I want you out of Hong Kong."

"I have no intention of staying a minute more than I have to. Nor will I cause you any grief. I promise."

He gave her one of those narrow-eyed glances that chilled her to the bone. "If I learn that you have—"

"I'm not going to do anything. I swear. And, believe me, I intend to pay you back," she said fervently. Tiffany had no intention of being beholden to this man.

He waved a dismissive hand. "Please. Don't lie."

"I *will* repay you. But I'll need your bank details."

"To further scam me?" The bark of laughter he gave sounded ugly. His eyes bored into hers. She didn't look away. The mood changed, becoming hot and oppressive. Something arced between them, an emotion so intense, so powerful that she lost the ability to think.

Without looking away, Rafiq reached into his pocket for his wallet. This time he extracted a small white card. "Here are my details. You can post me a check … but I don't want to see you again. Ever."

It stung.

Determined to hurt him, she flung the words back at him. "I have no intention of seeing you again." Then, for good measure, she added defiantly, "Ever."

She bit her lip hard to stop it trembling as he swung away, and she watched him head for the door with long, raking strides. When the door thudded shut behind him, she glanced down at the card she held.

Rafiq Al Dhahara. President, Royal Bank of Dhahara.

She should've known. He wasn't any old banker. He was the boss. The man who had showed her a glimpse of heaven would never be an ordinary man.

Four

Rafiq could not settle.

He'd been restless for weeks now. He told himself it was the fierce desert heat of Dhahara that kept him awake deep into the heart of the night. Not even the arctic air-conditioning circulating through the main boardroom of the Royal Bank of Dhahara soothed him.

"Stop pacing," Shafir said from behind him. "You called us in to talk about the new hotel you've financed, but now you wear holes in that kelim. Sit down and talk." He tapped his gold pen against the legal pad in front of him. "I'm in a hurry."

Swiveling on his heel, Rafiq put his hands on narrow hips, and scowled down at where his brother lounged in the black leather chair, his white robes cascading about him. "You can wait, Shafir."

"I might, but Megan won't. My wife is determined to spend every free minute we have at Qasr Al-Ward." Shafir flashed him the wicked grin of a man well satisfied by that state of affairs. "Come for the weekend. Celebrate that the contracts for the new Carling Hotel are in place. It'll give you a chance to shed that suit for a couple of days."

Shaking his head, Rafiq said, "Too much else to do. I'll resist the call of the desert." He envied his brother the bond he had to Qasr Al-Ward, the desert palace that had been in the family for centuries. Since his marriage to Megan, Shafir had made Qasr Al-Ward their home.

"Don't resist it too long—or you may not find your way back."

"Why don't you take our father?" Rafiq wasn't eager to engage in the kind of analysis that Shafir's sharp gaze suggested was about to begin. In an effort to distract his brother, he tipped his head to where King Selim was intent on getting his point across to his firstborn son. The words "duty" and "marriage" drifted across the expanse of the boardroom table. "That way Khalid might get some peace, too."

Shafir chuckled. "Looks like our father is determined not to give him a break."

"You realize your marriage has only increased the pressure on Khalid?"

Stabbing a finger at his brother's chest, Shafir chuckled. "And on you. Everyone expected you to marry first, Rafiq. Unlike Khalid, your bride isn't Father's choice. And unlike me, women don't view you as already wed to the desert. You spent years abroad—you've had plenty of opportunity to fall in love."

"It wasn't so straightforward." Rafiq realized that was true. "There were no expectations on you, Shafir. No pressure. You've always done exactly what you want."

His brother had spent much of his life growing up in the desert; he'd been allowed rough edges, whereas Rafiq had been groomed for a corporate role. Educated at Eton, followed by degrees at Cambridge and Harvard. There had been pressure to put thought and care into his choice of partner—someone who could bear scrutiny on an international stage. A trophy wife. A *powerful* trophy wife.

How could he explain how a relationship that started off as something special could deteriorate into nothing more than duty?

"Take it." His father's rising voice broke into his thoughts.

Rafiq refocused across the table. His father was trying to press a piece of paper into Khalid's hand. "All three of these women are suitable. Yasmin is a wealthy young woman who knows what you need in a wife."

"No!" Khalid's jaw was like rock.

"She's pretty, too." Shafir smirked.

"I don't want pretty," his eldest brother argued.

Pretty. Rafiq shied away from the word. Tiffany had thought she was pretty. Not beautiful. Pretty. Rafiq had considered her beautiful.

"I want a woman who will match me," Khalid was saying. "I don't care what she looks like. I need a partner … not a pinup."

"Hey, my wife is a partner," Shafir objected. "In my eyes she's a pinup, too."

Newly—and happily—married, he'd become the king's ally in the quest to seek a suitable wife for his brothers. Although Rafiq suspected that Shafir was only trying to drive home how fortunate he'd been to find his Megan. If he could find a woman as unique, as in tune with him as Megan was with Shafir, he'd get married in a shot ….

Khalid bestowed a killing look on Shafir, who laughed and helped himself to a cup of the rich, fragrant coffee that the bank's newest secretary was busy pouring into small brass cups.

"Thank you, Miss Turner." To his father Khalid added, "I don't need a list. I will find my own wife."

Rafiq craned his neck, peering at the list. "Who else is on there?"

"Farrah? She's far too young—I don't want a child bride."

"Leila Mummhar."

Rafiq's suggestion had captured his father's attention.

"Pah." The King flung out his arms. "Don't *you* give him advice. I was certain you'd be married long before Shafir. Now look at you—no woman at your side since your beloved departed."

"Shenilla and I had … differences." It was the best way to describe the pushy interest that Shenilla's father had started to exert as soon as they'd considered him hooked. Shenilla was a qualified accountant, she was beautiful, her family was well respected in Dhahara. On paper it was the perfect match.

Yet he'd run ….

"Differences?" His father growled. "What is a little difference? Your beloved mother and I had many differences while we were courting. We overcame them and—"

"But your marriage was expected," Rafiq interrupted. "It was arranged between your families from the time you were very young. You could not end such a relationship."

The king shook his head. "It made marriage no easier. But we worked at it. Happiness is something to strive for, my son, every day of your life. And you were so in love. Ay me, I was so certain that this time it would be right."

How could Rafiq confess that he'd been sure that Shenilla had been perfect for him, yet once their families had become involved as quickly as he'd fallen in love with her, he'd fallen out again? And it hadn't been the first time. Before that there had been Rosa and before her, Neela. He wasn't indiscriminate. His cautious courtships lasted for lengthy periods—that was expected after the care he put into the choice. But just when they got to the point where formalities like engagements became expected, when the pressure to set a wedding date was applied, the love dwindled, leaving only a restless need to escape the cloying trap the relationship had become.

"Khalid, you may object now but you know your duty." The king patted his firstborn son on the shoulder. "Choose any one of those women and you will be richly rewarded."

Rafiq eyed the list and thought of the requirements he'd set for women he considered in the past—after all he was a practical man, his wife would have to fit into his world. Wealthy. Beautiful. Well connected. "Yasmin comes from a powerful family."

Khalid shook his head fiercely. "No, it's not her family I'd be marrying. And I want more than power, wealth and looks in a bride. She must be able to keep me interested for many years, long after worldly goods are forgotten."

Interested? Rafiq's thoughts veered to the last woman who had occupied his bed.

Tiffany had kept him interested from the moment he'd met her. Yes, he'd told her she was beautiful. And he'd meant it. But she was nothing like the other beauties he'd dated. Her features reflected her every emotion, and the graceful way she moved had held him entranced. She certainly fulfilled none of the other criteria he looked for in a wife … she'd never be suitable.

It shamed him that in one short night with little effort she'd stripped him of the restraint and control he prided himself on. It had disturbed him deeply that a woman whom he didn't love, held no fondness for, a woman he suspected of being a con artist, a blackmailer, could hold such power over him.

She'd insisted she'd had no intention of bedding him; she'd been as deliciously tight as a virgin, yet she'd produced a condom at the critical moment. And she'd lied about deleting the photos she'd taken of him and Sir Julian. The more he thought about it, the more he decided he'd been played for a fool by an expert.

He'd given her his business card.

Fool!

He stared blindly at the list he held until Shafir stretched across the boardroom table and snagged it. His brother studied it … and hooted with laughter, pulling Rafiq out the trance that held him immobile. "I can't believe Leila is on here—she's more work than all the bandits that hide on the border of Marulla."

"It would make political sense—we would be able to watch her relations," the king growled.

"Father, we don't want the trouble that her uncles would bring." Rafiq shook his head as he referred to the spats that the two sheikhs were infamous for waging. "Pick someone with less baggage."

Khalid fixed his attention on Shafir. "Maybe I should do what you did … choose a woman with family on the other side of the world. That way I will have no problem with my inlaws."

Suppressing the urge to grin, Rafiq waited for his father to launch into a tirade about the sanctity of family. But his father wore an arrested expression. "Rafiq, did you not say that Sir Julian Carling has a daughter?"

"Yes." Rafiq thought of the woman he'd once met. "Elizabeth Carling."

Despite the dislike he'd taken to Sir Julian, there'd been nothing wrong with the daughter. Elizabeth had everything he usually looked for. Wealth, beauty, connections. Yet there'd been no spark. Not like what he'd experienced with Tiffany—if such a wild madness could be termed a spark. It had been more like a conflagration.

At last he nodded. "Yes, she would be a good choice for Khalid."

"Add her to the list," his father commanded Shafir. "Rafiq says her father is coming to Dhahara to inspect the site for the new Carling Hotel. Her father is a very wealthy man." King Selim gave his eldest son an arch look, and leaned back in his chair. "I will invite Lady Carling and his daughter, too."

Even as Khalid glared at him, the young secretary reappeared in the doorway, concern in her eyes. "The CEO of Pyramid Oil is here for his appointment. What shall I tell him?"

"That's right, run, before I kill you for adding to the pressure," his brother muttered, but Rafiq only laughed.

"Discussing your future took the heat off me, so thanks."

Khalid snorted in disgust.

Still grinning, Rafiq turned to the young secretary. "Miss Turner, give us five more minutes —by then I will be done."

Tiffany stepped out of the cab into the dry, arid midday heat of Dhahara. Hot wind redolent of spices and a tang of the desert swept around her. In front of her towered the Royal Bank of Dhahara. The butterflies that had been floating around in her stomach started to whip their wings in earnest.

Sure, she'd known from his gold-embossed card that Rafiq would be an important man. President, Royal Bank of Dhahara. But not *this* important.

Yet coming here had been the right thing to do. She'd never doubted her path from the moment the doctor had confirmed her deepest fear. But being confronted with the material reality of where Rafiq worked, knowing that it would be only minutes before she saw him again, made her palms grow moist and her heart thump loudly in her chest.

She paid the driver and couldn't help being relieved that she'd had the foresight to check into a city hotel and stow her luggage in her room before coming here. Pulling a filmy scarf over her hair, she passed the bank's uniformed guard and headed for the glass sliding doors.

Inside, behind the sleek, circular black marble reception counter, stood a young, clean-shaven man in a dark suit and white headgear. Tiffany approached him, determined to brazen this out. "I have an appointment."

His brow creased as he scanned the computer screen in front of him, searching for an appointment she knew would not be listed for today … or any day. Finally he shook his head.

But Tiffany had not come this far to be deterred. She held her ground, refusing to turn away.

"Call Rafiq Al Dhahara." Her conjuring up the name she'd memorized from the business card caused him to do a double take. "Tell him Tiffany Smith is here to see him." She mustered up every bit of authority that she had. "He won't be pleased if he learns you sent me away without bothering to check."

That was stretching the truth, because Rafiq might well refuse to see her. Even if he did agree to speak to her, he would certainly not be pleased to find her here in Dhahara.

But the bank official wasn't to know that.

Tiffany waited, arms folded across a stomach that was still behaving in the most peculiar fashion, as it fluttered and tumbled over.

He picked up a telephone and spoke in Arabic. When he'd finished, his expression had changed. "The sheikh will see you."

The sheikh?

Oh, my. This time her stomach turned a full somersault. "Sheikh?" she spluttered. "I thought he was—" she searched a mind gone suddenly blank for the impressive title on his business card "—the president of the Royal Bank of Dhahara."

The bank official gave her a peculiar look. "The royal family owns the bank."

"What does that have to do with Rafiq?"

He blinked at her casual use of his name, and then replied, "The sheikh is part of the royal family."

Before she could faintly repeat "royal family," the elevator doors to the left of the marble reception counter slid open, and Rafiq himself stepped out.

His face was haughtier than she remembered, his eyes darker, his cheekbones more aristocratic. Sheikh? Royal family? He certainly looked every inch the part in a dark suit with a conservative white shirt that even in this sweltering heat appeared crisp and fresh. Yet his head was uncovered, and his hair gleamed like a black hawk's wing. After all the soul-searching it had taken to bring her here, now that she faced him she couldn't think of a word to say.

So she settled for the most inane.

"Hi."

"Tiffany."

The sphinxlike gaze revealed no surprise. He'd told her he never wanted to see her again. *Ever.* Now she stood before him, shifting from one foot to the other. The displeasure she'd expected was absent. Typically, he showed no emotion at all. The wall of stony reserve was as high as ever.

He bowed his head. "Please, come with me."

If it hadn't been for one never-to-be-forgotten night in Hong Kong, she'd never have known that his reserve could be breached.

That night …

The memory of the catastrophic extremes, heaven and hell, pleasure and shame, still had the power to make her shudder.

Tiffany had been sure nothing would make her contact him again. Nothing. But she'd been so wrong. She pressed her hand to her belly.

Her baby.

He ushered her into the elevator. Unexpectedly, the elevator dropped instead of rising. Her stomach rolled wildly. Tiffany gritted her teeth. Seconds later the doors opened to reveal a well-lit parking level where a black Mercedes-Benz idled, waiting. Rafiq strode forward and opened the rear door.

She hesitated. “Where—?”

His dark gaze was hooded. “There is no privacy here.”

He was ashamed of her.

Despite a tinge of apprehension Tiffany swallowed her protests and, straightening her spine, stepped past him and slid into the leather backseat.

She’d come to Dhahara because of her baby. Not for herself. Not for Rafiq. For their unborn child.

She couldn’t afford to let fear dominate her.

For her daughter she had put aside her desire never to encounter Rafiq again. For the baby’s sake, she would keep her relationship with Rafiq cordial. Unemotional. Her daughter deserved the right to know her father. Nor could she allow herself to indulge in wild notions that he might kidnap her child, hide her away.

He was a businessman. He’d told her he’d been educated in England and the United States. He headed a large bank. Even it if was a position he’d gotten through nepotism, neither he—nor his royal family—could afford the kind of international outcry that would come from taking her baby from her. He was a single man—or at least she hoped he was—what would he do with a baby?

The silence was oppressive. Fifteen minutes later the Mercedes came to a smooth stop, and the rear doors opened. Rafiq’s hand closed around her elbow—to escort her or ensure she didn’t escape? Tiffany wasn’t sure. As he hurried her up a flight of stairs, she caught a glimpse of two guards in red berets standing in front of stone pillars that flanked a vast wooden front door. Then the door swung inward and they were inside a vaulted entrance hall.

She gazed around, wide-eyed. Despite the mansions she’d seen, this dwelling took luxury to new heights. “Where are we?”

“This is my home.”

A hasty glance revealed magnificent dark wooden floors covered in Persian rugs, original art hanging on deep blue walls. Refusing to be impressed, Tiffany focused her attention on Rafiq. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

His lips quirked, and something devilish gleamed in his eyes. “Talk? Our best communication is done in other ways. I thought that must be why you are here.”

Damn him for the reminder.

Tiffany compressed her lips. “I need to talk to you.”

“Whenever we talk, it seems to cost me money.” The humor had vanished, and he gave her a brooding look.

His words only underscored what she already knew: he thought her the worst kind of woman. What would he say when he discovered she was pregnant with his child? A frisson of alarm chilled her.

“I haven’t come all this way for money, Rafiq.”

“I’m very relieved to hear that.”

He strode down a hall hung with richly woven tapestries that held the patina of age. Tiffany resisted the urge to slow and inspect them.

“But for the moment I will reserve judgment,” he was saying. “I will be more convinced of that once I have heard what you have to say to me.”

He didn’t believe her. He thought this was about money.

“Hey, I sent you a check for what you gave me,” she protested. She hadn’t wanted to be in his debt.

"Sure you did."

"I sent it last week. Maybe it's still in the mail." She'd meant to send it earlier. Discovering she was pregnant had wiped all other thoughts out of her head. But now she was seriously starting to wish that she had called … not come all this way to give him the news about his impending fatherhood.

Yet it had seemed the right thing to do. She'd wanted to break the news in person, not over the phone separated by thousands of miles, unable to register the nuances of his expression. And certainly not by an e-mail that might go astray.

This was too important. Her child's whole life, her baby's relationship with her father, would be determined by the course of this conversation.

And she wasn't about to let Rafiq Al Dhahara cause her to regret the decision she'd made to come here to tell him.

Pushing open a door, he gestured for her to precede him. Tiffany entered a book-lined room that was clearly a man's domain. *His* domain. Before her nerve could give out, she drew a deep breath and spun to face him.

"I'm pregnant," she announced.

Rafiq went very still, and his eyes narrowed to dark cracks that revealed nothing.

All at once the dangerous man she'd seen glimpses of in Hong Kong, the man she'd known lurked under the polite, charming veneer, surfaced.

"We used a condom," he said, softly.

She spread her hands helplessly. "It must've been faulty."

"Did you know it was faulty?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Did you tamper with it?"

"How?" Outrage filled the question. "It was sealed!"

"Nothing a pinprick couldn't have taken care of."

"You're sick."

His mouth tightened. "Be careful how you talk to me."

Tiffany's front teeth worried at her bottom lip. His gaze flickered to her mouth, before returning to clash with hers. "How much do you want?"

"What?"

She stared at him, not sure she'd heard right. His eyes were fixed on her, his mouth tight. No sign of softness in the features that were so difficult to read. He'd pay money so that he'd never have to see his child again?

What kind of man did that?

Tiffany turned away, defeated. At least she would always carry the knowledge in her heart that she'd tried. And if her daughter one day wanted to know who her father was, she'd tell her. Rafiq might be a sheikh. He might be desert royalty. But he would be the loser … he'd have forfeited the chance to know his child.

But he'd been given the choice.

"I've been a fool."

Tiffany spun back and focused on him. He'd positioned himself behind an antique desk. One hand was raking through his hair. Straight and dark, it shone like silk under the overhead lights.

Unable to bear to look at him, she closed her eyes.

He'd been a fool? What did that make her?

"And I have absolutely no excuse. I even know how the scam works. Start with small amounts, get the idiot hooked and then, when he can't back out, increase the amount."

Her mouth fell open as she absorbed what he was saying. "You honestly think I'd travel *here* to blackmail you?" Her hand closed protectively over her belly. "That I'd blackmail the father of my child?"

From beyond the barrier of the desk, his glance fell to her still-flat stomach, and then lifted to meet her eyes. Black. Implacable. Furious. Tiffany felt the searing heat of his contempt. “Enough. Don’t expect me to believe there is a child.”

Rafiq thought—

She shook her head to clear it. “You really do think I came all this way to blackmail you.”

He arched a brow. “Didn’t you?”

“No!”

“Previous experience makes that impossible for me to believe.”

What was the point of arguing that she hadn’t wanted to blackmail him in the past, either? Tiffany placed her fingertips to her pounding temples. God, why had she allowed her conviction that she was doing the right thing to persuade her to come? He didn’t care about the child. All he cared about was protecting himself.

There was nothing here for her daughter … nothing worth fighting for.

She started to back away.

“Where are you going?”

“To my hotel. I’m pregnant. It was a long flight. I’m tired. My feet ache. I need a shower and a sleep.” She listed the reasons in a flat, dead tone.

He was around the desk before she could move and caught up to her with two long strides. Planting himself in front of her, he folded his arms across his chest. “You will stay here.”

Tiffany shook her head. “I can’t stay here.” He was a man—an unmarried man. It would not be sanctioned. “Besides, my luggage is already at the hotel.”

His jaw had set. “I am not letting you stay in the city alone. I want you where I can watch you. Give me the name of the hotel and I will have your luggage sent here.”

“I’d be your prisoner.”

“Not a prisoner,” he corrected, “my guest.”

“It’s hardly appropriate for me to stay here, even I know—”

Holding up a hand, he stopped her mid-sentence. “My aunt Lily will come stay. The widow of my father’s brother, and the perfect chaperone. Zara, her daughter, is away studying at present, and Aunt Lily is missing her. She’s Australian, so you should get along well. But don’t think you can wind her around your little finger. I will be there all the time you are together. Rest tonight, and I will escort you back to the airport myself tomorrow.”

Taking in his hard face, Tiffany made herself straighten. She’d come all this way, and he didn’t even believe she was pregnant. Right now she was too weary to argue further but she’d be damned if she’d let him see that. He’d only interpret it as weakness. Tomorrow she’d be ready to fight again.

At least she’d have a chance to meet a part of his family, his aunt. For her daughter’s future relationship with her father, Tiffany knew she would do her best to get along with the woman.

Before he took her by the scruff of her neck and threw her out of his country.

Five

Tiffany hadn't been lying about being weary, Rafiq saw that evening. Seated across from him at the dinner table, alongside his aunt Lily, who was clearly bursting with curiosity about her presence in his home, Tiffany barely picked at her food.

There were shadows beneath her eyes. Pale purple hollows that gave her a heart-wrenching fragility that tugged at him—even though he refused to put a name to the emotion.

The array of dishes at her elbow remained untouched. The succulent pieces of skewered lamb. The breads baked with great care in his kitchens. The char-roasted vegetables on earthenware platters. Even her wineglass remained full. Something of the fine spread should have tempted her. But nothing had.

Finally, his aunt could clearly contain herself no longer. "My daughter is at university in Los Angeles. Did you meet Rafiq when he studied abroad?"

Rafiq answered before she could reply. "Tiffany and I are … business acquaintances. She's been traveling—and decided to visit." It didn't satisfy his aunt's curiosity but she wouldn't ask again.

"You look tired, dear."

"I am." Tiffany gave Lily a smile. "I can't wait to go to bed."

"After dinner I'll show you where the women's quarters are."

"Thank you."

The subdued note in her voice made Rafiq want to confront the turmoil that had been whirling around inside his head. He'd been rough on her earlier. Even his aunt could see that her travels had worn her out.

A trickle of shame seeped through Rafiq, then he forced it ruthlessly aside. What else was he supposed to have done? Accepted the lie that she was pregnant? Paid through the nose for the privilege of silencing her new blackmail attempt?

Never.

He'd taken the only course of action open to him: he'd brought her here, away from the bank, away from any possible contact with his father, brothers and staff to learn what she wanted.

Pregnant? Hah! He would not let her get away with such a ruse. Now she was confined to his home. And he would make sure she wasn't left alone with his aunt. He made a mental note to assign one of the maids to keep the women company. His aunt would never gossip in front of the servants.

Tomorrow she would leave. He'd escort her to the airport himself. He certainly wouldn't allow himself any regrets. Tiffany was not the stranded innocent she'd once almost managed to con him into believing she was. He'd already allowed her to squeeze him for money once.

By foolishly possessing her, taking her under a starlit sky, he'd made a fatal mistake. One that she would milk for the rest of her life—if he let her.

Rafiq had no intention of becoming trapped in the prison she'd created with her soft touches and sweet, drugging kisses.

He became aware that Tiffany was talking to his aunt. He tensed, and started to pay attention.

"You must miss your daughter," Tiffany was saying.

Lily nodded. "But I'll be joining her when the holidays come. She wanted a little time to find her feet."

"How lucky for her that you respect her need for independence."

"I still worry about her. She had a bad romantic experience a while back."

That was enough! He wasn't having this woman interrogating his family, discovering pains better left hidden.

"Wine?" Rafiq brusquely offered Tiffany.

She shook her head, "No, thanks." And focused on his aunt. "Do you have any other children?"

"No, only Zara."

"I'm an only child, too."

"Oh, what a pity Zara wasn't here for you to meet. You would've gotten along like a house on fire."

Rafiq narrowed his gaze. If Tiffany even thought she might threaten his family's well-being she would learn how very ruthless he could be.

"I would've liked that."

She sounded so sincere. His aunt was glowing with delight. Lily put a hand on his arm, "I'm sure your father and brothers would like to meet Tiffany."

"I'd like that but—"

His killing glare interrupted the woman who had caused all this trouble. "Tiffany will not be staying for very long," he said with a snap of his teeth.

Aunt Lily looked crestfallen. "What a pity."

Rafiq wished savagely that he'd been less respectful of Tiffany's modesty. He should've known better than to introduce her to any member of his family.

"She'll be leaving us tomorrow."

The bedchamber Lily and the little plump maid called Mina showed Tiffany into was rich and luxurious. Filmy gold drapes surrounded a high bed covered by white linen while beautiful handwoven rugs covered the intricately patterned wooden floors. On the opposite walls, shutters were flung back to reveal a view of a courtyard containing a pool surrounded by padded loungers. Water trickled over a tiered fountain on the far side of the pool, the soothing sound adding to the welcome.

It felt as if she'd been transported into another, far more exotic, world.

Alone, Tiffany stripped off her crumpled clothes and pulled on a nightie. She felt dazed and disoriented and just a little bit queasy. Jet lag was setting in with vengeance.

Through an open door, she caught a glimpse of an immense tub with leaping dolphins—dolphins!—for faucets before weariness sank like a cloud around her. She padded through to the large bathroom to brush her teeth before heading for the bedchamber and clambering between the soft sheets where sleep claimed her.

The next thing she knew she was being wakened by the loud sound of knocking. Seconds later the door crashed open.

Tiffany sat up, dragging the covers up to her chin, thoroughly startled at being yanked from deep sleep.

"What do you want?" she demanded of the man looming in the doorway.

"Neither of the maids could awaken you." Whatever had glittered in Rafiq's eyes when the door first opened had already subsided.

"I was tired," she said defensively. "I told you that last night."

"It's late." He glanced at his watch. "Eleven o'clock. I thought you might've run out—" He broke off.

Eleven o'clock was all she heard. "It can't be that late."

He strode closer, brandishing the square face of his Cartier timepiece in her direction. "Look."

The wrist beneath the leather strap was tanned, a mix of sinew and muscle. Oh, God, surely she wasn't being drawn back under his thrall?

"I believe you," she said hastily, her grip tightening on the bedcovers as she pulled them up to her chin so that no bare flesh was visible. Her stomach had started its now-familiar morning lurching routine.

"Will you please *go?*"

And then it was too late. Tiffany bolted from the bed and into the adjoining bathroom, where she was miserably and ignominiously sick.

When she finally raised her head, it was—horror of horrors—to find Rafiq beside her, holding out a white facecloth. She took it and wiped it over her face, appreciating the cool wetness.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"You look terrible."

This time her "Thanks" held no gratitude.

"I don't like this. I'm going to call a doctor." He was already moving away with that sleek, predatory stride.

"Don't," Tiffany said.

He halted just short of the bathroom door.

"There's nothing wrong with me." She gave him a grim smile.

"Maybe it was something you ate." Two long paces had him at her side. "You may need an antibiotic."

"No antibiotic!" Nothing was going to harm her baby. "I promise you this is a perfectly normal part of being pregnant."

His hands closed around her shoulders. "Oh, don't try that tall tale again."

"It's the truth. I can't help that you're too dumb to see what's right in front of your nose." She poked a finger at his chest, but to her dismay he did not back away. Instead she became conscious of his muscled body beneath the crisply ironed business shirt. A body she'd touched all over the night they had been together.

She withdrew her finger as though it had been burned.

"I'm not dumb," he growled.

Right. "And I'm not pregnant," she countered.

"I *knew* you were faking it."

The triumph in his voice made her see red. "Oh, for heaven's sake!"

Tiffany broke out of his grasp and, slipping past him, headed for the bedroom. Grabbing her purse off the dressing table she upended it onto the bed and scrabbled through the displaced contents. Snatching up a black-and-white image in a small frame she spun around to wave it in front of his nose.

"Look at this."

"What is it?"

Couldn't he see? He had to be blind … as well as obtuse.

"A photo of your daughter."

"A photo of my daughter?" For once that air of composure had deserted him. "I don't have a daughter."

She pushed the picture into his hands. "It's an image from a scan. A scan of my baby—" *their baby* "—taken last week. See? There's her head, her hipbone, her arms. That's your daughter you're holding."

His expression changed. When he finally raised his head, his eyes were glazed with shock.

"You really *are* pregnant."

Six

"No, I'm only faking it. Remember?"

Rafiq glared at Tiffany, unamused by the flippant retort—and the sharp edge he detected beneath it. He tightened his grip on the photo, conscious of a sense that his world was shifting.

"So how do you know it's a girl? Can they tell?"

She stared down her nose at him in a way that made him want to kiss her, or throttle her. Then she said, "My intuition tells me she is."

Her intuition? The ridiculous reply brought him back to reality, and he shut down the string of questions that he'd been about to ask. Rafiq almost snorted in disgust at how readily he'd crumbled. She was softening him up—and worse, it was working.

"You don't think I'm going to fall for this?" He shoved the picture back at her. "This could be any man's baby."

Her fingers closed around the small framed image with great care. She slid it into the bag and walked back to the dressing table where she set the bag down. Her back to him, she said, "Doctors will be able to estimate the time of conception close enough to that night—"

"They won't be able to pinpoint exactly. The baby could've been conceived anytime around then." He paused as she wheeled around to face him. "It doesn't mean it is *my* child." He sneered. "I hardly met you under the most pristine conditions."

The gold flecks in those velvet eyes grew dull. "I told you that it was my first night at Le Club."

"I don't know you at all." He shrugged. "Even if it was the truth, who knows what's behind it?"

Tiffany flushed, and the gold in her tawny eyes had brightened to an accusatory flame. She looked spirited, alive, and Rafiq fisted his hands at his sides to stop himself from reaching for her. Instead he said, "I want to have DNA tests done before I pay a dollar."

"Have I demanded even one dollar from you since I got here?" she asked, her eyes blazing with what he realized in surprise was rage. Glorious, incandescent rage that had him blinking in admiration.

"I'm sure you intend to demand far more than that."

"There's no trust in you, is there?"

"Not a great deal," he said honestly. "When you grow up as wealthy as I have there's always someone with a new angle. A new scam."

"Everyone wants something from you?"

He shrugged. "I'm used to it."

There was a perturbing perception in her gaze. As if she understood exactly how he felt. And sympathized. But she couldn't. He'd found her in the backstreets of Hong Kong—hardly the place for someone who could have any insight into his world.

Crossing to the bedroom door that he'd left wide open, he paused. "I'll arrange for the DNA tests to be done as soon as possible." That would give him the answer he wanted and put an end to this farce.

"But you were going to take me to the airport."

Rafiq's gaze narrowed. Tiffany looked surprisingly agitated. "You're not staying in Dhahara long. You'll be on the first plane out once I have confirmation that your child is not mine. You're not going to hold that threat over my head for the rest of my life."

Once a week Rafiq met his brother Khalid for breakfast in one of Dhahara's seven-star hotels. As the two men were heavily invested in the political and economic well-being of the desert kingdom, talk was usually lively. But Rafiq was too abstracted by the rapidly approaching appointment for his and Tiffany's DNA tests that he'd arranged after their argument yesterday.

Before he could temper it, he found himself asking, "Khalid, have you ever thought what might happen if you get a woman who is not on father's list pregnant?"

His brother's mouth fell open in surprise. He looked around and lowered his voice. "I take great care not to get a woman pregnant."

So did Rafiq. It hadn't helped. He'd been a fool. "But what if you did," he pressed, pushing his empty plate away. "What would you do?"

Khalid looked disconcerted. "I don't know. One thing is for sure, an abortion would be out of the question. I suppose it would depend on the situation. The woman in question would have to be suitable for me to consider marrying her."

Suitable. Just thinking of the night he'd met Tiffany made Rafiq squirm. She couldn't have been more totally unsuitable if he'd scoured the entire earth. "That is true."

And there lay his problem.

"Of course," continued his brother, then pausing as a white-garbed waiter filled their cups with black, fragrant coffee and waiting until he'd left, "there has never been an illegitimate heir in our family. That's something else to consider. I suppose even an unsuitable marriage would be better than that," mused Khalid. "Later I could always find a second, more suitable wife who would perform the state duties."

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