



THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CHRISTMAS BABY

Marion Lennox

 Cherish™

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The Billionaire's Christmas Baby

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The maid, the billionaire...and the babyHotel maid Sunny Raye only went to Max Grayland's hotel suite to clean—and found herself calming a tiny abandoned baby! With just days until Christmas, the gorgeous but bewildered billionaire demands Sunny help him care for Phoebe over the holidays. She agrees—but only if they spend Christmas with her family!Max is totally out of his comfort zone, but warm-hearted Sunny is a revelation. And Max finds he wants more than a nanny for Phoebe...he wants Sunny to lighten his life for ever.

The maid, the billionaire...and the baby

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Phoebe was still awake, nestled in his arms, gazing upward as if trying to make sense of this man who was holding her.

This man sitting beside Sunny.

They were sitting at the end of the pew, in case Phoebe decided to roar and they had to take her out.

Anyone looking at her and at Max might think...

Don't go there, Sunny thought. This was a fantasy. There'd never been time or space for her to think of a love life.

She gazed down at her hands, at the lines and calluses formed by years of hard work, at the absence of rings. She stretched them out and suddenly, astonishingly, Max's fingers were closing over hers.

'Good hands,' he said in an undervoice. 'Honourable hands.'

She should... She didn't know what she should do. Had he known what she was thinking? How many hands had this man seen that looked like hers? *None*.

She should tug her hand back and the contact would be over. That was the sensible course, the only course, but she couldn't quite manage it. His clasp was warm and strong. Good.

Fantasy enveloped her again for a moment, insidious in its sweetness. To keep sitting here, to feel the peace of this moment, this place, this man...

The Billionaire's Christmas Baby

Marion Lennox



www.millsandboon.co.uk

MARION LENNOX has written more than one hundred romances, and is published in over a hundred countries and thirty languages. Her multiple awards include the prestigious RITA® Award (twice), and the *RT Book Reviews* Career Achievement Award for 'a body of work which makes us laugh and teaches us about love'. Marion adores her family, her kayak, her dog— and lying on the beach with a book someone else has written. Heaven!

Praise for

Marion Lennox

'The story is one of a kind and very interesting. Once I started, I couldn't stop.'

—Goodreads on

Stranded with the Secret Billionaire

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

SHE'D FORGOTTEN GRAN'S cherry liqueur chocolates.

No!

Sunny Raye abandoned her scrubbing and gave in to the horror of her memory lapse. The discount store near home brought in mountains of chocolates for Christmas. They were cheap and delicious, but they'd be sold out by now.

It was ten at night and she was bone-weary. She'd agreed to work overtime because she needed the pay—Christmas was expensive—but all she wanted now was her bed. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and she was rostered to work again from eight to five. Where could she find time to buy Gran's chocolates, and how much would she need to spend?

Aaagh!

'How long does it take to scrub one floor?'

Uh-oh.

The stain on the tiles was hard against the bathroom door. She hadn't been able to shut it, which meant she was in full view of the guest sitting at the desk. He was annoyed? The feeling was mutual. This was a job for Maintenance, not for a scrubbing brush.

But Sunny's job was to make the guest feel that this was a scrubbed stain rather than a missed-by-Housekeeping stain. Keep him happy at all costs—that had been the order. When Max Grayland was in town the hotel fell over itself to make sure all was right with his world. Heads would roll over this stain, but it wouldn't be her head.

Enough. She dried the floor with care, then rose. Oh, her knees hurt, but perky must be maintained.

'I'm so sorry, sir,' she told him brightly, as if this was the start of her shift rather than two hours after she was supposed to be gone. 'It appears to be a bleach stain, possibly from hair dye. It should have been noticed and I apologise that it wasn't. I can arrange for the tile to be replaced now, if you like.'

Ross in Maintenance would kill her, but she had to offer.

'However, it'll involve noise and you may wish us to leave it until morning,' she added. 'Meanwhile, I can assure you it's clean and totally hygienic.'

'Leave it then.' Max Grayland pushed the documents he'd been working on aside and rose, and she sensed he was almost as weary as she was. With reason? She knew he'd flown in from New York this morning, but Max Grayland crossed the globe at will. Surely travelling in first-class luxury prevented jet lag?

How would she know? Sunny had never flown in her life.

But he did look tired. Rumpled.

He was a financial whiz, she'd been told, a man in his mid-thirties, at the top of his game. The media described him as a legal eagle, and that was what he looked like. He was tall, dark and imposing, with deep, hooded eyes and a body that seemed toned to the point of impossible.

He was still wearing the clothes he'd worn at check-in but he'd ditched his jacket, unbuttoned the top of his shirt and rolled his sleeves. His after-five shadow looked like after five from the night before.

What was a man like this doing looking exhausted? Didn't he have minions to jump to his every whim?

He stalked over and stared at the stain as if it personally offended him, but she had a feeling he was seeing far more than the stain. He raked his dark hair and his look of exhaustion deepened.

'Leave it,' he growled again. 'Thanks for your help.'

That was something at least. Most of the guests who stayed in the penthouse didn't bother to say thank you.

'I'm sorry I can't do more.' She edged past him, which was a bit problematic. She was carrying a mop and bucket and she had to edge sideways. She didn't edge far enough and her body brushed his.

She smelled the faint scent of aftershave, something incredibly masculine, nice...

Sexy.

Good one, Sunny, she thought. This morning her hair had been tied into a neat knot, but the knot had loosened hours ago and she hadn't had time to redo it. After a day's hard physical work in the hotel's often overheated rooms, her curls were limp and plastered against her face. Her uniform was stained. She knew she smelled of cleaning products—and she was suddenly acutely aware that the guy she was brushing past was a hunk.

A billionaire hunk.

Get a grip.

'Goodnight, sir,' she said primly and headed for the door. For some reason she wanted to scuttle. What was he doing, unsettling her like this?

Cherry liqueur chocolates, she told herself firmly. Focus on imperatives.

But a rap at the door made her pause.

Her training told her to melt into the background, which was impossible when she was in his room, carrying an armload of cleaning gear.

'What the...?' Behind her, Max Grayland growled his displeasure. 'I don't need anyone else fussing over this. Tell your people to leave it.'

He was assuming it'd be the manager, coming to grovel his apologies. She hadn't reported that she couldn't fix the stain, though. Brent wouldn't be here yet.

But access to the penthouse suite floor was security locked. Stray visitors didn't make it up here.

'You're not expecting anyone, sir?'

'I'm not,' he snapped. 'Tell them to go away.' And he retreated behind his desk.

There was nothing for it. She put down her mop and bucket, pushed her stray curls back behind her ears—gee, that'd make a difference—and opened the door.

And almost fainted.

She knew the woman in front of her. Of course she did—this was a face that was emblazoned on billboards, on buses, on perfume advertisements nationwide. Exotic and glamorous, Isabelle Steinway's pouty face was her fortune. She was famous for...well, for being famous. Her fame had just started to fade when news of her pregnancy had hit the tabloids, and for the last few months the media had been going nuts. There'd been gossip galore, fed by Isabelle's publicity machine—a secret father, the body beautiful doing all the 'right things' and selling those 'right things' as exclusives...

And then nothing. For the last few weeks Isabelle had inexplicably gone to ground. There'd been a publicity statement that she wished for privacy for the birth, which was a huge ask for the public to believe.

But she was here now, glamorous as ever, in a tight-fitting frock that made a mockery of the fact that she must have just given birth.

A night porter was standing behind her, looking anxious. Nigel must have been badgered into allowing her up here, Sunny thought, but who could blame him? The media reported that what Isabelle wanted, Isabelle got, and one pimply-faced teenage porter wouldn't be enough to stand in her way. Nigel looked terrified. And deeply unhappy.

He was pushing a pram and the pram was wailing.

But Isabelle was ignoring the pram. The moment Sunny opened the door, she swept in, brushing her aside as if she was nothing. As indeed she should be. She should disappear, but Nigel was blocking her way. He'd pushed the pram into the doorway, stopping her leaving, and his gaze was that of a rabbit caught in headlights.

They were both stuck.

She might as well turn and watch the tableau in front of her.

The penthouse had been decorated for Christmas. A massive tree sparkled behind them. There were tasteful bud lights hanging from the windows, and through those windows the lights of Sydney Harbour glittered like a fairy tale.

The two centrepieces in this tableau were also like something out of a fairy tale. Yes, Max looked exhausted, but this man would look good after a week in the bush fighting to survive. The warrior image suited him—business clothes seemed almost inappropriate.

And Isabelle? She was wearing a silver-sequined frock that would have cost Sunny a year's wages or more. How had she got into it so soon after giving birth? There must be a whalebone corset somewhere under there, Sunny thought. Her blonde hair was shoulder-length, every curl exquisitely positioned. Her crimson mouth was painted into a heart shape. Everything about her seemed perfect.

Except the pram behind her. The wail coming from its depths was growing increasingly desperate.

But Isabelle seemed oblivious to the wail. She was focusing on Max, her glower designed to skewer at twenty paces.

'She's yours,' she spat and Sunny watched Max react with blank incredulity.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Do you think I want her?' Isabelle's voice was vituperative. 'I never wanted her in the first place. Your father... "Have a baby and I'll marry you," he said. "You'll be taken care of for life. You'll never have to work again."' Her voice was a mock imitation, a vicious recount of words obviously said long ago. 'And now...your father's will... Yeah, he changed it, like he promised he would. His whole fortune for this kid, held in trust by me until the age of twenty-one. But he never said anything to me about a son! I would have aborted. No, I'd have never got pregnant in the first place. So now he's dead and the will says everything goes to his youngest son. But there's only one son, and that's you. You get it all, and my lawyer says I'll even have to file a claim for this one's maintenance. Do you think I slept with a seventy-eight-year-old egomaniac and carried his kid for maintenance?'

Her voice ended on a screech. She sounded out of control, Sunny thought—there was real suffering under there. Real betrayal.

She looked again at Max and saw blank amazement.

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' he managed.

'So welcome to the real world,' Isabelle snapped, fighting to get her voice back to a reasonable level—which was tricky seeing she was talking over a baby's screams. 'She was born last week. Two days after your father's heart attack. You can do a paternity test if you like—I don't care. She's your father's. Her papers are with her. Everything's in the pram. Her name's Phoebe because Phoebe's the

midwife who delivered her and when I said I didn't care she sounded shocked so I said I'd call her after her. But now...if you think I'll sit at your father's funeral like a grieving widow you have another think coming. My lawyers will be contacting you for compensation.'

'Isabelle...' Max sounded gobsmacked. 'I'm so sorry...'

'I don't want your sympathy,' Isabelle hissed. 'Your father lied through his teeth to persuade me to have this kid and I might have known... But it's over. There's a house party up north starting tomorrow, with people who really matter. I have no intention of taking that...' she gestured at the howling pram '...with me. You inherited everything your father possessed, so she's yours.'

'You're planning to abandon your baby?' Max's voice was filled with shock, but also the beginnings of anger. 'Yours and my father's baby?'

'Of course I'm abandoning it. It was a business contract and he broke it.'

'So he planned a son—why? To keep me from inheriting?'

'If he'd told me that I might have even done something,' Isabelle snapped. 'For the amount of money he promised me, I could have fixed it. Sex selection's illegal in this country but he had enough money to pay for me to go abroad. But the stupid old fool didn't even have the sense to be upfront.'

'You know he had a brain tumour. He died of a heart attack but he had cancer. You know he wasn't thinking straight.'

'I don't know anything and I care less,' Isabelle snapped. 'All I know is that I'm leaving. My lawyers will be in touch.' She whirled back to the door, blocked now by the goggling Nigel and the pram. 'Get out of my way.'

Nigel, shocked beyond belief, edged the pram aside so Isabelle could shove her way past. She stalked the four steps to the elevator and hit the button.

The elevator slid open as if it had been waiting.

'Isabelle!' Max strode forward, but the terrified Nigel had swung the pram back into the doorway and bolted, straight through the fire door.

The pram held Max back for precious moments.

The elevator doors slid closed and the fire door slammed.

Isabelle and Nigel were gone.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRE DOOR looked very, very appealing.

Cleaning staff were supposed to be invisible.

'Enter discreetly. If guests are present, act as if you're a shadow. Listen to nothing and if there's the slightest sense of unease disappear and go back later. If there's a problem call Housekeeping and have a guest relations manager handle it.'

That had been the mantra drilled into her two years ago when she'd taken this job and Sunny liked it that way. There was too much drama and worry in her personal life to want any more at work.

So, like Nigel, she should bolt for the fire door. Except that would mean pushing past Max, pushing past the pram, possibly even dripping her mop on both.

He'd have to move. He'd have to tug the pram inside, so she could edge out.

Meanwhile, she tried melting against the wall, acting like part of the plaster, hoping he wouldn't notice her.

Though there was a sneaky little voice that was thinking, Whoa, did I really see what I just saw? Where was a camera when she needed it? The media would go nuts over what had just happened.

Right. And she'd lose her job and she wouldn't get one again in the service industry and what else was she trained for? She'd left school at fifteen and there'd only been sporadic attendance before then. She was fit for nothing except blending into the wall, which she'd done before and she had every intention of doing now.

Max didn't seem to notice her. Why would he? He'd just been handed a bombshell.

He walked cautiously forward and peered into the pram. The wails increased to the point of desperation and the look on Max's face matched exactly.

She expected him to back away in alarm. Instead he leaned over and scooped a white bundle into his arms. The wails didn't cease. He stood, looking down into the crumpled face of a newborn, and something in his own face twisted.

The pram was still blocking her path but with the baby out of it she could pull it to one side. She could leave.

She edged forward and Max turned as if he suddenly realised he had company.

'You...'

She was still standing with her mop and bucket. Her cleaner's uniform was damp down the front. Her curls were escaping from her regulation knot. She looked nothing like the image of immaculate efficiency the hotel insisted she maintain. Brent would have kittens if he could see her now, she thought, but there was nothing she could do about it.

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you know anything about babies?'

There was a loaded question. The answer was more than she wanted to think about, but she wasn't going there.

'If you need help, you might ring Housekeeping,' she suggested, clutching her mop and bucket like a shield and lance. 'Or I can ask them to send someone up.' She listened to the wails and softened just a little. 'She sounds like she needs feeding,' she suggested. 'You might check the pram for formula, or Housekeeping could provide some. Goodnight, sir...' And she edged forward.

She didn't make it two steps. He was in front of her, blocking her way.

'You're not going anywhere,' he growled. 'Take her.'

'I'm the cleaner.' She wasn't putting her mop and bucket down for the world.

'Until I find someone else, you're here to help. You stay until I get Housekeeping up here. Put that gear down and take her.'

'Sir, she's your baby...'

'She is not my baby.'

It was a deep, guttural snap that shocked them both. It appeared to shock even the baby. There was a moment's stunned silence while all of them, baby included, took a breath and reloaded.

Max recovered first. Maybe he had the most to lose. He strode to the door, slammed it shut, pushed the pram in front of it and then walked straight to her. He held the bundle out, pressing it against her.

She could hold her mop and bucket with all the dignity she could muster, or she could take this bundle of misery, a crumpled newborn.

Did she have a choice? What's new? she thought bitterly. When there's a mess, hand it to Sunny. She set the cleaning aids aside and took the bundle. As if on cue, it—she—started wailing again.

'I'll ring Housekeeping,' Max snapped. 'Stop her crying.'

Stop her crying. Right. In what universe did this man live? A universe where babies had off switches?

But as he stalked to the phone she relented and peered into the pram.

There was a bag tucked in the side. She investigated with hope.

A folder with documents. A tin of formula. A couple of bottles. Two diapers.

Okay, this baby's mother wasn't completely heartless. Or...she was pretty heartless, but Sunny had coped with worse.

She sighed and headed for the penthouse's kitchenette. She'd seen Max make himself a hot drink a few minutes ago. Blessedly, he'd overfilled the kettle, so she had boiled water. She balanced baby in one hand, scoop and bottle in the other, made it up, then ran cold water in the sink to immerse the base of the bottle to cool it.

The wailing continued but she could hear Max in the background on the phone. ‘What do you mean, no one? I want a babysitter. Now. Find someone. An outside agency. I don’t care. Just do it.’

A babysitter at ten o’clock, the night before Christmas Eve? Christmas was on a Sunday this year, which meant today was Friday. The whole world—except the likes of hotel cleaners—would have started Christmas holidays today. Celebrations would be almost universal and every babysitting service would be stretched to the limit.

Good luck, she thought drily, but then she looked down into the baby’s face. Phoebe was tiny, her face creased in distress, her rosebud mouth working frantically. How long since she’d been fed?

This little one’s mother had handed her over without a backward glance. This man didn’t want her.

There were echoes of Sunny’s background all over the place here, and she didn’t like it one bit. She needed to leave.

She could feel sogginess under her hand. And the baby...smelled?

‘Get someone up here. Get me the manager.’ Max was barking into the phone, but she tuned it out. How long since this little one had been changed?

A tentative examination made her shudder. Ugh. She gave up on the thought of a simple change and headed for the bathroom. She stripped off all the baby’s clothes, then used the washbasin to clean her. The wailing was starting to sound exhausted, but the baby had enough strength to flail her legs in objection to the warm water.

But Sunny was an old hand. Washing was brisk and efficient. She had a replacement nappy but no change of clothes. No matter—she was warmed and dry. Sunny wrapped her expertly in one of the hotel’s fluffy towels, carried her back to the living room, checked the bottle, settled down on the settee—had she ever sat on anything so luxurious in her life?—and popped one teat into one desperate mouth.

Then finally the world settled. The silence was almost overwhelming.

Even Sunny was tempted to smile.

Such little things. A clean bottom. A feed. Deal with the basics and worry about tomorrow tomorrow. That had been Sunny’s mantra all her life and it served her still.

But now she had time to think.

Next on her list was getting out of here.

She glanced across at Max, still barking orders into the phone. He looked like a man at the peak of his powers, a business magnate accustomed to ordering minions at will. He was trying to summon minions now.

But there weren’t many Australian minions who’d drop everything at this hour to be at his beck and call.

It’s not my problem, she told herself and turned her attention back to the bundle in her arms.

She was a real newborn. A week old at most, Sunny thought, suddenly remembering Tom. Sunny had been nine years old when Tom was born. She remembered weeks where she couldn’t go to school, where she’d struggled with a colicky newborn, where she’d felt more trapped than she ever wanted to feel again.

But she wasn’t trapped now. This little one had a family and that family wasn’t her. What was she—half-sister to the man on the phone? She even looked like him, Sunny thought. Same dark hair. Same skin tone—she looked as if she’d spent some of her time in utero under a sun lamp.

Did she have the same nose? It was difficult to say, she decided. It was a cute nose.

She was a cute baby. Wrapped in her white towel, she looked very new, and totally defenceless. She was still sucking her bottle but desperation had faded and tiredness was starting to take over. Sunny could feel the little body relax, drifting towards sleep.

Great. She could pop her back into the pram and leave.

‘She’s going to sleep?’

The deep voice, the hand on her shoulder made her start with shock. She hadn't heard him leave the desk and walk over to her.

He was standing behind her, staring down at the baby.

'She was well overdue for a feed,' she managed. Why had he put his hand on her shoulder? To hold her down? To keep her here?

Or maybe he simply wanted contact, reassurance that he wasn't alone.

He was alone, she thought. She was leaving.

'Can I ask you to keep quiet about what's happened?' he asked.

'Sorry?' Her mind had been heading in all sorts of directions, one of them being the way she was reacting to this man's touch. How inappropriate was that? Somehow she managed to focus.

'I work on the staff here,' she managed. 'I signed a confidentiality agreement.'

'And you'll keep it? The media will pay for a story like this. If they make you an offer... I'll meet it.'

'I said I signed a confidentiality agreement,' she retorted, flushing. 'You think I'd break it for money?'

'I have no idea what you'd do.' He lifted a corner of the towel so he could see her name, embroidered discreetly under the hotel logo on her uniform. 'Sunny Raye. What sort of name is that?'

'Mine.' She was starting to feel a bit glowery.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be personal.'

'That's good. There's no need to be personal. I'm a cleaner and I need to go back to work.'

The bottle was finished and laid aside. Phoebe's eyes were closed. Her tiny rosebud mouth was still making involuntary twitches, as if the bottle was still there.

She was beautiful, Sunny thought, but then she'd always been a sucker for a baby. A sucker for being needed?

Of course. Wasn't that the story of her whole life?

'I'll pop her back in the pram,' she suggested. She wanted to rise but the hand was still on her shoulder. The grip tightened.

Uh-oh. It was pressure.

'You can't leave.'

Watch me, she thought. And then she thought of the discreet little disc attached at her waist, like an extra button on her uniform. A security disc.

Even at exclusive hotels—and this was surely the most exclusive in Sydney—incidents happened. Guests drank too much. They were away from home. The normal rules often didn't seem to apply.

Female staff were taught how to back away fast from situations, but as a last resort there was the disc. Three pushes and she'd have security guards here in moments.

Protecting her from this man?

He wasn't harassing her for himself, though. He needed her for his baby.

Right, and she had chocolate cherry liqueurs to find and sleep to have and gifts to wrap before she returned here for her Christmas Eve shift tomorrow. Harden up, girl, she told herself. Even use the security disc if you must. You're a cleaner. This is not your business.

She rose, despite the pressure of his hand. He released her—with real reluctance, it seemed—and stood back.

'She's fed and changed, sir,' she told him, facing him head-on. 'I'll pop her back into the pram if you like, but I need to go. Though...' A sudden pang of conscience made her add, 'I'll clean the bathroom before I go.'

'You just cleaned the bathroom.'

'Yes, sir,' she said woodenly and he frowned and opened the bathroom door. And recoiled.

'My giddy aunt...'

‘Yes, sir,’ she said primly. She used his distraction to slip her sleeping bundle back in the pram. The pram was a mess too, filled with forms, baby clutter, a stupid elephant mobile strung across the top. But this wasn’t her concern either. She pulled out the loose stuff and laid it on the floor. Already his swish suite was starting to look as if a bomb had hit it, but this guy should have a few hours’ peace to sort things out. ‘Would you like me to clean?’ she asked primly.

‘Of course.’

‘There will be a charge,’ she said. ‘The stain on the tiles was our responsibility, but extra cleaning for normal hotel use incurs an out-of-hours service fee.’

‘You’re charging me for cleaning?’ He sounded incredulous.

‘I’m sorry, sir.’ She glanced at her watch. She’d been here for almost an hour and it’d go on the hotel’s time sheets. If she wanted to be paid for overtime, she had to report it. And he had to pay.

‘That’s unreasonable.’

She was overtired. She was at the end of a stupidly long shift. She’d had enough.

‘Unreasonable for me to be paid for scrubbing? Really?’ So much for being a shadow. She let her glower have full sway. ‘I know, I’m just a money-hungry grub.’ Grub was the truth. She felt filthy. ‘But your decision shouldn’t be my business. I’ve done what I was sent to do, and more. Ring Housekeeping if you want the bathroom cleaned, and discuss charges with them. My shift is finished.’ And she took a deep breath and strode to the door, prepared to depart with as much dignity as she could muster.

She swung the door open, and Brent was there.

Brent. Assistant hotel manager. Guy on the way up. Obviously here to appease.

He looked at her and grub didn’t begin to describe the look he gave her. Okay, she was filthy. She’d been down on her knees scrubbing. She’d just tended one distressed baby. The wet splotches on her uniform—you try bathing a baby in a bathroom sink—could have been anything. Maybe they were ‘anything’. Maybe she smelled as well. Who knew? Who cared? She was over this.

‘What seems to be the problem, Miss Raye?’ Brent said, silky-smooth, and she thought, I am in so much trouble. Cleaning staff should never, ever be noticed, much less by the assistant manager of the entire hotel.

‘Sir, I was sent up to clean a stain in Mr Grayland’s bathroom.’ She hauled back on her temper, doing her best to make herself sound subservient. Yes, she’d let her anger hold sway for a moment but she needed this job. She needed to retreat fast. ‘I’ve done my best with the tiles but the stain needs Maintenance. I was about to report it, but before I could leave Mr Grayland requested urgent assistance with his baby.’

‘It’s not my baby!’

She ignored the savage growl from behind. She was too busy salvaging her career to care.

‘I’ll talk to you later,’ Brent told her, in the tone used the world over to convey menace to underlings when on the surface all had to be rosy. ‘Wait for me before you leave.’ And he turned to Max and put on his full managerial, ingratiating smile. ‘Now, sir...’

She was free. She’d have to wait in the change room for Brent to tell her what he thought of her but at least she was out of here. She grabbed her trusty mop and bucket and headed for the fire stairs. No elevator was going to be fast enough.

‘Stop her.’

‘Sir?’ Brent sounded confused. Sunny had almost reached the stairs. Almost gone...

‘If you’re here to tell me there’s no babysitting service available, I want this woman to stay,’ Max snapped. ‘And I’m prepared to pay whatever it takes to keep her.’

Brent hadn’t got where he was by being thick. Or slow. He’d got it in one. Her desperation to leave. Max’s desperation to have her stay. Without seeming to move, Brent was suddenly, seamlessly between Sunny and her precious stairwell.

Yikes.

‘Put your equipment down,’ he told her and once again she got that look of disdain. Brent was immaculate, smoothly urbane, doing what the guest needed. That he had to put himself so close to an actual cleaner was obviously distasteful in the extreme—that he had to talk to her was worse.

But he was blocking her path and he was making it clear she had no option. She put her mop and bucket down again but she wasn’t buying into whatever was happening. She put her hands behind her back, looked at the floor and waited. A good little cleaning lady...

‘Sir...’ With Sunny trapped, Brent turned back to Max. ‘We apologise but there is no babysitting service available. If you’d booked your baby in earlier...’

‘I didn’t have a baby earlier,’ Max snapped. ‘And I told you before—she’s not my baby.’

‘She’s his sister,’ Sunny muttered because she’d just spent twenty minutes cleaning and feeding a little girl and it suddenly seemed important—no, imperative—that someone laid claim to her. But as she said it, memories surfaced.

A social worker, taking Chloe from her arms. ‘You can’t take care of her, sweetheart.’

And Sunny yelling back with all the might of her small self. ‘But she’s my sister!’

Those memories weren’t appropriate now, but they were strong enough to make her lift her gaze to Max and look defiant. But his anger blazed back at her.

‘I asked you to keep quiet about what’s just happened,’ he snapped.

Right. She went back to staring at the floor, but not before she’d seen the stab of shock as she’d said the word sister. Not before she’d seen him glance back at the pram with a look that was suddenly uncertain.

Up until now his reaction had been one of shock and anger. Something had messed with his world and he needed to put it right. But now...his face suddenly showed a new emotion.

Sister...

What sort of family did this man have? Obviously there’d been friction between father and son. Where was the rest of his family?

Why did the word sister register with such shock?

But Brent was forging on, trying to make sense of what was happening. Focusing on the near target.

‘Mr Grayland had to ask you to be quiet?’ he demanded.

‘He’s talking of my confidentiality agreement,’ she told him, still staring at the floor. ‘He doesn’t wish me to talk of what’s happened outside this room.’

‘Or inside either,’ Max snapped and amazingly Brent came to her defence.

‘Miss Raye is required to report anything that happens in this hotel to me. But of course the confidentiality agreement extends to me as well. I’d like Miss Raye to leave. She has work to be getting on with, and as a cleaner she can hardly be of any use to you.’

‘But you don’t have a babysitter for me.’

‘No, sir.’

‘And Miss Raye knows how to care for babies.’

Brent sent her an uncertain glance. He wasn’t sure where to go with this. ‘Is this true, Miss Raye?’

‘Please...’ She needed to get out of here. She spoke directly to her boss. ‘I’m at the end of a double shift. If you’ll excuse me...’

‘But you do know about babies?’

Did she know about babies? It was practically the only thing she did know. But now wasn’t the time for hollow laughter. Be invisible. Disappear.

‘She does,’ Max said, suddenly softening. ‘She washed her and fed her.’

‘Miss Raye?’ Brent reacted with shock. ‘That’s not in your list of duties. Our insurance doesn’t cover...’

'Damn your insurance.' Max's anger flared again, but once again he turned to Sunny. Who was still desperately looking at the floor. 'Miss Raye, you obviously know how to care for a baby. She's sleeping now. You're at the end of a double shift? You must be tired.' He gazed around the suite and she could almost see cogs whirring. 'This living room has a massive settee. Your manager... Mr...' He looked in query at Brent.

'Cottee,' Brent told him smoothly. 'Brent Cottee.'

'Thank you. Mr Cottee can no doubt send up nightwear, toothbrush, anything you need to stay the night. My bedroom has an en suite bathroom so you can be separate. Mr Cottee, I'm prepared to pay full babysitting services for the night, doubled, plus the same amount to Miss Raye personally.' He looked uncertainly back at the pram but forged on, plan in place. 'This could suit.'

'Suit who?' Sunny muttered.

'Suit me,' Max said smoothly. This obviously wasn't a man who let objections trouble his path. 'I can't believe money wouldn't be useful at this time of the year.'

Was he kidding? Of course it would. It'd be glorious.

And the alternative? By the time she got home it'd be midnight and she was due to start work again at eight. Gran and Pa wouldn't even realise she hadn't come home.

'The insurance...' Brent bleated but it was a weak bleat. He looked almost hopeful.

'I'll sign a waiver,' Max told him. 'Miss Raye might not have childcare credentials but I've seen enough to know I want her.'

'You're on duty again tomorrow?' Brent demanded.

'Yes, sir, at eight.'

He nodded. 'Then it seems satisfactory.' The fact that she'd just done a double shift, that she could well be up all night with a newborn and she had to work tomorrow seemed to worry neither of them. But then she thought...double money. A double shift today, payment for a double shift tonight and then tomorrow's shift... She could almost pay for Tom's tooth to be capped with that. Tom was working all summer to pay his uni fees but the money wouldn't stretch to dentistry.

And baby Phoebe was asleep. With luck, it'd be just a couple of quick feeds during the night.

So... She had her back to the wall but she also had Max Grayland at her mercy.

She could try.

So she tilted her chin and met his gaze square-on.

'I agree,' she told him. 'On one more condition.'

'Which is?'

'I need the biggest, fanciest box of cherry liqueur chocolates that money can buy, gift-wrapped and delivered here before I leave work tomorrow. If you can find me those, we have a deal.'

'You're kidding,' Max said, astounded.

'Miss Raye...' A hissed warning from Brent.

But she ignored him. Tomorrow night would be crazy. Christmas Eve would be in full swing before she got home. She'd have cooking, gift-wrapping, hugging, greeting, chaos... And Gran was expecting her chocolates.

'That or nothing,' she told him and Max met her look. A muscle twitched at the side of his mouth. For a moment she even saw a twinkle. Laughter?

'They're that important?'

'That or nothing,' she repeated and the twitch turned into a smile.

It transformed his face. She'd thought he seemed harsh, autocratic, bleak, but suddenly he was laughing at her...no, with her, she thought, because his smile seemed almost kind. His gaze was still on hers, holding her, blocking out the rest of the world.

Oh, my... It was enough to take a girl's breath away.

Actually, it had taken her breath away. She needed to find herself a nice, quiet place and remember how to get it back.

But Max had moved on. He turned to Brent. 'Mr Cottee? Cherry liqueur chocolates?'

'I'm sure Miss Raye doesn't mean it,' Brent said.

Sunny opened her mouth to retort but she didn't need to. Max got in before her.

'Miss Raye doesn't have to explain,' Max said smoothly. 'It's me who requires it. The biggest, fanciest box of cherry liqueur chocolates money can buy, delivered to this suite before Miss Raye finishes work tomorrow.'

At least this was easy. This hotel seemingly had links to every service industry in town. The cost would be high but Brent knew enough not to quibble. 'Yes, sir. We can do that.'

'And a qualified child carer to take over from Miss Raye in the morning.'

'Yes, sir,' Brent said and maybe Max heard the uncertainty in Brent's voice or maybe he didn't. Sunny did, but she wasn't saying anything. Tomorrow's worries were for Max, not for her.

'Then that's settled,' Max said smoothly. He glanced at his watch. 'I have a conference call coming in from New York in five minutes. I'll work from my bedroom. Miss Raye, you can use the separate bathroom out here, the kitchenette and anything you need from room service. Mr Cottee will no doubt organise it. I'll see you in the morning.'

So that was it. A child, dumped...

No.

'Say goodnight to her,' she managed.

'What?'

'You heard. Say goodnight to your sister.'

'She's asleep.'

'Yes, and you're family. Who knows what she can hear or not hear, but it seems to me you're all the family she's got. Say goodnight to her.'

'Miss Raye...' Brent sounded outraged but she was past caring. Once again she met Max's gaze full-on, defiant, and memories were all around.

Her childish voice from the past. 'She's your baby. You should feed her...' And her mother slapping her hard and slamming the door as she left.

This man wasn't in a position to slap her. She could still walk away. This was her only chance—maybe baby Phoebe's only chance—to find herself someone who cared.

And once again something twisted on Max Grayland's face. He gave her a look she didn't understand, then wheeled and walked back to the pram.

'Goodnight,' he muttered.

'Properly,' she hissed. 'Touch her. Say it properly.'

'Miss Raye!' Brent was practically exploding but she wasn't backing down.

'Do it.'

And Max sent her a look that was almost afraid. There was a long silence. He knew what she was demanding, she thought, and he was afraid of it.

But finally he turned back to the pram. He gazed down for a long moment at the sleeping baby—a newborn, who was his half-sister.

And his expression changed yet again. He put a finger down and stroked the tiny face, a feather touch, a blessing.

'Goodnight,' he said again and then looked back at Sunny. 'Satisfied?'

'That'll do for now,' she said smugly and smiled.

The look he sent her was pure bafflement. But then his phone rang. He snagged it from his pocket, glanced at the screen and swore. 'My conference call...'

'We'll take care of everything, sir,' Brent said smoothly. 'Take your call. Goodnight.'

'Thank you,' he said formally and, with a last uncertain glance at Sunny, he turned, walked into his grand bedroom and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT HAD WOKEN HIM? Probably nothing, he conceded. His body was still on New York time, even if in reality his body was lying in a king-sized bed in a suite overlooking Sydney Harbour.

Four a.m.

Today was the day he'd bury his father.

Nothing less important than this would have dragged him half a world from New York for Christmas. His usual method of coping with the festive season was to have his housekeeper fill his apartment with food, set himself up with the company's financial statements and use the break to conduct an overall assessment. It was a satisfying process, even if it meant a nasty shock for the occasional employee returning to work in the New Year.

But now... His mobile laptop didn't allow him to access the innermost secrets of the Grayland Corporation. Too risky. He'd brought some work but it wouldn't take all his concentration—and he needed his concentration to be taken.

His father's funeral...

And a baby sister?

What had the old man been thinking?

He knew his father's illness had made him confused over the last year. There'd never been any love lost between them at the best of times, but Colin Grayland had been proud of his company and fiercely patriarchal. There'd never been any hint that he'd disinherit Max, but that had been mainly through lack of choice, and for the last twelve months the old man had been obsessively secretive.

Max had learned of Isabelle's existence two days ago. As sole heir, the lawyers had transferred his father's personal banking details to him before he'd left New York. A quick perusal had shown a massive payment to Isabelle almost a year ago. Then another seven months back—was that when Isabelle had her pregnancy confirmed?—and then regular deposits until the last few days of the old man's life.

He'd assumed Isabelle had been his father's mistress but the amounts had been staggering, and now he knew why.

Colin Grayland had paid for a baby. A son, if Isabelle was to be believed, though he must have been too confused to think of the ramifications, or the possibility, of a daughter.

And now he was landed with a baby. His sister?

The thought was doing his head in. He had no idea how to face it.

Lawyers? Surely it was illegal to dump a baby. Isabelle would have to take the baby back.

But she didn't want her.

So adoption? For a baby who was...his sister?

He couldn't think straight. He needed a drink, badly.

Was he kidding? It was four in the morning.

Yeah, but it was midday in New York. He travelled often and his rule for coping with jet lag was not to convert to local time unless he was staying for more than a few days. So his body was telling him he'd stayed up late and now he'd overslept. It was thus time for lunch and a man could have a whisky with lunch.

He wouldn't mind a sandwich either. Room service was his go-to option in such circumstances but he couldn't wake the pair in the next room.

He didn't want to think about the pair in the next room.

But the next room also held the minibar. A packet of crisps and a whisky would set him up to sit and write the final version of what he had to say at his father's funeral.

He definitely needed a whisky to write what had to be said.

If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. That had been a mantra drummed into him by some long ago nanny, and it normally held true, but a huge section of Australia's business community would turn out. They'd be expecting praise for a man who'd made his money sucking the resources of a country dry.

He did need a whisky, but that'd involved the minibar. Which involved walking into the next room.

They were in the next room. Sleeping.

Or...had something woken him? Maybe they were awake and he was wasting time, hanging out for a snack. Besides, he was paying her.

Do it.

The minibar was by the door through to the elevators. Moonlight from the open drapes showed the way.

He moved soundlessly across the room.

And stopped.

A sliver of moonlight was casting a beam of light across the settee.

The woman—Sunny Raye, her name tag had said—was sleeping. The settee had been made up as a bed, loaded with the hotel's luxury sheets and duvet and pillows.

They weren't being appreciated.

The pillows were on the floor. The duvet had been discarded as well, so her bedding consisted of an under-sheet and an open weave cotton blanket pulled to her waist.

Having discarded the pillows, she was using her arm to support her head. That'd give her a crick neck or a stiff shoulder in the morning, he thought, but he was distracted.

She was wearing an oversized golfing T-shirt with the hotel's logo emblazoned on the chest. Her curls, caught up in a knot when he'd last seen her, were now splayed over the white sheet. Brown with a hint of copper. Shoulder-length. Tangled.

Nice.

Earlier he'd thought she was in her thirties. Her face had worn the look he often saw on hotel staff at the lower end of the pay scale—pale from not enough sunlight, weary, worn from hard physical work.

Now, though, he revised his age guess downward. She looked younger, peaceful in sleep, even vulnerable?

And then a faint stir in the crook of her arm had him focusing to her far side.

The baby was asleep beside her.

In what universe...? Even he knew this!

'What do you think you're doing?' The exclamation was out before he could stop himself. She jerked awake, staring up, as if unsure where she was, what she was doing, what he was.

She looked terrified.

He took a couple of fast steps back to give her space. He didn't apologise, though. He might have scared her but he was paying for childcare. He wanted childcare—not a baby suffocated in sleep.

'She shouldn't be sleeping with you,' he said, louder than he should because there were suddenly emotions everywhere. He shouldn't care. Or should he care? Of course he should because this baby was his sister, but that was something he didn't have head space to think about. The idea, though, made him angrier. 'I know little about babies but even I know it's dangerous to sleep in the same bed,' he snapped. 'Surely you know it too.'

He saw the confusion of sleep disappear, incredulity take its place. She pushed herself up on her elbow, making a futile effort to push her tumbling curls from her eyes. The baby slept on beside her, neatly swaddled, lying on her back, eyes blissfully closed.

'You want an apology?' she demanded and an anger that matched his was in her voice. 'It's not going to happen. I'm a cleaner, not a nanny.'

'I'm paying you to care for her.'

'Which I'm doing to the best of my ability. Sack me if you don't like it. Look after your baby yourself.'

'I might have to if you won't.'

And the anger in her face turned to full scale fury. All traces of sleep were gone. ‘Might?’ she demanded. ‘Might? How much danger would she have to be in before you showed you care enough to do that?’ She rose to face him. She was wearing T-shirt and knickers but nothing else. Her legs were long and thin and her bare feet on the plush carpet made her seem strangely vulnerable. His impression of her age did another descent. ‘You want me to leave?’

‘I want you to do what you’re being paid for.’

‘Believe it or not, I am.’ She glared her fury. ‘Your sister’s sleeping on a firm settee that has no cracks in the cushioning and a sloping back that’s too firm to smother her. See the lovely soft settee cushions? They’re over there. See my pillows and my nice fluffy duvet? They’re over there too. So I’m sleeping on a rock-hard settee with no cushions and no duvet.’

‘Because...’

‘Because the moron who set up Phoebe’s pram filled it with a feather mattress, which is far more dangerous to a newborn than how I’ve arranged things. The mattress is stuck in the pram. Did you notice? Of course not. But I did when I checked her before I went to sleep. Some idiot’s screwed in an elephant mobile—for a newborn!—and they’ve caught the fabric of the mattress. I’d need to rip the mattress to get it out and feathers would go everywhere and you’d probably make me pay for it. Housekeeping’s up to their ears in work and it would’ve taken them an hour to get me a cot, even if there was one available, which I doubt. I didn’t fancy putting her to sleep on the floor and by the time I’d figured all that out I was tired and over it so she slept with me. She’s been as safe as I could make her. But take over, by all means. I’ve a crick in my arm like you wouldn’t believe. It’s been over four hours since she fed so she’s likely to wake up any minute but she has formula and the instructions are on the tin. Forget the money. I couldn’t give a toss. I’m leaving.’

There was a stunned silence. He stared at the settee, bereft of anything soft. He looked at the still miraculously sleeping Phoebe.

He looked at the furious, tired, overworked woman in front of him and he felt a sweep of shame. He was way out of his comfort zone and he knew enough to realise he had to back off.

‘I apologise.’

‘Of course you do. You’ve given me a lecture. Now you’re expecting to go back to your nice comfy bed and leave me holding the baby. I don’t think so.’ She was a ball of fury, standing in her bare feet in the near-dark, venting her fury. Righteous fury.

‘I could double the chocolates,’ he said, feeling helpless.

‘You think you can buy me with chocolates?’

‘I thought I already had.’

‘Get stuffed,’ she told him and flicked on the table lamp and started searching among the discarded bedding for her uniform.

And, as if on cue, the baby woke.

Phoebe. His sister.

She didn’t cry but he was attuned to her, and the moment her eyes flickered open he noticed.

She was so tiny. So fragile. She was swaddled in a soft wrap, all white. Her hair was black.

Her eyes were dark too.

She looked nothing like Isabelle.

She was all his father.

She was all...him?

Dear heaven...

‘The formula’s on the sink,’ Sunny said, sulkily now, as if she thought she was misbehaving. ‘Make sure the bottle’s clean and the water’s been boiled.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You don’t know what you can do until you have to. Believe me, I know.’ She snagged her uniform from the floor and headed for the bathroom. ‘She’s all yours.’

And, as if the idea terrified her, Phoebe opened her mouth and started to wail.

‘Well,’ Sunny said, over her shoulder. ‘Pick her up.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ She reached the bathroom and closed the door firmly behind her.

Help...

The baby’s wails escalated, from sad bleats to a full-throated roar in seconds. How could such a beautiful, perfect wee thing turn into an angry, red-faced ball of desperation?

Was it the thought of being left with him? He knew nothing of babies. Zip.

This was his sister. Half-sister, he reminded himself, but it didn’t help.

The bathroom door was still firmly closed.

Somehow he’d sacked his babysitter for no reason.

How could he have thought she’d been unsafe? Sunny had her as safe as she could make her. She’d checked her before she’d gone to sleep. She’d noticed the too-soft mattress.

He hadn’t.

Tentatively he lifted the wailing bundle into his arms. Even the movement seemed to soothe her, and her sobs eased. Did she sense then how close she was to being abandoned?

The bathroom door opened again. Sunny stood there, still ruffled by sleep, but back in her stained uniform, her sensible shoes, her workday gear.

‘Where will you go?’ he asked, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘Home.’

‘Where’s home?’

‘Out west. Because there’s no public transport at four a.m. it’s an hour’s bike ride but that’s none of your business. I have no idea why I’m telling you.’

‘Stay.’

‘In your dreams.’

‘Sunny, I’m sorry,’ he said and he was. Deeply sorry. He looked at her tilted chin, her weary pride, her humiliation, and he felt a shame so deep it threatened to overwhelm him. That she was tired and overworked he had no doubt. Hotel cleaners were a race apart from the likes of him. They were shadows in the background of his world.

This one was suddenly front and centre.

And then he had a thought. A bad one.

‘You know about babies.’ The words were suddenly hard to form. ‘Are you...? Do you...?’

She got it before he could find the words. ‘You mean do I have my own baby strapped to my bike, waiting for me to finish my shift? Or left in a kitchen drawer with a bottle of formula laced with gin?’ She gave a snort of mirthless laughter. ‘Hardly. But I’ve raised four, or maybe I should say I’ve been there for them while they raised themselves. They’re grown up now, almost independent, apart from Tom’s teeth. But that’s my problem and you have your own. Goodnight and good luck.’ She headed for the door.

But he was before her, striding forward with a speed born of desperation. Putting his body between her and the door. But her words were still hanging in the air even as he prevented her leaving.

Four? He thought of how old she was, and how young she must have started, and he thought of a world that was as removed from his as another planet.

And she got that too. She gave a sardonic grin. ‘Yep, I started mothering when I was five, with four babies by the time I was nine. Life got busy for a while, and I admit I even co-slept. Not just with one baby—sometimes all five of us were in the same bed. But, hey, they’re all healthy and your Phoebe’s still alive so maybe I’m not such a failure. Now, if you’d let me leave...’

He didn’t understand but now wasn’t the time to ask questions. ‘Please,’ he said, doing his best to sound humble. ‘Stay.’

‘You can cope.’

'I probably can,' he admitted. 'If you refuse then I'll pay for a taxi to take you home and to bring you back tomorrow.' He hesitated. 'But, to be honest, it's Phoebe who needs you. She shouldn't be left with someone so inept.'

She hesitated, obviously torn between sense and pride. It was four in the morning. Even in a taxi it'd take time for her to get home, he thought. She was weary and she had to be back here again in a few hours.

Logic should win, but he could also sense something else, an anger that didn't stem from what had just happened.

He was replaying things she'd said. 'How much danger would she have to be in before you showed you care?' She thought he didn't care and she was right. He had nothing invested in this baby. Tomorrow he'd see lawyers, come to some arrangement, pay whatever it took to reunite her with her mother.

Except...she looked like him. And this woman was looking at him with judgement.

'I'll do it on one condition,' she said.

'I've already said more chocolates. And I'll double your pay.'

'Gran's got the appetite of a bird. One box is fine, and I'm not taking any more of your money.'

'Then what?'

'I'll stay on condition you change her and feed her now,' she told him. 'I'll watch but you do it.'

'I need to write the eulogy for my father's funeral.' He said it harshly but he couldn't hide the note of panic. 'That's why I'm awake.'

'Oh, that's hard,' she said, her voice softening. 'I'm sorry about your dad.' But then her chin tilted again. 'But your dad's dead and this little one's not, and it seems to me that someone's got to go into bat for her. So you change her and feed her and then you can do what you like. I'll go back to caring. My way. But it's that or nothing, Mr Grayland.'

She met his gaze full-on, anger still brimming. She was flushed, indignant, defiant, and suddenly he thought... She's beautiful.

Which was an entirely inappropriate thing to think and, as if she agreed with him, baby Phoebe opened her mouth and wailed again.

'Fine,' he said helplessly. 'Show me how.'

'It'd be my pleasure,' she said and grinned and went to fetch a diaper.

* * *

She could have insisted that he take the baby back to his bedroom to feed her, but Max's tension was tangible. She could almost reach out and touch it. According to the media, this man was one of the most powerful businessmen in the world, but right now he was simply a guy who'd been thrust a baby he didn't know what to do with.

And didn't she know what that felt like?

So she helped prepare the bottle, showed him the skin test for heat and agreed there should be some scientific way—there probably was but who had time to search for a thermometer at four in the morning? She watched as he did the diaper change, blessing herself that she'd asked the hotel shop to send up extras. It took him three tries to get it right without messing with the adhesive tapes.

Then she retreated to her settee and gave herself the luxury of leaning on pillows, while Max sat at the desk by the window and fed his little sister.

When she'd fed her last time it had been a desperate feed, a baby over-tired and over-hungry, relieved beyond measure that here was the milk she needed. She'd sucked with desperation.

This time, though, things had settled. Phoebe was warm and dry, and the bottle was being offered almost as soon as she'd let the world know she needed it. She seemed content to suck lazily, gazing upward at the world, at the man who was holding her.

They hadn't turned on the main light. Sunny was watching by moonlight, seeing the tension slowly evaporate as Max realised he was doing things right. As Phoebe realised things were okay in her world.

It wouldn't always be as easy as this, Sunny thought. What did this man have in store for him? Colic? Inexplicable crying jags? Teething? All the complications that went with babies. Would he cope with them?

Of course he wouldn't. The thought was laughable. He'd been so desperate for help that he'd employed her, a cleaner. He'd employ someone more suitable the moment he could.

Still, she had to cut him some slack. He'd come to Australia for his father's funeral. All the world knew that. Colin Grayland had been a colossus of the Australian mining scene. His son had taken over the less controversial part of a financial empire that was generations old. He must have kept his head down, because she knew little about him. He'd been an occasional guest in this hotel. There was always a buzz when he visited, but it was mostly among the female staff because a billionaire who looked so gorgeous...well, why wouldn't there be a buzz? And there was also a buzz because his visits usually coincided with his father storming into the hotel, usually shouting.

Here in Australia, Colin Grayland had seemed to court controversy. He'd ripped into open cut mining, overriding environmental protections, refusing to restore land after it had been sucked of anything of any value. He had such power, such resources, that even legal channels seemed powerless to stop him.

His son, however, seemed to disagree with much of what the old man had done. The media gossip of clashes between the two was legion.

'So what will you say about your father tomorrow?' she asked into the silence and thought, Whoa, did I just ask that? Cleaner asking tycoon what his eulogy would be? But the man had said he'd woken to write the eulogy. Maybe she could be helpful.

She tucked her arms around her knees, looked interested and prepared to be helpful.

'I don't know,' Max said shortly.

'You don't know.' Phoebe was steadily sucking. The near dark lent a weird kind of intimacy to the setting. It was like a pyjama party, Sunny thought. But different. She watched him for a while, his big hands cradling his little sister, the bottle being slowly but steadily sucked. Okay, not a pyjama party, she conceded. Like...like...

Like two parents. Like the dad taking his share.

What did she know of either? Pyjama parties? Not in her world. And parents sharing?

Ha.

But now wasn't the time for going there; indeed she hardly ever did. Now was the time to focus on the man before her and his immediate problems.

Actually, his immediate problem was sorted for now. But his dad... She'd read the newspapers. The funeral would be huge. Every cashed-up developer, every politician on the make, even the Honourables would be there, because even with the old man gone the Grayland influence was huge.

And this man was doing the eulogy. In less than seven hours.

'I'd be so scared I'd be running a mile,' she told him. 'But then public speaking's not my thing. Are you thinking you'll wing it?'

'What, decide what I'll say in front of the microphone?'

'The way you're going, you'll need to.'

'Says the woman who won't give me time to think, who won't feed my baby.'

My baby. They were loaded words. She saw his shock when he realised he'd said them. She saw his horror.

'Hey, I'm happy to help with the speech,' she told him hurriedly. 'How hard can it be?'

And she watched his face and saw...what? A determination to steer the conversation away from the baby he was holding? Because he couldn't face what he was feeling? 'To say my father and I didn't get on is an understatement,' he told her. 'Look how little I knew of his personal life.'

'Because?' She said it tentatively. She had no right to ask, and no need, but he didn't have to answer if he didn't want to, and something told her that he wanted to talk. About anything but the baby.

'My parents were pretty much absent all my life,' he told her. 'I was an only child, with nannies from the start. My parents divorced when I was two and went their separate ways. I lived with whoever's current partner didn't mind a kid and a nanny tagging along, or the nanny and I had separate quarters if it didn't suit. But I was raised to take over the financial empire. It was only when I developed a mind of my own—and a social conscience—that I saw my father often. Our meetings have never been pretty. Maybe I should have walked away but I've been given enough autonomy to realise I can eventually make a difference. As he's grown older and more frail I've been able to stop the worst of his excesses. But now...to give a eulogy...'

She heard his bleakness and something inside her twisted. She thought of her own childhood, itself bleak. But she'd always had her siblings. She'd always felt part of a family.

But this was a man in charge of his destiny, as well as the destiny of the thousands of people he employed. She refused to feel sorry for him.

'Hey, reality doesn't matter at funerals,' she told him. 'No one's there for a bare-all exposé. You want my advice? Tell them a funny story to start with, a personal touch, like how he wouldn't buy you an ice cream when you were six because you hadn't saved up for it. There must have been something you can think of, something like that'll make them all laugh and put them onside with you. Then give his achievement spiel. Look him up on Mr Google. That'll list all his glories. Finally, choke up a little, say he'll be sadly missed and walk off. Job done.'

He sent her a curious look. 'You want to do it for me?'

'I would,' she told him agreeably. 'But I'm working tomorrow. Eleven o'clock will see you at the lectern, and I'll be scrubbing bathrooms.'

'You can't take the day off?'

'To give your father's eulogy? I don't think so.'

He smiled. She sensed it rather than saw it. Nice, she thought, and hugged her knees a bit more.

It really was weirdly intimate, sitting in the moonlight in her almost-PJs, talking to this...stranger.

'I'm guessing here,' he ventured, sounding cautious. 'But am I hearing the voice of experience? You've worked out a eulogy for someone you didn't like?'

That was enough to destroy any hint of intimacy. She hugged her knees a bit tighter, needing the comfort.

'I might have.'

'These kids you looked after...were they your brothers and sisters?'

'It's none of your business.'

'It's not,' he agreed. 'But you know a lot about me now. It's dark, we're both tired and this is a weird space. I wouldn't mind pretending I'm not alone in it.'

And she got it.

He was sitting in an impersonal hotel half a world away from where he lived. He was holding a baby he hadn't known existed and later that morning he'd have to stand in a vast cathedral and speak about a father it sounded as if he'd loathed.

He felt alone? He felt as if he needed some sort of reassurance that he wasn't the only one who'd ended up in a mess up to their neck?

After tomorrow she'd never see this man again. Why not give it to him?

'I gave my mother's eulogy when I was fourteen,' she said and she felt rather than saw the shock her words caused.

'At fourteen...'

'There was no one else. Mum died of an overdose after she'd alienated everyone. I never knew my father. She had me a couple of years after she'd run away from home, and then there was a gap. Who knows why? Maybe she was responsible enough to use birth control for a while, but it didn't last. The next four babies came in quick succession and for some reason she kept us. But kept is a loose description. We were raised...well, we weren't raised. We lurched from one crisis to the next. Finally she died. The social worker said we didn't need to go to the funeral, but they hadn't found Gran and Pa then, so there was only us. And they'd already split us up. Daisy and Sam had gone to one set of foster parents, Chloe and Tom to another. It's hard to find foster parents for a fourteen-year-old, so I was placed in a home for...troubled adolescents and I was going nuts, wanting to see them. So when the coroner released the body for burial I made a king-sized fuss and said we all had to be at the funeral. Our case worker said she had reservations but she arranged it anyway. Then I figured I had to say something the kids could remember.'

'You did?' he demanded, sounding awed.

'I did,' she said proudly. 'I made them laugh by telling them about Mum's awful cooking. I reminded them of the way she could never get her toenails perfect and the way she had funny names for all of us, even if sometimes she couldn't quite remember which one of us she was talking to. They were sort of sad stories but I made them smile. Then, when we came out, the social worker had organised morning tea. I still remember the sausage rolls! And then she sat us down, very serious, and told us they'd found Gran and Pa. Apparently, they hadn't even known we existed! Mum had robbed them blind when she was young and then, when she knew they had no more money, she cut off all contact. But they're just...wonderful. I can't tell you how wonderful. They had somewhere we could live and they loved us straight away. So then we all lived happily ever after. Isn't that nice? So it's worth thinking of something good, even if it kills you to say it.'

There was an appalled silence. It stretched on and on and she thought uh-oh, she shouldn't have said. Kid of a drug addict? It was a wonder he even let her near his baby.

But it seemed he wasn't thinking that. 'You make me feel ashamed,' he said at last.

'There's no need to feel ashamed,' she said with asperity. 'Unless you intend to let a fourteen-year-old girl beat you at the eulogy stakes. Let me have Phoebe. You can write your eulogy in peace.' She unhugged her knees and headed over to take the baby from him.

But he held on, just for a moment.

'Thank you,' he said simply.

'You're paying me.'

'Not enough for what you're doing tonight.'

'I don't think you realise how big a deal Gran's chocolates are,' she told him. 'For those alone I'd have written your eulogy for you. Now, off you go and write. The intro's easy. Lords, Ladies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen...there's the thing half done.' And she scooped the now sleeping baby into her arms and backed away.

She needed to back away, she thought. The look on this man's face...

This was a night out of frame. The intimacy between them was something that couldn't be replicated and could never exist in the light of day.

She needed to back off fast, and she did. And he let her.

'I'll write in the bedroom,' he managed and she nodded.

'You came out for something? Or to check on me.'

'I came out for a whisky.'

'It won't help the jet lag. Or the eulogy.'

'I know that,' he told her. 'And I don't need it any more. You've given me all I need.'

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

She grinned. ‘Hooray. Advice by Auntie Sunny. Off you go then like a good boy and get it done.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he said and cast her a look she didn’t understand. A look full of questions she couldn’t hope to answer.

He rose and left.

She settled Phoebe again with care, and told herself to sleep.

Sleep didn’t come. For some reason the memory of that appalling time, her mother’s dreadful funeral, was suddenly all around her.

She was thinking too of the grand funeral waiting for Max tomorrow, and she was thinking there were similarities.

She hugged Phoebe because she suddenly needed the comfort and she thought again of the man through the bedroom door. Who did he hug?

It wasn’t any of her business, but the question stayed with her until finally sleep overcame her.

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