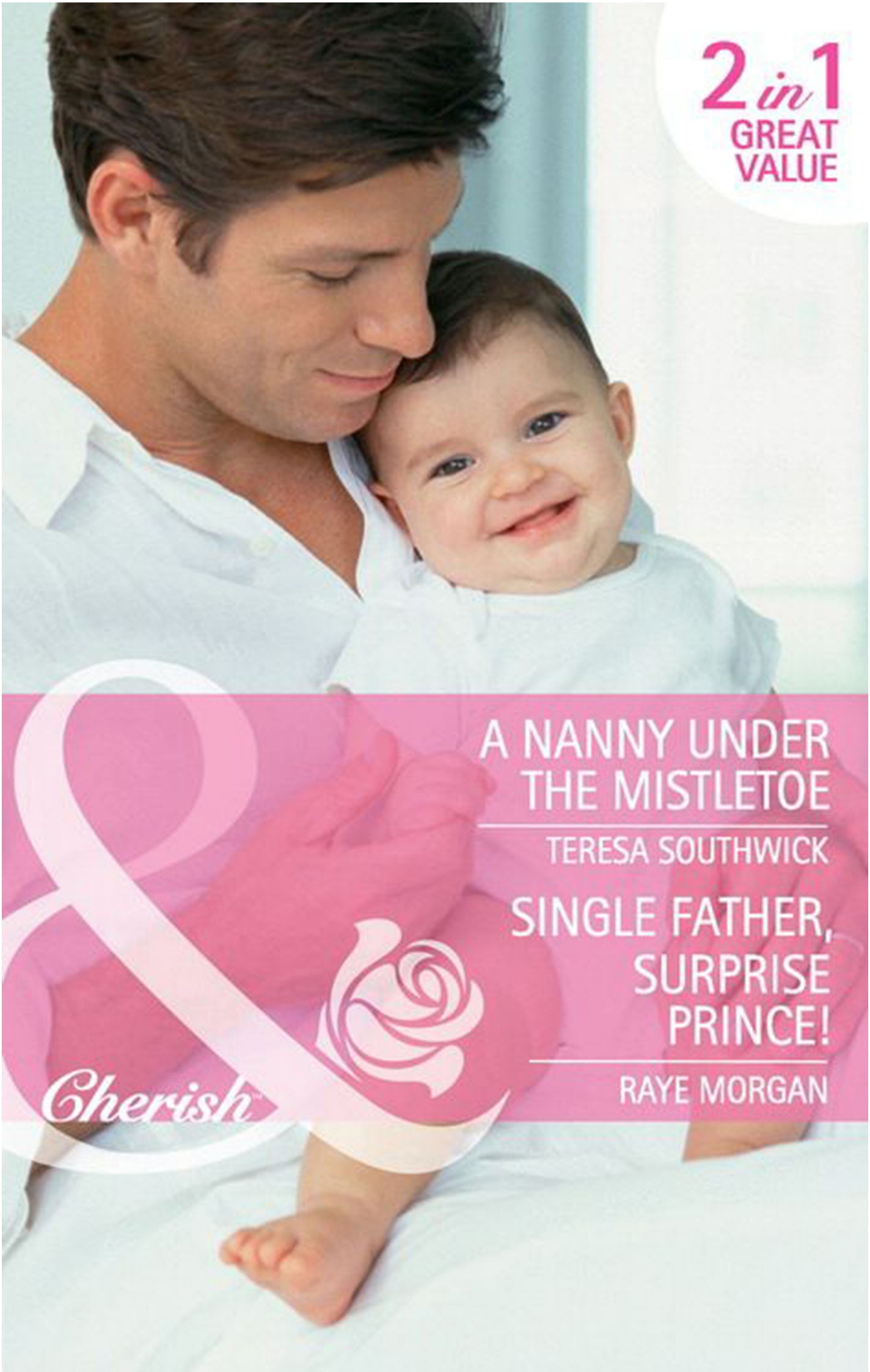

2 in 1
GREAT VALUE
A NANNY UNDER THE MISTLETOE
TERESA SOUTHWICK
SINGLE FATHER, SURPRISE PRINCE!
RAYE MORGAN
Cherish

Teresa Southwick

A Nanny Under the Mistletoe: A Nanny Under the Mistletoe / Single Father, Surprise Prince!

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A Nanny Under the Mistletoe: A Nanny Under the Mistletoe / Single Father, Surprise Prince! / T. Southwick — «HarperCollins»,

A Nanny Under the Mistletoe Nanny extraordinaire Libby spent her life nurturing children. So when her best friend's daughter was left orphaned, Libby lost no time in opening her heart to Morgan. Yet she never expected to feel sparks for Morgan's guardian, troubled billionaire Jess. SINGLE Father, Surprise Prince!Nothing on the battleground could have prepared soldier Joe for being a single dad! But Joe will do anything to keep precious Mei and he's thankful for Kelly's help…until she reveals his secret heritage! Could her bombshell destroy their budding attraction?

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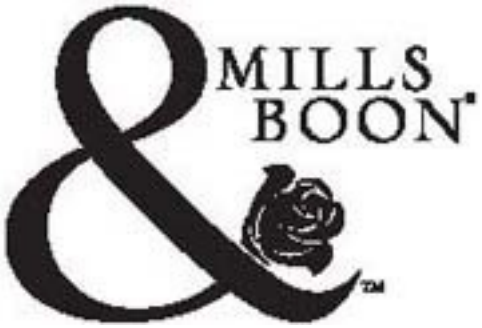
A Nanny Under the Mistletoe

BY

Teresa Southwick
Single Father, Surprise Prince!

BY

Raye Morgan



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A Nanny Under the Mistletoe

BY

Teresa Southwick

Dear Reader,

It's December!

That's exclamation-point-worthy, since I live in Las Vegas and triple-digit heat is just a bad memory. Last year, ten days before Christmas, we actually had snow. Honest. I took pictures, because it felt like a little miracle.

Now the holidays are here again!

This time of year teases our senses with food, decorations, lights, the fragrance of pine. Some of my favourite movies, books and stories are about Christmas. *It's a Wonderful Life. Miracle on 34th Street.* Like the themes of Cherish™, love and family are at the heart of these tales. They leave us smiling and possibly reaching for a tissue—in a good way.

So, with 2010 drawing to a close, I hope all of you have a very happy ending to this year. May your December include mistletoe, magic and miracles.

Happy holidays!

Teresa Southwick

About the Author

TERESA SOUTHWICK lives with her husband in Las Vegas, the city that reinvents itself every day. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Mills & Boon.

To my friend Mary Karlik, a talented writer and extraordinarily strong woman. You're proof that the best things do come in small packages. I hope 2010 brings you nothing but good things.

Chapter One

Until now, Libby Bradford had never understood how it felt to be so angry you couldn't see straight. At least being this furious kept the grief at bay. Or maybe her fear was so big there was no room for the sadness.

She stared across the utilitarian oak desk in her boss's office. "I really need to talk to someone."

Probably it was the thread of desperation in her voice that made Ginger Davis shut off the computer. "Just a guess, but you didn't come to see me just to discuss the newest show at the Hard Rock Hotel. I'm listening."

Humor normally took the edge off Libby's intensity, but not this time. "Jess Donnelly is going to take Morgan Rose away from me."

"*The* Jess Donnelly?"

"Is there another one?" Libby couldn't imagine the world was big enough for two of him. At least not in his world. "I'm talking about Las Vegas's most eligible and obscenely rich bachelor."

It wasn't often Ginger looked surprised, but she did now. An attractive, brown-eyed brunette somewhere near fifty, she could pass for twenty years younger and it would be pathetically easy for her. Maybe because she loved what she did. As president and CEO of The Nanny Network, she placed thoroughly vetted nannies with famous and wealthy families who cherished competence and confidentiality in equal parts. She had also opened Nooks and Nannies, a preschool that included child care as well as parent and caregiver enrichment classes. Libby was a teacher here.

"Now it makes sense."

Huh?

"What makes sense?" Libby asked her boss. "His attorney called and said that when Jess has child care in place he will take custody of Morgan."

"Mr. Donnelly contacted me about hiring a live-in nanny."

"He did?" Fear balled in Libby's belly.

"Yes. I explained that I recently had two of my employees leave the agency to get married." Ginger removed her glasses. "But you didn't come by my office to hear that I'm shorthanded."

"Not really. It's Morgan I'm concerned about."

"Since Mr. Donnelly didn't share details, I had no idea that he was looking for a nanny for *your* Morgan. I had the impression that your friend Charity left her daughter to you."

Hearing her best friend's name brought a fresh wave of sorrow that hurt Libby's heart. Charity and her husband, Ben, had been in Africa for ten months on a humanitarian mission. They'd been killed by a rebel faction in a raid on the village where they were working.

"No one thought they wouldn't come home." Libby's voice broke and she stopped, trying to manage the unmanageable emotions.

"Apparently someone thought about it. Otherwise Mr. Donnelly wouldn't be making inquiries about child care," Ginger gently reminded her.

If Libby had been less emotional and more rational she would have commended Morgan's parents for taking care of the details. Except she'd fallen in love with the child she was caring for and giving her up to a man like Jess Donnelly seemed wrong on so many levels.

"Jess *was* named Morgan's guardian in her parents' will," she finally admitted.

"I see."

"I don't," Libby said, squeezing her hands together in her lap. She'd always thought this office a warm place, what with its friendly oak desk and orange and yellow wall prints. But today everything felt cold.

"Why do you question their decision?"

Libby slid forward to the edge of her chair. “Because Charity and Ben trusted *me* with their child when they went halfway around the world.”

Ginger’s voice was full of gentle sympathy when she asked, “Are you angry because they put a humanitarian effort ahead of their daughter’s well-being? Or because they died?”

“Both,” Libby said without thinking.

Ginger nodded. “You grew up with Charity and were best friends. You told me that her primary goal in life was to make the world a better place.”

“And isn’t that ironic? Because the world is so much worse for her not being in it.”

Libby had spent more time at Charity’s house than with her own messed-up family because there wasn’t any tension there and everyone was welcomed with open arms, accepted in a way Libby would never be where she lived. Her friend’s folks took the girls to nursing homes, hospitals and women’s shelters to give back to their community and make a difference.

“Charity was raised to help people. But now my primary concern has to be raising Morgan the way Charity would want. Her child’s welfare is the most important thing.”

“It seems to me that she’ll be well taken care of.”

Not by Jess Donnelly. The man was certainly handsome, wealthy and powerful. From firsthand experience Libby knew he was also arrogant, selfish and shallow. She’d met him the first time when Charity and Ben got married. Her attraction to him was instantaneous. The earth moved. Lightning struck. Cupid’s arrow nailed her right smack in the heart.

He’d flirted and fixed his intense blue eyes on her. His thick dark hair and Irish good looks had made quite a lasting impression. She’d have been his for the asking. But he’d never asked.

Actually, he’d left with the other blonde bridesmaid, the buxom one Libby still fondly thought of as the wedding slut. In the nearly six years since Morgan’s birth, Libby and Jess had occasionally seen each other, at Morgan’s christening, birthday parties, Christmas. Every time their paths crossed, she felt the pull of attraction even though Jess would stick out his hand and say he didn’t believe they’d met before, then proceed to introduce himself.

The first time Libby gave him the benefit of the doubt, believing a new hairdo and ten-pound weight loss made her look different. After that it became clear that her breasts just weren’t big enough to snag his attention, let alone make her name worthy of remembering.

She pushed the humiliating past from her mind and looked at Ginger. “You think he can really take care of Morgan?”

“Mr. Donnelly certainly has the means to provide for her.”

“It takes more than money to raise a child.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ginger said. “It’s too bad the two of you can’t co-parent.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has the resources, you have the heart. Seems like a partnership made in child-rearing heaven.”

Libby’s mind started to hum as an idea began to take shape. “I could be her nanny.”

Ginger stared at her. “You already work here at the preschool.”

“Which will save you time in the vetting process since I’m already a Nanny Network employee.”

Her boss frowned. “Since you have a personal history with the client, I’m not sure this would be an ideal situation.”

“I respectfully disagree. Personal history isn’t how I’d describe what we have. A handful of get-togethers over the years.” And none of them had been the least bit personal, she thought with a mixture of annoyance and yearning that annoyed her even more. “He and I both knew and cared about Morgan’s parents. She’s a child who needs all the love and support she can get right now. The last thing she needs is to be yanked away from what’s familiar and plopped into life with a stern guardian she barely knows.”

“You make it sound like a wacky version of *Jane Eyre.*”

"Not my intention," Libby assured her. "Just the opposite. It seems like a win-win situation. You said yourself that with his money and my maternal skills we'd make the perfect parents."

"That was an off-the-cuff comment."

"But it makes sense," Libby said, warming to the role of persuader. "You said you're short-handed right now. This is the perfect solution. I can do double duty—take care of her for Jess and continue to teach here at the school. I'll bring Morgan with me, just like I have been. Her routine wouldn't change and that's important right now."

Ginger tapped her lip thoughtfully before saying, "There's a certain logic to the idea that I could run by Mr. Donnelly."

"Of course he needs to make the final decision." Libby didn't think that would be a problem. As long as his personal life wasn't inconvenienced, Jess would be happy.

"This could be a short-term answer for everyone," Ginger said cautiously.

Exactly what Libby was thinking. It was impossible for her to imagine loving Morgan any more even if she'd given birth to her. She couldn't simply turn her over to a guy who had the sensitivity of a robot. She especially couldn't hand vulnerable Morgan Rose to him, then walk out of her life.

If Jess approved this arrangement, it would give Libby time to figure out a long-term solution.

Jess Donnelly had agreed to be guardian of his best friend's daughter, but he'd never thought he'd have to. Maybe he'd agreed *because* he never thought he'd have to. People did that all the time, never seriously entertaining the possibility that either parent would die, let alone both of them at the same time.

But the worst-case scenario had come to pass and now he was waiting for Morgan. In a few minutes the child's current caretaker would deliver her. Negotiations between his lawyer and the Nanny Network relayed through his secretary resulted in him expecting the nanny, Elizabeth Bradford, momentarily.

He'd checked the child-care company's references and called a random selection of current and former clients, all of whom had nothing but high praise for the professionals Ginger Davis had provided. Since he didn't know the first thing about raising a kid, let alone a five-year-old girl, he was more than happy to defer to the kid experts.

It wasn't that Jess didn't like children, so much as he didn't relish the idea of someone depending on him. He knew from firsthand experience how betrayal and disillusionment felt. It was especially unpleasant coming from the one person on the planet you counted on. This was his best friend's kid. The friend he'd vowed to support. Always. A friend who was the brother he'd never had. Jess had promised Ben, given his word, which put the pledge firmly in sacred territory. When you watched a friend's back, you didn't turn your own on a sacred promise.

He blew out a long breath as the pain of loss squeezed his chest. "What the hell were you thinking, Ben? No way am I prepared for this."

The phone rang, jarring him into action. He picked up the extension from the end table by the cream-colored sofa. "Yes?"

"Peter Sexton, Mr. Donnelly. Building security. There's a Miss Morgan Rose Harrison to see you and Libby—"

"They're expected," he said. "Bring them up."

Jess had fervently hoped the newly hired nanny would get here before Morgan so he'd have an on-site expert who could hit the ground running when he took custody of the little girl. If the nanny didn't show up soon, he'd be calling Ms. Davis and make Nanny Network news as the first dissatisfied client putting a big fat black mark on its pristine reputation.

The doorbell sounded and since he was already standing in the two-story foyer, it took only a second to answer. A young woman and small girl stood there—Libby and Morgan.

The taller blonde was slim, blue-eyed and pretty plain. Or maybe plainly pretty. On the few occasions they'd met, he'd never been able to decide. Her shiny hair turned under and barely touched

the collar of the white cotton blouse peeking from the neck of her navy sweater. Dark denim jeans did remarkable things to her hips and legs, leaving no mixed feelings about his opinion of her figure, which was firmly in the approval column.

The little, tiny blonde who clutched an old, beat-up doll to her chest had curly hair and brown eyes she'd inherited from her father as well as the hint of an indentation in her determined chin. Both blondes stared expectantly up at him.

"Hi," he held out his hand. "Jess Donnelly."

"We've met."

"Right. How long has it been?"

"Last Christmas. Almost a year ago."

He remembered seeing her under the mistletoe at Ben and Charity's holiday party. It would have been so easy to catch her there and claim the kiss he'd wanted since the first time he'd seen her, but he'd deliberately let the chance slip by. Instinct said she wasn't the sort of woman he could easily walk away from and he didn't get involved with any other kind.

"You look great." An understatement.

Libby glanced at the little girl for a moment. "We missed you at the memorial service."

"Yeah." Pain sliced through him at the reminder that his friend was gone. "I was in Europe on business and there was a snow storm. The airport was closed for two days."

"I see."

He couldn't tell from her carefully neutral tone whether she did or not. Either way there was nothing he could do about that. And what really mattered was his friend's child.

He looked down at her. "Hello, Morgan. Do you remember me?"

Her blond curls bounced when she shook her head. "Not really."

"That's okay," he said, guilt twisting in his gut. "Welcome to my home."

"Nice place," Libby said. Something flashed quickly through her eyes before she continued in a pleasant voice, "The security gates are pretty cool and a twenty-four hour guard who used his key card to escort us to the penthouse on the top floor of the building, in the private elevator, no less, is a nice touch."

Did he hear sarcasm in her voice? Or was the edge simply a symptom of the awkward situation? Did it matter?

"I'm glad you like it." He looked at the child. "What did you think, Morgan?"

"It's okay," she whispered, looking uncertain as she stepped closer and slid her small fingers into the woman's hand.

"Are you going to invite us in?" Libby asked.

"Of course." Mentally he smacked his forehead as he stepped back and opened the door wider.

"Don't forget your suitcase, Morgan," Libby cautioned.

The little girl nodded, then took the handle of a princess-pink weekend-size bag and rolled it onto the foyer's beige marble floor where no princess suitcase had gone before. The woman did the same with a plain black bag. For the first time he thought about the little girl's things. Surely she had more than would fit into the two pieces of luggage just wheeled in.

Major awkward silence followed that flurry of activity as the three of them stood there. He wasn't sure what to do next and wished again that the nanny would show up and bail him out. In the meantime he figured that a tour was in order. It's what he normally did with a first-time female guest. Although nothing about this situation could even remotely be described as normal. And this small female would be a permanent resident, a thought that registered pretty high on his uneasiness meter.

"How about I show you around?" he offered.

"We'd like that," Libby answered, then looked down. "What do you say, Morgan? Would you like to see your new home?"

Still clutching Libby's hand, the little girl nodded apprehensively. The solemn look on her pale face said she liked the idea about as much as a double helping of Brussels sprouts.

"Follow me."

He led them into the living room with its floor-to-ceiling windows that showed the extensive outdoor area. Because the penthouse was on the top floor, he had a private pool and patio with barbecue. "If you want a view of the Las Vegas strip, you've come to the right place."

"I'm sure Morgan is thrilled at the idea of looking at the adult entertainment capital of the world," Libby said wryly.

"Good point." Another mental forehead smack.

"Although she'll like looking at the pretty lights. Right, sweetie?" When Libby smiled at the child the tenderness in her expression was almost palpable.

"It's pretty high up," the little girl answered cautiously, keeping her distance from the windows.

Libby looked around the room with its dark wood tables bearing traces of European design. "The couch and chairs are very beautiful, but they look like they'll show every spot."

"I haven't found it to be a problem." He glanced at the cream-colored furniture with the overstuffed brown pillows, then at the child, the first to set foot in his place. Life as he'd known it was about to change.

Jess led them through the kitchen that included a morning room with a door onto the terrace. The spacious formal dining area held a table for eight, matching buffet and china cabinet. They walked through the large family room, past the leather corner group and plasma TV. After showing them the living room and master bedroom, he walked to the other side of the condo and pointed out Morgan's bedroom.

"You'll have a king-size bed and your own bathroom. What do you think?" He glanced at the little girl who was looking back at him as if he'd just beheaded her favorite doll.

"It's awfully big." Her mouth trembled. "What if I get lost?"

Instantly Libby went down on one knee and pulled her into a hug. The gesture was completely natural and struck him as incredibly maternal and reassuring. The way a mother should be. The way his mother had been until everything changed.

Libby tucked the child's hair behind her ears. "It's scary, I know. Change always is. But in time you'll get used to it and hardly remember anything else," she explained.

"What if I wake up and it's dark and I get scared?"

"I'm sure Mr. Donnelly won't mind if you leave lights on." She looked up at him. "Right?"

"Of course."

She gently brushed her palms up and down Morgan's arms. "That's an awfully big bed for a little girl. Probably he'll get you a smaller one, maybe with a trundle. That's a bed that slides underneath and pulls out so if you're afraid at night someone can stay in your room. A new bed means a bedspread and sheets. Maybe the princess ones you like. Then the walls might have to be painted to match. That would be your favorite color and would help you get used to a new place."

"What's your favorite color, Morgan?" Jess asked, struggling to find something to say. With the ladies he had no problem, but little girls were out of his league.

"Pink." She met his gaze and her own was troubled. "Sometimes purple."

"Lavender," Libby clarified.

Neither was an earth tone as far as he knew, but no one would accuse him of being the interior design police. Among other things, he built hotels and exclusive resorts, then hired people to decorate them. Exclusively.

"We can talk about altering things," he said. "But I think it might be best to hold off on any sweeping changes until getting some feedback from a child-care professional."

"I'm a licensed preschool teacher, Mr. Donnelly. I've spent the last few years with kids of all different ages at Nooks and Nannies." Her full lips compressed into a straight line. "And Morgan

has been in my care for quite a few months. I think I'm eminently qualified to express an opinion on her new environment and would be happy to consult with you about what will help her adjust to her new and different surroundings."

He studied the twin spots of color on her cheeks and the way her blue eyes darkened to navy with this show of spirit. She was standing up for the kid who wasn't even hers and he wondered suddenly whether or not there was a man in her life. The two thoughts would have been contradictory except for his history.

After his dad died, his mother had elevated him to man-of-the-house status. It was the two of them against the world until she fell in love and remarried, at which time she couldn't get rid of Jess fast enough. So he couldn't help wondering if Libby had a boyfriend. If so, was she relieved to hand off this child so she could put the guy first? And he had no reason to care since she'd be gone in a few minutes. And where was the nanny he *was* paying for her expertise in regard to Morgan's environment?

"I'm getting the distinct impression that you don't like my place," he said.

She stood to look at him, but kept a hand on the little girl's shoulder. "It's spectacular and quite lovely. I've never been in a more beautiful home."

"And yet you're talking redecorating."

"If you don't mind my asking, how big is it?"

"About sixty-five-hundred square feet, including the pool and patio," he answered, unable to completely suppress the note of satisfaction. His mother's main squeeze hadn't been shy about expressing the opinion that Jess was a screwup who wouldn't amount to anything. So sue him for taking pride in his spectacular success.

Libby absently nodded as she glanced around. "It's very big and one doesn't need to look far to realize it's a very adult environment."

"I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"The decor is dark. Strategically lighted artwork hangs in nearly every room. There's expensive glass and pricey figurines on flat surfaces and in cabinets. What if something gets broken because a child is high-spirited and energetic? Sticky hands and art projects aren't compatible with light-colored fabric and expensive wood. How is a five-year-old supposed to feel comfortable here?"

"I'm almost six, Aunt Libby," Morgan piped up.

"Yes, you are, sweetie, right after Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. I forgot that you're almost a grown-up." A smile turned up the corners of her full mouth, then disappeared when she looked at him again.

"Is there a point to the running commentary?" he asked.

"I'd feel more comfortable if you seemed the slightest bit willing to compromise for Morgan's sake."

Jess rested his hands on his hips as he studied her. There was something in her voice and a look skipping across her face that made him think her critique of his habitat was more personal than professional. He hadn't seen her often but their paths had crossed enough for him to know that she was smart, very smart. But he'd never seen this sassy side of her before and wondered if he'd done something to tick her off.

Regardless of her attitude, he would concede that she had a point. "Is it possible to cut me some slack? I wasn't expecting to have a child dropped—" He glanced at Morgan and tempered his words. "This situation is not something I anticipated."

"I understand." For a split second profound sadness stood out in her eyes, reminding him that she'd also lost a friend.

"Look, Libby, let me rephrase. After consulting with Morgan, I will discuss kid-friendly changes to her environment with her nanny." He looked at his watch again. "If she ever gets here."

"If she—" Libby's expression went from sad to surprised. "Did you talk to Ginger Davis?"

"Yes."

"Personally?"

"I made initial contact. Then my representatives were in negotiations with her regarding the particulars," he admitted.

"So you never actually spoke with her about the final arrangement?"

The final arrangement? Just like that he felt the need to defend himself. "I'm deeply involved in a massive resort project. My secretary and lawyer handled all the details." The look in her eyes made him add, "Both are trusted professionals who have been on my payroll for a number of years. I have complete faith in their ability to handle my affairs."

"So you staffed out the responsibility of child care?"

Her tone was neutral, the question more about information gathering to fully understand the situation. But again his defensive instincts kicked in. "I've done my homework regarding The Nanny Network and fulfilled my fiduciary responsibility as Morgan's guardian. Elizabeth Bradford comes highly recommended and will take exemplary care of Morgan."

"Elizabeth Bradford is the nanny?"

"Yes." Something about the way she said it made him brace himself. "Why? Do you know her?"

"I do. And I'm quite sure that she'll take very good care of Morgan."

He detected a definite "gotcha" tone to her voice. "What's going on?"

"You really don't know, do you?"

He couldn't shake the feeling that there was a joke unfolding at his expense. A surprise was coming and in his opinion that was never a good thing. "Know what?"

She tilted her chin up, just a bit defiantly. "Libby is a nickname for Elizabeth. It probably slipped your mind that my last name is Bradford. That makes me Elizabeth Bradford. Apparently you missed the part in the negotiations where Morgan's current and future child-care professional are one and the same person. I'm your new nanny."

Chapter Two

Libby knew she shouldn't be surprised that Jess had introduced himself again and barely remembered the last time he'd seen her. He'd proved over and over that she was about as memorable as a bus bench. Part of her desperately wanted him to notice her. The practical, street-wise part instinctively knew there was as much chance of that as deleting her past and inserting one that included a home where she felt wanted.

More shocking was that he'd been expecting a stranger named Elizabeth Bradford. When Ginger had told her that it was a go for her to be Morgan's nanny, she'd assumed he knew about and had agreed to the arrangement. Obviously she'd assumed wrong. He'd started the ball rolling then turned everything over to his employees, who didn't have a clue about them being acquainted.

"Aunt Libby?" The small hand gripped tighter.

"What is it, sweetie?" With an effort Libby kept her tone even and friendly. Kids didn't miss much going on around them—good and bad. She didn't want the little girl to sense her concern. If anyone was to blame for this misunderstanding, it was Jess. He'd been too busy to take a personal interest, which was exactly the reason she'd felt the need to stay with Morgan in the first place.

"Is it time for SpongeBob yet?" Morgan asked.

"You're right. I forgot." And the distraction would be good, Libby realized. She recognized confusion on Jess's face. "It's a cartoon."

"I knew that. I think. Do you want to watch television?" When the little girl nodded, he pointed into the family room. "Right this way."

He grabbed the remote from a shelf in the entertainment center then turned on the TV. "What channel?"

Libby wasn't surprised that he didn't know off the top of his head. News, sports or movies were probably more his thing. That wasn't his fault. She told him the numbers that were second nature to her and seconds later the big yellow guy with the quirky smile came on the screen followed by the sound of his squeaky voice.

Wow. It was the most awesomely clear, bright, big picture she'd ever seen up close and personal. Probably it was the best, latest and most expensive technology on the market. A far cry from her small, old, economical set.

Libby touched the little girl. "Look, Morgan. Sponge-Bob has never looked better. What do you think?"

The thin shoulder lifted briefly. "It's fine."

"Why don't you sit on the sofa with your doll?"

Uncertainty glittered in her eyes before she scrambled up onto the big, L-shaped leather corner group. She looked tiny and frightened and Libby hated leaving her by herself, but it was the lesser of two evils. The bigger bad would be this vulnerable child being present for the talk Libby and Jess were obviously going to have.

Ginger was an extraordinarily efficient woman. Because Jess hadn't handled the negotiations personally, obviously something had been lost in translation. Like the fact that he was already acquainted with Elizabeth Bradford.

"We'll just be in the other room, kiddo." She leaned down for a quick hug. "Just a few minutes. Okay?"

Clutching her doll, Morgan stared up with sad brown eyes. "Promise?"

"Cross my heart." She automatically made the gesture over her chest then held up two fingers.

When she glanced at Jess there was an odd expression on his face. Then he angled his head and she followed him into the foyer, where the plain black and princess suitcases still stood, looking very out of place on the marble floor with the fancy crystal chandelier overhead.

Jess, on the other hand, looked right at home. Which he would, since this *was* his home. She'd always wondered what it was like, a part of her curious about the man who couldn't even remember her name. But she remembered everything about him in far too much detail. The flesh-and-blood man was even better than the image she carried around in her head.

Other than the wedding where she'd first seen him in a traditional black tux, the other run-ins had been casual and his clothes reflected that. Formal or informal attire made no difference; he was an extraordinarily handsome man. She thought she'd prepared herself for seeing him face-to-face, but steel girders and cinder blocks wouldn't have been enough to do the job.

It was Saturday and clearly he wasn't dressed for the office. In his chest-hugging black T-shirt and worn jeans he looked less like the wealthy man she knew he was. His black hair was cut short and the scruff of beard on his cheeks and jaw made his blue eyes look bluer. Her heart hammered, making it hard to think straight, which was darned inconvenient when thinking was important because she had a lot on the line.

He folded his arms over the chest she'd just admired. "So, let me get this straight. You're the nanny?"

"I am." At least she hoped so.

"I don't think so."

"Give me one good reason," she said.

"We know each other—"

"That's not technically true," she interrupted. Best to take the wind out of his sails before he picked up speed with that thought process. "Knowing each other would imply you remember my name. But every time our paths cross you stick out your hand and say 'Hi, I'm Jess Donnelly.'" She slid her own shaking hands into the pockets of her jeans. "That says Teflon brain."

"Excuse me?"

"You know. Teflon. Slippery. Nothing sticks. Like the fact that we've met. In my book, we really don't *know* each other."

"You were Charity's maid of honor. You came to their housewarming barbecue. You're godmother to that child."

"And you're godfather."

"I remember."

"All evidence to the contrary." She bit her tongue but it was too late because the words were already out.

His gaze narrowed on her. "I learned a long time ago not to assume that everyone recalls who I am. I meet a lot of people and always introduce myself." He lifted one broad shoulder in a casual shrug. "It's polite, avoids potential awkwardness and now it's a habit of mine."

"I see." But it wasn't really okay and she didn't know why. "So you're aware that I've been taking care of Morgan for over nine months?"

"Ben mentioned it." A dark look slid into his eyes. "Before he and Charity left—"

"When he asked you to be her legal guardian if anything happened," she finished.

"Yeah."

"Obviously there's been something of a misunderstanding. Just so you know, I'm more than willing to take on the nanny job."

"No."

"Even though I've been caring for her all this time?" She blinked. "Just like that? You don't even want to think about it?"

"There's nothing to think about."

"So you really want to take on a child you hardly know and didn't come to see while her parents were gone? Not even when you found out her mother and father had passed away?"

"I already explained that I was out of the country at the time."

"And I was the one here with her. The one who had to break the news that Ben and Charity weren't coming back."

"I promised my friend that I would raise his child if anything happened to him. I gave my word."

"But they gave Morgan to me," she countered.

"So you want to keep her. I get it." He ran his fingers through his hair. "The thing is they made me her legal guardian."

"Paperwork. It can be changed if you agree."

"I don't."

"Even though you don't really want her?"

"Who said I don't?" he asked sharply.

She raised a hand to indicate his posh penthouse. "There are signs."

"I assured Ben that his daughter would have everything she needed and he shouldn't worry." He looked at her. "So I found the finest child-care service available to provide supervision. Now you're here. How did that happen?"

"Since you were too busy to seal the deal, maybe you should ask your lawyer and secretary."

"I will. And Ginger Davis is on my list, too. Frankly I'm questioning her judgment in sending you."

"She wouldn't have sent me unless you approved," Libby defended. "I'll admit it was my idea—"

"There's a surprise."

She glared at him. "Just think about it and you'll see that this makes sense. Morgan has been with me since her parents left and it could potentially be harmful to leave her in the care of strangers. I'm willing and eager to be her nanny. It's a good plan."

"Define *good,*" he said.

"Continuity of care for Morgan at a time when she's especially vulnerable."

"By that you mean yourself." He stared at her. "Why didn't you come to me? Approach me up front and run this scenario by me?"

"I tried."

"Apparently not very hard."

"You're not really like the rest of us, are you? Do you remember what it felt like when the name of gazillionaire Jess Donnelly didn't open doors or grease the wheels in getting you past secretaries, administrative assistants, doormen and security? Right to the top of the food chain?"

"I'll admit there are layers to my organization."

"No kidding." She blew out a breath and struggled for calm. "I didn't set out to campaign for this job. As it happens I already work for Ginger at the preschool. We discussed the arrangement and she decided there was some merit to my suggestion. I assumed that when she said everything had been worked out you'd agreed to it." She folded her arms over her chest. "No one told me negotiations had gone through your minions."

"Look, I've only ever been introduced to you as Libby. I didn't know you and Elizabeth Bradford were one and the same. It seems a conflict of interest since we have a prior relationship."

"What we have isn't a relationship. It's a series of brief encounters, ships passing in the night. Nothing about that is personal enough to prevent me being Morgan's nanny."

He shook his head. "Look, Libby, I don't think this is going to work out—"

"Aunt Libby?"

Jess whirled around and when he moved, Libby saw Morgan behind him. She didn't know how long the little girl had been there. "Hey, sweetie. Is SpongeBob over?"

"No."

"Is something wrong?" Libby asked. Stupid question. Everything was wrong, she realized. But nothing good would come of letting Morgan see her desperation.

"I got scared. You sounded mad."

"I'm sorry. And I'm not mad." Not at you, she wanted to say. She hurried over to the child whose brown eyes were now worried and filling with tears. So much for hiding the highly charged situation from her. "We didn't mean to disturb you."

Morgan brushed a finger beneath her nose and stared uncertainly at Jess. "Is he making you go away?"

"We were just talking about that." She looked at him.

"I don't want you to go. I don't want to stay here by myself. Please, Aunt Libby—"

When Morgan started to cry, Libby gathered her close. "It's going to be okay, baby. It will."

"I d-don't want you to g-go away."

Jess ran his fingers through his hair. "Don't cry, Morgan. Your Aunt Libby isn't going away."

"Really?" Libby said.

Morgan lifted her head and looked at him. "Really?"

"Really. I'm sorry. I didn't handle everything very well. Your Aunt Libby is mad at me." He shrugged when she lifted one eyebrow. Points to him for getting it. "The truth is that you're both going to stay here with me and Aunt Libby is going to be your nanny."

"What changed your mind?"

"You were right," he said. "It wouldn't be a good idea to let a stranger look after her. So I'd appreciate it if you'd stay on. Until she's adjusted to the situation."

"Okay."

"Is that all right with you, Morgan?"

"Yes." She nodded eagerly.

"Then we have a plan for the short term."

That was good enough for Libby. She'd take what she could get and figure out the rest later.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time" was the best way Libby could describe her first week under Jess's roof. Libby had been so sure the living arrangement would take the edge off her attraction, but not so much in the first week. Even when he wasn't there, which was ninety-five percent of the time, the place was all about him.

Pictures of him hiking in Red Rock Canyon. A carelessly discarded expensive silk tie in the family room. The spicy scent of him in *every* room made it feel like having his arms around her. Or was that wishful thinking? Not that it mattered. Or it wouldn't if she could say the idea was unpleasant. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Aunt Libby?"

"Hmm?" She pulled her thoughts back to tucking Morgan into bed. "Sorry, sweetie. I was thinking about something else."

"That's okay." The little girl pulled the sheet and blanket more securely over her.

"Do you want me to finish the story?"

"No."

Libby studied the serious little face. "Is something on your mind?"

"Yes."

Libby suppressed a smile. When Morgan first came to stay with her this method of communication had taken some getting used to. Instead of blurting out whatever was going through her head, she worked her way to it with a series of questions. It wasn't efficient, but eventually what she needed to discuss got discussed.

"Is everything all right at school? Your kindergarten teacher says you're one of her pet pupils and she's not supposed to have favorites."

Twin dimples flashed on the child's cheeks when she smiled. "Miss Connie is nice."

"She is very nice."

Nooks and Nannies Preschool had a kindergarten class and Morgan went there while Libby was working with her preschoolers. Charity and Ben had been supposed to come home before first

grade to enroll the little girl at the school near their home. Now their child lived in a luxury penthouse condominium, a different home. Fortunately, Jess had agreed with her that changing schools right now wasn't the best plan.

"So if school isn't keeping you up at night, what's bothering you?"

Morgan clutched her doll against her thin chest. "I don't think he likes me."

"Who? A boy at school? Is someone being mean to you?"

"No. That guy."

"Who?" Alarm trickled through Libby.

"My daddy's friend."

"You mean Uncle Jess?"

She nodded. "I don't think he's very happy that we came to live with him."

Libby had hoped Morgan didn't pick up on the signs that he was ignoring them, but no such luck. "Why do you think that, sweetie?"

"He's never here."

"Sure he is," Libby protested. "In the mornings."

Her stomach tightened as she remembered just today he'd come into the kitchen to say goodbye before heading to his office. In his pinstriped navy suit and red tie he'd looked particularly handsome. Freshly shaven, with every hair in place, he'd set her female parts quivering with awareness. Darn him. He'd revved up her hormones, then raced out the door.

"Two times he drank a cup of coffee while I ate cereal. But he doesn't sit down with me. Not like you do, Aunt Libby."

Sometimes a smart and perceptive child could be worrisome and this was one of those times. At least she wasn't perceptive enough to notice Libby's insane crush on Jess, but that probably had more to do with her young age. There was still an ick factor regarding boys.

Libby wished for the good old days because her current plan wasn't coming together very well. Every exposure to Jess was supposed to be like a vaccination and living here should have been the booster. *Should have* being the key words.

"Jess is a busy man, sweetheart. He has lots of people working for him and depending on him."

"Does he eat supper?" Morgan asked.

"I'm sure he does." If he didn't, the impressive muscles that filled out his T-shirt would be fairly nonexistent. And they were definitely existent, positively thriving. In a mouth-watering way. Libby had no ick factor where he was concerned.

"I've never seen him eat supper, Aunt Libby. He doesn't like us."

Libby figured that was true enough for her, but he had no reason to dislike this sweet, innocent child who was right about him not coming home for dinner.

"He doesn't really know us yet," she said. "Give it time. This is new for him. He's not used to us, but that will change. Everything will be all right. You'll see."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart," she said.

After a big hug and lots of kisses that made Morgan giggle, Libby turned on the world's brightest night light. "Sweet dreams, love bug."

"Okay," Morgan answered sleepily as she rolled to her side.

With a full heart and troubled spirit Libby watched for several moments, then made up her mind to talk to Jess. It wasn't long before she heard the front door open and close.

Imagine that. We have touchdown right after the kid is in bed. Morgan wasn't the only observant resident of the penthouse. Apparently Jess was aware of her bedtime and how to avoid it and her.

Libby found him in the kitchen, where he was reaching into the refrigerator for a beer and the plate of food saved for him. The angle gave her a chance to admire his excellent butt. That thought was immediately replaced by a mental command for her hormones to back off.

"Hi, Jess."

He straightened and turned to meet her gaze. "Hi."

"How was your day?"

"Fine. Busy." He shrugged. "You?"

"I just put Morgan to bed. You can go in and tell her good-night if you want. I don't think she's asleep yet."

"That's okay. It might upset her routine."

Hers or his? she wondered.

"You must be hungry," she said.

"Why?"

"Besides the plate of food in your hand?"

He glanced at it and a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I missed dinner."

"We noticed."

"Oh?" He removed the plastic over the meatloaf, mashed potatoes and green beans, then set it in the microwave and pressed the reheat button.

"Yeah, what with your chair at the table being empty and all."

He twisted the top off his beer and took a long swallow, then looked at her. "What's on your mind, Libby?"

"Funny, that's just what I said to Morgan when I tucked her in bed. I could tell there was something bothering her. She tends to share what's on her mind at bedtime."

"Do I need to know what it is?"

Of course, you nit, she wanted to say. Struggling for patience, she said, "You're her guardian."

"And I pay you to make sure she has everything she needs."

She walked over to the granite-covered island and kept it between them as she met his gaze. "It's also in my job description to make sure you're aware of what's going on with her emotionally. I thought you should know that she's noticed you don't come home for dinner."

"I see."

That's all he could say? Libby rubbed her palms over the black-and-beige granite countertop, but the smooth coolness did little to ease the heat trickling through her. Heat that was part attraction and part annoyance. Just breathing the same air with him raised her pulse when she most needed calm rationality.

In her college speech class there had been discussion of techniques for calming nerves in public speaking. The one about picturing your audience naked came to mind, but with Jess in the same room that only throttled up her quivering nerve endings. Her best bet was to say what she had to and leave.

"Morgan thinks you don't like her."

"That's ridiculous. She's a kid. Of course I like her. How did she get an idea like that?"

"Besides the fact that you work really hard at not being around her?" Libby struggled to keep accusation from her tone.

"I'll cop to the working hard, but it has nothing to do with avoiding her."

"Really?"

"What's this really about?" he asked.

Apparently she'd been unsuccessful in maintaining a neutral expression. She might as well say what had been on her mind.

"Was weather the real reason you couldn't be at Ben and Charity's memorial service? Or was it about dodging the hard stuff? The part where you're Morgan's guardian?"

Stark pain etched itself on his face and looked even darker for the scruff of beard that was three hours past his five o'clock shadow.

"I'll admit to being grateful that weather grounded my plane. But it had nothing to do with the kid and everything to do with the fact that a memorial service meant facing the truth that my friend was gone and he wasn't coming back."

"If anyone knows how you feel, it's me." Missing Charity was still a raw and ragged wound inside her. She was probably the only person on the planet who knew exactly how Jess felt. And she sympathized with him. "I didn't want to go either."

He took another long drink of his beer and pulled the plate out of the microwave. "I'd have been there if weather hadn't shut down the airport."

She believed him and that realization made her feel all gooey inside. Under the circumstances that was the wrong way to feel.

"The fact is," she said, "Ben and Charity made you Morgan's guardian. The designation implies making an effort to be involved with her. Just like Ben would have been if he were here."

A muscle jerked in Jess's jaw as he stared her down. "Define *involved.*"

Libby tapped an index finger against her lips as she thought about the question. "Think of her as a resort development. Periodic reports from a project manager. That would be me. Intermittent on-site social interaction with said project. That would be—"

"Dinner?" he guessed.

"Go to the head of the class," she said.

He ran his fingers through his hair, then nodded. "I'll make it a point to be home for dinner tomorrow night."

"Promise?"

"Is that really necessary?"

"I don't want to tell Morgan you'll be here unless it's going to happen," Libby said. Life was full of disappointments and she didn't want more than necessary for a little girl who was dealing with the worst one of all.

"Promise." He made a cross over his heart and held up two fingers.

"Okay, then. It's a date."

Almost instantly she regretted her phrasing. That made it sound too personal, which was so the wrong tone. She wanted him to take an interest in Morgan, not herself. Mostly.

And so she felt the same conflict of smart women throughout time. How could she want him so intensely when she wasn't sure she liked him at all?

Chapter Three

The next night Jess walked into the penthouse and heard Libby's voice, the smoke-and-whiskey huskiness that skipped over his skin and made him hot. Now was no exception. When she stopped talking, a little-girl giggle filled the silence. This was the first time he'd ever heard that sound in his home and it made him smile. Amusement faded fast when he remembered why he was here.

To get involved with Morgan. Libby's words came back to him—like Ben would have been if he'd lived.

"I'm trying, buddy," Jess whispered. "Man, I wish you were here. I'm already screwing this up."

Libby had figured out that he worked late to avoid the situation at home. She'd nailed him and he didn't like it. He also wasn't sure how he felt about her coming up with the idea of being the nanny. On one hand, he was glad to have someone caring for Morgan that she knew and felt comfortable with. Someone who could make her giggle, he thought when the sound came to him again.

On the other hand, Libby had also guessed that he hadn't wanted to go to the memorial service and seemed to share the feeling. She'd gone soft when they discussed it, unlike the harsh way she'd reviewed his home as it related to being kid-friendly. But he could tell that she didn't particularly like him and he didn't particularly care. At least he tried not to because that was a slippery slope straight to hell.

Jess set his briefcase down by the front door, took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen. Every light in the room was on, including the under-the-cabinet fluorescents. Morgan was sitting on one of the six tall, padded wrought-iron stools arranged in a semi-circle around the island. Libby was across from her putting something on a cookie sheet. The glass-topped dinette was set with three woven placemats, plates, eating utensils and glasses. Until the last week, he'd always come home to a dark, silent penthouse. All this light and activity made him feel as if he'd stepped into an alternate universe.

Libby looked up and saw him standing there. "Hi."

"Hi." He lifted a hand when Morgan turned in his direction. "Hey."

"Hi," she said, not quite looking at him.

Until he made his presence known, Libby and Morgan had been talking and laughing. Now it was as if the cone of awkwardness had descended, closing off the giggles. Suddenly the room wasn't quite so bright. Maybe Libby had been wrong about Morgan wanting him there.

He observed Libby, noting how the tailored white cotton blouse and snug jeans set off her curves to perfection. There was uncertainty in her vivid blue eyes. Maybe they took on that extraordinary color because her cheeks were flushed. It didn't matter why, really, because the more he saw her, the more he realized how striking she was.

"So," she said.

"What's for dinner?" He looked at Morgan, who was staring at the beige-and-black design on the granite-covered island.

Libby waited a couple of beats, then answered with exaggerated cheerfulness in her tone. "We're having chicken nuggets and french fries."

He moved beside her and studied the mystery chicken pieces arranged in rows on the cookie sheet. He picked one up and examined it. "I have a number of luxury resorts that employ world-renowned chefs and I don't think one of them has this particular entrée in their repertoire."

"It's Morgan's favorite." Libby gave him a look, although her tone was still relatively good-humored. "She chose this for dinner."

He'd meant the words in a teasing way but the little girl looked worried. Clearly she didn't get his sense of humor, but he'd put his foot in his mouth and needed to salvage the situation somehow.

"I can't wait to try this," he said, wondering if his voice had enough enthusiasm or was over-the-top.

"You're going to love it," Libby promised. "Isn't he, Morgan?"

"I guess." She didn't look up.

"And to balance this meal nutritionally, I've made a salad with various kinds of lettuce, veggies, shaved almonds, croutons for crunch and blue cheese crumbles just because."

"Yuck," Morgan commented, wrinkling her nose.

"You know the rule," Libby said.

The little girl heaved a huge sigh. "I don't have to like it, but I have to try it."

"Seems fair," Jess said.

This brought back memories of his own childhood, before his dad died. Before everything went to hell. He knew the signs well enough to know that Morgan was on the dark side now. He wanted to make it better, but he didn't even know how to carry on a conversation without hurting her feelings.

"Why don't you tell Uncle Jess what you did at school today," Libby suggested, as if she could read minds.

His next thought was the realization that the little girl had never addressed him by his given name, let alone said "Uncle Jess." He'd have remembered that. When he'd dropped in on her parents, they'd run interference and the visits had been scattered, infrequent. Not enough for her to remember him.

Now he was the one in charge of running interference, which made him certain that fate had a sadistic sense of humor. It also made him want to put a fist through the wall, but that wasn't an option.

"What did you do in school, Morgan?" he asked, grateful that Libby had thrown him a bone.

Morgan glanced up at him, then down again. "I made a pumpkin."

"It's there on the refrigerator. For Halloween," Libby explained.

He looked behind him and saw the construction paper creation held to the front of the appliance with a magnet. The little girl had colored it green and he was about to say something about pumpkins being orange when he noticed Libby shake her head slightly in a negative motion. Fortunately he wasn't quite as dense as a rock and got her drift.

"Wow, Morgan. I really like your pumpkin," he said. "You did a great job."

"One of the kids said it's the wrong color," she mumbled.

"What do they know? Maybe this is a pumpkin that's not ripe yet," he suggested.

Morgan lifted one slight shoulder in a shrug.

When he met Libby's gaze, her expression was sympathetic. That wasn't something he was used to seeing. If anyone could sense that it was him. When his mother had brought home a guy two years after his dad's death, Jess had known in seconds that he didn't measure up. He'd always gotten the same hostile vibe from Libby.

He was accustomed to her shooting daggers at him when their paths crossed in a party setting with other people around. He'd always noticed her but managed to find someone safe to take his mind off her. That wasn't the case now. Worse, he kind of liked that she was cutting him some slack for his inexperience.

But there was something else about her that was different, too. Her blond hair was tousled around her face, teasing her pink cheeks. The smile she flashed him was bright and beautiful and made his chest feel weird. Intelligence snapped in her eyes and her mouth made him wonder if it would taste as good as he imagined.

From the first moment he met her, he'd been concerned that she could take his mind and libido to a place he'd always managed to avoid going. And he shouldn't be going there now.

"How long until dinner?" he asked. "I'm going to change clothes."

"About fifteen minutes," she answered.

He nodded and headed out of the room. It wasn't nearly enough time, he thought, feeling cornered in his own home. If he hadn't promised to eat dinner with Morgan, he would leave. But he'd crossed his heart and somehow knew that the gesture was tantamount to sacred between Morgan and Libby.

As if that wasn't enough proof of their attachment, the sound of Libby's voice followed by Morgan's giggle sliced into him and rattled around, echoing off the emptiness there.

The female interlopers in his world had a bond—the two of them against the world. He remembered the feeling from long ago and felt a flash of wanting to be a part of it again. But he'd experienced an alliance like they had and found out it wasn't something he could trust. A unit as tight as Libby and Morgan's had no room for him. Even if he wanted to join, which he didn't.

Sooner or later he'd wind up in the cold anyway, so the cold was where he would stay.

Dinner could have been more awkward, but Libby wasn't sure how. Her cheeks and jaw hurt from smiling too much and her brain was tired after thinking so hard to singlehandedly keep up a three-way conversation. Jess had stuffed his face full of nuggets and fries, then excused himself—a polite way of saying he couldn't get away fast enough.

Once he'd vacated the table, Morgan released her inner chatterbox and turned back into the child Libby knew and loved. If Ben and Charity had been able to see their daughter's future, would they still have named Jess her guardian? She wasn't so sure. But there was something she needed to discuss with him and finally found him in the morning room.

Libby hadn't thought to look there because it was evening and there were no lights on, which had made her think the room was empty the first time she'd checked. Now she stood in the doorway. The only illumination came from the lights on the Strip that were visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows. As he'd said on her penthouse tour, it was a fabulous sight.

She felt a stab of guilt for pointing out that a five-year-old girl had no frame of reference to appreciate the adult view. It was true that billboards and taxis flaunted advertisements of scantily-clad women that Morgan shouldn't see, but from here the view was classy and breathtaking. And she didn't just mean the lights. Jess looked pretty fabulous, too. But he always did to her.

"Jess?"

The light on a glass-topped table came on instantly. He was sitting in a rattan chair on a plush, cream-colored cushion.

"Is everything okay?"

That depended on what he meant by *everything* and *okay.* But she figured he probably meant was there a crisis for which his presence was required.

"Fine."

"Okay. Good."

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

There was only a slight hesitation before he said no. That could have been her imagination, but she didn't think so because the look in his eyes said she was marginally more welcome than a global financial crisis.

There was an identical chair beside his and she lowered herself into it. The seat was deep and if she slid back, she felt her feet wouldn't touch the floor. Jess, on the other hand, had no problem, what with his long legs.

Before dinner he'd changed out of his suit into a pair of jeans, a cotton shirt and navy pullover sweater. It was a preppy look that he somehow pulled off as rugged. Her stomach did that quivery thing she recognized as acute attraction—unwelcome, but best acknowledged so it could be dealt with.

Libby folded her hands and settled them in her lap, angling her knees toward him. "So, how did you like dinner?"

"Awesome."

"Really?"

"Best I ever had."

"So, you've eaten chicken nuggets before?"

"It's been a while." Something darkened in his eyes. "But, yes, I have."

"The amount you consumed was pretty amazing."

"Did Morgan notice?"

"That you were shoving record-breaking amounts of food in your mouth to redeem yourself for dumping on her favorite meal?"

"Yeah. That."

"No."

"Just so we're clear, I wasn't dumping on her choice. That was humor."

"She's five." Libby gave him a wry look. "She doesn't know *world-renowned, repertoire* or *chef.*"

"I got that." He folded his arms over his chest as he stared out the window.

"Complimenting her artwork was a nice save."

"Oh, please." Now his look was wry. "It was pathetic and you know it."

"What I know," she said, feeling sorry for him in spite of herself, "is that you didn't have a meltdown when you noticed a magnet on the expensive stainless-steel front of your refrigerator."

"Don't think it didn't cross my mind," he answered.

Libby laughed, but it didn't lighten her mood. She wasn't here to worship at the altar of Jess Donnelly and be seduced by his charm and self-deprecating humor.

"But you held back."

"I would have made a joke about it but I was afraid she'd think I wanted her drawn and quartered at dawn."

"You're exaggerating."

"Only a little." He blew out a long breath. "It probably didn't escape your notice that I'm not very good at kid talk."

"No? Really?" she said in mock surprise. "I swear I was planning to get out the duct tape to shut you up."

The corners of his mouth curved up slightly. "In my own defense, it has to be said that I spend my days in meetings about budgets, building materials and stock market shares. Until a week ago I didn't have to know about nightlights, green pumpkins or trying something I don't like."

Libby didn't want to sympathize with what he was going through and worked hard to suppress it. He'd agreed to be Morgan's guardian should anything happen to her parents. The argument that no one expected they wouldn't come home didn't fly with her. For God's sake, they'd gone halfway around the world to a place where bad, life-threatening things happened much more frequently than here in the States.

Jess could have taken the time to get to know Morgan. He could have made the effort to fill his friend's shoes and make the absence of a little girl's father a little easier for her. But he hadn't done that.

He was doing the right thing now and got points for that, but no sympathy for the fact that talking to a little girl, a virtual stranger, wasn't easy. Still, for Morgan's sake, she decided to help him out. Be a bridge.

Libby blew out a breath. "Kid talk takes practice, just like any other language. Ask her questions."

"Like?"

"What's her favorite color?"

"Pink," he answered. "Sometimes purple, better known as lavender."

Would wonders never cease? He'd actually listened that day they'd first arrived. "So ask things you don't know. Such as what she did at school."

"You covered that," he reminded her.

"I found out she made a pumpkin. A good question would be why that, as opposed to a ghost or pirate."

"I just figured it best captured Halloween." He shrugged.

"Of course, but asking shows that you're interested and could get her talking. Which brings to mind an obvious question."

"Obvious to who?"

"Everyone."

"That's where you're wrong, Libby. I have no idea what to say to her next."

"I keep forgetting you don't live in the real world." She sighed. "You do know that Halloween is when kids dress up in costumes and go trick-or-treating for candy?"

It took several moments before the "aha" light came on in his eyes. "So the question is—what does she want to be for Halloween?"

Libby smiled. "Give the man a prize."

"Even though the man doesn't deserve it?"

He sounded sincere. Like he didn't believe getting a clue was anything to be proud of. And she had to agree with him. It wasn't a big deal. But the fact that this being-out-of-his-comfort-zone side to Jess was something that she'd never seen before *did* land squarely in big-deal territory. It could make him sympathy-worthy and she couldn't afford to feel that way. She wasn't here to stroke his ego, but as Morgan's advocate. It was time to bring up the subject she'd come here to discuss with him.

"I just tucked her into bed and we were talking about something—"

Alarm jumped into his eyes. "The fact you're here means she had something on her mind."

"I see you've gone to the bad place where you're expected to eat fish sticks as well as chicken nuggets every night for the rest of your life." She smiled. "Don't worry. It's not about that." His confused male look was so astonishingly cute that there was a definite tug on her heart. "She remembered that you said you would think about making changes to her room."

"Oh." He relaxed. "Okay."

"Letting Morgan put her personality stamp on her own space might help her to niche in with you."

He steepled his fingers and tapped them against his mouth. "I have no objection to that."

"Good. So, let's figure out when you can take her shopping."

He shook his head. "I don't need to approve her taste. Just let her pick out whatever she wants and send the bills to me."

It was like he'd pulled down a shield to hide the vulnerability she'd seen just moments before, when he worried about how to talk to a little girl. What was up with that?

"Shopping with Morgan is a good way to know her and build up a collection of conversational questions," Libby pointed out.

"I'll pass."

"Don't you want to be a part of picking things out?"

"It's not necessary."

"No one said it was. But to continue our discussion of a little while ago, it's a way to break the ice. Which you were just wondering how to do. Because she lives with you now. You're her family."

"No."

"Excuse me, you're her guardian."

"And as such I will make sure she has everything she ever needs, but don't call it family because I don't know how a family is supposed to behave." He met her gaze and there were shadows in his own.

"Ben and Charity believed otherwise or you wouldn't be Morgan's guardian."

"A past like mine makes their judgment questionable."

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"My father died when I was a boy. A little older than Morgan."

"I'm sorry," she said automatically.

"Don't be. It was a long time ago."

"Even so…" She thought for a moment. "It would seem that a loss like that would make you more sympathetic to what Morgan is going through—"

He held up a hand to stop her. "What I know is Ben and Charity meant for me to provide for Morgan's material needs. He was my friend and knew me and my limitations and he still asked me to take her. So I'm prepared to pay the bills." He stood, signaling an end to the discussion. "Is there anything else?"

"I'll let you know."

He nodded. "Then I'll say good night."

When he was gone the chill in the morning room made Libby shiver, a feeling fueled by sympathy she couldn't stop this time. She realized how little she knew about Jess's life. She hadn't been aware that he'd lost his father at such a young age. At a time when he felt the loss destroyed any sense of family for him. What about his mother?

Libby had never known her own. The woman had died before she was old enough to remember her. Her father was still alive, still an opportunist who used people. But she'd grown up watching a family support their own. Even though she'd never felt a part of that family, she understood the dynamic and the love that underscored everything.

Apparently Jess hadn't been as lucky. She'd always thought of him as the golden boy, never touched by tragedy. Obviously there were more layers to him than she'd suspected.

Only time would tell whether that was good or bad.

Chapter Four

Libby pushed the control button and watched the security gates into Jess's luxury condo complex part like the Red Sea. Glancing in the rearview mirror of her practical little compact car, she smiled at Morgan, who was barely awake in her car seat. She'd learned that napping this close to bedtime could vaporize the evening schedule.

"Hey, kiddo. Are you excited about your new princess comforter?"

"Yes," the child answered, then sleepily rubbed her eyes.

"You know, your new bed has to be delivered before you can use the new things."

"When is it coming?" Morgan asked again.

"Saturday." Libby drove into her assigned space next to Jess's. She noted that his car wasn't there yet, which meant he was still working. Or something. She turned off the car's ignition.

"Why can't they bring my bed tomorrow?" Morgan asked.

"Because we're at school all day and no one will be at home to let the delivery men in. They wouldn't know where it goes," she explained.

"What about Uncle Jess?"

Yeah. That was a good question. Libby wanted to warn Morgan not to count on him. The man was unwilling to do the hard work. The answer to what about Jess was as simple as that.

It had to have been hard losing his dad so young, but he was making a deliberate choice to keep this precious little girl at arm's length. No matter what he said about Ben and Charity knowing him, Libby would never believe his passive parenting is what they'd have wanted for their little girl.

But she couldn't say any of that out loud in answer to the question.

"Uncle Jess works, too. Very hard. He can't be here for the delivery." Or anything else, Libby added silently. "So we'll just keep all the bedding stacked in the corner of your room until Saturday."

"Okay." Morgan unhooked herself from the safety seat and opened the rear passenger door.

Libby lifted the twin comforter and the bag with matching sheets and towels from her trunk. The two of them managed to carry the bulky shopping bags to the private elevator, then rode it to the penthouse. She pulled the key from her jeans pocket and turned it in the lock. But when she tried to open the door it didn't budge. After turning the key in the opposite direction, the door opened, which meant she hadn't secured it properly when they'd left earlier.

"That's funny," she said.

"What is, Aunt Libby?" Morgan looked up with big, innocent brown eyes.

"I was sure I locked the door." She always did.

This was a secure building, but leaving an unobstructed way into a luxury penthouse was like an engraved invitation to get ripped off. Her only excuse was that she'd had Jess on her mind a lot. The distraction took a toll and important things like not locking up were the result.

She set the bags down in the foyer and her purse on the circular table.

"I'm thirsty, Aunt Libby."

"How about a gigantic glass of milk?"

The two of them had grabbed a burger at the mall, but before leaving she'd fixed a salad and pasta for Jess, then left it in the fridge.

She smiled down at the little girl. "Soda with your hamburger for dinner was a treat but you still need milk."

"Why?"

"It has calcium to give you shiny hair and strong teeth and bones so you'll grow up big and strong."

Libby walked into the kitchen where the light was already on, which made the hair at her nape prickle with unease. On top of that there was an almost-empty plate of pasta on the counter. One of the bar stools had been pulled out for sitting down on.

"This just keeps getting weirder."

"Uncle Jess ate his dinner," Morgan said.

Libby didn't think so, what with the fact that his car wasn't in its usual space. She didn't think he was home yet. Not only that, there was a half-full wineglass beside the plate. Jess was a beer guy as far as she knew. She picked up the stemware and looked closer.

"Uncle Jess didn't pour this, not unless he's started wearing lipstick."

Libby wondered whether or not she should be afraid. Should she take Morgan out and call 911? It didn't feel like there was anything bad going on. This had a sensation of familiarity, of being at home and comfortable with the surroundings.

"Aunt Libby—"

"What, sweetie?" she said, preoccupied with what to do.

"It's like that story you read me," Morgan said, excitement humming in her voice. "Remember? The one about the girl and the three bears."

She raced out of the room before Libby could stop her. And she needed to stop her because in that story they found the girl in bed. Hurrying to catch up, Libby went into the family room where she found Morgan standing still, staring down the long hall that led to Jess's bedroom. A beautiful, curvaceous woman was walking toward them wearing a man's black silk robe. Libby was thinking it was probably all she was wearing but couldn't say for sure and didn't really want to confirm. Her next thought was that although she'd never seen him in it, the robe was probably Jess's.

"This is the three bears' story and Goldilocks is a redhead," she mumbled.

The woman tightened the tie at her waist and stopped in front of them. "Who are you?"

"I'm Libby. Who are you?"

"Elena Cavanaugh. I wasn't aware that Jess got married."

"He didn't. How did you get in here?" Libby demanded.

"With the key he gave me. And you?"

Libby settled her hands on Morgan's shoulders. The two of them lived here and shouldn't have to justify their presence. Red, on the other hand, had a lot of explaining to do. "I'm the nanny."

Elena's gaze dropped to Morgan. "I didn't know he had a child."

"A recent development," she explained, giving the small shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm a flight attendant. Jess gave me a key. We're—" Her gaze dropped to Morgan. "We're *friends.* When my flight schedule brings me to Las Vegas I stop by to say hello."

"Without calling?"

Elena shrugged. "He likes surprises."

"Why are you wearing that robe?" Morgan asked.

"You're a cutie," the woman said with genuine warmth.

"I'm Morgan."

"It's nice to meet you, Morgan. I like your name. And to answer your question, I was just going to take a bath."

"To get ready for bed?" the little girl innocently persisted.

"Something like that." Elena looked at Libby. "But I see that Jess has made some changes around here."

"This all happened recently." Libby glanced down at the child in front of her. "For Morgan. Jess isn't actually her uncle. He's her guardian because…"

Elena nodded slightly, letting her know she didn't have to go into detail in front of the little girl. It was a sensitive thing to do and took the starch out of Libby's indignant outrage over this

"arrangement." Though she had no right to it, there was probably a little jealousy stuck between indignance and outrage.

"I think I'll just go and get dressed," Elena said.

Morgan stepped away from Libby. "Are you leaving already?"

"It would be best," the woman answered in the same words Libby was thinking.

"You're not going to sleep over?" Morgan persisted.

"That wouldn't be a good idea." Again her response was exactly what Libby would have said. Elena turned and walked back down the hall.

When they were alone Morgan looked up at her. "I wish she would stay. She's nice, Aunt Libby."

"I can see why you feel that way." The kid meant stunning, Libby thought. What in the world was Jess thinking, giving out keys to his place? Didn't he ever see the movie *Fatal Attraction?* She felt like the queen of snark because Elena seemed nice enough under incredibly awkward circumstances.

The front door opened and closed, and speaking of the devil, he walked into the family room looking like he'd just arrived for a magazine fashion shoot. Charcoal suit, white shirt, red tie. Awesomely appealing. How could he look so good at the end of a long, difficult day? Libby felt as if she'd been run over by heavy equipment and it was his fault.

"Hi," he said, smiling at both of them. "I see you did some shopping."

"My new bed is coming on Saturday," Morgan said. "I got a princess comforter and sheets to match. Want to see?"

He looked from her to Libby. "I think that's the most words she's ever strung together in my presence."

"Mall magic," Libby answered, wondering how to diplomatically bring up Elena in front of a child.

"So you guys had fun?" he asked.

"You could say that."

He must have heard something in her tone because he frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"You could say that, too."

"What's going on?"

"Hi, Jess." The flight attendant stopped just inside the doorway and he whirled around to look at her.

After a couple of beats he said, "Elena." Shock mixed with recognition equaled awkward.

"You look great," she said. The crisp white shirt and navy pants of her flight uniform made her shapely figure look even more curvy.

"Right back at you." He glanced at Morgan. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you got in."

"No problem."

"The thing is, this isn't a very good time—"

"Yeah. I kind of figured that out on my own." She smiled with genuine regret as she handed him his key. Then she stood on tiptoe and placed a soft kiss on his lips that clearly said goodbye. Looking first at Libby, then Morgan, she said, "It was nice to meet you both. For what it's worth, I think Jess will be a really good dad."

On what planet? Libby wanted to ask. But Elena was gone before she could say the words even if she dared.

Libby blew out a breath. "I can truthfully say that nothing like that has ever happened to me before."

"I bet she drinks lots of milk," Morgan commented.

"Why?" Jess and Libby asked together.

"Because her hair is shiny. She has nice teeth and is big and strong." Morgan looked wistfully toward the front door. "She's pretty. I want that color hair. And when I grow up, I hope my boobs are like hers."

Jess looked as horrified as Libby felt but she was pretty sure it was for a different reason. Libby was already a woman and there was no chance of her growing into the “assets” necessary to get Jess’s attention.

Jess wondered which of the gods he’d pissed off and, more important, what sacrifice it would take to get them off his back. While Libby supervised Morgan’s bath and bedtime rituals, he was in the morning room downing his second beer.

When this child fell into his lap, he’d known life would change, but he hadn’t counted on parts of the old one creeping in. Elena looked good, no question about that. She was fun, flirty and fantastic in bed. Part of the fun was her showing up without warning. That was exciting, or at least it used to be. Her goodbye said they were over and he would have understood even if she hadn’t returned the key.

The thing was, it didn’t bother him, which bothered him more than anything. That was just wrong and he blamed a petite, blue-eyed blonde who didn’t seem at all intimidated or impressed by his wealth and power.

He blamed her because she had the damnedest way of creeping into his thoughts at inconvenient times. Board meetings. Business lunches. Phone calls. It was difficult to concentrate when a memory of her tart comments made him smile. Or the way she caught her top lip between her teeth sent his thoughts to kissing first that lip and then the bottom one to see for himself how she tasted.

And suddenly he sensed her behind him. Although she didn’t make a sound, he knew she was there. The hair at his nape prickled and his skin felt too tight. That happened when normal blood flow was involuntarily diverted to points south. This was the last thing he wanted or needed.

“Jess? Can I talk to you?”

The last time they’d talked in here was chicken-nugget night. Libby had given him a crash course in child-speak. She’d encouraged him to engage Morgan in conversation and complimented him on what was right with his style. Then he’d seen the light in her eyes dim and extinguish because he’d disappointed her. Libby was a grown-up, but Morgan wasn’t. What if he let her down? He was pretty sure conversing with the kid didn’t include her sharing that she wanted a big bosom and red hair when she grew up. So he’d already failed her.

Libby didn’t understand why family was a hot button for him. How could he explain that love had cost him the only family he had? She wouldn’t understand that promises made and broken were what destroyed all he thought he knew about love and loyalty. He wanted to say no to the talking, but knew that wasn’t an option.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” he suggested, turning to meet her gaze.

“No, thanks. This won’t take long.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

The choice of words was unfortunate because he suspected Libby would very much like to do just that. After Elena left and Morgan said what she said, her nanny had glared at him in a way that could reduce a lesser man to a brown stain on the rug.

“Is Morgan settled?” he asked.

“That’s a good question.”

Here we go, he thought. “What’s wrong?”

The look on her face told him what he already knew—stupid question. “Let’s start with the naked woman in your bed.”

In his obviously flawed judgment, she sounded jealous, and the idea of that had some merit. “If we’re going to discuss this rationally, let’s get the facts straight. We don’t know if she was naked and I have no independent confirmation that she was in my bed.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.” It wasn’t easy to remember innocence, but he put as much as possible into his voice and expression.

Jess was baiting her, plain and simple. He was deliberately agitating her because, as stupid as it sounded, she was beautiful when she was angry. More beautiful, he amended. Not in the classic, statuesque, turn-a-man's-head way Elena was. But in a down-to-earth way that was more appealing than he would have ever believed.

"Okay." She put her hands on her hips, drawing his attention to curves that made his palms tingle. "Let me put it like this. Morgan could have walked into a scene featuring a naked woman in your bed. It's not something I want to explain to her. Do you?" She paused thoughtfully and tapped a finger to her lips. "Oh, wait, you're the guy who doesn't do kid talk at all which would make explaining sex to a five-year-old—"

"Almost six," he pointed out.

"Right. Because a couple months would solve the problem entirely."

Definitely beautiful, he thought. "The situation was awkward, I'll admit that. But it wasn't as bad as it could have been. So, I guess I'm wondering what you want me to do."

She blew out a breath. "And I guess I'm wondering how many more keys are out there? How many more of your women are going to show up unexpectedly?"

Elena was the only flight attendant he dated. He'd given her a key because it was convenient for both of them. She'd have a place to stay when she was in Las Vegas and he enjoyed her showing up out of the blue.

He could tell Libby there were no more women, but then they'd have nothing left to talk about. For reasons he couldn't explain, he wasn't quite ready for this conversation to be over. Scratching his head he said, "It's hard to put an exact figure on it."

"*Figure* being the operative word." Sarcasm surrounded every syllable.

"No pun intended." Again he let his expression ooze innocence. "So Morgan had some questions?"

"I managed to do damage control. This time."

"How?"

Her eyes narrowed and the expression was sexy as hell. "She's still young and naïve enough to believe that *people* look past a woman's appearance to find her inner beauty."

Her emphasis on the word *people* told him she really meant men. Truthfully, the kid's comment about growing up had freaked him out big time. "I'm glad you were able to smooth things over."

"Is it necessary for me to point out that boobalicious babes arriving without warning is going to be a problem the older Morgan gets?"

"I will take appropriate action to avoid a repeat of the situation," he assured her.

"How?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you have a master list of who has access to your home?" she grilled him.

"I've never found it to be necessary."

Her stubborn, pointed little chin lifted slightly. "Now it is."

"Would you feel more secure if I had the locks changed?" Even though it's not necessary, he added to himself.

She nodded. "It's a start."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thank you." She stared at him and caught her top lip with her teeth.

Heat shot straight through him as his mind went to a place where he kissed her until both of them were clinging to each other because neither could catch their breath. The next part of the mental picture had her naked in his bed. Before the vision went any further, he looked closer and noticed there was something else on her mind. And he would bet it had nothing whatsoever to do with his bed.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's none of my business."

"Since when has that stopped you?" He shrugged. "Go ahead. Tell me what's on your mind."

"You don't really want to know."

Probably not. But now he was too curious. "Yeah, I do want to know."

"Technically you're my boss. I'm your employee. It's not my place to offer an opinion."

Curiouser and curiouser. Now he really needed to hear what she had to say. "Just pretend I'm the company suggestion box. Or better yet, a comment card. The one that says we're really interested in your feedback. Et cetera. Lay it on me."

"Okay. If you insist." She folded her arms over her chest. "I can't help noticing that you don't seem like the type of guy who embraces parenting. The sort who doesn't do the dance of joy at being tied down."

She was right about that. Ties gave people the power to stab you in the back. If someone was going on the offensive, he preferred to see it coming and take appropriate evasive measures in order to defend himself. Maybe that's why he was so drawn to Libby. She had no problem with telling him what was on her mind, whether or not he wanted to hear it.

Jess met her gaze as the defensive part of him locked and loaded. "My energy has been focused on business for a very long time. I put together some cash and parlayed that stake into something of much greater value. With one enormously successful resort open on the Strip and another one in development, not to mention partnerships in properties all over the world, there's not a lot left over for anything else."

Which is why relationships like Elena worked for him. No demands, just rewards.

"I understand what you're saying," she agreed, in a tone that indicated she didn't see at all. "The problem, as I see it, is that when you're raising a child, being tied down comes with the territory."

Okay. She'd nailed him. Mission accomplished. It was a direct hit on the target. What she meant was that Ben and Charity had picked the wrong guy to take care of their kid. Did she really think he wasn't aware of that?

On the day she'd delivered Morgan, she'd accused him of not really wanting the child. He hadn't confirmed or denied but defended himself with a question. *Who says I don't want her?* Libby was dancing around it again now, but the meaning came through loud and clear. He wasn't the go-to guy and his friend had misplaced his trust.

He was more than ready now to end this conversation.

"Okay, Libby. Point taken. I'm well aware of my shortcomings and limitations."

"It's not a flaw," she backpedaled. "Some people just aren't cut out to raise kids. Self-awareness is a good thing."

Jess ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't know why Ben chose me to be Morgan's guardian, but he did."

"And what you're doing is admirable, Jess, but—"

He held up a hand to stop her. "I assured my friend that his child would be taken care of if anything happened to him. It was one of the last conversations we had. You're here in my employ to take care of Morgan. I gave my word and I'm doing my duty."

Disappointment was evident in her eyes again and he hated putting it there. One of the perks of living alone was not having anyone to let down. He would have to learn not to let it bother him the way it was now.

Chapter Five

After her students had gone home for the day, Libby had work to do while Morgan was being supervised in the Nooks and Nannies after-school program. She sat behind the flat oak desk in her brightly decorated classroom. The walls were filled with pumpkins colored by her kids, as well as witches, ghosts and other costumed characters to commemorate the upcoming event. When Halloween was over next week, she wanted to go right into projects for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As she thumbed through material for ideas, several caught her eye. Paper plates and brown construction-paper feathers to fashion a turkey. If everything was cut out and ready, the kids would have fun pasting it all together. There was another one that used small magazines with the pages folded to form the turkey body, then a pattern to cut out the long neck and head.

It would make a great centerpiece for the dinner table on the big day but would require a lot of supervision, a higher adult-to-child ratio than normal. Mental note: ask for parent volunteers. There were enough involved parents this year to make it a fun exercise for everyone.

Christmas would be next, a time rich in project material from trees and ornaments to Santa and presents, as well as the spiritual side of the season. She wanted this holiday to be special for Morgan, the first without her parents.

The thought made Libby's heart heavy. Her own holiday memories were filled with Charity, and then Ben. Some of them included Jess, because he was their friend, too. A vision of him popped into her mind followed by a familiar yearning that lately had turned into an empty ache. Her seeing-him-every-day plan to crush out her crush didn't seem to be working all that well. Not much had changed from the days when their paths crossed because of mutual friends.

In all fairness, it wasn't Jess's fault that she had the hots for him but left him so cold he couldn't remember her name. She knew that and in spite of it, her longing for him was still an issue even though no one would ever accuse him of being a parent, let alone one she could count on.

The intercom on her phone buzzed and she picked up. "This is Libby."

"Hi, Lib, it's Mary in the office."

"Hey." The receptionist's tone was normally upbeat and cheery. It took Libby a couple of seconds to realize that wasn't the case now. "What's wrong?"

"Morgan is here. She had a little accident—"

"I'll be right there."

Libby ran out of her classroom and to the administration offices, which were in another building. There was a small room just off the reception area where the kids went with minor scrapes and bumps, where first aid was handled. The door was open and she heard whimpering. The knot in her chest squeezed against her heart as she braced herself and walked in.

"Hey kiddo. You have a boo-boo?"

The little girl was sitting on a chair, her right hand wrapped in a towel. There was blood on her pink sweater, jeans and white sneakers. It was more shocking because, for some stupid reason, she hadn't expected to see blood.

She looked at Sophia Green, the Nooks and Nannies director, who was sitting beside Morgan, an arm around her shoulders.

"What happened?" Libby asked.

Sophia's gray eyes were serious as she tucked a strand of reddish-brown hair behind her ear. "She cut her hand."

"How?" Libby knew that question bordered on dense because it didn't matter. But in that heart-stopping moment, it was all she could think to say.

"The kids were at outside playtime. Morgan was by herself near the perimeter fence. She reached through and picked up a piece of glass."

Libby dropped to her knees beside the little girl. “Oh, baby—”

“I didn’t know it was sharp, Aunt Libby.” Tears welled in her brown eyes.

Words of censure fueled by her own fear were on the tip of her tongue, but somehow Libby held back. This wasn’t the time for a safety lesson.

“Okay, sweetie. We’ll put a Band-Aid on it and fix you right up.”

“About that, Libby—”

If she’d been thinking more clearly, she’d have realized there would already be a bandage on the boo-boo and Morgan would be showing it off. Because that wasn’t the case she knew it was more serious.

“What?” she asked Sophia.

“It’s a little deep,” the other woman said gently. “I think she needs stitches.”

“Okay.”

Libby was doing her best imitation of calm even though her hand shook as she brushed the hair off Morgan’s forehead. “I’ll call the pediatrician.”

“Lib, it will probably be faster to take her to Mercy Medical Center. The emergency room has a pediatric trauma specialist available twenty-four hours a day.”

Libby glanced up at the little girl’s pale face and frightened eyes. “You don’t think that would be scarier?”

Sophia shook her head. “They’re specially trained for things like this. Not that I think it’s that serious, but the staff knows how to put their littlest patients at ease in these circumstances.”

She trusted implicitly her friend’s judgment. Sophia had been with the Clark County department of family services before job burnout sent her to Nooks and Nannies. The woman had seen trauma. If anyone knew how to deal with it, Sophia did.

“Okay. We’ll go to Mercy Medical Center.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“Thanks.”

That way she could call Jess to meet them there, then she could concentrate on keeping Morgan calm.

A couple of hours later Libby was sitting alone with Morgan in one of the emergency room’s trauma bays. When they’d been called back she’d insisted Sophia didn’t have to stay. That was before she’d known how long they’d be waiting. She still hadn’t spoken to Jess. His cell phone went straight to voice mail, which was now full due to all the messages she’d left. Unable to reach him directly, she’d tried his secretary, who’d informed her he was in a meeting and had left strict orders that he wasn’t to be disturbed. The problem was that Morgan couldn’t be treated until he authorized it.

That wasn’t the only problem, just the most pressing. Somewhere deep down inside, Libby knew she wanted him there for herself. She was scared, too, and could really use his support, a strong shoulder to lean on, someone to talk to. Not just anyone. *Him.*

At that moment the privacy curtain moved and she expected to see the nurse who had been checking in on them whenever possible for the last couple of hours. Instead, Jess stood there. She hated how glad she was to see him, how badly she wanted to throw herself in his arms and have him hold her.

“I got here as soon as I could,” he said, stopping on the other side of the bed.

Right. Not soon enough, she thought.

Her resentment and anger were out of proportion to the situation and she wasn’t sure why. But this wasn’t the time to call him on it any more than scolding Morgan after the fact would have been.

“How is she?”

Why do you care? she wanted to ask. But part of her knew that was just taking all her fear and frustration out on him.

She blew out a long breath. “Worn out. We’ve been here a long time. You got my messages?”

A muscle jerked in his jaw. “Yeah. I need to give permission for treatment.”

She nodded. “You could have done it over the phone.”

“I’ve never handled something like this. It seemed better to show up.”

“The pediatric trauma specialist—Dr. Tenney—looked at her hand and said no nerves or tendons or anything that would permanently affect her fine motor coordination were compromised.”

“That’s good,” he said.

“It is, but she needs stitches, because of where she cut herself. Movement in her palm will make healing take a lot longer unless he closes the cut.”

His mouth thinned to a grim line. “Something like this never crossed my mind. How did you handle stuff while she was with you, after Charity and Ben left?”

Libby met his troubled gaze. “I had power of attorney. I was authorized to approve routine check-ups, visits to the doctor’s office and whatever came up. When they died everything changed. You’re her legal guardian and I couldn’t sign any of the forms. So we’ve been waiting—”

Her voice cracked and the weakness shamed her, making her more self-conscious.

“Libby, I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“Your secretary said her orders were that you not be disturbed. She’s very good at her job.”

“Still—” He ran his fingers through his hair. “This should have been an exception.”

He looked sincere, she thought. And in all fairness this was a situation she hadn’t foreseen. The fact that she’d had a lot on her mind, including him, was no justification for her not to consider what would happen in a medical emergency. But it also made a certain amount of sense that his employees who worked so closely with him knew him better than anyone. Knew his priorities. If a child who needed medical treatment was an exception-worthy event, the woman would have put Libby through to him. She hadn’t. And that didn’t speak highly of his attitudes toward parenting.

Morgan stretched and opened her eyes. “Hi, Uncle Jess.”

“Hey, Morgan. How are you?”

“Not good.” She glanced at her hand. “I got a boo-boo.”

“I heard. Does it hurt?”

“Not really,” she said. “Want to see it?”

His hesitation wasn’t all that obvious, but Libby saw. “Sure.” He lifted the small surgical drape covering the little hand and winced, turning a little pale. “It looks like it hurts a lot.”

“If I hold really still it’s okay.” Morgan’s eyes filled with tears. “But I’ve been holding still for a long time. I wanna go home.”

“Can’t blame you,” he said. “I’ll go do what I have to do to make that happen.”

Libby watched him disappear and aloneness surrounded her again. Wasn’t she the perverse one? Jess was damned if he did, damned if he didn’t. She didn’t trust him with this child, but Libby was desperately drawn to his strength and support.

Not more than a few minutes later Jess returned. “Okay. Everything is taken care of. The doctor will be here in a few minutes to fix you up and pretty soon you can go home.”

“Thank you, Uncle Jess.”

The small, sad voice brought a pained look to his face. “Morgan, I’m very sorry you had to wait so long.”

“That’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t,” he said. “I didn’t get the message and it’s my responsibility to let the doctor know he can do what’s necessary to make you better. I was in a meeting.”

“Was it important?” Morgan asked.

“Yes. It means lots of people will have jobs.”

“That’s pretty important,” the little girl agreed.

Jess shook his head. “My secretary didn’t give me the message.”

“Why not?”

"Because I told her not to."

"You made a rule?"

"I guess you could say that." He reached out with one finger and brushed a stray strand of hair from her cheek. "I just want you to know that I'm very sorry you had to hang around here so long."

Libby waited for him to say that nothing like this would ever happen again. He didn't. She knew Jess took a promise very seriously and the flip side of that was not to make a vow you couldn't keep. But this was one that he should move heaven and earth to make and not break.

"So," he said, looking down at Morgan. "Other than this trip to the emergency room, how was your day?"

"Okay." The small smile she'd given him disappeared. "But I'm scared about gettin' stitches."

"I can see where you would be," he said seriously. "But I've had them before."

"Really?" Her eyes widened. "Is it gonna hurt?"

"The doctor is going to give you some medicine that will make you not feel anything." He held up his finger. "But here's the thing. The medicine comes through a needle, a really small one and it will feel like a little pinch. Then it might burn for a couple of seconds. After that, you won't feel anything."

"Promise?"

He made the cross over his heart and held up two fingers. "Swear."

He'd told her the truth, Libby realized. It would have been easy to lie and tell her it wouldn't hurt, but he hadn't done that. Which made his omission about promising to be accessible to Morgan all the more significant. If he couldn't make that promise, Libby would see to it that nothing like this ever happened again. She'd make sure that if Morgan needed anything she wouldn't have to wait. Maybe it was time to do something she'd been considering for a while—consult a lawyer about her alternatives for obtaining legal custody of Morgan.

He'd cited his sense of duty, but in her opinion love should trump obligation.

She didn't ever want this little girl to wait for what she needed until Jess could find time to be available. She didn't ever want this precious child to feel like an unwanted obligation. Libby knew from firsthand experience how painful growing up that way could be.

Twenty-four hours later things were back to normal, whatever that was. Morgan was in the Nooks and Nannies after-school program, where she was being watched over and pampered so Libby had felt confident in resuming her teaching duties. A lot of parents counted on child care and the kids could be thrown off by a substitute. If Morgan needed her, she was right down the hall, as opposed to Jess, who had meetings and left orders not to be disturbed for any reason.

Still, after he'd arrived at the emergency room and expedited the little girl's treatment, he'd been great, making her laugh, distracting her while the doctor stitched her hand. Then he'd taken them home, with a detour to a toy store where he bought what he'd called her brave-little-girl reward. Libby had experienced the E.R. with and without him and definitely preferred him there. Which was a bummer since he couldn't be counted on to show up when needed.

Her classroom door opened and Sophia Green walked in. "Hi, Lib."

Her stomach clenched. "Is Morgan okay?"

"Fine. I just checked on her." The preschool director sighed. "Are you going to the bad place every time you see me now?"

"No." And that was a big fat lie.

"Give it time." She sat in the chair beside the desk. "Morgan says her hand doesn't hurt. I think that very impressive bandage is helping in that regard."

"Good. She does like her Band-Aids."

"Miss Connie is keeping her quiet. Which isn't really all that difficult." Sophia frowned. "How is Morgan coping with losing her parents?"

Libby thought about the question. “Fine. She seemed to take the news okay and was a trouper at the memorial service.” Now Libby frowned as she mulled it over. “But she never asked many questions and now she doesn’t talk about them at all.”

“I see.”

But Libby didn’t miss the deepening worry lines. “She’s had to cope with moving. Jess is practically a stranger to her. That’s a lot for a little kid to deal with.”

“How’s the arrangement working out?” Sophia asked. “I mean you being her nanny.”

“You mean what’s *he* like. Admit it.”

Sophia shrugged. “I think it’s perfectly normal to be curious about an above-average-looking wealthy man that my friend is living with.”

Wow, that was an understatement in every way. Jess was drop-dead gorgeous and the penthouse lifestyle didn’t happen without a couple extra bucks in the bank. But the “living with” part made the arrangement sound way too personal.

“I’m not *living* with him—”

“So you commute there to fulfill nanny duties?” Sophia’s expression was all innocence except for the gleam in her gray eyes.

“No. I’m a live-in nanny.”

“So, how is that working for you?”

It was Libby’s turn to shrug. “Nice place. Morgan doesn’t want for anything that money can buy.”

“I hear a *but.*”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing I’m a live-in nanny,” Libby hedged. “For Morgan’s sake.”

“Are you concerned about her welfare?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Sophia persisted.

“For starters, sexy stewardesses show up with their own key and let themselves into the penthouse.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Oh, please.” Libby rolled her eyes. “You’re a grown-up. Do the math.”

“They drop by for…” Sophia thoughtfully tapped her lip. “*Benefits* when they’re in town.”

“Right in one.”

“And you’re jealous.”

Not a question mark anywhere near that statement. How irritating that she was so easy to read. Instead of outright denial, Libby attempted a flanking maneuver. “Why in the world would I be jealous?”

Sophia linked her fingers and settled her hands in her lap. “Because he’s a hot guy and you have a crush on him.”

“Give me credit for some maturity.” Again not a lie.

“Age has nothing to do with it. Secretaries fall in love with their bosses all the time. And the nanny falling for the guy she lives with is the stuff of romantic fantasies from *Jane Eyre* to *The Sound of Music.*”

Libby thought about confessing that her crush wasn’t a recent development and had happened years before she’d moved into the penthouse, then decided a lie was easier. “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” her friend conceded. “So, you’re concerned because a sexy stewardess with a key is bad because there’s a child in the house.”

“A child who subsequently decided when she grows up, she wants to be a redhead with big boobs.”

“Oh, my.”

"No kidding."

"That's unfortunate, Lib, but give him the benefit of the doubt. This is a major lifestyle change for him."

"I get that." Libby picked up her pen and rolled it between her fingers. "If that was the only thing, I'd shrug it off. But he's a workaholic. His priorities are budgets and business models. What concerns me is that so far he's shown no inclination to change his lifestyle to accommodate Morgan."

Sophia nodded. "That's a concern."

"Yeah. Charity and Ben took care of all the details before they left. They dotted *I*s and crossed *T*s. Their decisions were made with abundant thought. And it begs the question—why did they trust me with Morgan for the short term, but make Jess her long-term legal guardian?"

"I can't answer that." Sophia studied her. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm just wondering who would be the better parent," Libby admitted.

"As in changing the custodial status quo?"

"It's crossed my mind. I have an appointment with an attorney."

Sophia sat forward, her expression shocked. "You're talking about suing for custody?"

"I haven't really thought about it in those terms or that far ahead."

"Have you talked to Mr. Donnelly? Maybe he would be willing, possibly relieved, to step aside. It's possible you'd be doing him a favor. You might be able to work out a mutually agreeable solution."

Libby clicked the top of the pen, sending the point in and out. "Before moving Morgan, I tried to talk to him and couldn't get access. Rich people have a lot of insulation."

"It's probably because they need it," her friend commented. "There are probably a lot of folks who'd like to separate him from a million or two."

That was a good point and something Libby hadn't considered. "I suppose it's not easy to trust when you're in his position. But I tried to talk to him when I brought Morgan, that very first day. He adamantly refused to even consider altering custody. Said he promised his friend."

"Sounds awfully noble to me."

Libby would have thought so, too. Except Jess had put a finer point on it and called Morgan a duty. But then, in the E.R., he'd been so sweet with her. Probably guilt for not being available to authorize her treatment. And yet his interaction with her had seemed to be completely natural. It was so confusing and she didn't know what the right thing was anymore.

"What I know for sure is that I love that little girl like she's my own. For me, walking away isn't an option. I just want to talk to an attorney and find out what my options are—if any."

Sophia nodded thoughtfully. "If he doesn't voluntarily agree to walk away, you could be talking about a legal battle."

"I know."

"It could get expensive," her friend pointed out. "No *could* about it. We're talking lawyers and protracted legal proceedings. All of that can add up fast."

"I get it."

"He's got unlimited funds and you—"

"Don't," Libby finished for her.

But technically she was working two jobs and saving every penny possible. Just in case.

Sophia studied her for several moments. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Yeah. Me, too."

But Libby wouldn't run away from it either. If she decided to go that route, it would be because that's what was best for Morgan.

"I have to go. So much paperwork, so little time." Sophia stood and looked down. "I have just one thing to say."

"Do I want to hear this?"

"Doesn't matter. It's not directly about you." She smiled. "Morgan is a lucky little girl."

That surprised Libby, what with losing her parents and all. “Why do you say that?”

“Two good people care enough to be there for her. You and Mr. Donnelly are ready and willing to make sure she’s got everything she needs. He’s got the money, you’ve got the emotional thing going on.”

“That’s what Ginger said. It’s how I came up with the idea to be his nanny in the first place.”

“There are an awful lot of children that no one wants.” Memories turned Sophia’s eyes stormy and sad.

Libby wondered, not for the first time, about Sophia’s past, but when she looked like she did now, bringing up the bad stuff just seemed wrong. “Thanks for stopping in. It really helped to talk.”

Libby finished up her work, then left the classroom and locked the door before stopping by the day-care center to pick up Morgan. They were on the way to the car before she realized she’d forgotten the folder for a project that she’d wanted to look over for the next day. When they rounded the corner a man was standing there, peeking into her classroom window. She recognized him immediately and her stomach knotted.

Speaking of people who’d like to dip into the bank account of the wealthy, or the not wealthy. Just anyone he could use for his own selfish reasons. Including his own daughter—especially his daughter.

“What are you doing here, Dad?”

Chapter Six

Libby stared at Bill Bradford's charming smile and the crinkly lines around his pale blue eyes. It seemed wrong that her father's dark hair was sprinkled with gray. That should be earned by hard work and worry, neither of which the man had ever done. This was the first time in months that she'd seen him, not since her younger sister Kelly had graduated from high school.

That meant he was up to something.

"What do you want?" she asked, pulling Morgan close to her.

"How are you, Lib?"

"Fine."

"Who's this?" he asked, looking at the little girl.

"Morgan," she answered. "Charity's child."

He nodded. "I heard. Kelly mentioned it. I'm sorry."

Libby didn't answer. This man didn't give a rat's behind about anyone but himself. "What do you want?" she asked again.

"Can't a father say hello to his kid?"

"Of course. But when *you* do, there's an ulterior motive."

The charming smile disappeared and the crinkly lines just made him look old. "Have you talked to your sister?"

"We e-mail all the time. She loves UCLA."

He nodded. "Now that she's away at college, Cathy's parents have suggested I should make other living arrangements."

A nice way to say *get out,* and about darn time, she thought. The man had mooched off Cathy's family for years, ever since Libby was a little girl. There was nothing that tugged on heartstrings more than a motherless child. About the time her folks had his number, Cathy turned up pregnant. She'd lost a child to a debilitating disease and descended into despair and drugs. She'd been on the street when she'd hooked up with Bill Bradford. All Cathy had ever wanted was her own baby to love and her parents would do anything to give her that, even if they also had to take in the baby-to-be's worthless father and his kid.

"What about Cathy?" Libby asked.

"She's staying."

So they were splitting up, which meant Cathy had finally had enough, too. At least the woman had been smart enough not to marry him.

He slid his fingers into the pockets of his jeans. "They didn't give me any warning, so I haven't had a chance to put together a plan. Other living arrangements take money and I haven't had time to save up."

She didn't say it out loud—that he'd had the last eighteen years to put away money, but that took ambition. "I don't have any cash to spare."

"I understand. Just thought I'd check." He looked at Morgan. "I know how expensive it is to have a kid."

Play the guilt card and fishing for information at the same time. Classic manipulation.

"I'm her nanny," Libby explained. "Just a working girl."

"I live with my Uncle Jess," Morgan added. "He has a big, big apartment in a very high building."

Bill forced a smile. "Sounds really nice."

"It is. And he bought me a new bed, with princess sheets." She held up her bandaged hand. "I didn't cry when I got stitches yesterday and he took me to the toy store and got me lots of stuff."

"Your Uncle Jess did that?" Bill Bradford's eyes gleamed with interest.

"Don't even think about it," Libby warned. "Jess Donnelly isn't someone you can—"

"*The* Jess Donnelly, billionaire resort builder?"

Darn. Darn. Darn.

"Look, we have to go." She took Morgan's uninjured hand and led her away.

From behind she heard him say, "Goodbye, Morgan."

"'Bye."

When the little girl slowed to look back, Libby tugged her along.

"See you later, Lib."

Not if she saw him first.

Libby kicked herself for letting anger squeeze out common sense. She was trying so hard to leave her past in the past and didn't want it to spill over into her present. All she wanted was what every woman wanted—a family, someone to love who would love her back. She didn't want to be associated with the man whose DNA she was trying so hard to overcome.

At dinner around the kitchen table, Jess had Libby on one side and Morgan on the other. She was eating fish sticks and fries, picking them up with her left hand because her right one was wrapped in white gauze. Because of him, her trauma had stretched out far longer than necessary.

He felt like pond scum. Actually worse. Scum was on top of the water. What he was settled lower, deeper, darker and slimier, at the bottom of the water. Because of him, the experience had been worse for Morgan, and remembering the way Libby's voice cracked and her struggle not to cry ripped him up even now. Fear had been starkly etched on her face and bothered him more than he would have believed possible.

When he stopped beating himself up, Jess noticed that the girls were quieter than usual. No small talk tonight to fill the silence. Normally Libby picked up the slack, but tonight she looked different. The sunshine was gone and he wondered why. It was best not to consider why he noticed at all.

He looked at her, then Morgan. "So, how was your day?"

"I didn't have to go to the hop-spital."

"I'm glad about that," he said, trying to keep his voice light. Obviously she remembered his boneheaded attempt to distract her from the upsetting situation with her hand.

"But I didn't get to play outside," the little girl added.

"Why?"

"'Cuz of my hurt hand." She chewed a French fry. "Miss Connie didn't want me to make it worser."

He glanced at Libby, who would normally have corrected the grammar slip, and was surprised when there was no comment. Definitely preoccupied.

"So what did you do inside?" Jess persisted.

"I colored. But not very good."

"How come?"

He directed the question to Morgan, then glanced at Libby, who was passive-aggressively multi-tasking. She was pushing fish stick bites around her plate and brooding at the same time.

"It was hard to hold the crayons in my other hand." She picked up a green bean and popped it in her mouth. "But Miss Connie said it was art stick."

"Is that scholastic terminology? A secret word between students and teachers?" he asked Libby.

"What?" she hadn't been paying attention.

"Her teacher called her coloring 'art stick.'"

"Artistic," she translated.

"Ah. That means it was good," he told Morgan. "Sometimes it's hard to be objective about our own work."

"Huh?"

"It means that we always like what we do so it's not easy to tell whether or not other people will like it, too."

"Oh." But she still looked confused.

"The good news is that while your right hand is getting better, your left got a chance to be a star."

"I guess." Her look was doubtful.

"So you had a quiet day?" He couldn't shake the feeling something had happened.

"Yup." Morgan nodded emphatically. "Then me and Aunt Libby came here."

He noticed she didn't say *home* and on some level it bothered him. "After yesterday, I'm glad everything was peaceful. So, that's all that happened?"

Morgan scrunched her nose thoughtfully. "I forgot. A man came to see Aunt Libby and asked if he could say hello to his kid."

That sent his "uh-oh" radar into on mode. "Who was he? Libby?"

"Hmm?" She glanced at Morgan and the conversation must have registered on some level because she said, "Oh. Just my father."

Jess realized he didn't know anything about her family and suddenly wanted to. "That's nice. Him stopping by, I mean."

"Aunt Libby didn't look happy. She s'plained to him that she's my nanny."

And had been for a while, Jess thought. That meant she wasn't communicating with him regularly.

"I told him I live with you," Morgan continued. "And that you bought me a new bed even before I hurt my hand. But when I didn't cry you took me to the toy store for a 'ward."

"Reward," Libby clarified, tuning in to the conversation now.

"Right," Morgan said. "I told him stuff about you and Aunt Libby said for him not to think about that. But I don't know what that means."

"It was nothing," Libby said. "He just stopped to say hello."

"But you were mad, Aunt Libby."

"I wasn't mad, sweetie." Libby looked startled. "What makes you think I was mad?"

"'Cuz you squeezed my not-hurt hand very, very tight and made me walk away kind of fast. And you didn't even say goodbye to him, which wasn't p'lite."

"I was just in a hurry to get you home," she said. "I'm sorry you thought I was angry."

"That's okay." She slid from her chair. "I hafta go potty."

She raced from the room, the unexpected visitor forgotten. But not to Jess.

When they were alone, he looked at Libby, who wouldn't make eye contact. "You must have been happy to see your father."

She looked up and there was nothing happy in her expression. "He shows up from time to time."

"You didn't tell him you're working for me?"

"I did today."

Not what he meant and the look on her face told him she knew that. "Does your mother know about this job?"

"She died when I was born."

"I'm sorry," he said automatically.

Before he could ask even one of the million questions that popped into his head, Morgan ran back into the kitchen and Libby was reminding her to slow down and be careful of her hand. After that the routine ritual of table-clearing and bathtime commenced. The fact that it was becoming familiar to him wasn't as disturbing as curiosity about Libby.

He hoped that was because she so obviously didn't want to talk about her father. He figured that was because of a strained relationship, something he understood only too well. He didn't share information about his mother because there was nothing to be gained by telling a story that always managed to piss him off all over again.

He refused to consider that his high curiosity level was due to anything more than Libby's out-of-the-ordinary reserve. Every time their paths had crossed over the years, her smart, sassy sense of humor drew him, among other things that had caught his attention and some that hadn't until she'd moved into his penthouse.

He'd deliberately pretended not to remember her because he couldn't ever completely forget her. He had sensed the moment they met that she could be more to him, which wasn't something he ever wanted. The problem was getting that message where it needed to go. Every day he became more aware that she was bright *and* sexy. Not drop-dead gorgeous, but definitely pretty. And he was damned attracted.

The good news was that Morgan had talked to him more than she ever had and didn't seem to hold the emergencyroom fiasco against him. The bad? Every day it was becoming increasingly more difficult to keep himself from kissing the nanny.

And that would be a huge mistake.

Libby expected Jess to work late and miss Halloween, but that hadn't stopped her from hoping she'd be wrong. She wasn't. When he walked into the penthouse, Morgan was already asleep, worn out from trick-or-treating and the excitement of wearing her costume.

He came into the kitchen, where Libby was standing by the island, inspecting the cache of candy the little girl had collected in her plastic pumpkin.

"Sorry I'm late," he said by way of greeting.

"Yeah."

With his jacket slung over his shoulder and held by one finger, he looked every inch a corporate pirate. His tie was loosened and the first button of his white dress shirt undone, with the long sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm. The look was so blatantly male, so incredibly masculine that he quite literally took her breath away. She wasn't prepared for that, but then she never was. There was no way to brace for the overwhelming force of attraction she'd experienced from the moment they'd met.

Jess picked up a chocolate bar and the expression on his face held traces of regret, which was surprising. "Did Morgan have fun?"

"Big time." Libby tossed a small bag of hard candy with a tear in the package onto the discard pile. "I took her to the District in Green Valley Ranch. The stores surround a big courtyard and were all giving out candy. It had a safe, blockparty sort of feel and there were lots of kids. She had a blast."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to see her dressed up."

"It's not too late. She insisted on wearing her princess costume to bed."

One dark eyebrow rose. "You let her?"

"It's a special occasion. Relaxing the rules seemed like a good idea." *Relax* being the operative word since there was something she needed to discuss with him. "You can look in on her if you want."

"I'll do that."

And there was a surprise. Every time she thought she had him figured out he did the unexpected.

He was gone for a while and returned wearing worn jeans and a pale yellow pullover sweater with the neck of his white T-shirt peeking out. Another masculine look that rocked her hormones. She should be used to it by now, but not so much.

"She looks pretty cute," he said. "While I think it's really cool, I have to ask. You don't think the glow-in-the-dark tiara is dangerous?"

Libby laughed. "I tried to talk her out of sleeping in it, but she was willing to take the risk. Then things threatened to get ugly. That wasn't a hill I wanted to die on, since I can take it off when she's sound asleep."

"Sounds like a wise decision." He opened the refrigerator and grabbed a longneck brown beer bottle, then twisted off the metal cap.

"Speaking of wise…"

Libby wasn't anxious to bring up the subject of his father or parental males in general after all the questions he asked about her own. Jess had never shown quite that level of interest in her before and she regretted more than was prudent that it probably wasn't about her at all. For the record, he was smart to be wary of her father.

As much as she didn't want to, she needed to talk—specifically about his feelings after his father died. He might be able to help Morgan more than anyone.

"What?" He took a drink of beer.

"I was hoping you could help with something."

"If I can," he agreed.

"Miss Connie came to see me today."

"Who?"

"Her kindergarten teacher. She was wondering how Morgan's coping with the loss of her parents."

"What do you think?" he asked.

"That's difficult to answer." Absently she twisted the cellophane ends of a candy package. "I had to break the news to her."

Libby remembered that horrible day. Reeling from the news that her best friend wasn't ever coming home. The realization that she'd have to tell Morgan something that no child should have to hear. "She didn't have an immediate reaction except to get very quiet. I figured she was only five and hadn't seen them for months, which is forever to a kid."

"That makes sense." The tone was casual and completely at odds with the hard edges and shadows on his face.

"But the regular phone calls from Charity and Ben stopped. I've sort of been waiting for her to bring up the subject, if she wants to talk about it."

"And?" he prompted.

Libby toed open the stainless-steel trash can, then tossed in the questionable candy before meeting his gaze. "She hasn't mentioned Charity and Ben at all. The thing is, I don't know how a kid would react to something like that."

He leaned a hip on the bar stool beside her. "I'm not sure how I can help."

"You lost your dad when you were just a kid. I was wondering how you handled it."

He'd started to lift the bottle to his mouth and stopped. The expression on his face said he'd rather walk naked in a hail storm than discuss this.

"That was a long time ago. I don't remember anything specific."

Something about his tone made her think he wasn't telling the whole truth about that. For the life of her she couldn't figure out why he wouldn't open up. For all his flaws, shallowness being top of the list, she'd never known him to be deliberately mean. And clearly he was loyal. Maybe she could get him to share.

"Did you talk about how you felt? To a counselor? A teacher? Or some other professional?"

"No." A muscle in his jaw jerked.

"Was there anything your mother did to make it easier?"

He set the beer down with enough force to splash some of the liquid on the counter. "Like I said, it was a long time ago. And I was only a few years older than Morgan."

"Which is why I think you're the best person to consult about how to proceed—"

"That's where you're wrong," he said. "Little girls are way outside my area of expertise."

In essence he was refusing to discuss the issue, which tweaked Libby's temper. "Right. I forgot. Big girls are more your style."

"I like women," he agreed.

Libby remembered. She hadn't meant to say anything out loud and wasn't sure why she did now. That wasn't exactly true. It was no surprise that he dated, but seeing Elena Cavanaugh had hurt more

than she was prepared for. His type was something she would never be, and face-to-face confirmation was tough to reconcile.

"A child is definitely a responsibility," she said, bringing the subject back to the little girl. "Is the obligation cramping your style?"

"Morgan is the daughter of my best friend. He'd have done the same for me."

That wasn't an answer and sounded more like the company line than a reason to raise an orphaned little girl. This time a dash of irritation made her ask, "Did you ever plan to have children?"

"Honestly?"

"Always the best policy," she said.

"Since high school my focus has been on achieving success. I knew business was the best way to do that and concentrated all my energy in college on learning everything I could to get me where I wanted to be. I'm determined to make the name Jess Donnelly as recognizable and synonymous with Las Vegas resorts as Steve Wynn or the Maloof family with their fantasy suites at the Palms Hotel."

"So children aren't now nor have they ever been one of your priorities?"

"No."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

His gaze narrowed. "Has anyone ever told you that's quite the talent you've got for lobbing verbal zingers?"

"I'm glad you like it."

"I didn't say that. Just that I noticed."

"That makes two of us." Libby froze, then let out a long breath.

What she noticed reinforced that her recent appointment with the attorney had been the right thing to do. The family law specialist had promised to research the situation and get back to her on options for Morgan's custody—if it became clear that was in the child's best interest. Libby still hadn't made up her mind about that.

Sometimes Jess showed signs of bonding with Morgan, then he pulled back. Like tonight. Missing Halloween.

Or maybe she was painting her perception of him with the rejection brush he used on her. She wasn't proud of the way she yearned for him to become aware of her but couldn't deny the feelings for him that had simmered inside her for so long.

"What did you notice?" he asked.

Like she would actually share her most personal and intimate thoughts with him. "It's not so much that as watching Morgan tonight. She made a couple of comments about kids with the adults around them. Wondering if they were moms and dads."

Jess folded his arms over his chest. "So you're wondering whether or not her teacher is right about a delayed reaction to losing her parents."

"Yeah. It crossed my mind." Among other things, she thought.

"Do you think she needs to see a professional?"

"It's an option," she agreed. "I think it might be best to just observe for a while."

"Okay," he said.

"And I'm thinking it might be a good idea to get out pictures of Charity and Ben. Not only is there a chance she would open up, but we should try and keep their memory alive for their child."

"You're right. Okay."

Okay. There'd been willingness in his voice to do whatever Morgan needed. That was the kind of thing that warmed Libby's heart and fueled her impossible fantasies where Jess was concerned. It's why she wasn't prepared to do anything drastic to uproot Morgan yet again.

As long as Libby was around to keep that little girl from getting hurt, there was no reason things couldn't stay the way they were. And that was the problem. They'd agreed she would stay on

as nanny until Morgan adjusted. There was no guarantee he wouldn't decide tomorrow that Morgan was peachy and Libby's services were no longer required.

She didn't think he was there yet. At the moment she was more worried about her secret crush on him. But she'd had a lot of practice in hiding how she felt and would simply keep on not letting Jess see what was in her heart, the feelings that just refused to go away.

Chapter Seven

Libby and Jess had agreed to let the trauma of the E.R. and the sugar rush of Halloween recede before talking to Morgan about her parents. A week after trick-or-treating, the stitches had been removed and the remainder of the candy stash discreetly discarded.

It was Saturday, two weeks before Thanksgiving, a rare cold and rainy day in Las Vegas. Jess had turned on the gas fireplace in the family room where the three of them had watched Morgan's favorite animated movie. A feeling of yearning enveloped Libby just as tangible and encompassing as the cold. She wanted this to be *real.* She wanted a family.

With an effort, she pushed the yearning away even as she dreaded what was coming.

Morgan wiggled on the sofa beside her and looked up. "I'm bored, Aunt Libby."

She met Jess's gaze and gave him a what-do-you-think-about-now? look. He only hesitated a moment before nodding slightly.

Morgan glanced between them and asked, "What did I say?"

Libby fervently wished he would take the lead on this, which was nothing more than classic avoidance. She was the one with a degree in early childhood education, the one with child-care experience. Of the two of them, she could be considered the kid expert, but that was not how she felt in this delicate situation. She loved kids and cared about every single one, but there was a special place in her heart for Morgan. She was emotionally involved, which made knowledge and experience not very useful.

If it was within her power, she would make this child's life perfect and never let anything bad happen. Obviously she was powerless or they wouldn't be here now. And sometimes pain was a necessary therapy to get to a better place. She clung to that with every fiber of her being.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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