

BILLIONAIRES GALORE!

THREE
BOOKS
IN ONE



LEANNE BANKS

MILLS & BOON

By Request

Leanne Banks
Billionaires Galore!:
Bedded by the Billionaire

Аннотация

Bedded by the Billionaire Duty demanded Max DeLuca take care of Lilli McCall, who was carrying his late brother's baby. But never had the billionaire experienced such searing desire. When Max uncovered a secret Lilli was determined to keep hidden, would the truth bring him to his knees...or send him running for the door? Billionaire's Marriage Bargain Forced to the altar by scandal, Mallory James found herself almost believing that her new husband, Greek billionaire playboy Alex Megalos, was committed to their vows. Until she discovered their marriage was the result of a bargain... with her as the ultimate prize. Billionaire Extraordinaire The key to avenging Damien Medici's family lay in the hands of his sweet new secretary, Emma Weatherfield. She held the privileged information he so desperately wanted. But in order to gain Emma's trust, he had to win her love. Romancing his way into her heart was easy – but now Damien was in danger of falling in love himself...

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About the Author

LEANNE BANKS is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author who is surprised every time she realizes how many books she has written. Leanne loves chocolate, the beach and new adventures. To name a few, Leanne has ridden on an elephant, stood on an ostrich egg (no, it didn't break), gone parasailing and indoor skydiving. Leanne loves writing romance because she believes in the power and magic of love. She lives in Virginia with her family and her four-and-a-half-pound Pomeranian named Bijou.

**Billionaires Galore!
Bedded by the Billionaire
Billionaire's Marriage Bargain
Billionaire Extraordinaire**

Leanne Banks

MILLS & BOON

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Bedded by the Billionaire

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Special thanks to Cindy Gerard, Rhonda Pollero and all my wonderful, supportive writing friends and the great Melissa Jeglinski, who continues to make my work better! This book is dedicated to the comeback kid in all of us.

One

“I understand you’re pregnant with my brother’s child.”

Lilli McCall instinctively put her hand over her swollen belly and studied Maximillian De Luca. She’d reluctantly allowed him and his associate into her small suburban Las Vegas apartment. Heaven knew, she’d had several unwelcome visitors since Tony De Luca had died two weeks ago.

She’d spotted the family resemblance between Tony and Max through the peephole of her door—the natural tanned complexion, similar bone structure. Only this man wasn’t as pretty as Tony. Tony had been full of easy smiles and charm, and ultimately lies. This man’s face was so hard she wondered if it would break into pieces if he smiled.

Tony had told her about his brother, Max. He’d frequently complained that his brother was cutthroat, even with his own family. He’d called him the man of steel, a steel mind and a steel heart.

Lilli had detached herself from Tony for good reasons. She wanted nothing to do with him, his friends or his family.

“Miss McCall?” Max prompted.

Taking a quick breath, she gave a slow nod, willing herself not to be intimidated by the tall man. “Yes, we got involved after my mother died, but things didn’t work out between us,” she said in a voice she knew was stilted, but she couldn’t smooth it for the

life of her.

“The details aren’t necessary. As you know, my brother died in an automobile accident. He had no will and no provision for children, so—”

“I didn’t expect anything from him,” she interjected.

He paused, his gaze flickering over her in a considering way again. “Really,” he said in a doubtful voice.

His tone jabbed at her. “Really,” she said. “Tony was kind to me after my mother died, but it became clear to me that I didn’t belong in his world.”

“Why is that?”

“I—” She hesitated, her chest tightening as she remembered the fateful night that had made her break up with him for good. “We had different values. I wanted the baby brought up in a different environment.”

His gaze fell to her pregnant belly. “You came to that decision a little late, didn’t you?”

In more ways than he could know, she thought. “Yes, but I can focus on the baby or on my failures. Focusing on my failures isn’t going to help me. So,” she said, more than ready for him to leave, “since I wasn’t expecting anything from Tony, you don’t need to—”

“That’s where we disagree,” he said and nodded toward the man standing behind him. “Jim, could you give me the paperwork? Lilli, this is Jim Gregory. You may recognize him as someone who has knocked on your door a few times recently.”

Lilli tore her gaze away from Max long enough to look at the older man and recognized him. “I apologize,” she said. “I live by myself, so I’m not really comfortable opening the door to men I don’t know.”

“I understand,” Jim said and she thought she saw a hint of compassion in the older man’s eyes. “Here it is, Max,” he said, producing some papers from a manila envelope, along with a pen.

Max took the papers and pen and handed them to Lilli. “It’s a simple document. In exchange for one million dollars now and another million dollars if and when the child reaches the age of twenty-five, you agree to give up any rights to my brother’s inheritance. If you should die or fail to raise the child in a responsible manner, you agree to relinquish custody of the child to a suitable guardian of my choice.”

Lilli felt her jaw drop to the floor.

“It’s all there,” Max said. “Let me know if you have any questions.”

Lilli stared blankly at the paper and felt her hands begin to shake with anger. Shoving the papers back at him, she stepped backward. “Are you nuts?”

“Should have known,” Max said to Jim. “I told you she would want more money.”

Stunned, Lilli continued to stare at him. “So you *are* nuts,” she said. “You didn’t hear me earlier, did you? I didn’t expect anything from Tony. I don’t now. And I certainly don’t expect anything from you. And if you think for one second that I would

let someone I've never met choose who raises my child, you're totally crazy."

"That clause is just to protect the child in the event of your death or in case you develop any dangerous habits." He placed the agreement on top of her mother's marble-top table. "Read it. Sleep on it. I'll negotiate the amount within reason."

She snatched it up to give it back to him again.

He shook his head and held up his hand. "The drama is unnecessary. It costs a lot to raise a child. It will be difficult since you're doing it alone. Think about your child's needs. Do you really want to give up everything this money can buy for your child?" He paused while her heart pounded in her chest five beats. "I'll be in touch."

As soon as the two men left her apartment, Lilli flipped the dead bolt in place. Incensed and insulted, she paced into the den. Her pulse was racing in her ears, her nails digging into her palms as she clenched her hands together. Who in hell did he think he was, coming into her home and talking to her that way?

Granted, there were a few things that didn't put her in the best light, such as the fact that she'd even gotten involved with Tony in the first place, and the fact that she was unwed and pregnant. But everyone made mistakes. The solution was owning up to them and making the best of whatever choices have been made.

Although she hadn't intended to get pregnant by Tony, Lilli was determined to be the best mother she could be. Even with all the uncertainty and responsibility she was facing, from the

moment she'd learned she was carrying a life inside her, she'd felt a little less lonely.

Lilli walked into the nursery she had begun to decorate and took a deep calming breath. She'd given the walls a fresh coat of paint and hung a puffy Noah's Ark wall hanging with removable animals. The crib was solid maple, and she'd already attached a mobile with friendly colorful butterflies and birds. With her next paycheck, she planned to buy soft crib sheets and blankets in blue for her little guy.

Pressing her hand to her belly again, she thought of Max De Luca. She'd never met a man like him. Arrogant, insulting, charm-free. At least to her. She couldn't deny, though, that in different circumstances he would have fascinated her. But lions had always fascinated her, too, and she knew better than to get into a den with one of them.

"That went well," Jim said in a wry voice as Max led the way to the black Ferrari.

Loosening his tie a fraction of an inch, Max unlocked the car and slid behind the steering wheel. Max preferred being in the driver's seat. It gave him the illusion of control. He slid into the leather seat. "Damn Tony for this," he said, even though his grief was still fresh. "He was going to be a father, for God's sake. You would think he could have at least provided for his child."

"You've been cleaning up his messes a long time," Jim said as Max sped out of the apartment complex. "Just curious. Did you have to be a total ass to her?"

Max had known Jim since he was a child and that was the only reason he allowed the older man to talk to him so bluntly. “She surprised me,” he said, shifting into fourth as he turned onto the interstate. “I was expecting one of those showgirls he went through like cheap wine.”

“I told you she’s a pediatric dental hygienist.”

“I figured that was her day job. She had to have another angle.” He shook his head. “She looked almost wholesome. I mean, aside from the bump, she had a nice body as far as I could tell. Did you notice she was wearing bunny slippers?”

Jim laughed. “Hard to miss them.”

“She wasn’t wearing a speck of makeup. Her hair color didn’t look like it came out of a bottle. She looked soft,” he said, still trying to come to grips with his impression of Lilli McCall. “Real. Not Tony’s type at all.”

“She must have been his type for a while.”

Max felt his chest tighten in a strange way. How had Tony lucked into her? A woman like that shouldn’t have been abandoned. Not if his first instincts about her were correct. “Yeah. He got lucky.”

Lilli was that irresistible combination of soft and sexy that every man craved. It was all too easy to wonder how that mouth of hers would feel all over a man’s body.

He felt himself grow warm at the thought and shook his head. He’d never been attracted to one of his brother’s women. Turning the AC on high, he directed the vent at his face.

“I really ticked her off with my offer,” he said, his lips twitching in amusement. She’d looked as if she would have gladly ripped out his vocal cords. He’d found her reaction surprising and oddly attractive.

That didn’t change the fact that everyone had their price. Even a blond woman with pink cheeks, bee-stung lips and blue eyes that lit up like sparklers when she was angry. “She’ll take the money,” he said to Jim, shifting gear. “They all eventually do.”

Max would clean up this mess. He had a lot of practice. Left to deal with his father’s disastrous personal and financial choices, Max had worked nonstop during the past ten years to rebuild the family name and wealth.

His investments had delivered triple returns. The merger of Megalos Resorts with De Luca Inc. to form Megalos-De Luca Enterprises had sent the shares of his stock in the company skyrocketing. Determined to keep talent in the merged company, the new board paid the top performers eight-figure salaries.

Max’s father may have been kicked off the board of the family company, but Max was determined that the next CEO would be a De Luca. Nothing would stop him. Especially not a feisty little blonde who happened to be carrying a De Luca baby in her belly.

The following evening, as she left the dental practice where she worked, Lilli winced as she flexed her fingers. Three-year-old Timmy Johnson just couldn’t resist chewing on her index finger. Although she wore rubber gloves, they didn’t always protect her from a chewing child.

She worked late three nights a week for two reasons. One, she earned a little more money working after five and two, she didn't really have anything else to do in the evenings. It wasn't as if she were a party animal. She'd left that brief period of her life way in the past.

Pulling her keys from her purse, she walked toward her trusty four-year-old blue Toyota Corolla. Just as she neared her car, two men stepped in front of her. They both appeared to be in their twenties and they looked so much alike they could have been brothers.

"Lilli McCall?" one of them said.

The one man looked vaguely familiar, although she couldn't recall his name. One of Tony's friends? She tensed. "Why do you ask?" She backed away.

Both men took a step toward her. "We're hoping you can help us."

She bit her lip and took another step back. "I—uh." She cleared her throat. "How could I possibly help you?"

"We're here about Tony," one of the men said with a shrug. "He left some unpaid debts. We knew you two were close and we were hoping you could help us."

She shook her head. "I broke up with Tony a long time ago."

"Not before he knocked you up," the other guy cracked. "That baby's gotta be worth something to the De Luca family. Tony must have left you something."

"He didn't," she said, even though her throat was squeezing

tight with fear. “Look at my car. It’s four years old. I’m working as a dental hygienist. Do I look like someone who is loaded?”

The men frowned.

“Maybe you’re hiding it.”

Frustrated and afraid, she shook her head. “I’m not. Just leave me alone.”

“It would be a lot easier to leave you alone if we got our money.” One of the men pulled a card out of his pocket and walked toward her.

She wanted to run, but her feet seemed to grow roots into the pavement. The man pressed his card into her hand. “Call me if you find something. We’ll check back in case you forget.”

Her heart racing, she watched the two men leave and felt sick to her stomach. How much longer would they harass her? And how many more of Tony’s so-called business acquaintances were going to show up at her door?

Taking a deep breath, she walked quickly to her car and got inside. Maybe she should move out of town. That could be expensive, though, and she’d like to keep the few friends she’d made over the last couple of months. The idea of being surrounded by strangers after she had her baby unsettled her.

She mulled over a dozen different options as she drove through a fast-food restaurant and ordered a milk shake. After she got home, she sipped on it and changed into a tank top that covered her pregnant belly and a pair of terry cloth shorts. Then to drown out her disturbing thoughts, she turned on the television to watch

a rerun of her favorite medical drama.

Five minutes later, her doorbell sounded. She sighed, hoping it was her best friend Dee, off early from her second job as an aerobics instructor. The doorbell rang again before she could reach it. She looked through the peephole, but her porch light wasn't on. She could only make out the shadow of a man.

Fed up, she pounded on her side of the door. "Go away! I don't have Tony's money. I—"

"Miss McCall," a male voice cut in.

Lilli immediately recognized that voice. Mr. Steel, she'd named him. She bit her lip.

"Lilli," Max De Luca said again. "Can I come in?"

She glanced down at her outfit. It was far from swimsuit bare, but she knew she'd feel more comfortable wearing something else. Armor would work. "I'm not really dressed for visitors."

"This won't take long," he insisted.

Swallowing a groan, she opened the door. "I don't think we have anything else to—"

Max walked past her. He was dressed in a black suit that probably cost more than her car. Meeting him again, she could see why Tony had resented his older brother. Max was taller, his shoulders were broader, and he oozed enough confidence for a dozen men. Lilli suspected he was the type who would command any situation no matter how he was dressed. Despite the hard edges of his face, there was something sensual about the shape of his mouth. His thick black eyelashes gave his dark eyes a sexual

cast.

If he were inclined, she would bet he could reduce a woman to melted butter with just a look. There was nothing boyish about him. He was all man and he would want a woman as tough and confident as he, a raving beauty. Lilli knew she would never make the cut.

Max stared at her, his dark eyes flashing. “Why do you keep talking about my brother and his money?”

She met his hot, hard gaze. “Since Tony died, some of his business acquaintances have been asking me to pay off his loans.”

He frowned. “You? Why you?” His expression turned cynical. “Were you involved in some of his business dealings?”

“Absolutely not. I told you I stopped seeing Tony over six months ago because I realized we didn’t share the same values.” She remembered that terrible last night and closed her eyes, trying to push it from her mind. “We were only together for about four months.”

“Long enough for you to get pregnant,” he said.

Offended by his tone, she glared at him. “Just in case you weren’t paying attention in your high school biology class, it doesn’t take four months to get pregnant. It takes one time. One slip.” She shook her head. “Listen, I didn’t ask you to show up at my home, insult me, offer me a big check and threaten to take my baby away if you don’t approve of how I’m raising him.”

“Him,” he said. “So it’s a boy.”

“Yes,” she said and felt her baby move inside her. Cradling

her belly, she watched as Max's gaze raked over her from head to toe. After lingering on her breasts and legs, his eyes moved back up to her mouth. The intensity in his eyes made her feel as if she'd stayed out in the sun too long.

He finally lifted his gaze to hers. "How many men have come asking for money?"

"Five or six," she said. "They usually come in pairs. I stopped answering if I don't recognize who's ringing the doorbell."

"So this has happened, what three, four times?"

She bit her lip. "More like seven or eight," she admitted. "And two men showed up in the parking lot of my office after work tonight."

He paused one moment then nodded. "You shouldn't stay here by yourself any longer. You can come and stay at my house. I have ten bedrooms with staff and security."

Stunned, she stared at him. "Whoa, that's kind of fast. Don't you think they'll stop coming around when they realize I really don't have anything to give them?"

"But you do," Max said. "You have a De Luca growing in your belly. Did any of them give you contact information?"

"One of the guys tonight gave me his card."

"Please get it for me," he said in a voice that was so polite and so calm it made her uneasy.

"Okay," she said and went into her bedroom to retrieve the card from her purse. She gave it to Max.

"I'll have Jim find out about this guy by morning." Max looked

at her intently. “You got involved with a De Luca. We’re a powerful family and there are people who resent us. There are people who want to hurt us. If you really care about the safety of your baby, then you need to come home with me.”

She immediately shook her head. “I just met you. Why in the world would I leave my apartment to go to your home?”

“Because you’ll be safe there,” he said, impatience threading his voice. “Do you really trust that door against someone determined to get inside?”

Her mouth went dry at the image of an intruder, but she refused to be intimidated. “You’re deliberately trying to scare me.”

“No, I’m not,” he said. “I’m merely protecting you and my nephew.”

His words rocked her. He seemed to take the responsibility for granted, where Tony had been just the opposite. She shook her head. Could two brothers be so different? “How do I know you’re not like him?” she had to ask.

His eyebrow creased in displeasure. “Like who? Tony?” He gave a harsh laugh. “I’m nothing like my brother. Or my father, for that matter.”

She wondered what that meant, but from his expression, she suspected there was a world of history in his statement. A world she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. She felt his shimmering impatience, but she resisted the pressure. “The only thing I know about you is what Tony told me.”

Max gave a slow nod. “And that was?”

She bit her lip, reluctant to repeat the insults. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to—”

“Okay, then let me guess. Tony said I was heartless and unforgiving, straitlaced, boring, power-hungry and greedy.”

She winced at his accuracy. “I’m not sure he used those words. He did refer to you as a man with a steel heart and steel mind. And he said you were ruthless.”

“Ruthless,” he said with a nod. “That was the other word I forgot. Not that far off the mark. I can be ruthless and I guard my heart and mind. I’m not distracted and I won’t be tricked or deceived. But tell me, if I were completely cold and ruthless, why would I give a damn about you and your baby’s safety?”

Good point, she thought, but the man still made her nervous.

“What do your instincts tell you about me?” he demanded.

She bit her lip again, and felt a flash of disappointment in herself. “My instincts got a little off-kilter after my mother died. I’m not sure how much I can trust them.”

His expression was enigmatic. “Then you have a choice to make. You can either trust your door to those thugs who have been showing up and who aren’t going away. Or you can trust me.”

Two

“Dee,” Lilli said. “This situation is crazy.”

Max paused just inside the open sliding-glass door that led out to the patio, and watched Lilli as she paced and talked on her cell phone. After just one night in his home, she looked rattled and nervous. He couldn't remember a time when he'd had to work so hard to get a woman to stay overnight at his place, and this one hadn't even slept in his bed.

“Oh, it has to be temporary,” she said. “It has to be.”

He turned to walk away.

“It's clear that I don't belong here and I'm sure Max De Luca would be thrilled if I could disappear from the earth.”

He stopped at the mention of his name, curious despite himself. Turning around, he watched her wavy hair bounce against her shoulders and her silver hoop earrings reflect the late-afternoon sunlight. She was wearing shorts that revealed her long, shapely legs, and he noticed her toenails were painted a vibrant pink. A silver chain wrapped around her ankle. She was an odd mix of feminine and practical. He didn't know why, but he'd liked the combination of strength and vulnerability he'd witnessed in her last night. She'd been determined not to be a pushover, but she'd also revealed her regret over her involvement with Tony. Although Max could name a million reasons, he wondered what had made Lilli decide to break up with his

brother.

“How would I describe Max? Tony always called him a man of steel, but he didn’t mean it as a compliment.” She laughed. “Yes, he’s disgustingly good-looking and completely lacking in charm.” She sighed. “Maybe I just bring that out in him. Anyway, I can’t imagine staying here. I can’t imagine a baby living here, spitting up on carpets that probably cost twice what my car does. And speaking of my car, you would get a good laugh at how ridiculous it looks in the garage next to a Ferrari.”

Max felt a twitch of humor at her colorful descriptions. Crossing his arms over his chest, he decided to listen to the rest of the conversation. She was providing him with more amusement than he’d had in a while.

“His wife? I don’t even know if he has one. This house is huge. Maybe she hides in a different wing. Or maybe he keeps her chained to his bed to take care of his every *need and pleasure*,” she said in an exaggerated voice. “Come to think of it, he’s not wearing a ring and he doesn’t really strike me as the kind to pin himself down to just one woman. Not that it’s any of my business,” she added. “I would move to the other side of the world except I hate the idea of going to a new place with a baby and not knowing anyone.”

The honest desperation in her voice slid past his cynicism.

“I know I should be more brave about this. Maybe it’s just hormones. And what happened when I was with Tony doesn’t help.”

Besides the obvious, what exactly had happened between Lilli and his brother? Max wondered, and he decided to make his presence known. Clearing his throat, he pushed the sliding-glass door farther open.

Giving a jerk of surprise, Lilli turned to look at him. “Uh, yeah I should go now. Dinner next Tuesday with the girls. I wouldn’t miss it. Bye, Dee.” She turned off the phone and lifted her chin defensively. “I, uh, didn’t see you.”

He nodded. “Was your room okay last night?”

“It’s beautiful, of course,” she said. “Your entire house is beautiful.”

“The parts of it you’ve seen,” he said, recalling what she’d said about his bedroom. He could practically see her mind whirling, wondering how much he’d heard. “It was too late for me to give you the complete tour last night. I should do that tonight.”

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“I insist. The rumors about the dungeon are all false,” he joked and watched her eyes widen. Swallowing a chuckle, he continued to meet her gaze. “And your bed? Did it work for you? Too soft? Too hard?” Last night the image of her in bed had bothered him. He’d wondered what kind of nightclothes she wore, if she ever slept naked.

“Oh, no. It was very nice, thank you.” She cleared her throat. “I’ve been thinking about my living arrangements and—”

“So have I,” he interjected. “If you’re free for dinner, we can discuss it then.”

She worked her mouth in surprise then shrugged. "I'm free."

"Okay, then we can eat on the terrace." He glanced at his watch. "Will you be hungry in an hour?"

"Sure," she said. "How do you dress for dinner?"

He allowed himself a leisurely gaze down her body. He wondered why she made something inside him itch. "Casual is fine. It will be just you and me."

Despite Max's insistence that dinner would be casual, Lilli changed from shorts into a periwinkle cotton baby-doll dress she hadn't worn in a while.

To bolster her confidence, she stepped into a pair of sandals with heels. She suspected she would need every bit of confidence she could muster when she told Max that she was returning to her apartment.

She walked downstairs through a hallway of marble and a living area that looked as if it had been taken out of a high-end decorator magazine. The sliding-glass door was open and Max stood, holding a glass of red wine, in front of a warming stove. With his back to her, she couldn't miss the V-shape of his broad shoulders and his narrow waist.

She felt a strange dip in her stomach at the sight of him and grabbed an extra breath. He must have heard her because he turned to face her. He was dressed in slacks and a white open-neck shirt that contrasted with his tanned skin. Moving beside a small table already set with plates and platters with sterling covers, he pulled out a chair for her.

“The chef prepared orange juice and seltzer for you. Is that okay?”

“Very nice,” she said, surprised he’d known about the no-alcohol-during-pregnancy rule because he didn’t seem to have any children of his own.

“My chef has prepared one of his specialties. He’s excellent, so you should enjoy it.”

A woman dressed in a uniform appeared from the sliding-glass doors. “May I serve you now, Mr. De Luca?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you, Ada,” he said. “Lilli, this is my assistant housekeeper. She assists my chief housekeeper, Myrtle. Ada usually covers the 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. shift, so if you need anything after hours, feel free to ring her.”

He had an assistant housekeeper? Lilli took another gulp of her drink, feeling more out of place than ever. “It’s nice to meet you, Ada.”

“My pleasure,” Ada said with a smile and proceeded to serve the meal.

As soon as Ada left, Max turned to her and lifted his glass. “To a good meal and a meeting of the minds.”

His gaze dipped to her décolletage and she felt a shocking awareness of him as a man. A strong, sexual man. Pushing the feeling aside, she took a deep breath and gave a determined smile. “It was very generous of you to invite me to stay here last night and tonight. I’ve given it some thought and I believe it will be best for me to move back to my apartment.”

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't allow that."

She blinked. "Allow?"

"I have some information that makes the choice clear, but I intended to tell you after our meal. I suspect you're concerned about staying here. You're probably afraid this setup isn't conducive for a baby."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Please go ahead and eat."

Lilli wanted to protest, but politeness compelled her to force down a forkful of the beef dish. The delicious taste momentarily distracted her and she took another bite. "Oh, you were right about your chef. This is amazing."

"You'll find I'm often right," he said. "I learned at an early age not to allow emotion to determine my choices."

"Why?" she asked, taking another bite.

"I watched my father spend half his fortune trying to keep his mistress happy."

She heard cynicism creep into his tone again, and for the first time understood why. "I'm assuming his mistress wasn't your mother," she ventured.

"She wasn't. She was Tony's mother."

"Oh," she said again, remembering something Tony had told her. "But I thought Tony's parents were dead."

"They are both dead. Died in a boating accident."

She set down her fork. "I'm so sorry."

He shrugged. "It was ironic because the boat was called

Franco's Folly. My father's name was Franco. He spent a good part of his life chasing after things that eventually ruined him. Something I refuse to do. But that's a different subject." He took a sip of wine. "Jim did some research on the man who gave you his card yesterday. Trust me, he's bad news. You may as well be a sitting duck if you move back to your apartment without protection."

"Protection?" she echoed, appalled. "That's got to be an exaggeration. The man was a little pushy, but he backed off when I told him to. I'll just have to be very firm—"

"Lilli," Max interjected in a quiet, ultracalm voice that immediately got her attention. "It turns out he's involved with the local mafia. They're not above kidnapping or murder to collect on a debt."

Lilli froze, her appetite fleeing. "Oh, my God."

Nausea rose inside her and she turned from the table, automatically turning away. Terror coursed through her. How could she protect her child?

She felt Max just behind her. His body heat warmed her back. "You won't need to worry if you stay here. No one would dare hurt you as long as everyone knows you're in my care."

"Maybe I should go ahead and move out of town. I didn't want to do that, but—"

"You're too vulnerable for that right now," he said.

She turned to look at him. "What do you mean, too vulnerable?"

“Physically, for one thing. It’s not like you’d be able to beat off an attacker.”

“But if I moved away, I wouldn’t have to beat off anyone.”

He shook his head. “They’re watching you too closely. Maybe later, but not now.”

“Oh, God, I feel so stupid,” she said, fighting back tears. “How did I let this get so out of control?”

“It could be worse,” he said. “You can set up a nursery here. I’ll cover the cost. We’ll make the necessary adjustments in the house. Your life will be just like it was before, with a few perks.”

“Just like before,” she said, laughing with gallows humor. *As if anything could ever be like before.* “There’s no way I could allow you to cover the cost of the nursery. It wouldn’t be right. And I can’t imagine living here. It’s just so—”

“So what?”

“Perfect. This isn’t at all what I pictured for my child.”

“Why wouldn’t my home be appropriate? I’m a blood relative. How is it right for your child not to know his uncle?”

Oh, Lord. She hadn’t even thought of it that way. Her heart splintered. Her father had left before her third birthday and since her mother’s relatives had lived on the other coast, she’d never had an opportunity to meet them, let alone enjoy any sort of family bond.

She shook her head. “I’d never considered any of this. Once I broke off with Tony, I knew it would be just me and the baby. I didn’t think Tony’s family would want to be involved, and frankly

I didn't want anything to do with anyone bearing the name De Luca."

Max narrowed his eyes. "Tony and I are not the same man."

"I'm beginning to see that," she said. "I need to think about this."

"Finish your dinner," he said, cupping her arm with his strong hand. "We can discuss this more later."

Lilli's stomach jumped. She wasn't sure if it was a result of Max's hand on her bare arm or the terrible news he'd just delivered. She looked into his eyes and had the sense that this man could turn her world upside down in ways she'd never imagined. She stepped backward, needing air, needing to think. "I'm sorry, but I can't eat right now. Please excuse me. I need to go upstairs."

Max watched Lilli as she fled the patio through the door. With each passing moment, he felt more drawn to her, but for the life of him, he couldn't explain why.

Her immediate rejection of his offer to pay to furnish the nursery had caught him off guard. He was so accustomed to covering expenses for a multitude of people that he rarely gave it a second thought.

Women had always been more than happy to accept his generosity. In fact, on a couple of occasions, his companions had tried to take advantage of him. One woman had even gotten herself pregnant by another man and tried to make Max take responsibility for the child.

Lilli was the exact opposite. Unless it was all an act, which it could be, he thought, his natural cynicism rising inside him. Still, Lilli didn't strike him as a woman adept at hiding her emotions or motives.

He suspected she didn't want him to know that she was attracted to him, but he had seen it in her eyes. The attraction was reluctant, but strong, the same as it was for him.

In other circumstances, he would want her for himself. And he wouldn't just *want* her. He would take her.

Lilli paced her bedroom for two hours. With her head feeling as if it were going to split into a million pieces, she lay down and surprised herself by falling asleep. When she awakened at eleven-thirty, her stomach was growling like a mountain lion.

"Sorry, sweetie," she murmured, rubbing her stomach. The idea of that dinner going to waste nearly made her sob. Max had told her to call Ada, the housekeeper, if she needed anything, including a snack, but Lilli couldn't imagine imposing at this hour.

Dressed in a tank top and shorts, she quietly crept downstairs to the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and peered inside. She found the leftovers and turned around.

"I'm glad you got back your appetite," Max said, startling her so much she almost dropped the container she was holding. Swearing under her breath, she managed to save the dish. Her heart racing, she backed away and closed the refrigerator door.

"I didn't think you would be down—" She broke off when

she saw that he was shirtless, his pajama pants riding low on his waist. His chest was a work of art. Her mouth went dry.

“I heard a noise,” he said casually, as if he didn’t know that seeing him half-naked took her breath away.

She needed to keep it that way, she told herself and locked her gaze on his forehead. “I was hungry. I can just grab an apple and go back upstairs.”

He moved closer to her and pulled the dish from her hands. “Why would you eat an apple when you can have this?” He put the dish in the microwave and started to warm it up.

Lilli tried very hard not to allow her gaze to dip across his naked shoulders, but she didn’t quite succeed. When the plate was hot, he directed her to a seat at the table.

Twenty minutes later, she’d polished off a reasonable portion of beef, bread and a brownie he’d insisted she eat.

She leaned back in her chair and stretched her legs. “That was delicious. Thanks.”

His gaze enigmatic, he gave a slight smile. “You’re welcome. Not bad for Mr. Steel.”

Lilli blinked, then realized there was only one way he could have known she’d called him that. Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. “How long were you listening to my phone conversation?” she accused.

“It wasn’t premeditated,” he said. “I was going to tell you about the report I got from Jim, but you were so absorbed in your conversation that you didn’t notice me.”

Lilli closed her eyes, wishing she could hide. “Great.”

“And no, I don’t have a wife or mistress tied to my bed. I haven’t found it necessary to tie women up to keep them in my bed.”

She opened her eyes. “I didn’t mean it the way—”

He waved his hand. “We may as well get this on the table. I know you’re attracted to me,” he said without a millimeter of arrogance.

She opened her mouth to deny it, but her throat closed around the lie.

“I’m flattered that you think I’m hot,” he said. “But it’s probably a good idea that you also think I’m cold because, for some reason, I find you attractive.”

Lilli gaped at him, sure he was mocking her. “No.”

“Yes,” he said.

“But I’m pregnant,” she blurted out. “And not with your baby.”

“Your pregnancy doesn’t conceal your other assets. It doesn’t conceal your fire.” His gaze traveled to her breasts and lower to her legs, then all the way back up to her mouth, making her feel as if a hot wind had blown over her. He gave a short laugh as if the joke was on him. “Don’t worry. I’ll get over it. You may have seduced one De Luca, but I’m not as easily impressed as my brother.”

She felt as if he’d slapped her. “I haven’t been trying to impress you,” she told him. “Besides, your brother did the seducing, not me.”

“It doesn’t sound like you fought him.”

“I didn’t,” she told him, but there’d been a time he’d taken advantage of her. “My mother died one week before I met Tony and I freely admit I was a mess.” She met and held his gaze for a long, fierce moment. “And besides the fact that you’re hot, what makes you think I would want to go round two with anyone with the last name De Luca?” She stood and whirled away.

He snagged her wrist, pulling her against him when she stumbled. Her hand fell against his chest and she felt his heart against her palm, his heat all over her.

“Hold on to that thought,” he said. “You’re going to need it. But just so you know, if you ever went to bed with me, you would never think of it as round two.”

Looking into his hard, sensual gaze, Lilli felt a shiver run through her. Somehow, deep inside her, deeper than her bones, she knew that again he wasn’t bragging. He was just telling the truth.

Three

Lilli awakened to the sound of the Bose alarm clock on the elegant bedside table. The strains of classical music lulled her into consciousness. Rolling to her side, she pulled the pillow over her head.

Just a couple more minutes. This bed was divine. It felt so wonderful she hated to leave it. Much better than her lumpy mattress back at her apartment.

She stiffened at the thought and immediately sat up in bed. Frowning, she told herself not to get used to this level of luxury. Sometime, more likely sooner than later, she would be living in a place where she was both the chief housekeeper and assistant housekeeper. There would be no Bose stereo systems and the closest she would get to a gourmet meal prepared by a chef would be a frozen dinner.

Rising from the bed, she padded across the luxury carpet to the large shower in the connecting bathroom. She would need to get up earlier since her commute to work was longer from Max's home. The very thought of him made something inside flutter and flip.

Hunger, she told herself. It had to be hunger or the baby. After she donned her colorful scrubs, she headed downstairs and was surprised to see Max pacing and speaking into a cell phone via a Bluetooth in his ear. He wore running shorts and a tank top that

showed off his muscular legs and arms. Everything about him oozed strength. “Tell Alex we’re limiting our domestic expansion until we see what happens with the dollar.”

He saw her and lifted a hand. “Yes, I know Alex still resents that I was promoted over him. We each serve an important purpose. I provide the balance. He provides the fireworks. Tell him I said to think global. I’m working from home this morning. I’ll be in the office this afternoon and will get an update then. Thanks. Bye.”

He immediately turned to Lilli. “Good morning. Did you rest well?”

She nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“We have fresh-squeezed orange juice and the cook will be happy to prepare anything you like.”

She shook her head. “I need to get on the road if I’m going to make it to work in time.”

He frowned. “You can’t skip breakfast. What about the baby?”

“I’ll grab something at work. We always have fruit and bagels in the workroom,” she said.

He shot her a disapproving glance. “That’s not good nutrition.”

“I don’t think my baby is suffering. I’m taking my prenatal vitamins.” He moved toward her and she struggled with the urge to flee. She was doing her best to keep her gaze fixed on his eyebrows. She refused to look into his eyes, or at his mouth, or at that stubborn chin or at those shoulders. Or lower. Feeling a flush of heat, she stepped backward. “Better go. See you la—”

“Your things from your apartment should be here by the time you return,” he said.

Lilli stopped abruptly and blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I arranged for someone to pack your belongings and bring them here. Duplications like most of your furniture, dishes and linens will be put in storage. All the baby items will be moved into the nursery.”

Trying to catch up with him, she shook her head in confusion. “Where is the nursery?”

“Across the hall from your bedroom,” he said. “A decorator will be calling you later today so you can tell her what you would like done to it.”

She shook her head again. “Did I ever actually say that I was going to stay here?”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “There was another choice?”

She sighed, hating him for being right. “Well, you could have given me a little time to adjust to the idea. There’s no reason I couldn’t pack my own stuff and—”

His eyes widened in horror. “Moving in your condition?”

She sighed. “I’m very healthy. Women have been getting pregnant and delivering babies for years. In ancient times, it wasn’t unusual for a woman to be working in the fields one minute, having her baby the next, then back at work immediately.”

“I won’t have you in the fields, period,” he said in a dry tone. “In terms of the speed of the movers, there was no need to wait.

We both agree, even if you don't want to admit it, that you belong here until we figure out a safe place for you and the baby. And that will be months from now."

She made a face at his imperious tone. Lord help her, he sounded like an emperor.

"In the meantime, I've asked my personal attorney to draw up some documents regarding custody of the child in case something should happen to you."

Lilli felt a chill. "I already told you I'm not signing those papers. If signing those papers is part of the bargain for me staying here, then I'm leaving."

"I never said that."

"No, but even you admitted that you could be ruthless. I'm not signing my child over to Ruthless Mr. Steel," she said, mentally drawing a line and daring him to cross over it.

"Yet," he said.

"I won't be manipulated over this," she warned him.

"Manipulation is for sissies," he said with a scoff.

"Then what do you call what you do?" she asked. "Bullying?"

"Reason and logic prevail among rational human beings."

Lilli knew she wasn't totally rational about this subject. It was too close to her heart. She took a shallow breath and met his gaze. "I don't want you to intimidate me about this," she said in a quiet voice.

He studied her for a moment, his gaze more curious than threatening. "Okay. Are you open to gentle persuasion?"

“Not if it involves any power plays,” she said.

He nodded, stepping closer. “Deal. By the way, I’m hosting a casual business gathering Friday night. It’s just a barbecue. Feel free to drop in and fill up a plate.”

His closeness made her feel as if he’d set off a dozen mini electrical charges inside her. He lifted his hand to a stray strand of her hair. “Your hair reminds me of your personality.”

He looped the strand around one of his fingers and she felt her heart accelerate. “How is that?”

His mouth stretched into a sexy grin. “It’s the color of an angel’s hair, but the curl shows it’s rebellious.”

Looking into his eyes, she felt as if she were sinking into a place where she was aware of only him. He was the most dynamic man she’d ever met in her life. She felt totally fascinated and totally out of her league.

Grasping on to that thought, she took a shallow breath and stepped back. It was a move totally motivated by survival. Max De Luca was a powerful force, too powerful for her.

The strand of her hair stretched taut between them. Max hadn’t released her. She lifted her hand to unravel her hair from his finger, brushing his skin. “I should go. I don’t want to be late,” she said and fled out the door, feeling as if she’d been burned.

Max arrived home after going several rounds with Alex Megalos, Director of Domestic Operation and Expansion for Megalos-De Luca Enterprises. Alex had been Max’s rival for his current position as Director of Worldwide Operation and

Expansion.

Talented and aggressive, Alex was always trying to focus resources and energy in his area. Max, however, was forced to continually remind Alex that he had to consider the big picture.

Alex provided a lot of energy, but he also caused more than his share of heartburn. Suffering from a burning sensation in his gut even now, Max just wanted a quiet peaceful evening and an opportunity to wind down. He headed for the bar downstairs and poured himself a glass of red wine.

Sitting in the darkness of the den, he took a sip and savored the stillness of the moment.

A crashing sound followed by a scream shattered the quiet. Alarm shot through him. Immediately jumping to his feet, he raced upstairs. That had been Lilli's scream. What had happened?

Rounding the corner, he found her on the floor of the nursery surrounded by scattered pieces of a crib and tools.

“What in hell are you doing?”

Dressed in shorts that revealed her long legs, her hair straying from the ponytail in back, she glanced up at him with a scowl. “Trying to put this crib back together. Your moving guys took it apart.”

He frowned, entering the room. “They should have put it back together.” He reached into his pocket for his cell phone. “I’ll get my driver up here immediately. He’s excellent, extremely mechanical. He’ll put it together in no time.”

Scrambling to her feet, she put her hands over his to prevent him from dialing. “No. No.”

“Why not?”

“Besides the fact that it’s not his job to put together cribs and it’s almost ten o’clock,” she said, “I want to do it myself.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “Why?”

“Because I just do. I put this crib together after I bought it. I should be able to do it now.”

“Why is it so important that you be the one to assemble it? The baby isn’t going to know.”

She lifted her chin. “Someday he will. Someday he will know that his mother loved him so much and was so excited that he was coming that she put her time and energy and money into making a nice place for him.”

Her heartfelt determination tugged at something inside him. “That never would have occurred to me. I’m certain my mother didn’t assemble my crib. I had a string of nannies and was shipped off to boarding school before my parents divorced.”

“My mother could sew and knit and she made blankets and caps and booties for me. I’m going to use some of them on my little one.”

“But not anything pink,” he said.

She smiled and laughed. “Nothing pink. I have a few white and yellow things. After my father left, it was just my mom and me.” She bit her lip. “I wish she was still around. I have a feeling I’m going to have a lot of questions.”

“I’m sure you’ll do an excellent job and when he goes to boarding school—”

Lilli gaped at him. “I’m not sending my child to boarding school.”

“There’s no need to automatically reject the idea. A young man can get an excellent education and important connections at an elite boarding school.”

“And they end up with warm, affectionate family ties just like you,” she said.

He opened his mouth then closed it. “Mr. Steel haunts me again.” He shook his head. “There’s no need to discuss boarding school. That’s years away.”

“Never,” she corrected.

He loosened his tie and unfastened the top couple of buttons of his shirt. “Let me help you put this crib together. Where are the instructions?”

Lilli winced. “That’s the problem. I threw them away after I put it together the first time.”

He couldn’t swallow a chuckle at her stymied expression. “Okay, then we’ll just look it up on Google.”

“Google it?” she echoed. “I never thought of that.”

“So I’m good for something,” he said in a wry voice. “My laptop is in my quarters. Come on. I still haven’t given you that tour. From the way you act toward me, I wonder if you still think I have a woman tied to my bed.”

Her face bloomed with color and she groaned. “When are you

going to stop teasing me about that?”

“When you stop calling me Mr. Steel,” he said and led her to another wing of the house.

When Max opened the door to his suite, all Lilli could do was stare. Lush carpet covered the floor, cushioning every footstep. A gas fireplace featuring a stone mantel provided instant warmth. On either side, stone shelves held books, electronic items and a full bar. A large bed covered with luxury linens provided the centerpiece, but what captured her attention was the dramatic arched window that showed the starry sky in all its glory.

“I have shades to cover them if it’s too bright,” he said.

“How can you bear to do that? It’s so beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you. I like it. I also have a flat-screen television that comes down from over that wall.” He walked through one door and motioned for her to follow. “Personal gym and lap pool.”

Lilli blinked at all the equipment. “But you already have a pool.”

“That one is for being lazy. This one is for exercise.” He glanced her. “You can use it anytime you like. It’s okay to swim during pregnancy, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He led her to another room, which held a desk, sofa and more electronic equipment. He turned on his laptop. “There’s another office suite downstairs, but I tend to accomplish more up here. Would you like some juice or sparkling water?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m fine. All you need to live in here

are a kitchen and washer and dryer.”

His lips twitched. “There’s a galley kitchen across the hall. Laundry chute in my closet.”

Tugging off his tie, he released another shirt button. Lilli was struck by the sight of his tanned fingers against the white shirt. He truly was an amazing male. She wondered how many women had shared his bed. No chains needed for him.

She cleared her throat and tried to move her mind in a different direction as he tapped on the keyboard. “Just curious, but do you even know *how* to do laundry?”

He glanced at her and gave a cryptic smile. “Yes, I know how. We were required to learn in boarding school, along with basic mechanics, financial management, survival skills and cooking.”

“You can cook?” she said in disbelief.

“I make a damn good omelet, can broil a steak with the best of them and I was recognized for making the best grilled cheese sandwich in my class.”

She couldn’t stifle a laugh from his defense of his culinary abilities. “Nothing chocolate in your repertoire?”

He shot her a level glance. “I buy only the best.” He looked at the screen. “Here we are. Instructions for assembling your crib.”

She joined him to look at the screen, surprised at how fast he’d found the instructions. “How did you know what kind?”

“I looked at the brand and model before I left the nursery.” He hit the print button and seconds later, they returned to the nursery armed with instructions.

An hour later, they proclaimed victory as Lilli put in the final screw. “We did it,” she said, punchy with excitement. She lifted her hand for a high five. “I hate to say it, but I couldn’t have done it without you. Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” he said, his hair mussed from raking his fingers through it. She’d known he’d spent the entire time itching to do the work himself. He’d offered and insisted every five minutes, but she’d demurred. “If only everything were this easy,” he said, offering his hand to help her up from the floor.

Her knees cramped from staying in one position too long, she wobbled as she stood. Strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her against his warm body.

Bracing herself on his arms, she was immediately distracted by the sensation of him, smooth skin over hard muscle. Her breasts pressed against his chest, her belly meshed with his and her thighs just barely touched his trousers.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice.

Her heart pounding a mile a minute, she nodded and barely managed a whisper. “Yes. I guess I sat a little too long.”

He slid his hand through her hair, surprising her with the sensual but tender gesture. “You stopped seeing my brother months ago. How is it that you don’t have a man in your life now?”

She swallowed hard. “I’m pregnant.”

“And no man has approached you?”

“No.” She closed her eyes, trying not to sink into a helpless puddle on the floor. He felt so strong, so good. The intimate

sound of his low voice both soothed her and wreaked havoc with her nervous system. “I didn’t want a man in my life. I don’t know if I ever will,” she said, remembering how victimized she’d felt.

He gave a low laugh that caught her off guard. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

She looked up at him, searching his face in the low lighting. “No. I’m not.”

“Every woman has needs,” he said.

“I don’t,” she told him, because it had seemed all her sexual needs had disappeared. “Not for a long time.”

“How can you say that? You’re attracted to me,” he said and slid his fingertips from her hair to her throat.

“That doesn’t mean I want to have sex with you,” she said, but her skin was heating and her heart was racing.

“I could make you want to be with me,” he said. “I could make you want it more than you ever have.”

For a sliver of a moment, she believed him and the possibility sent her into turmoil. She had to shut this down once and for all. She took his hand and put it on her belly. “There will always be this between us,” she said. “Always.”

Max returned to his suite and poured himself a glass of red wine. There was something electric between him and Lilli. He could feel it in his skin and deeper in his gut. She was a little afraid of him, but still determined to hold her own. That attracted him even more. She was resolved to push him away, but she was fascinated by him. He could see it in the way she looked at him,

hear it in her quick intake of breath and he felt it in her response to him.

The passion she tried to hide got to him more than any other woman's overt seduction had. He was still aroused from being so close to her.

Plowing his fingers through his hair, he walked to his office and pulled out another legal proposal from his attorney. After watching what had happened to his brother because his guardian had been permissive and irresponsible, Max couldn't stand the idea of another De Luca plunging down the same path.

He suspected Lilli would never sign a document giving him guardianship unless she became ill, and she might not even sign it under those conditions.

There were other options, though. Other ways to make sure this De Luca was raised properly. His attorney had outlined each of them. Some were more costly than others, and not just in terms of money. Rubbing his chin, he remembered when he'd got the news of his brother's death. The feeling of loss and despair had slammed into him like a concrete wall.

He would never let the same thing happen to another De Luca. Never.

Four

The next evening, after a full day at work, Lilli entered the De Luca house to the sound of jazz music, tinkling glasses and animated conversation. She'd noticed a few extra cars in the driveway, but she hadn't known what to expect once she got inside.

The scent of grilled food permeated the house, making her mouth water and her stomach growl. Then she remembered. This must be the barbecue gathering Max had mentioned the other day. All she wanted was a sandwich and she could fix that herself. Heading for the kitchen, she found two men and two women preparing food and placing it on serving trays.

A large bald man barked orders from one end of the large kitchen island. The man pinned her with his gaze as she approached the island. "No guests in the kitchen, *bella*," he chided and pointed to himself. "Louie can't have you stealing secrets."

This was Max's fabulous chef. She hadn't had a chance to meet him yet because he seemed to cook and disappear.

"I'm not really a guest and I won't steal your secrets. I just want to make a peanut butter sandwich. It won't take a minute."

He gasped in horror. "Peanut butter sandwich, when you can eat this?"

"I need to make this quick," she said, more than ready for the

solace and quiet of her room. She stepped behind the island. “I just want to take it to my room. Upstairs.”

Louie’s eyebrows shot upward. “Upstairs? You are a special friend of Mr. De Luca. Only the best—”

“No, no, I’m sure he doesn’t think of me as a special friend.”

“I don’t know why not,” a man said from behind her.

Lilli whipped her head around to look at a tall, muscular man with brown hair and luminescent green eyes. “Alex Megalos,” he said with a smile as he stood on the other side of the kitchen island.

“Nice to meet you. Lilli McCall.”

His eyes crinkled when he smiled. She liked that. She liked that he smiled at her instead of frowning. But she felt the need to disappear. She didn’t want to call attention to herself. “I really should go,” she said. “This is a business gathering.”

“No reason we can’t mix business and pleasure. Let’s get you a drink. Come out on the patio.”

Lilli shook her head again. “Thank you, but I—”

Max stepped into the kitchen and Lilli felt her heart take an extra beat. “When did the party move in here?”

“Max, you’ve been holding out on us. How did you lure this angel into your dark castle?”

Max met her gaze and she took a deep breath. A snap of electricity crackled between them. “Just lucky, I guess,” he said.

“Well, if you need anyone to take her off your hands,” Alex ventured.

Max shot him a sideways glance. “Always competing,” he said, then turned to the chef. “Louie, the lady is hungry.”

“We can’t have that,” Louie said and quickly put a plate together.

“Max, don’t be so greedy. You’ve already got Kiki,” Alex said. “Share her with the rest of us. She should join us tonight.”

Lilli stared at Max in panic.

“If you would like—

“I wouldn’t,” she said. “Like,” she added, gulping and shot Alex an apologetic look. “I’m a little tired. Thanks, though.”

“I’m crushed,” Alex said. “Maybe I could give you a call when you’re rested.”

Confusion rolled through her as she watched a beautiful brunette appear from behind him. “Max, sweetheart, you disappeared,” the woman said.

He turned to the woman. “Kiki, I’ll be back before you finish your next drink. I need to take care of a personal matter.”

The woman looked at Lilli and lifted one of her perfectly arched eyebrows. “Is this the personal matter?” She narrowed her eyes.

“I—uh—need to go,” Lilli said.

“No need to rush,” Alex said.

“Exactly,” Kiki said.

Lilli felt as if she were suddenly surrounded by vipers. There were too many competing agendas for her comfort. “All I wanted was a peanut butter sandwich,” she murmured.

Kiki snickered. “How charming.”

“Here’s your plate, bella,” Louie said.

“Bless you,” she said. “Thank you. It looks delicious.” She turned to Alex and Kiki. “It was nice to meet you. Have a lovely evening.”

“I will,” Kiki said and slid her hand around Max’s well-developed bicep.

Lilli nodded, feeling an odd combination of emotions, most of which she didn’t want to examine. “Good night,” she said and stepped from behind the kitchen island.

Kiki’s jaw dropped. Alex blinked.

They were looking at her pregnant belly.

“Want Lilli all to yourself for the rest of the evening?” Max asked, shooting Alex a sly grin. He winked at Lilli and his humor helped her get through the incredibly awkward moment.

“Uh... uh...” Alex seemed unable to pry his gaze from her belly. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes then forced his gaze upward. He exhaled and smiled. “Hell, I bet she would be more fun than you are. And trust me, Lilli, I’m a lot more fun than Max.”

“Who is the lucky father?” Kiki asked in a strained voice.

Lilli glanced at Max. “Um, it’s—”

He met her gaze. “That’s between me and Lilli.”

Kiki’s face tightened with suspicion. “That’s a little vague, darling,” she said with an edge to her tone.

“Kiki, this is not the place for this discussion,” he said. “Louie

will be upset if we don't enjoy his meal. I'll talk to you later," he said, looking at Lilli.

"That's okay," she said, feeling her nerves jump in her stomach. "I'm hitting the sack early tonight. Very tired. Thank you again, Louie. G'night. Enjoy your evening," she said and scooted out of the room, thankful that Kiki wasn't armed. Otherwise, she was certain she would be so dead.

While Lilli ate, she watched a boring show on her flat-screen television. Afterward, she took a shower and went to bed, but didn't fall asleep. Pulling a book about newborn care from her nightstand, she added to the list of items she would need to purchase for the baby.

A knock sounded on her door and she tensed, but didn't answer. The knock sounded again and she held her breath.

"I know you're not asleep," Max said. "I heard you walking around three minutes ago."

Lilli frowned. She'd gotten a drink of water from the attached bathroom. Sighing, she rose from the bed and opened the door.

Max stepped inside and closed the door behind him. His gaze fell over her body, and he gave her a bottle of water and a cookie. "You've charmed my chef. Louie said you looked like you could use a cookie."

"Thank you," she said, appreciating his kindness. "But I'm sure it's because he thinks I'm a special friend of yours, even though I told him I'm not."

"It's safe to say we have a special relationship," he said. "A

bond, in a way.”

His tone made her stomach dip. “Speaking of special friends,” she said. “Just curious, was there a particular reason you didn’t tell Kiki the real father of my child?”

“Yes. For safety reasons, I’ve decided it’s better not to comment on your relationship with Tony. There are too many people he owes.”

“Oh,” she said, remembering the threat and feeling a sinking sensation in her stomach. She sat down on the bed. “I keep trying to forget about that.”

“Don’t,” he said, moving toward her. “You need to be on guard when you go out in public. People will try to take advantage of you if they know of your association with the De Lucas.”

“I don’t think my real friends would dream of taking advantage of me,” she said and put the cookie and bottle of water on the nightstand. The soft glow of the bedside lamp intensified the intimacy of the moment. He was close enough that she could smell a hint of his cologne and masculine scent. She could almost feel him.

He gave a cynical smile. “People will always try to take advantage of you when you have money.”

“You forget,” she said. “I don’t really have any money.”

He sat down beside her on the bed and studied her. “That could change,” he said.

Feeling his gaze on her, she looked at him. The expression on his face affected her in a strange way. “How?”

“There are options,” he said.

“If this involves that crazy contract,” she began.

“We won’t discuss it at this late hour,” he said. “Alex asked me to give you his card. He couldn’t stop talking about you.”

“That didn’t have anything to do with me,” she said, her hair drooping over one of her eyes. “I could tell he was only interested because he liked the idea of taking something away that he thought was yours. Just a game.”

“You’re right that Alex is very competitive with me, but you underestimate your appeal,” he said and lifted his hand to her hair.

Her heart fluttered. She could have pushed him away if she’d had the inclination, but she couldn’t find it anywhere inside her. He slid his hand over her cheek and then down to her mouth, rubbing his thumb over her bottom lip.

Her skin tingled everywhere he touched. She swallowed hard. “Why are you touching me?”

“You don’t like it?” he asked, his dark gaze meeting hers. “There are so many reasons you should be offlimits.” He moved closer. “But I like the way your skin feels. I like the way you look at me when I touch you.”

She inhaled a shallow breath and caught another draft of his spicy scent mixed with cologne. In some corner of her mind, it occurred to her that she’d never been this close to such a powerful man. He knew who he was and what he had to do, and he was the kind of man who would make whatever he wanted a reality.

For Lilli, it was like getting up close and personal with a wild tiger. At the same time, he was solid and strong and she knew he would never force a woman. He wouldn't need to. And to have him looking at her as his object of desire made her dizzy.

"There's something about you," he said, gently urging her mouth open so he could slide his thumb just inside to her tongue. "Wide blue eyes with secrets, a sweet smile." He glanced downward. "You make me curious."

Lilli was shocked at how quickly her body responded. She'd considered herself sexually dead, but she felt her skin heat and the tips of her breasts tighten against her white cotton gown.

He saw it, too. She knew it by the expression on his face.

"I shouldn't want you," he muttered and slid his hand around the back of her neck. "But dammit, I do." He lowered his mouth to hers and took her lips in a kiss that made her lose track of time and space.

His tongue slid over hers and she felt herself respond. It was all instinctual. Her heart pounded in her head and her blood pooled in secret, sensitive places. Every second that she felt his warmth, his touch, she was shocked by her immediate response to him. Something inside her could not push him away.

She felt him lower one of his hands to her breast. Air caught somewhere in her throat as he caressed her through her gown. He rubbed the palm of his hand over the side of her breast and she shivered, pressing up against him.

He gave a low groan of approval and drew his hand closer to

her nipple, but not quite touching it. She felt the peak of it stiffen against her nightgown, aching for his touch.

Full of wanting, she held her breath.

He finally pushed the top of her gown down and slid his thumb over her nipple. She couldn't swallow a moan of relief with a twinge of frustration.

He pulled his mouth from hers and slid his lips over her skin, down her throat and collarbone. A riot of sensations shot through her. She wanted him everywhere at once.

His other hand slid over her back, massaging her, holding her in a solid embrace. The combination of security and caresses hit her physically and emotionally.

He looked up at her, dark desire in his eyes. Swearing under his breath, he shook his head.

Pulling back, he rose from the bed and prowled toward the window. Moonlight spilled over his profile as he raked his hand through his hair.

Lilli drank in a gulp of air, trying to clear her head. Shocked at herself, she tugged her gown back in place and tried to make sense of what had just happened. That night after she'd broken up with Tony, the night made doubly awful because she couldn't recall it, she'd changed. She'd known she would never be the same. She would never be able to let a man touch her again unless she trusted him.

Why should she trust Max? There was no good reason. But something inside her did. Either that or she was crazier than she'd

thought she was.

“You’re so responsive. I wonder... were you this responsive with my brother,” he ventured in a low voice.

“I wasn’t,” she said, the words popping out before she could stop them.

He turned to look at her. “Why not?”

She bit her lip. “I can’t explain it. It’s just different.”

He continued to hold her gaze. “Did you leave my brother before or after you found out you were pregnant?”

“Before.” She looked away from him. “Something happened one night. I knew I couldn’t stay.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t like talking about it,” she said, twisting her fingers together. “I knew I had to get away from him and his—” her stomach clenched with nausea “—his world.”

“And you weren’t tempted to go back with him when you found out you were pregnant?”

She shook her head vehemently. “Oh, absolutely not. If I didn’t belong in his world, there was no way a baby would.”

“Did he ask you back?”

She nodded. “Several times. But I think he was relieved when I said no. Tony wasn’t ready to be a father.”

“What about the baby? What will you do about a father figure for him?”

“I’ll deal with that later. Right now, I need to get through the pregnancy and delivery. My girlfriends have promised to help me

through the scary first few months.” She felt a sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. “Then I guess I’ll have to move.”

Feeling his gaze on her, she looked up at him, wondering what he was thinking, what judgments he was making. “You probably don’t understand any of this. How I could end up with your brother and then pregnant with no husband? You would never get yourself into such a crazy situation because you don’t let emotions make your decisions.”

“You’re completely correct.”

“I’m also completely human. Are you?”

His mouth lifted in a half smile. “Unfortunately, yes. Human enough to want to finish what we started a few minutes ago.” He moved toward her, and she felt her heart jump into her throat. “Don’t worry. I won’t. I may be human, but I’m not ruled by my hormones. Good night, Lilli.”

Staring after him in surprise, she took a ragged breath. She felt totally off balance.

I’m human, but I’m not ruled by my hormones.

That was part of the reason she’d responded to him. She had a gut feeling that he had maintained control of himself. He wouldn’t lose it unless he chose to do so. She’d never been around such a man but she could sense it about him and it made her feel secure at the same time that it knocked her sideways. She closed her eyes and pushed her hair from her face. She needed to stay on guard.

Five

Lilli's hands were shaking as she turned onto Max's street Saturday after working at the free dental clinic. She'd been so careful at work lately, always making sure to have someone walk her to her car. Afterward, she'd stopped to visit Devon Jones, one of the hospice workers who had helped her mother during her last days. Devon was now caring for his own father during the end stages of a long illness.

After she'd left, she'd noticed a black car in her rearview mirror. Even after making a few turns, the car remained behind her. She became so nervous that she'd taken some wrong turns and had got lost.

Glancing over her shoulder as she pulled into the driveway, she shook her head. Surely they wouldn't follow her all the way to Max's house. Biting her lip, she grabbed her purse and rushed into the house, leaning against the door as she closed it, and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes for a moment to calm herself. When she opened them, Max was five feet away from her, pinning her with a searching gaze.

"And you look like you've had some excitement," he said. "Anything you want to tell me?"

She tried to shrug, but shivered instead. Despite the way he'd left her feeling last night, she couldn't deny feeling ten times safer in his presence. "Not right now," she said and headed for the

kitchen. “Water sounds good.”

Her heart still racing, she took another deep breath and put her hand to her chest.

“Lilli,” he said from behind her and she thought she heard a note of concern in his voice. Hallucinating, she told herself. “Are you okay?”

“I will be,” she insisted, getting a glass and filling it with filtered water from the refrigerator.

He moved in front of her and studied her. “Where have you been?”

“Work, well, not really work,” she corrected.

“Your office isn’t open on Saturday,” he said, his expression growing suspicious.

“That’s right. But we volunteer for the free clinic downtown. I filled in for one of the other hygienists.”

“Downtown? Where?” he asked, clearly not pleased.

She winced. She had expected he wouldn’t approve of her driving downtown by herself, but no one had bothered her for days.

She told him the address and his mouth tightened. “Afterward, I stopped by to check on a hospice assistant who worked with my mother.” She shook her head. “Poor Devon. His own father is dying now.”

“Devon? What did this guy want? Did he ask you for anything?”

“No, but if he did, I would try to help him. He helped my

mother and I during a very difficult time.”

“This is what I warned you about. You need to be careful because people will come out of the woodwork playing on your sympathy and asking for *help*.”

“That hasn’t happened,” she said, folding her arms over her chest.

“Then what happened to make you so upset? Did one of Tony’s buddies show up?”

“Aside from getting lost, the only thing I can tell you is that someone in a black Mercedes followed me most of the way home.”

He swore under his breath. “That’s it. You’re quitting.”

She gaped at him. “Quitting?”

“It’s the only rational thing to do. Each day that passes I learn more about how deeply Tony was in trouble. You can stay here until the baby is born and you’re ready to move and say goodbye to your contacts here. I’ve told you before. You need to be on guard in every way. People will try to take advantage of you.”

She shook her head. “I can’t quit. I need the income for the baby. As you said, babies aren’t cheap.”

“Money won’t be a concern after you sign the agreement.”

She supposed she should have been intimidated by him and part of her was, but she refused to give in to it. “I’m not signing that stupid agreement and I’m not taking your money.”

“You would turn down a good life for your child in exchange for pride.”

She scowled at him. “That was low. The point is that I’m not giving control of my child to you or anyone else. I don’t know you well enough. You may give the impression of being very responsible, but at the same time you’re bitter, cynical and a workaholic. I want my butter bean to be happy. You may be loaded, but you don’t seem very happy.”

“Butter bean?” he repeated.

“Yes, butter bean. An affectionate nickname. Something you wouldn’t understand.”

Exasperation crossed his handsome face. “Most women would kill to have the equivalent of an extended vacation here, but you’re fighting it every inch of the way. Have you always been this disagreeable?”

“I think you just bring it out in me,” she said.

“Do you have a will?”

“Yes, I do,” she said.

“Have you chosen a guardian for you child?”

She resisted the urge to squirm. “I’m working on it.”

“Why don’t you name me the guardian?” he demanded.

She bit her lip. “Because you don’t smile enough.” As soon as she blurted out her answer, she knew it sounded a little crazy. “I think kids need smiles and lots of hugs.”

He moved toward her. “I think you trust me more than you admit.”

Her heart flipped. Maybe she did. There was something so solid about him. “I trust you to be rational, but some decisions

should be more emotional.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Are you saying your emotional decisions have turned out well?”

“Not all, obviously,” she said. “But it was at least partly an emotional decision for me to take a leave of absence from work to take care of my mother during her last months. I wouldn’t trade anything for the time I had with her, because I won’t have a chance for that again.”

A trace of sympathy softened his hard gaze.

“If you were my son’s guardian, what would you do if you had to choose between attending an important business meeting or going to his T-ball game?” She shrugged. “I’m going to make a wild guess and say you’d choose the former because it would be the more rational decision.”

“You make a good point, but most parents have to balance career and children’s needs. There’s no reason I couldn’t learn to do the same thing.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “How would you do that?”

He looked surprised that she would question him. “Why do I feel as if I’m being interviewed for a position?”

She nodded. “Maybe you are,” she said. “You’ve pretty much asked, no, demanded to be the baby’s guardian in case of my death or path to self-destruction. If someone asked you to give them the most important job in the world, wouldn’t you interview them? Probably conduct a background search. Ask for

references.”

He gave an incredulous laugh, his teeth gleaming brightly in contrast to his tanned skin. “I don’t know whether to be offended or—” A cell phone rang and his smile fell. He pulled the phone from his pocket and checked the number. “Excuse me,” he murmured. “Yes, Rena?” He paused and shook his head. “I’ve sent a donation for the event tonight, but won’t be attending.” He listened for a moment. “I’m sorry they’ll be disappointed. Hopefully the money I sent will soothe some of their pain. Okay. Have a good day.”

He turned off the phone and turned back to Lilli. “Sorry that was my cousin Rena. She thinks I’m a recluse and she’s determined to get me more socially involved.”

“But you don’t want to,” Lilli included.

“This will be a boring chicken dinner with a silent auction afterward. I get enough social involvement at work. And I’m not stingy with my donations.”

“But maybe Rena thinks that more people would be more generous with their contributions if they actually saw you show up at the charitable functions sometimes. You would be a good example,” she said.

“Maybe,” he said, clearly not convinced. “Do you know how painful these things can be?”

“Probably not,” she said. “But it’s not like you’re making a lifetime commitment.”

He sighed and met her gaze. “Okay, I’ll tell you what. I’ll go

to the fund-raiser for the children's wing of the hospital if you'll go with me."

"Me?" she said, shocked. "But I'm pregnant."

"Does that mean you're disabled?"

"No, but—" she shook her head "—why would you want me to go? You're bound to have a dozen other women on the line who would want to go with you."

"Meaning you wouldn't," he said in a dry, amused tone.

"I didn't say that," he said. "What about Kiki?"

"I didn't invite Kiki," he said. "I invited you."

Her heart sped up. She cleared her throat. "I don't have anything to wear."

"I can have someone take care of that within an hour."

He was shredding her protests more effectively than a paper shredder. She stared at him, her mind spinning.

"Think of it as an opportunity to continue your interview," he said, as if he weren't at all worried that he would meet and exceed her expectations.

Must be nice to have that kind of confidence, she thought. "This is crazy. I can't believe you want to take me to this kind of event. Aren't you concerned about the gossip?"

"With my father, his mistress and my brother, I've been dealing with gossip most of my life. This will be a cakewalk."

Lilli took a shower and as she was fixing her hair, a knock sounded on her door. She opened it to Max's housekeeper, Myrtle, who held a large box. "For you," the older woman with

iron-gray hair said and carried the box to the bed.

“Already?” Lilli asked, glancing at the clock. When Max said an hour, he meant an hour. “Thank you very much, Myrtle,” she said, opening the box and pushing aside layers of tissue paper. “Omigoodness, this is beautiful. Did you see it?” she asked the chief housekeeper. She held up the black gown with the fitted bodice and deep V-neck. Just under the bustline dotted with tiny embroidered pink flowers, the remainder of the dress fell in a swirl of silk.

The woman nodded. “It’s beautiful. Perfect for you. Mr. De Luca is always very generous.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” She looked in vain for a price tag, wishing she could reimburse him for the dress. “Do you think he would let me pay him—”

Before she even finished, Myrtle shook her head. “Never,” she said.

Sighing, she met Myrtle’s gaze. “I don’t want to be on the long list of people who sponge off of him.”

Myrtle gave a slight smile that softened her usual stern expression. “You will have a difficult time outgiving Mr. De Luca.”

Lilli frowned thoughtfully. “How long have you worked for Mr. De Luca?”

“Six years. One of those years, my husband was ill and he allowed me extra time off with pay. I’ll always be grateful to him for that.”

“I don’t know how to ask this, but does Mr. De Luca have any *real* friends?”

“Very few,” Myrtle said. “He keeps very busy with his company and socializes very little. And there are his godchildren.”

Lilli blinked. “Godchildren? I didn’t know he was a godfather.”

“With such wealth, he’s a natural choice. I should go,” she said. “You’ll look beautiful in your dress. Mr. De Luca would want you to enjoy it.”

“Just on more thing,” Lilli said as the woman headed for the door. “When is Mr. De Luca’s birthday?”

“Next month, the fifth,” she said. “But he never celebrates it.”

Lilli’s mind immediately flew with possibilities. *He never celebrates it.* Well, maybe this year should be different. And he was a godfather? Who would have guessed? Sheesh, she should talk to Myrtle more often.

She glanced at the clock again and felt a kick of nerves. She would think about that later. Now she needed to get ready for the charity dinner. She wanted the rest of her to measure up to that beautiful dress.

It occurred to Lilli that perhaps she could have used a team of hairstylists and consultants to get her up to snuff for this event. Instead she would need to rely on the cosmetic tips she’d gleaned from the last fashion magazine she’d read and that had been two or three months ago.

One hour and ten minutes later, Max checked his watch again and wondered if he should sit down and review some reports while he waited for Lilli. Just as he headed for his downstairs office, she appeared at the top of the stairs. He stared for a long moment as she descended the steps. Her blond hair flowing in loose spiral curls to her shoulders and fair skin made her look like an angel. The cut of her black halter dress dipped into a deep V that drew his gaze to her breasts, and the way the fabric bonded lovingly to her curves made him hard.

Her pregnancy was obvious. The dress made no attempt to hide it. He wondered why he was so attracted to this woman. It made no sense at all, especially knowing the baby she carried belonged to his dead brother.

He clenched his teeth and nodded. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "So do you."

His lips twitched. He chuckled. "Thanks." He extended his elbow. "Ready?"

"As ever," she murmured and slid her arm through his. "You can still back out if you want. I mean, unless you've changed your mind about having me tag along."

"Not a chance," he said, guiding her through the doorway. "You're not backing out, are you?"

She shot him a sideways glance. "Not a chance. It's not as if I'm ever going to see these people again."

"You never know," he said, escorting her to the luxury sedan parked out front. He opened the car door for her. "You may enjoy

yourself.”

“I just hope the food is good. If it’s not, we can always stop for a cheeseburger with everything on the way home.”

He just grinned and got into the car. Adjusting the sound system to play an operatic aria, he noticed Lilli began to fidget after a few minutes. “Problem?” he asked.

“No, no, not really,” she said, pushing her hair behind her shoulder as she moved her foot in a staccato beat at odds with the aria. He heard the soft jangle of her anklet with every movement. It was difficult to keep his gaze from straying to her sexy legs.

“Are you sure there’s nothing wrong?” he asked.

“Do you know what she’s saying?” she asked, pointing toward the CD player.

“It’s from a German opera by Mozart called *The Magic Flute*. I didn’t study much German, but if I remember correctly, she’s saying something along the lines of ‘The vengeance of hell boils in my heart. Death and despair flame about me.’”

“Cheerful little ditty, huh,” she said. “That’s why I’m not crazy about opera. Someone is usually pissed off, plotting to kill someone or getting killed.”

“True. But some are more upbeat than others. I’ll have to take you sometime,” he said, amused at the image of sharing such an experience with Lilli. “Have you thought about what kind of music is good for the baby’s development?”

She nodded vigorously. “I want him to enjoy a variety of music, so I play instrumental Mozart for him. Based on what you

just told me about the translation to that aria, I think I'll skip most opera for a while. I've also already started him on the Baby Einstein series."

"You've done some research," he said and felt the weight of her gaze on him.

"You sound surprised."

"Maybe I was," he admitted. "Since this pregnancy was unplanned—"

"Doesn't mean I'm not going to be informed. I've signed up to take an infant care class in a couple of weeks, and I've been researching pediatricians. Since I've changed where I'm living, I may need to do some additional research."

"I can get you the best pediatrician in Las Vegas anytime you want," he said finally, determined that Lilli and his nephew would have no less. "What kind of preschool you want him to attend?"

"I'm leaning toward a Montessori school but they can be expensive, so I'll have to see."

"Money won't be an issue—"

"As long as I sign your agreement, which I won't," she said.

"Yet," he corrected, feeling a twist of impatience. He'd made sure he didn't do anything that would cause his character to be called into question. Not after his father. "You can change your mind after you know me better."

"Maybe," she conceded. "But I still don't like the idea of signing my butter bean over to anyone."

“It’s the job of a parent to make sure the child is taken care of in the event of the parent’s death.”

“I know.”

A swollen silence followed, and he sensed she was thinking about things that made her sad. His gut twisted. He couldn’t explain it, but he didn’t want Lilli sad, so he changed the subject. “You didn’t say anything about sports. The De Lucas are naturally athletic, good with any competitive sports. I could teach him soccer, tennis, basketball.”

“That’s nice, but the important question is can you play peekaboo?”

Max blinked and glanced at her. From the glow of the dashboard, her eyes gleamed with a combination of innocence and sensuality. “Peekaboo?”

She nodded. “Yes, and how good are you at giving hugs and pats on the back? A kid needs hugs and pats on the back more than soccer.”

Max digested her comments for a long moment. “You think I may not be affectionate enough.”

“I didn’t actually say that.”

“But you thought it.”

She opened her mouth then closed it. “I think a child needs someone who means safety and security, home. That person will love you whether you make the goal or not. That person will teach you how to take a bad day and make it better. I think a child needs compassion.”

He pulled in front of the resort where the event was being hosted. “We’ll continue this discussion later.”

“Okay,” she said and lifted her mouth in a sexy smile. “Are you ready for your grand entrance?”

He looked at her for a long moment, unable to tear his gaze away from her. With her sunbeam hair and eyes full of life, she literally sparkled. She took his breath away. “Sweetheart, they’re not going to be looking at me,” he said, and gave his keys to the valet.

Six

Lilli felt curious gazes fastened on her as she sat next to Max at the dinner table. Chandeliers lit the luxurious ballroom, warming the red carpet and creating a glow on faces belonging to the who's who of the Las Vegas elite. Walls lined with elegant mirrors reflected women outfitted in designer gowns swishing alongside men dressed in expertly tailored suits. Servers refilled her glass of water before she had an opportunity to make a request.

It was by far the most luxurious event she'd ever attended and she constantly reminded herself not to put her elbows on the table. She noticed many people made a point of stopping to speak to Max. Even the mistress of ceremonies introduced him and thanked him for donating the resort's grand ballroom for the night's festivities.

Just as Max picked up his fork to take a bite of coq au vin, a man stopped and touched his shoulder. "Good to see you here, Max. And congrats on the success of your latest refurbishment project in your Luxotic resorts in the Caribbean. I understand they're often booked over a year in advance."

"Thank you," Max said. "It takes a team. Good to see you too, Robert."

The man walked away and Lilli leaned toward Max and whispered, "Would you like me to put a sign on the back of your chair telling people not to talk to you until you finish eating?"

His lips twitched. “There are only three words appropriate for that question.”

“What?”

“I told you,” he said and took a bite.

“True,” she said. “But maybe people wouldn’t feel it necessary to try to talk to you if you attended more of these. Think about it. If they know this is their only shot at actually speaking to the mighty Max De Luca, they’ve got to grab it. If, however, they know you’ll show up at some other events, maybe they won’t feel the need to speak to you every time they see you, which is almost never.”

“You’re saying the attraction to me is how rarely I appear. It has nothing to do with me or my position. If I showed up more often, I would be old news.”

She realized he could take that as an insult. “I never used the word *old news*. I’m just saying maybe some of the attention could be spread out over several appearances instead of concentrated on just one.”

“Spread the torture out over several evenings instead of getting it done in one.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Maybe it wouldn’t feel as much like torture if it was spread out.” She glanced up and saw a familiar woman walking toward them. “Is that—”

“Max, what a surprise. You told me you weren’t planning to come tonight,” the woman said and Lilli recalled who she was. Kiki.

Lilli felt a nervous twitch at the back of her neck.

“Last-minute change of plans,” Max said, rising to his feet. “Are you enjoying the event?”

Kiki shot Lilli a venomous glance. “Not as much as if I were with you,” she said and touched his arm.

“Oh, I’m sure I would have bored you to tears. I’m doing the same to Lilli. Just ask her,” he said, glancing down at Lilli with a devil’s glint in his eyes.

“I’m sure *Lilli* would never call you boring,” Kiki said. “No woman in her right mind would.”

“Let’s ask Lilli. Tell the truth,” he said.

She searched his gaze, wondering why on earth he was putting her on the spot like this. “Kiki is right. I wouldn’t have described you as boring.”

“See?” Kiki said.

“But he can complain right up there with the best of them,” she added.

Kiki’s eyes narrowed in disapproval. Max stared at her in surprise and Lilli heard the clatter of sterling silver hit the floor beside her followed by the sound of nervous laughter from the woman sitting in the chair beside her.

Fighting a twinge of nervousness and regret, Lilli lifted her shoulders. “You told me to be honest.”

“Yes, I did,” he said, giving the distinct impression he wouldn’t make the same request again.

Kiki cleared her throat. “I need a quick private word with you,

Max. It's urgent. Do you mind?"

He shot a longing glance at his food and Lilli. "Oh, go," she urged him. "If you're not back soon, I'll ask the server to wrap it up to take home."

He bent down and whispered in her ear. "At this rate we may be stopping at Wendy's for me."

She smiled. "Drive-through is open until midnight."

He gave a rough chuckle and turned toward Kiki.

"He's so hot," the young woman beside her said. "How could you send him off with that beautiful woman? You must be confident of your relationship with him," she said in admiration.

Lilli turned to the pudgy young woman with the sweet face. "Max and I have an unusual relationship," she said wryly.

The woman nodded, glancing at Lilli's pregnant belly. "You don't have to tell me anything. I've heard him dodging questions the entire dinner. I know what it's like to be surrounded by people with hidden agendas. Oh, I'm sorry. I should have introduced myself. I'm Mallory James."

"I'm Lilli—"

"McCall," Mallory said, then blushed. "I overheard him introduce you several times. I'm not usually nosy, but since I'm here by myself tonight, and the two of you were more interesting than the almost-dead and completely deaf eighty-seven-year-old beside me... well..."

Lilli smiled. "I'm glad we at least provided a little entertainment. Nice to meet you, Mallory."

The other woman glanced past Lilli's shoulder. "Good grief, you're surrounded by them," she murmured.

"Lilli, you're looking delicious tonight," a male voice said just behind her.

Lilli turned around to meet Alex Megalos's friendly gaze. She couldn't help smiling as she shook her head. "Do you give lessons on flirting on the side?"

"No way. Gotta keep my edge. Where did Max go? Not wise to abandon a woman as beautiful as you."

"You're so right," she said. "I'm bracing myself for the stampede any minute."

Mallory cleared her throat loudly.

Lilli glanced back at the woman whose expression clearly said *please introduce me*. "Oh, Alex Megalos, have you met Mallory James? She's new to town. Alex works for Megalos-De Luca Enterprises."

Alex extended his hand to Mallory and lifted it to his lips. "Enchanted. Have I heard of your father?"

"Perhaps," Mallory said, stuttering. "James Investments and Wealth Management."

Alex nodded in recognition and gave a roguish smile, dipping his head toward hers. "Yes. I bet he keeps you under lock and key. I hear he's excellent. I'd love a chance to chat with him. Is he here tonight?"

"Not tonight," Mallory said and pulled out a card. "But I'd be happy to introduce you. Give me a call?" she asked, rising,

bumping into a server carrying a tray of drinks.

“Oh, no.” Lilli watched helplessly as the drinks tumbled, splattering Mallory’s pink gown and at least one leg of Alex’s pants.

The server’s face froze. “I’m so sorry.”

“Club soda,” Lilli said, quickly standing. “Club soda works magic for stains. And we need more napkins,” she called after the waiter as he left. She gave her napkin to Alex and blindly accepted one that someone else offered her.

She gave the other napkin to Mallory, meeting the horrified gaze of her new acquaintance. “Mallory, go ahead to the powder room. I’ll bring the club soda, sweetheart. These servers move so quickly,” she said.

As soon as Mallory was out of earshot, she turned to Alex. “Shame on you for causing all this trouble.”

“Me?” Alex said in an incredulous voice, wiping his slacks.

“You’re such a flirt. I’m sure you know what kind of effect you have on most women. You really should be more careful doling out those kisses and smiles.”

Max appeared at her side and glanced at Alex. “Did someone finally decide to douse him?” he asked, half-joking.

Alex met Max’s gaze and gave a heavy sigh. “No. it was the server. Dammit, Lilli can explain it to you,” he said and left.

“He didn’t hit on you again, did he?”

She shook her head. “He’s a flirt. I introduced him to the woman beside me and he got her all flustered. She bumped into

the server and there was a spill. Ah, here comes the club soda,” she said, smiling at the server as he delivered the bottle and some extra napkins.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Accidents happen,” she said then looked at Max. “I need to do a little emergency stain removal.”

“Saving the day?” he said, his gaze glinting with something that looked like approval.

“That’s a stretch, but I would hope someone would do the same for me in the same situation.”

He lowered his head toward her. “I could kiss you right this very minute.”

Lilli’s heart slammed into her rib cage and she gaped at Max. “You—”

“You heard me,” he said and his voice was so seductive she immediately felt hot and flustered. “Now go do your good deed.”

Stepping backward, her gaze still trapped by his, she nearly stumbled. Max’s hand shot out to steady her. “You’re worse than Alex.”

His eyes widened in outrage. “What the hell—”

She pulled away. “I need to do my good deed,” she said and forced her gaze away from his so she could regain her equilibrium. *Men*, she thought and headed for the powder room.

As soon as she entered the luxurious room with a sitting area separate from the stalls, she looked for Mallory, but couldn’t find her. Lilli walked into the connecting room filled with stalls and

tentatively called, “Mallory?”

“I’m here,” she said, covering her face as she exited one of the restrooms. “I can’t believe I did that. I’m so embarrassed. I can’t go back in there.”

“Of course you can. It was just a little spill. They happen all the time,” Lilli said, urging the young woman into the sitting area. “Come on. Let me work on your dress.”

Mallory moaned. “Why did I have to make a server spill wine on the most amazing man I’ve ever met?”

“Alex can afford to be taken down a peg or two.” She poured a little club soda on the worst spots.

“But not by me,” Mallory said. “Do you think he’ll run from me every time he sees me from now on?”

Lilli shook her head, dabbing at the dress. “Of course he won’t. If nothing else, your meeting was memorable. He’ll probably talk to dozens of people tonight, but not many—”

“None,” Mallory corrected and gave a reluctant laugh. “None will have gotten his slacks wet.” She smiled and met Lillie’s gaze. “You’ve been very kind to me. Would you mind getting together with me sometime for lunch if I promise to try not to spill anything on you?”

Lilli laughed. “I’d love to,” she said. “You know this is the same kind of thing that could have happened to me.”

“I can’t see it,” Mallory said. “You look so graceful.”

“Thank you, but it’s true. Now it’s time for us to get back to dinner. The auction should start soon.”

Mallory sighed and stood. “Okay, let me put on a little more lipstick.”

While Mallory took a couple extra minutes to primp, Lilli walked out into the hallway. She’d gone no more than three steps when she nearly ran into Kiki.

Lilli immediately backed away. “Oh, excuse me. How are you?”

Kiki narrowed her eyes. “I could be a lot better.” She stared at Lilli for a long moment then cocked her head to the other less busy side of the hallway. “Do you have a moment? I’d like to talk with you.”

“I probably should get back to—”

“Max,” Kiki said, her beautiful face tightening with displeasure. “He can wait. This won’t take long.”

Lilli reluctantly followed Kiki.

“You probably don’t know this, but Max and I have a very close relationship. *Very* close,” she emphasized. “In fact, no one would be surprised if we were to get married. We’ve been seeing each other for a couple of years.”

Lilli nodded. “I see.”

“A man like Max, well, a woman just has to accept that he may stray every now and then. It doesn’t really mean anything. Men, especially powerful men, have women throwing themselves at them all the time.”

Lilli wondered what this had to do with her.

“Now Max hasn’t wanted to admit anything,” Kiki continued

with a determined smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I'm sure he doesn't want to hurt my feelings. But I'm not stupid. He obviously feels obligated toward you and I can understand why you would want to take advantage of the situation."

"Not really," Lilli said.

Kiki waved her hand. "You don't need to deny it. I can't imagine any woman in your position who wouldn't exploit the situation to her advantage."

Lilli felt a spurt of anger. "I'm—"

"Just hear me out," Kiki interjected. "What you need to understand is that you won't be able to hold him. Sure, he'll be a great father to the child, but Max is a special man and trust me, he requires special handling. I know he will provide financial support for your child. But you seem like an independent-minded woman, so I thought you might like some additional support of your own."

Confusion and wariness mixed inside her. "Additional support?"

Kiki lowered her voice. "Here's the deal. You leave Max, never come back and don't get in my way and I'll give you fifty thousand dollars."

Lilli blinked at the woman in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious," Kiki said. "Max is very important to me."

Incredulous, Lilli shook her head. "I can't—"

"Sure you can. Think about it. Imagine getting all that money and a clean break to do what you want where you want." She

paused a half beat. “If you make the move within a week, I might even throw in a bonus. You could buy yourself a little condo or house and be in charge of your own life. Trust me, if you stay with Max, he’ll have an opinion about everything you say and do.” She pressed a card into Lilli’s hand. “Call me. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Lilli stared after the woman as she strode away. She couldn’t believe what had just happened. The conversation ran through her mind again, but it was almost too much for her to comprehend.

“Hey, Lilli,” Mallory said, moving her hand in front of Lilli’s face. “Are you okay? You look a little sick. Should you sit down?”

Lilli shook her head to clear it. “No, I just—” She sighed and headed back to the table.

“Are you sure?” Mallory asked as she followed after her. “You look pale. Like you’re sick or you just had a close encounter with an alien or something. Some people don’t believe in that stuff, but I do.”

Lilli shook her head at the irony. “That’s a pretty good explanation,” she said.

“What is?” Mallory asked.

“A close encounter with an alien,” Lilli said, crumpling Kiki’s card into a little wad and tossing it onto a passing waiter’s empty tray.

Mallory nodded and whispered, “The place is full of aliens tonight, isn’t it?”

Still shaken from her encounter with Kiki, but trying to get past it, Lilli returned with Mallory to the table just as dessert was being served. Max immediately stood and helped both Lilli and Mallory into their chairs while Lilli introduced Mallory.

After they all sat down, he turned to Lilli. “Everything okay?”

She gave a circular nod, but mustered a smile.

“You want to explain that remark about Alex?” he asked.

She felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment. “I was just commenting that it’s not fair for him—or you—to use your—” she searched for an appropriate word “—appeal to put a woman off balance.”

His lips twitched. “Are you admitting I put you off balance?”

She reached for her glass of water. “I’m not saying anything else. I offered my explanation.”

“Sounds like you’re pleading the fifth.”

“How is Kiki?” she asked, changing the focus off herself.

Irritation crossed his face. “How is it that a woman can appear perfectly sane and rational at the beginning of a relationship then turn totally insane and irrational at the end?”

“It’s all the man’s fault,” she said. “Men turn women into raging lunatics. They hint, they promise, they mislead.”

“I am always up-front in my relationships with women. I make it clear that I’m not interested in marriage and—”

“Why not?” she asked. “Why aren’t you interested in marriage?”

“It needs to be the right woman at the right time. I’ve never

found the right woman.”

“Why not Kiki?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

“This isn’t the best place for a private discussion, but I’ve never been serious about Kiki. She’s a beautiful, intelligent woman, but not right for me in the long run. I told her that from the beginning.”

Ouch, Lilli thought. That couldn’t have gone over well. “Is there anything you did that might have led her to believe that you’d changed your mind and that you and her were getting close to a commitment?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why are you asking these questions?”

She shrugged. “Just curious. She seems a little...”

“A little what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe possessive.”

“I made it clear tonight that we’re through. Now, don’t you want to eat some of this dessert? It’s chocolate cake.”

Lilli’s stomach twisted. “I’d love to, but I’m full.”

He studied her for a long moment. “Something’s not right,” he began.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Ann Wingate, the mistress of ceremonies announced, saving Lilli from replying to Max. “It’s now time for the Silent Auction. Please make your way to the display tables and loosen your purse strings. And remember, it’s all for a good cause.”

“You’re sure you don’t want your cake,” Max said.

She shook her head. “Thanks, no. I’m curious what they’ve

put up for auction.”

He nodded and stood, pulling her chair back for her to rise. “Pick a couple things you like and make a bid on my behalf.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not? It’s for charity.”

“Yes, but—” She broke off. “It wouldn’t feel right.”

He gave a heavy sigh. “Then pick out something I can donate to a good cause.”

She liked that idea much better. “That could be fun.”

With the exception of several interruptions, Max actually enjoyed himself during the next hour. Lilli’s careful assessment of the items amused him. He noticed she spent an inordinate amount of time studying an expensive baby stroller before she dismissed it and moved along.

“Which should I buy to give away?” he asked, curious what her answer would be.

“The spa and makeover packages for the women’s shelter downtown. The deluxe computer system for the homeless shelter.”

“That’s all?”

“I think they’ll provide good bang for the buck.”

“You didn’t see anything you like? Jewelry? A luxury cruise?”

She shook her head and he continued. “Baby stroller.”

She gave a start then shook her head again. “That thing costs almost as much as a car. Crazy expensive.”

Max couldn’t help wondering how long her attitude would last

if she were exposed to luxury all the time. In his experience, women tended to easily grow accustomed to the finer things. She amused him at the same time that she attracted him. Her laughter affected him like a strong jolt of java and her determination not to brown-nose him startled him. He was surrounded by yes people and she didn't hesitate to tell him no. Even though she was pregnant, or perhaps partly because of it, she drew his attention the way no other woman had.

How could she possibly be so innocent and sexy at the same time? He couldn't believe his half brother's damn good luck in finding her. She couldn't be perfect, though, he reminded himself. No one was, and he'd never met a woman who didn't have the capacity for deceit and manipulation. Still, he wanted her. And he wasn't inclined to resist her.

Seven

“You absolutely shouldn’t have gotten that baby stroller,” Lilli said in a huffy voice. “It was insanely expensive.”

“Butter bean will like it,” Max said.

She threw him a sideways glance as he opened the door to the house for her. “He would have been just as happy with a less costly model.”

“You don’t know that,” Max argued. “The cutting-edge aerodynamic design, which features an unparalleled smooth ride,” he quoted from the manufacturer, “may make a huge difference.”

“In that case, he’d better be flexible because my compact car gives a high five to every bump in the road.”

He chuckled.

She turned to face him. “But seriously, I cannot accept the jewelry.”

“It’s just sterling silver.”

“David Yurman’s top-of-the-line.” She shook her head. “I don’t understand why you bought it for me. I told you I didn’t want anything.”

“I’m sure that was part of it,” he said.

“You mean you gave me this just to be disagreeable?” she asked, her eyes rounding in surprise.

“It contributed, plus as the hostess kept saying, it’s all for

charity.”

Her lips twitched. “You don’t believe any of it. You don’t believe the manufacturer’s brag about the stroller and you think it’s stupid to hold an auction to get donations.”

“It’s a lot easier to just guilt people into giving money through the mail,” he said.

“But for some people, it’s more fun to give it away at an auction.”

He nodded. “Depends on the people.”

She bit her lip and her expression changed. “Maybe.” She paused. “I still don’t understand why you got me the jewelry.”

“The blue topaz reminded me of your eyes,” he said.

He saw a hint of something deeper than desire flash through her eyes before she took a quick breath and looked away. “Oh.”

His gut twisted with a surprising instinct to pull her against him and kiss her. Take her. He swore under his breath.

She cleared her throat. “Well, you shouldn’t have, but it was very nice of you.”

“I surprised you,” he said. “You thought I was a selfish miser like Scrooge.”

“I never thought you were like Scrooge.” She paused and seemed to decide that she shouldn’t elaborate.

He would love to know what she was really thinking.

“Thank you again. I should go up to bed,” she said and paused. “I was wondering,” she began and abruptly stopped.

“Wondering what?”

"It's really none of my business."

"I won't know if that's true until you ask the question."

"I was wondering," she ventured. "Do you have any godchildren?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Why do you ask? Did someone mention that to you tonight?"

"At the auction?" she said. "Of course not."

He tugged at his tie. "The truth is I have five godchildren."

Her eyes rounded. "Omgoodness. So many."

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "I'm not expected to do any real parenting. I'm actually a co-godparent. The parents just want my financial management in case anything should happen to them. Along with the gifts and tuition," he added.

"Gifts and tuition?" she echoed, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"They're counting on me to provide a significant college fund."

"For five children?" she said. "Isn't that a bit much?"

"I've got it," he said. "But I've started dodging the opportunity to add any more godchildren."

"I can't blame you for that. My goodness, no wonder you're so cynical."

"No need for flattery," he said, chuckling at her assessment.

Her gaze softened. "But it is very generous of you to accept the responsibility."

"Financial responsibility," he corrected.

She gave a slow nod. “Whatever would you do if, for some unforeseen reason, you became the guardian of five children?”

“Boarding school,” he said.

Her face fell. “Oh. That’s why I’ll never sign your agreement for butter bean.”

“You don’t really have anyone in mind to be the guardian for your child, do you?” he asked.

She looked away. “I really am working on it.”

He touched her arm. “Lilli, tell me the truth.”

She bit her lip. “The closest I have is my good friend Dee. She’s loving and affectionate and adores children. But she’s also a free spirit and loves to travel.” She sighed and lifted her lips in a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Maybe I should place a want ad.”

“Never,” he said.

“That’s what I have to say about boarding school,” she replied. The silence hung between them, thick with pent-up desire and emotion. It was so strong he could taste it.

“I should go to bed. Thank you again for an amazing evening. Good night,” she said and turned to go upstairs.

He felt the same twitchy sensation he’d felt the first time he’d met her. It was the same feeling of intuition he had just before he made a successful business move. He’d never felt it about a woman, he thought, shaking his head. Loosening his tie, he picked up the weekend edition of one of his newspapers and sat down for a few minutes.

Restless, he decided to pour a glass of red wine. Taking it outside on the patio, he inhaled the scent of the flowers his gardener kept in meticulous condition year-round and listened to the soothing sound of the waterfall in the pool.

Max wondered what would have happened between him and Lilli if they'd met under different circumstances. If she'd never been involved with his brother and gotten pregnant. For just a moment, he indulged himself. He would have seduced her immediately. He would have talked her into quitting her job so she could travel with him at a moment's notice.

The image of her pale naked body available to him at all times made him hard. She was a passionate woman and he would want to learn all of her secrets. He would find out what made her moan, what made her sweat and what would make her come alive in his arms.

He would want to mark her as his with jewelry, but not marriage. Although he'd never invited a woman to live in his home, Lilli may very well have been the first.

Of course, he would have asked her to sign a financial agreement that would protect both her and him for the time when their relationship ended. Every good thing came to an end, Max knew that. He suspected she would have refused to sign the agreement, he thought with a twinge of humor, and he would have had the affair with her anyway.

He swallowed a drink of wine and ruthlessly cut off his little mental fantasy. With the impending birth of his brother's child,

there was far more at stake than Max's libido. Even though he was encouraged by how seriously Lilli was taking her maternal duties, he knew that attitude could change for a variety of reasons.

His own brother's guardian had started out well, but when Tony had hit his teens, the guardian had seemed to give up. She'd allowed Tony way too much freedom and Max was convinced the lack of parental influence had sent Tony down the road into trouble and eventually to his death.

Max refused to allow that to happen to another De Luca. If Lilli continued to refuse to sign an agreement with him, there were other ways. More drastic, more costly, but perhaps ultimately necessary.

Two days later, Lilli left work a little early because Max had invited her to join him for dinner at The Trillion Resort's rooftop restaurant. His assistant had made the arrangements with her, and she had no idea why he'd invited her. Since the auction, Max had worked such late hours she hadn't seen him at all.

She fussed over what to wear and finally chose a pair of maternity slacks and a silk top with varying colors of sea-blue that featured an Empire waist and fell nearly to her knees.

She wore the sterling jewelry Max had purchased for her at the auction and had gone a little more daring with her makeup by giving her eyes a smoky look.

Although she cursed herself for it, she wanted to look nice for Max. She rolled her eyes at the way she minimized her feelings. The truth was she wanted to make his head spin. It was only fair

since the man could turn her upside down with just a glance.

Max's chauffeur drove her in one of the luxury sedans. As he pulled in front of the palatial resort, a valet rushed to her door to open it. "Good evening. Mr. De Luca's guest?"

She nodded in surprise as she accepted his assistance out of the car. "Yes, how did you—"

The young man smiled. "We know all of Mr. De Luca's vehicles."

"Oh," she said, nodding. "Thank you." She turned back to Max's chauffeur, Ricardo. "Thank you for the ride."

Ricardo smiled at her and waved. "My pleasure, Miss McCall. Enjoy your evening."

Lilli made her way to the glass elevators that whisked her up to the top level of the resort. Walking into the restaurant, she looked for Max. A man beside her said, "May I help..."

Her gaze collided with Max's across the room and she didn't hear anything else. He rose from the table where he sat, his gaze fixed on her.

The intensity with which he watched her made her feel as if she couldn't breathe. Her heart felt as if it were tripping over itself. Why did this man affect her on so many levels?

She walked to his table and he extended his hand, taking hers. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she whispered and took a shallow breath. "This is lovely."

"I thought you might enjoy a night out," he said and glanced

down at the necklace she wore. He touched the pendant and his warm fingers brushed her bare skin. "I like the way my gift looks on you."

The hint of sensual possessiveness in his tone gave her a surprising, forbidden thrill. She was a liberated woman. For Pete's sake, what was wrong with her?

"Have a seat," he said before she could reply. "I already ordered orange juice and seltzer for you."

"Thank you." She sat down and felt the hum of anticipation and electricity wind a little tighter between them.

The waiter appeared at their table, offered suggestions and they placed their orders. Max was all charming conversation, pointing out different sights from the restaurant's breathtaking view as the sun slid lower on the horizon.

Tonight interruptions were kept to a minimum. Although Lilli felt plenty of gazes on her and Max, no one approached the table. The waitstaff were perfect, appearing to refill drinks, clear plates and provide nearly invisible but courteous service.

"I told the maître' d I wanted as few interruptions as possible tonight," Max said as if he'd read her mind.

She nodded. "I couldn't help comparing this experience to the auction."

"The auction was a free-for-all. Now you understand why I don't attend many," he said and lifted his hand. "Although I must say I enjoyed it much more because you were there."

"It was fun and I made a new friend," she said.

“Who?”

“Mallory James. She invited me to lunch on Saturday.”

He nodded his head in approval. “Good. You’ll be occupied.”

Strange response, she thought. “Occupied for what?”

“I’m going out of town for three weeks.”

Her heart sank. Crazy. She would have to think about that later. “Oh, wow. That’s a long trip.”

“Yes. I knew it was coming. We have several grand reopenings in different locations scheduled over the next few weeks and my presence is required at all of them.”

“The bane of being the boss,” she said, forcing a smile because, heaven help her, she would miss him.

“These arrangements were made before I knew you existed. I’ll be out of the country,” he said, clearly displeased. “I’m not comfortable leaving you at this stage.”

His confession made her feel as if the sun came out from behind a cloud. “I’ve got six weeks until my due date. Everything’s been perfect so far. There’s no reason to think I’ll have any problems.”

“Still,” he said. “It’s best to be prepared for everything. Give me your cell phone.”

She blinked. “Why?”

“So I can program in my contact numbers,” he said.

“Oh, I can’t imagine that I would need to call you while you’re out of the country,” she said.

He waved his fingers impatiently and she gave him her phone.

“Of course, you’ll be talking to me. I’ll be checking in with you on a regular basis. For any immediate emergencies, you’re to call my assistant, Grace. I’ve told her to be on twenty-four hour call.”

“That’s ridiculous. I wouldn’t call your assistant. I’ve never even met her.”

“If you’re not comfortable, I can arrange a meeting.”

Overwhelmed, Lilli shook her head. “No. That’s not necessary.” She lowered her voice. “None of this is necessary. I’ll be fine.”

He met her gaze. “It’s my job to make sure you stay that way.”

“Why?” she demanded. “It’s not as if you’re my hus—” She broke off, horrified that the words had just popped out of her mouth.

Unable to tear her gaze from his, Lilli felt something snap and shimmer between them. A forbidden possibility neither of them would consider. What if Max *was* her husband? What if... Feeling as if the circuits in her head had scrambled and misfired, she looked away from him.

She took a mind-clearing breath. “That was stupid. This is about the baby. You feel responsible because you’re the uncle. It’s not about me.”

He cleared his throat. “It’s all connected. The baby, you, me. And since your delivery date is growing closer, you must make a decision about guardianship if something should happen to you.”

She glanced back at him and watched him pull a manila envelope from his suit jacket pocket. “I’ve asked my attorney to

come up with an agreement that should be more palatable for you. While I'm gone, I want you to look at this and take it to another attorney if that will make you more comfortable.”

Her heart twisted. This entire meal had been a setup. Max wanted one thing and one thing alone from her. Control of her baby. Although she wanted to toss the agreement back at him, she felt forced to take the envelope for the sake of civility.

Max seemed to sense the change in her mood and signed for the check and escorted her from the dining room. She hated sharing the close space of the elevator, but getting into the Ferrari with him was far more excruciating. The darkness closed around them, creating a veil of intimacy.

Every time he shifted gears, her gaze strayed to his hand tightening around the knob. His long legs flexed as he accelerated and pushed in the clutch. Despite her hostility, she couldn't help noticing a commanding sensuality with the way he drove the luxury sports car. He would be a commanding, demanding lover, she knew, but he would also make sure his partner was satisfied. In fact, she suspected a woman might never be the same once she'd shared a bed with Max.

As soon as he pulled into the garage and came to a stop, she turned to unlock her door. The second after she hit the button, the automatic lock clicked again, effectively trapping her in the car with Max. Inhaling a shallow breath, she caught a draft of his masculine scent with just a hint of cologne.

Although she fought its effect on her, she couldn't deny feeling

light-headed and entirely too aware of him as a man. “What do you want?” she asked without turning to look at him.

“You haven’t had a chance to read my attorney’s proposal, so you can’t be upset about it. But you haven’t said a word since we left the restaurant. Why?”

She stiffened her resolve against his gentle, reasonable voice. “You don’t seem to understand. My baby is not for sale.”

Three seconds of silence passed before she felt his hand on her arm. “Look at me. You can’t really believe that I intend to buy your child.”

She reluctantly faced him. “Why should I believe anything else? You’ve been trying to cram money down my throat since the first time I met you. In exchange for control of my child.” She willed herself to keep her voice from wavering. “You said I should find this agreement more palatable. You don’t seem to understand that it doesn’t matter how much money you pile onto the agreement, I’m not giving up my baby to you.”

He stared at her in shock. “Is that what you think? That the new agreement is about money? It isn’t. It gives you far more rights than the previous one. Good God, do you really think I’m that much of an ogre?”

Glimpsing his sincerity, she bit her lip in confusion. “I didn’t know what else to think. You invite me to a fabulous dinner where you act as if you’re actually enjoying my company then slap me with a contract.”

“Of course I enjoyed dinner with you. Otherwise, I could have

left the contract with one of my staff to give to you. And I wanted you to have my contact numbers. This is my last night in town for a while. I wanted to spend it with you.”

Her heart hammered against her rib cage and she shook her head. “You’re confusing me. I don’t know what you want from me,” she said. “Other than to sign your agreement.”

He looked into her eyes for a long moment then his gaze traveled to her lips and lingered. He lifted his gaze again to hers and she felt scorched by the desire she saw there.

“You want to know what I want from you?” he asked in a low voice. Then he lowered his head and took her mouth. He slid one of his hands under her jaw and cupped her face as if she were both precious and sensuous. The gesture undid her.

He devoured her mouth in dizzying kisses as he gently rubbed his hands down her neck, massaging her taut muscles.

His kiss turned her body into a bow of tension, eager for him. His massaging fingers gentled her, clouding her mind, making her willing to do whatever he wanted.

His mouth continued to take hers while his fingers drifted across her collarbone and lower to the tops of her breasts. She felt her nipples strain against the cups of her bra. Restlessness and need swelled inside her.

He paused a half beat then slid his fingertips beneath the top of her blouse, brushing them over her sensitized nipples. She gasped in pleasure at the sensation.

He pulled his hands from her breasts and placed them on her

shoulders. He pulled his mouth a breath away from hers and it was all she could do to keep from asking him not to stop.

“I want you,” he said against her mouth. “I want you in every way you can imagine and probably a few you can’t. But now is not the time.” He slid one of his hands through her hair. “Promise me that you’ll take care of yourself while I’m away. No taking chances. And call me if you need me.”

Lilli closed her eyes. She’d felt the power of his desire. What frightened her was the fact that her desire for him matched his. What frightened her even more was the very real possibility that she could need Max in ways *he* would never dream.

Eight

Two and a half weeks later, Lilli dragged herself from her little car up the steps from the mansion's garage. Her back and legs had been aching all day. She felt tired and cranky and, heaven help her, she missed Max. He called frequently, and every time, she felt the tension between them twist a little tighter.

She'd spent more than one night flirting with the forbidden fantasy of Max being the father of her child. Right now, though, all she wanted to focus on was getting a sandwich, taking a shower and going to bed.

Stepping into the foyer, she stopped and drank in a moment of peace and quiet then walked toward the kitchen.

"Surprise!" a chorus of voices called, startling her so much she dropped her water bottle and purse.

Her friends clapped in delight.

"We did it," her best friend Dee crowed. "We surprised you."

"Yes, you did." Lilli felt some of her weariness fade away and smiled. "How did you pull this off?"

"Because we're your brilliant friends, of course," Dee said. "And I think Mallory here has a magic wand. She knew how to deal with the staff, and just wait until you see the cake she brought."

"Cake?" Lilli echoed and gave Mallory a hug as the woman walked toward her. She'd enjoyed a few lunches with Mallory

during the last two weeks and Lilli already had a soft spot for the woman. “You shouldn’t have.”

“It’s nothing. I’m just glad to be a part of all this. Now come in and sit down. Let me get you some sherbet punch.”

After Lilli opened the gifts for her and the baby, Mallory presented Lilli with a large sheet cake decorated with a baby in a blue buggy inscribed with frosted letters, “Happy Baby, Lilli!” The cake was lit with one candle.

“Make a wish and blow out the candle,” Mallory said.

“But it’s not my birthday.”

“It’s your first baby. You can add more candles when you have more babies.”

Lilli looked at her in horror. “More?”

“Okay, let’s just focus on one, then,” Mallory quickly amended. “Make a wish and blow out the candle.”

Lilli closed her eyes and wished for a safe and easy delivery and good health for her baby. Secretly, she wished for a father for her child. An image of the man she would choose appeared in her mind. She blinked, pushing aside the thought. Crazy and impossible, she thought. Must be the hormones.

Just after she opened the last gift, the room abruptly turned silent.

“Major hot guy alert,” Dee whispered.

Lilli turned to see Max standing in the doorway, a wrapped package in his hand. “Max,” she said, stunned. “I thought you were still traveling.”

"I just got back thirty minutes ago. You didn't tell me you were having a baby shower," he said in a lightly chastising tone.

Lilli drank in the sight of him. Holding her breath, she wondered if he had looked forward to seeing her again as much as she had looked forward to having him back home. She wondered if he still wanted her the same way he had before.

Dee cleared her throat. "It was a surprise shower," she said to Max. "What's in the box?"

He gave a brief glance to Dee then moved toward Lilli. His gaze dipped to her belly.

"I've gotten bigger," she said, unable to keep herself from smiling.

He gave a half grin. "So you have. And still glowing." He gave her the small but beautifully wrapped box. "Myrtle left a message for me about the shower. I thought you could use this."

Her hands trembled and she wished they would stop. She hadn't seen Max in weeks and she would just like to sit down and talk with him. She managed to open the box and found a gift certificate inside. "One mother's helper of your choice from Personalized Nanny Services for one year."

Mallory nodded in approval. "PNS is the very best."

"A nanny?" Lilli said, staring at Max. "I hadn't planned—"

"Oh, no," Dee said. "You're not turning this one down. She loves it," Dee said to Max. "Perfect gift. Thank you very much." She turned back to Lilli. "If you get tired of having her around, you can send her over to my place. I would love for someone

to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies for me.”

Several of the women moaned in agreement. “Will she do laundry? Will she grocery shop?”

Max met Lilli’s gaze. “She’ll do whatever Lilli wants her to do.”

There was another group moan followed by a collective sigh.

“Can I see you privately for a moment?” he asked.

Lilli felt a combination kick from the baby and a flutter from her heart. “Sure,” she said, rising from her seat.

“Ask him about Alex,” Mallory whispered.

Tearing her gaze from Max, she glanced at Mallory. “Ask him what about Alex?”

“Where he hangs out after work. I introduced him to my father and haven’t seen him since.”

“From what Max says, that could be for the best. Alex is supposed to be a major player.”

“I’d just like the opportunity to find out for myself,” Mallory said.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do,” she said, but her mind wasn’t on Alex or Mallory. It was dominated by Max. She followed him into the foyer, noticing subtle changes in his appearance. His hair was just a little longer, more wavy. When he turned to face her, she noticed his eyes looked a bit weary as he studied her.

“It’s a nice surprise to see you,” she said. “I had no idea you’d be back so soon.”

“I’m glad I could make it. Are you okay? Any of Tony’s friends hanging around?”

“I’m fine and I haven’t seen any of Tony’s friends in a long time.”

“Good,” he said and held her gaze. “I have another event I’m expected to attend tonight, but we need to talk sometime soon. Have you looked over the agreement I left with you?”

She felt a rush of disappointment. “Yes, I have.”

“Good,” he said again. His gaze seemed to say so much more, but Lilli wondered if she was imagining it. “I won’t keep you from your friends.”

She felt another twist of disappointment. That was it. No *I’m glad to see you, I want you...* Nothing. She stared, waiting, wanting.

“Good night,” he said and turned toward the door.

Lilli continued to stare after him, starting to feel like a fool. Had she misunderstood? “Wait,” she said.

He stopped just as he reached the door and turned around. “Yes?”

Her heart raced. Confused, she didn’t know what to say. “I... uh...” She groped for something to say. “Mallory asked me to ask you about Alex.”

“Alex Megalos?” he said with a frown, walking back toward her.

“Yes. I think she’d like to get to know him better. She was wondering where he usually hangs out after work,” she said,

suddenly feeling like a middle schooler.

He shook his head. "I have no idea."

She gave a slow nod. "Okay" she said. "I'll tell her."

He shrugged. "I can probably find out something from my assistant."

"Thanks." She hesitated a half beat, hating the awkwardness between them. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just tired and harassed. I've been on longer trips, but this one felt like it went on forever."

She nodded again. "Yeah, it did—" She broke off before she added *for me, too*. Feeling her cheeks heat from his knowing gaze, she cleared her throat. "Why do you think it felt so long?"

"I think you know," he said and moved closer to her.

"You want me to sign the agreement about the baby," she said in a husky voice.

"That's part of it." He lowered his head. He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes then stepped back. God help him, if he started kissing her, he wouldn't stop. Being away from her hadn't cleared his perspective or dampened his desire for her. And Max knew there wasn't a damn thing he could do about wanting her at the moment. He'd missed the sound of her laughter and knowing she would be there at home for the end of the day.

Maybe it was a good thing he had to attend the charity fundraiser tonight after all. Being with Lilli was a constant reminder of what he couldn't have.

"I should go," he said in a low voice. "We can talk more on

Friday. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

“Okay, thank you for the gift.”

“You’re welcome,” he said and held her gaze for a long moment before he left.

The following evening, Lilli flipped through the newspaper as she put up her feet at the end of a long day. She glanced at the bad news on the front page, skipped the Sports section and stopped at the Lifestyle section. The front page featured photos of a charity function sponsored by Max’s company. In one of the photos, Kiki stood next to Max, her arm looped through his. He didn’t look as if he were suffering at all.

A surge of something dark twisted through her and when she realized what it was, she felt more stupid than ever. She was jealous. Maybe it was hormones. Oh Lord, she hoped so. Because if it were hormones then at some point, when her hormones straightened out again, the crazy longing would go away.

Restless after reading the article, she took a long bath and listened to soothing music. She sipped herbal tea to calm herself and tried not to think about that photo of Max with Kiki.

She slept horribly, unable to get comfortable. Giving up on sleep, she rose earlier than usual. When she got out of bed, she felt exhausted and noticed her abdomen tightening. As she prepared for work, the sensation didn’t go away. Were these contractions?

Although she had a few weeks left before her due date she called her doctor’s office. The doctor on call asked a few

questions then, erring on the cautious side, instructed her to go to the hospital.

Lilli grabbed her purse and went downstairs. Max stood poised to leave. He met her gaze. “Good morning. How are you?”

Lilli burst into tears.

Alarmed by her response, Max dropped his briefcase and immediately took her in her arms. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

She choked back a sob. “I may be in labor. My doctor told me to go to the hospital. Max, this is happening too fast.” Her blue eyes filled with tears of desperation. “I’m not ready.”

“Of course you are,” he said firmly even though his own gut was clenching in apprehension. “I’ll drive you to the hospital and —”

“Are you sure that’s what you want—?”

“Of course I’m sure,” he said, appalled that she would expect anything less of him. “We’ll take the town car.” He ushered her to the garage. “I’ll drive. You can sit in the backseat and stretch out.”

His own heart hammering in his chest, Max helped her into the car and sped to the hospital. He shot a glance at Lilli in the rearview mirror and the expression of fear on her face tore at him. “You’re going to be okay. The baby is going to be okay.”

“Do you really believe that?”

He nodded. “Yes, I do.” He had to believe it.

Pulling the car to a stop outside the emergency room door, he helped Lilli inside. An admission clerk took her information and

Lilli was whisked away. Just before she disappeared behind the double doors, she looked back at Max. “Are you leaving?”

He shook his head. “I’ll be right back after I park the car.” Returning to the hospital, he was consumed with concern for Lilli and the baby. He would get the finest doctors in Las Vegas to care for her. He would do whatever it took to keep Lilli and the baby safe and healthy.

He strode toward the emergency room double doors, making a mental list. A woman stepped in front of him. “Excuse me, sir. You’re not allowed inside unless you’re a member of a patient’s family.”

Frustration ripped through him. He needed to take care of Lilli, but it wasn’t his official duty or his official right. At that moment, he made a life-altering decision. He knew there would be no going back. But never again would he worry about being barred from taking care of Lilli or the baby. He would make her his wife. That way, taking care of her and the baby would always be his right. “I’m the baby’s father,” he told the woman, and she allowed him to pass.

Two and a half hours later, a mortified Lilli left the hospital with Max. “I’m so sorry,” she said, shooting a wincing glance at him. His hair was ruffled from plowing his fingers through it and his tie hung loose from his collar. He was more gorgeous than ever and she felt like a lunatic. “I should have realized it was false labor.”

“Like the doctor said, it’s an easy mistake to make. This is

your first pregnancy.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But now you’ve lost half a day of work because of my mistake.”

“A half day of work is nothing to make sure you and the baby are safe,” he said, his words barely softening the harsh sound of his voice as he drove them home. “Stop apologizing.”

She bit her lip and looked out the window then back at him. “Are you sure you’re not angry?”

“I’m not angry, but I am concerned. This underscores the need for you to provide for the baby if something, God forbid, should happen to you,” he said and swore under his breath.

“I know,” she said glumly. She knew she couldn’t dodge it any longer. “I’m going to change my will today so that you’ll be the baby’s guardian.”

He narrowed his eyes at her words. “That’s a good start, but we may need to take that further.”

Her chest tightened. He was talking about the agreement he wanted her to sign. Even though she understood the money in the agreement was designated for support, she still found it distasteful. “I don’t want your money and I don’t want to sign the agreement. It just feels totally wrong to me.”

“I’m not talking about that agreement,” he said, pulling the car into a bank parking lot and cutting the engine.

Lilli looked at him in surprise. “Then what?”

“I’ve been thinking. How do you feel about the baby’s last name being De Luca?”

She frowned in confusion. “I thought I was going to try not to draw attention to the fact that Tony was his father. For safety’s sake. That’s the reason I’ll be moving away.”

“What if you didn’t move away?” he asked, his gaze searching hers. “What if your last name became De Luca, too?”

More confused than ever, she shook her head. “How could that happen?”

“If you named me the father of—” he paused “—your child. And married me.”

She gaped at him, feeling as if someone had turned the whole world upside down. “Married you? But you don’t love me.”

“Starting out in love isn’t the best predictor of success in marriage.”

Her head was whirling. “I don’t understand. You don’t want to get married. You’re pretty cynical about marriage.”

“I want to provide a good life for the baby. I feel responsible for him. For you,” he said as if he didn’t totally understand his own feelings.

“I don’t think that’s a good basis for a marriage.”

“There’s a lot worse,” he said.

Her chest tightened. “I don’t want to feel like a responsibility. Like a burden. And I don’t want the baby to ever feel that way.”

“It *wouldn’t* be that way. I think you and I could make this work.” He slid his hand under her jaw. “And there’s the fact that I want you. And you want me,” he said, his tone intimate.

“I wondered if maybe that had changed.”

He slowly shook his head.

Her heart skipped over itself. “What about when that does change?”

“How do you know it will?” he asked, his dark eyes holding hers.

Lilli felt herself sinking into a delicious, forbidden pool of hope. “I don’t know.”

He caressed her jaw. “I think you know that you and I would be good together. In a lot of ways.”

True. But that didn’t mean they should get married. Lilli tore away her gaze to clear her head. If she put the baby’s needs in front of hers, what would she do? She felt an immediate smack from her conscience. Who was she fooling? It wasn’t as if being with Max De Luca would present a hardship for her. But this was a huge decision. Huge enough that she wanted to make it with a clear head.

“Could you give me some time to think this over?”

He met her gaze and nodded. “Sure.” He paused a half beat. “Think about it. You’ll realize it’s best for everyone.”

She felt a sliver of relief. She’d bought herself a little time.

“Do you have any questions you’d like to ask me?” he said, as if he sensed what was going on inside her.

She closed her eyes so she wouldn’t be affected by his presence, but she still sensed him, still smelled the faintest scent of his sexy cologne. “If you raised the baby, would you blow bubbles with him?”

He didn't even pause. "Yes."

"Will you read him books at night? You can let the nanny do it every now and then, but you need to do it most nights."

"Yes," he said.

"Will you tell him he's wonderful?"

"Yes."

"Will you hold him when he cries?"

"Yes. And I'll hold you, too, Lilli, whether you're crying or not."

And Lilli felt her heart tumble a little farther away from good sense and sanity.

Nine

“I like it,” Max said to Alex during a one-on-one meeting in his office. “At first glance, when you say West Virginia, I would think the local economy wouldn’t be able to support this kind of luxury resort.”

Alex tapped his pen on his outline. “Because it’s close to Washington, D.C., there’s great transportation access. D.C. residents will be rushing there every weekend.”

“The sticking point with the board will be the midweek challenge,” Max said. “Who wants to go to West Virginia in the middle of the week?”

“We can hold meetings and conferences. Plus, if we do it right, this place will have a spa, golf course, special events and all kinds of luxury amenities that will draw people year-round.”

“Like I said, I like it. You’ve got my—” His intercom beeped, interrupting him. Surprised because he’d told his assistant no interruptions during his meeting, he picked up his phone. “Yes.”

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt you, Mr. De Luca, but security downstairs has called and they said a very pregnant woman insists on seeing you.”

There was only one very pregnant woman in his life. Immediately concerned, he frowned. “Lilli,” he said. “Is she okay?”

His assistant, Grace, made a sound between a cough and

swallowed laughter. “She sounds quite healthy, sir. Just very determined to see you. Security was unsure what to do with her.”

He nodded, feeling a twinge of amusement at the notion of the beefy guys downstairs trying to handle a demanding pregnant woman. “Send her up immediately.”

Alex stood, lifting his eyebrow. “Does this mean our meeting is over?”

“For now,” Max said. “Let’s set up a time to discuss a strategy for approaching the board about this.”

Alex extended his hand. “Sounds great.” He gathered his report and headed for the office door. Just as he reached for it, the door flung open and Lilli burst inside. Her cheeks bright red, she carried a large rectangular plastic food container.

“Good grief,” she said. “Do you train your security to suspect that every pregnant woman is a nut or did I just get lucky today?”

Max chuckled under his breath and moved toward her to take the container. “It won’t happen again. Here, let me help—”

“No,” Alex said and grabbed the container before Max could. “Allow me and let me say you look gorgeous as ever.”

Flirting again, Max thought with more than a pinch of irritation. Did the man ever stop?

“I look like a blond beach ball,” she told Alex. “But thanks for the effort. Would you do me a favor and call a few of the assistants into the office?”

Max frowned. “What—”

“Sure,” Alex said and set the container down on a table.

Lilli smiled nervously as she met Max's gaze. "This won't take but a few minutes. Then you can get back to whatever you were doing."

Max shook his head. "But what is *this*?"

She gnawed her lip. "Just a little something."

Her expression made him uneasy. *What the...*

Alex reappeared in the doorway with several members of the staff, their faces filled with curiosity. "Ready for service," Alex said.

"Thank you," Lilli said and went to the table where the plastic container sat. "I just need to borrow your voices for two minutes. Today is Max's birthday, so I was hoping you would join with me in singing 'Happy Birthday.'" She whipped off the top of the container to reveal a collection of frosted cupcakes decorated with sprinkles. "Sorry you can't blow out the candles," she said with a moue. "Security took my matches. Okay, let's go."

Max stood in stunned disbelief as she led the small group in song. Alex laughed the entire way through the tune.

When they finished, Lilli shot him a wary glance and a tentative smile. "Happy Birthday, Max."

Max met her gaze and felt his heart swell to at least twice its normal size. He hadn't celebrated his birthday in years. It was just another day to him. "How did you know?"

"That's a secret," she said. "But I didn't know your favorite kind of cupcake, so I made a variety. Vanilla with chocolate frosting, chocolate with chocolate frosting, chocolate with vanilla

—”

Alex extended his hand into the container. “I’ll take the chocolate with—”

Lilli lightly swatted his hand. “It’s Max’s birthday. He gets to choose first.” She glanced at Max. “What kind do you want?”

I want Lilli with Lilli frosting, he thought and cleared his throat. “Chocolate and chocolate,” he said and nodded toward the staff. “Go ahead, help yourself.”

Each of his employees took their treats and wished him a happy birthday before they left. Alex lingered an extra moment. “For your information, my birthday is November 16 and I love cupcakes.”

Max felt a surge of possessiveness. “Call a bakery,” he growled.

Alex laughed and shook his head. “You’re a damn lucky man, Max. Happy birthday,” he said and left the office.

Closing the door, Max turned toward Lilli, who was sitting in a chair across from his desk, biting off the top of a chocolate cupcake. He walked to the chair across from hers and sat down. “What possessed you to do this?”

“You’re not angry, are you?”

He shook his head. “Off guard. Surprised.” And a few other things he didn’t want to name. “You didn’t answer my question.”

She licked her lips and he wished he could do it for her. “It occurred to me that you may not have celebrated your birthday very much when you were in boarding school. That was a bad

habit to start at such a young age,” she said in a chastising voice that made his lips twitch. “So I thought I should get you back on track.”

“Why?”

She met his gaze and he saw a flash of deep emotion shimmer in her eyes. Max could identify things that held a high value and what he saw in her gaze was more precious than all the gems in the exclusive jewelry store down the street.

“I think you are an amazing man. So the day you were born should be celebrated.”

Her simple explanation held no false flattery. He heard the sincerity in her voice, saw it on her face, and it was the most seductive thing anyone had ever said to him. Lilli, pregnant or not, made him hungry for more of her. Standing, he took her hand and pulled her close. “Marry me.”

He saw the desire and fear collide in her gaze. “It’s right,” he said. “For all of us.”

“How can you be so sure?” she whispered.

“Be honest, Lilli. Underneath it all, you want it, too.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment and he could feel her heart hammering against him. She took a small shallow breath and opened her eyes. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Max made the arrangements so quickly Lilli barely had time to catch her breath, let alone her sanity. Three days before he’d scheduled a private wedding ceremony with a judge who was a friend, he and Lilli shared late-night conversation on the patio.

“I picked this up today. Let me know if you like it.” He casually slid a box across the table toward her.

Curious, she opened the box. Shocked at the diamond ring winking back at her from the velvet fold of the box, she choked on the water she had just swallowed.

Max patted her on her back. “Are you okay?”

She coughed, tears coming to her eyes, then waved her hand. “Yes.” She coughed again and shook her head. “I didn’t expect an engagement ring.”

“Of course I’d get you a ring.”

She stared at the ring, almost afraid to touch it. “The stone is huge.”

He was silent for a moment then laughed under his breath. “You’re complaining about a large diamond?” he asked in disbelief. “That’s a first.”

“I’m not complaining,” she quickly said. “I just didn’t expect it. When I think about us getting married, I haven’t thought about diamonds, or even rings.”

“Then what have you been thinking?”

She bit her lip, reluctant to reveal the fact that she was wondering if it was such a smart thing to marry Max. She shrugged, not meeting his gaze. “More about how all three of us will adjust to family life.” She hesitated. “Wondering how you and I will adjust to being married.”

“I think we’ve demonstrated we won’t have any problems,” he said, sliding his hands over her neck, making her feel as if her

collarbone was a sensual hot spot for the first time in her life. It amazed her that he could make her feel so sexy with just a touch.

She closed her eyes for a second. "In bed," she said in a voice that sounded small to her own ears.

His hands stilled. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it may be a rumor," she said, trying to keep a light tone, "but I hear married couples tend to spend a lot more time out of bed than in bed."

"Damn," he said. "So you may actually have to join me for dinner most nights and we'll have to do things together." He walked around her chair and bent down over her, meeting her gaze. "Sounds rough, but I think I can do it. What about you?"

She smiled reluctantly. "Probably," she said.

"But you're still bothered."

"You have to admit this isn't the typical romantic wedding. We don't even have a honeymoon planned. For that matter, how did you find out my ring size? I didn't know yours."

"While you were sleeping," he said and added, "in your bed. Say what you want, but sex between us will take away a lot of your doubts."

The notion filled her with a combination of anticipation and anxiety. Would she have any leftover reactions to that last experience with Tony? So far, Max seemed to push everything from her mind, but him.

"So try on the ring. Maybe you'll like it better on your finger," he said casually and plucked the ring from the box and slid it

onto her hand.

It fit perfectly. It sparkled like a bright star. “It’s beautiful,” she said and wiggled her finger. “Does it come with a crane?”

Lilli woke up the next morning full of anticipation and hope. She was just two weeks from her delivery date, two weeks from when she would hold her baby in her arms. The excitement inside her seemed to build with each passing hour. And she was getting married in just two days.

Glancing at the diamond ring that felt heavy on her finger, she fought the slivers of trepidation that stabbed at her. She felt as if she were on the precipice of falling completely in love with Max. What if she spent a lifetime waiting for him to love her and he never did? What if he fell out of lust with her and left her? Or worse yet, what if he never allowed himself to love her, but stayed with her even though he was miserable?

Lilli shook off the thoughts. She had every reason to hope everything would work out well. The sun shining brightly outside seemed to invite her to take a short stroll along the driveway that led to Max’s home and then down the block. The fresh air cleared her head and the sunshine gave her a boost of optimism.

Returning from the stroll, she spotted a car parked in the driveway. It was a Jaguar, so she knew it didn’t belong to any of her friends. Mallory drove a BMW.

Curious, Lilli entered the house and overheard a woman talking with Ada, the assistant housekeeper. “I left some of my things here several months ago. I just want to pick them up.”

Recognizing the woman's voice as Kiki, Lilli stiffened. She turned away to quietly climb the stairs. She didn't want a confrontation with the woman.

"Oh, look, the sweet mother-to-be. Don't run off. It's been too long. We should visit for a little bit," Kiki said.

Lilli reluctantly stopped and turned. "Hello, Kiki."

Looking as svelte and perfect as ever in a fashionable black-and-white sheath, Kiki moved past the housekeeper. "Omigoodness, you look like you're ready to go any minute. Positively glowing," she said. "Babies are pure magic, aren't they? They make the impossible seem possible. I mean, look at how your life has changed."

"I just want what's best for my baby," Lilli said.

"Of course you do," Kiki said. "I was surprised that I never heard back from you after we met at the charity auction. Did you lose my card?"

"Yes. I think I did," Lilli said.

"You seem like a smart woman. I thought you might take me up on my offer. But rumor has it you're placing your bets somewhere else."

Lilli and Max hadn't announced their decision to marry, so Lilli refused to confirm or deny any implications. "I should go upstairs. I have a doctor's appointment this afternoon."

"You can at least show me the nursery," the other woman said with a fake pout. "I'll go upstairs with you. I need to pick up a few things I left here."

Ada stepped forward. “I’m sorry, Miss Lane, but I’m not sure Mr. De Luca would be comfortable with you going through his private quarters. If you’ll wait, I can call him.”

Alarm shot across Kiki’s face. “That’s not necessary. I’ll give him a call myself. It’s just so awkward to ask a man to return lingerie,” she whispered. “But it was La Perla. One of my favorites,” she said with a sigh. “One of his, too, as I recall. Oh, well. Lovely seeing you. You can still give me a call if you change your mind about anything, but don’t wait too long.”

Watching Kiki leave, Lilli told herself not to trust the woman. Kiki was clearly desperate and would do anything to get Max back. She shouldn’t let the woman generate any doubts about her decision to marry Max. Her rebellious mind, though, hung on to Kiki’s description of lingerie. She remembered the photo of Max and Kiki in the newspaper just recently. Perhaps she had underestimated their relationship.

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