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GREAT  
VALUE

THE BABY  
PROJECT

&

SECOND  
CHANCE BABY

SUSAN MEIER

*Cherish*

SUSAN MEIER

**The Baby Project / Second  
Chance Baby: The Baby Project**

«HarperCollins»

## **MEIER S.**

The Baby Project / Second Chance Baby: The Baby Project /  
S. MEIER — «HarperCollins»,

The Baby Project When Whitney Ross is made temporary guardian of baby Gino, there's a problem – the little orphan's new daddy. Shockingly gorgeous tycoon Darius Andreas is far from ready to be a father! Soon another daunting task comes to light: dealing with her inconvenient feelings for Darius! Second Chance Baby Millionaire businessman Nick Andreas is stunned. The woman who broke his heart is his new assistant – and she's pregnant! As they work together, Maggie's growing bump is a poignant reminder of what they lost... But can they dare dream of getting back together and having a family the second time around?

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**THE BABY PROJECT  
SECOND CHANCE BABY  
SUSAN MEIER**



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## About the Author

**SUSAN MEIER** spent most of her twenties thinking she was a job-hopper—until she began to write and realised everything that had come before was only research! One of eleven children, with twenty-four nieces and nephews and three kids of her own, Susan has had plenty of real-life experience watching romance blossom in unexpected ways. She lives in Western Pennsylvania with her wonderful husband, Mike, three children, and two over-fed, well-cuddled cats, Sophie and Fluffy. You can visit Susan's website at [www.susanmeier.com](http://www.susanmeier.com).

### **THE BABY PROJECT**

**SUSAN MEIER**

Dear Reader,

Every once in a while in a writer's career a really great story idea comes along. For me *The Baby Project* was one of those ideas.

With the loss of both her husband and baby daughter, Whitney ROSS has suffered the kind of tragedy most of us will never experience. But Darius hasn't had an easy life either. Imagine not merely being ignored by your super-rich father, but also discovering that you have three half-brothers. One of them a baby!

When Darius and Whitney are named Gino's guardians, neither expects to be overwhelmingly attracted. Still, both are positive they're strong enough to handle it—and each other.

But raising a baby and falling in love are equally surprising. Sometimes funny. Sometimes poignant. Darius and Whitney discover that when everything seems to be rolling out of control the best idea is to simply hang on.

Join me for laughter and tears when Darius and Whitney try to raise spunky little Gino, form a family with Darius's two cantankerous adult half-brothers, and unexpectedly fall desperately, breathlessly in love.

*Susan Meier*

## CHAPTER ONE

“THE ANDREAS BROTHERS HAVE ARRIVED.”

As the secretary’s announcement came through the speaker phone, attorney Whitney Ross turned from the window in her father’s law office. The gathering January storm clouds above the New York City skyscrapers concerned her, but the Andreas brothers’ visit would be every bit as tumultuous.

Gerard Ross pressed a button on his phone. “Tell them I need five minutes.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Not *enjoying* exactly.” He grimaced, leaning his round body back in his office chair. He rhythmically tapped the blotter on his cherrywood desk. “How about if we say Stephone used his will to accomplish a few important things?”

Though Whitney had never met Stephone Andreas’s sons, the man had been a close friend of her father’s. He’d come to dinner at least once a month from the time she was six, and had talked about “his boys” incessantly. So she suspected she knew what was going on. The senior Andreas had always believed his three sons needed a kick in the pants and it seemed he’d finally found a way to give them one.

“You persuaded Stephone to use his will to force them to grow up.”

“This is about more than growing up. All three are smart. All three are good businessmen. Any one of them could take over the family holdings. But not one of them has a sense of loyalty or family.”

“And this is where the will comes in?”

“Yes. Stephone made his oldest son, Darius, chairman and CEO and left him the Montauk estate. Whether that divides them for good or forces them to unite all depends on whether Darius takes the reins like a true leader.”

He rose and headed for the black leather sofa in the comfortable meeting area in the corner of his big law office. After he sat, he patted the spot beside him, indicating that it was where Whitney should sit for their upcoming meeting.

“But before I bring the brothers in, there’s something you need to know. Missy had something put in her will for you that Stephone agreed would also go into his.”

Whitney took the seat he’d offered. “Missy put something in her will for me?” She wasn’t surprised. Missy Harrington had been her roommate from the time they were freshman at university the whole way through law school. With an alcoholic mom and a dad who’d left when Missy was young, Missy had adopted Whitney’s family as her own, and they in turn had taken her under their wing. For seven years she’d shared every holiday and most of her vacations with the Rosses. Whitney had hardly seen Missy since she had introduced her friend to Stephone Andreas, but they had still shared a strong bond.

“She didn’t exactly leave you something. In accordance with Stephone’s and Missy’s wills, you and Darius got shared custody of their son.”

Whitney’s stomach squeezed. “What?”

“Okay. Look. It’s been three years since the accident that took Burn and Layla. And though I had never dreamed that Missy and Stephone would die so soon when I let them put this provision in their wills, it’s still time you came back to the land of the living.” Her dad pulled a small envelope from one of the files in the stack on the coffee table. “She left this note for you.”

Whitney wrapped her hand around the envelope, and she paled.

“In the unlikely event of their deaths, Stephone wanted Darius to raise their son, but Missy was adamant about you having joint custody. The Andreas brothers are rich and spoiled. And they don’t even know their father had another son. It’s anybody’s guess how they’ll react when they find out. I

believe that Missy made you co-guardian to ensure that Gino was also in the hands of someone *she* knew could take the reins and care for her baby.”

“But I don’t know Gino! When Missy and Stephone moved to Greece, we practically lost touch. I’ve never even met Gino. I’ll be no better for this baby than his brother.”

He caught her hand. “You might not know Gino, but Missy knew you. She knew you had a sense of family. A sense of right and wrong. You’ve also been a mom. You’ll get to know Gino and, as young as he is, Gino will grow accustomed to you, too.” He squeezed her fingers. “Besides, you need this.”

She tried to bounce off the sofa, but her dad held fast to her hand. When she faced him her eyes were blazing. “No! I don’t *need* this! I’m fine!”

“You’re not fine. Otherwise, getting custody of Gino wouldn’t make you angry.”

He pressed a button on the phone on the coffee table that sat in the center of the circle made by the sofa and three black leather chairs. “Cynthia, bring in Gino, please.”

Whitney’s heart stopped. Her stomach rolled. Her head spun. For the past three years she’d avoided even being near a baby. The scent of baby powder, the feel of snuggly blankets, the sight of someone so tiny, so helpless and so beautiful would have been her undoing. And now her father wanted her to take a baby into her home?

The side door opened and Cynthia Smith walked in carrying six-month-old Gino Andreas in a baby carrier, along with a diaper bag and a duffel.

Her father squeezed her hand again. “Your mother and I have been keeping Gino during the Andreas funerals, but it’s time you took him.” He rose and accepted the baby carrier from Cynthia. “Thank you, Cyn.”

She nodded and her blond hair bobbed. “You’re welcome, sir.”

As Cynthia left the room, Whitney’s father set the carrier on the sofa, pulled Gino out and presented the dark-haired, dark-eyed baby boy to her. “He’s yours, Whitney.”

Knowing there was no arguing with her father, Whitney slid the envelope into her jacket pocket and took the six-month-old with shaking hands. He immediately began to cry.

“Don’t cry, sweetie,” she crooned, automatically pressing his head to her shoulder to comfort him. “It’s okay.”

Her instinctive response to his crying amazed her, but she wasn’t surprised by the pain that sliced through her—the memories that flashed through her brain. Her daughter had been a tiny blonde with huge blue eyes. She’d rarely cried, except when she missed her mother. She’d loved bananas and puppies. To Whitney, she’d seemed the smartest baby on the face of the earth.

Tears filled her eyes. Her stomach tightened.

She couldn’t do this.

Maybe she needed more time with her therapist, Dr. Miller?

But before she could say anything to her dad, the office door opened. Wearing jeans, cowboy boots and a cable-knit sweater, Cade Andreas entered first. Behind him was Nick, the dark-haired, dark-eyed brother who most resembled the senior Andreas. And finally Darius. Taller than their father, but with eyes and hair as dark as his, striking in his expensive business suit, Darius was very clearly the leader of the group.

Their expressions were solemn, yet strong. Almost arrogant. The head of the Andreas family was dead. They now controlled one of the largest shipping conglomerates in the world.

Or so they thought.

She glanced at the baby in her arms. For the first time in three years she felt a swell of protectiveness only a mother could feel, and she understood why Missy had given *her* custody along with Darius. The Andreas men were strong. Maybe too strong. And babies needed love.

The question was did she have any left to give?

“Are you kidding me?”

Darius Andreas gaped at Gerard Ross, his deceased father's attorney, then at Gerard's daughter Whitney Ross, a tall, cool blonde with gray-blue eyes who looked nothing like her short, round father. The pair sat on the black leather sofa. The Andreas brothers sat across from them on three black leather chairs. Beside Whitney was a baby carrier and inside the carrier was a baby boy who looked to be only a few months old. His black hair and dark eyes marked him as an Andreas as clearly as Gerard Ross's pronouncement did.

"I assure you, there's no joke." Gerard leaned back, getting more comfortable. "This little boy is your father's final son. There are four of you now."

He picked up the will and began reading again. "It is my wish that the remaining two-thirds share of Andreas Holdings be divided equally among my four sons—Darius, Cade, Nick and Gino."

Gino.

A baby.

His final half-sibling was a baby!

Darius sucked in a breath, forcing that to sink in, but it wouldn't. His brain had frozen. He was stunned, speechless and working not to lose his temper over something he couldn't change. Nick and Cade appeared to be equally shell shocked.

Finally, the business sense Darius had trusted his entire life came to his rescue. "I want a DNA test."

The smooth leather sofa sighed when Gerard sat forward. He looked down at his entwined fingers, then caught Darius's gaze. "Your father might not have married Missy Harrington, but he's named on the birth certificate as Gino's father. Had Missy not died with your father, you might be fighting her for the company right now."

"I still want DNA."

"I understand you're surprised—"

"Surprised? How about shocked? First our father calls us to the hospital after the accident to tell us that he gave one-third interest in the company to someone else. So we'll never fully own our own damned company. Then he tells us *we* have no sense of family and unless we pull together we're going to lose everything he built. Then he dies. Just like that." He snapped his fingers. "Now you're telling us there's a fourth brother?"

"Mr. Andreas, the very fact that you didn't know your father had another child is proof that your sense of family leaves a bit to be desired."

Darius nearly cursed. Who was his womanizing father to tell him that he had no sense of family? His father had abandoned his mother. Hell, Stephone had abandoned *him* until he was in his teens. And then he'd appeared in Darius's life only because he had wanted to ensure that Darius went to a good university so he could be groomed to work for Andreas Holdings.

"For decades our father preached that we shouldn't take family troubles to outsiders." He rose. "Yet it looks like that's exactly what he's done." He reached for the baby carrier. Now that the shock was receding, things were beginning to sink in and make sense. He didn't really need DNA to tell him this was his brother. His father had been living with a thirty-year-old woman. It was no shock she'd gotten pregnant. Gino had all the physical markings of an Andreas. With his father's name on the birth certificate and Gino's name in the will, this little boy was family. And his father wanted him to care for him. So he would. Unlike his two brothers, Darius had always done what their father had asked.

"We'll take our brother and go now."

Whitney held back the carrier. "Dad?"

Gerard said, "There's more."

Darius just barely controlled his rising fury. "*More?*"

"You, Darius, get custody of Gino, but you share it with Whitney."

He turned his heated gaze on her.

Her yellow hair was probably pretty, but she had it rolled in a tight, no-nonsense bun at the back of her head. Her gray suit hid any hint of the body beneath it. He caught the gaze of her blue-gray eyes. In spite of the fact that she dressed to downplay her appearance, Darius felt a click of attraction. And it was mutual. He saw the flicker in her pretty blue orbs.

“It’s up to you how you divide Gino’s time. If you want to have him three days a week and Whitney four, or if you want to have him for two weeks a month and Whitney two, whatever you choose is up to you two. But she will vote his share at your board of directors meetings.”

This time Darius did curse. But he quickly pulled in a breath, struggling to rein in his temper, and glanced again at Whitney. The click of attraction he’d felt when he’d first looked into her eyes turned into a current of electricity that zapped between them. They were definitely attracted.

If this were any other day, any other time, any other circumstance, he would have pursued her. Peel off a few layers of clothes, take down her hair—he was just about certain he’d find paradise.

But those eyes, those pretty Persian-cat eyes, told him to forget it. It didn’t matter if they were attracted to each other. They had a job to do. Raise Gino. Together.

Whitney stayed perfectly still under Darius Andreas’s scrutiny, though warm, sweet attraction hummed through her. She ignored it. He was a gorgeous man with his dark, brooding good looks, his tailored suit made to accentuate his broad shoulders and trim hips, and his commanding personality. Any woman would react to him. Simply from the way his other brothers hadn’t even spoken since introductions were made, it was clear that Darius was the brother in charge. And that was very sexy.

With his piercing onyx eyes boring into hers, she suppressed a shiver. But she wasn’t worried about falling victim to the attraction. Attractions frequently grew into relationships and relationships made people vulnerable. The pain that had followed the loss of her husband had been indescribable. She’d never put herself through that again. She’d never even let herself get close. She couldn’t be attracted to Darius Andreas. She refused.

Darius squeezed his eyes shut in disgust and popped them open again. “All right. Fine.” He motioned for Whitney to follow him. “Let’s go.”

“Go?”

“If this baby’s on the board, he’s working for a living.”

Whitney’s dad laughed. “Very funny, Darius.”

“I’m not laughing. My father left the company in a sad state. There’s work to do. And nobody’s excused. Since your daughter has his vote, she’ll pull his share of the duty.”

“That’s preposterous—”

“Dad.” Whitney interrupted her father. “It’s okay. I’ve never been one to shirk my responsibilities.” She straightened her shoulders and looked Darius in the eye, accepting his challenge. If he thought he’d intimidate her on day one, he was sadly mistaken. She could handle a little work. “If everybody’s working, then I will, too.”

“All right,” her dad agreed, “but before anybody leaves there’s one more thing.”

Darius turned. His dark eyes were ablaze now.

Whitney’s dad looked from Darius to Cade to Nick and back at Darius again. “With someone else in possession of a one-third share of Andreas Holdings, and four brothers sharing the other two-thirds, you don’t have to be a math scholar to know that individually none of you has controlling interest in the whole company.” He glanced from Darius to Cade to Nick again. “Your father has instructed me to allow the holder of the one-third interest to remain anonymous until she decides how to handle her position. She’s in her seventies, so she may simply want to sit back and enjoy the profits. But if she decides she wants to be active in the company, you had better be united or Andreas Holdings will end up being run by somebody other than an Andreas.”

“We’ll need a few minutes.” Past being shocked by the conditions and warnings coming out of his dad’s lawyer’s mouth, Darius spoke quietly, with the authority of command. “We’d appreciate the use of your office to discuss this.”

Gerard Ross rose. “Whitney and I will take Gino to her office. Have Cynthia call us when you’re ready.”

Gerard and Whitney left the room through a side door and Darius faced his brothers. “This wasn’t exactly how we expected the reading of the will to turn out.”

Nick snorted a laugh, but Cade rose. “Frankly, with the exception of Gino, nothing that happened this morning surprised me. You got most of the goodies, Darius. The Montauk estate and the chairmanship, but I think it all evens out with you also getting the baby.” He saluted and headed for the door. “Good luck with that.”

Right. Cade. The rebel. He should have guessed he wouldn’t hang around to lend a helping hand and probably neither would Nick. There was no love, loyalty or unity among the Andreas brothers. They’d gone their separate ways, managed their trust funds individually, made their own fortunes. And each of them had his own life. But after Attorney Ross’s warning about the mystery shareholder, Darius was beginning to understand some of the things their father had babbled about on his deathbed. If they weren’t unified when that shareholder came out of the woodwork they could end up dockworkers in their own shipyards.

“Come on. You can’t just walk away.” He motioned for Cade to return to his seat, but instead, Nick rose.

“Sure we can. You’re the chairman and CEO. You’re the one who has to run things. You might have bullied Ms. Ross into working for you, but we’re not buying in. We’ll be back for board of directors meetings and for our share of the profits.”

“So you really are just going to leave? Even after Dad told us he wanted us to unite? Even after hearing there’s another shareholder?”

“You’ll handle it.”

“This company belongs to *all* of us. I thought you’d both want a part of things.”

“Yeah, and I thought Dad would be around when I was a kid. But he wasn’t.” Nick caught Darius’s gaze. “You were the golden boy. The company, the baby, the troubles are all yours.”

He left the room with Cade right behind him.

Darius fell to the sofa. Over the years he’d cursed his dad for being a philanderer who had created three very different sons ... four now. Today he looked up at the ceiling, finally understanding what had troubled his father for the last ten years of his life. The Andreas brothers truly weren’t family. Having three different moms and hailing from three different parts of the United States, they were as divided as they were different. They might share dark hair, dark eyes and a shrewd business sense, but there was no love lost between them.

The silence of the lawyer’s office rattled around him. Both of his parents were dead now. He had no cousins or aunts and uncles. He had two adult half-brothers, but they wanted nothing to do with him.

He thought back a few weeks to Christmas. He’d gone to parties galore, but on Christmas morning he’d been alone. His footsteps had echoed in his cold, empty apartment. Unless he did a better job of raising Gino than his father had done with him, Nick and Cade, this would be the sound of his life. Silence.

In a weird way, he was glad he’d gotten custody of Gino. Gino was his family now.

Well, his and Whitney Ross’s.

A sliver of excitement slithered through him when he remembered the feeling of attraction that had arced between him and Whitney. Oh, she was tempting. A challenge. A buttoned-down present, begging to be unwrapped. But that would be nothing but trouble. He had to raise a child with her.

He understood why Missy Harrington had recognized that Gino would need a mother figure. Anybody who spent two minutes in the company of any of the Andreas brothers knew they weren’t the settling-down kind. So if Missy wanted a mother for Gino, she’d probably known she’d have to pick her. But he didn’t have a clue how “shared custody” would work in the real world. Would sharing

a child be like being married? Or maybe being divorced? Would they have to draw up a custody agreement that set forth who got the baby and when? Or would they pass the poor kid back and forth like a tennis ball or Frisbee?

He ran his hands down his face. He had absolutely no idea how this would go. Worse, he had no idea how to care for a baby. Hell, he just plain had no idea how to be a dad, since his own father hadn't come around until he was nearly an adult.

Which gave Whitney a second, maybe more important, role in this child-custody venture. Because Darius didn't know how a father was supposed to behave, Whitney was going to have to teach him.

## CHAPTER TWO

AS WHITNEY AND HER DAD left his office, Cyn caught his arm. “They need you in the conference room right now.”

“But I’m still working with the Andreas brothers—”

“The exact words Roger said were, ‘The Mahoney case is going to hell in a ham sandwich. The very second Gerry is out of his meeting we need him in here.’”

Whitney’s dad faced her. “Will you be okay?”

She forced a smile. “Yes. You go on. When the Andreas brothers are through with their little powwow, I’ll have you paged if we need you.”

“Thanks.” He kissed her cheek, slid the duffel and diaper bag onto her shoulder, turned and raced away from her.

Walking to her office, Whitney looked down at Gino. Sucking a green-and-brown camouflage-print pacifier, he peered up at her. Luminous dark eyes met hers. Her heart stumbled in her chest. Layla’s pale-blue eyes had been a combination of her father’s sky blue eyes and Whitney’s gray blue. Her hair had been yellow. Baby-fine. Wispy. Whitney had never been able to get a clip to hold and she’d become one of those moms who used multicolored cloth hair bands to decorate her baby’s head.

Her chest tightened. She’d give everything she had, everything she owned, every day of the rest of her life, for even one more chance to touch that wispy hair.

Gino spat out his pacifier and began to cry. Whitney set the baby carrier on the small floral-print sofa in the right-hand corner of her office.

“Don’t cry, sweetie,” she said automatically and her throat closed. Her chest tightened. Caring for a baby was something like riding a bike. Unfortunately, all the remembered skills also brought back memories of the baby she’d lost—

The nights she’d walked the floor when Layla was colicky. Her first birthday party when the abundance of guests had scared her. Bathing her, cuddling her, loving her.

Being her mom.

*Don’t cry, sweetie.*

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to pull herself together, but Gino cried all the harder.

She sat on the sofa, lifted him from the carrier and cuddled him against her chest. Sobbing in earnest now, the little boy buried his face in her neck.

He smelled like baby lotion and felt as soft as feathers from an angel’s wings. She closed her eyes again, weakened by longings for her own baby. Remembering treasured events. The plans they’d had for Layla’s future. The mom she’d wanted to be.

Shaking with sorrow, she pushed at those memories, trying to get them out of her head. But they wouldn’t budge. Instead, they arched in her brain like a rainbow of photos, a cacophony of happy sounds. Baby giggles. Toddler laughs. First words. Mama. Da Da. Nanna. Pap Pap. Kitty.

She knew it was the sweet baby scents that caused her total recall. So she grabbed a blanket from the diaper bag and laid it on the sofa, then placed Gino on top, putting three feet of distance between them.

She swallowed. The memories receded. Her shaking subsided. The thumping of her heart slowed.

The little boy blinked at her.

“I know you’re probably scared,” she said, talking to him as if he were an adult because she couldn’t risk the baby talk that she knew would soothe him. “I know my mom was very good to you the past few days, but I’ll bet you miss your own mama ...” She swallowed. Miss didn’t even halfway describe the feelings of loss this baby must feel. Even though he probably didn’t understand that his parents were dead, *her* heart broke because she *did* understand. She knew exactly what it felt like

to lose the two people closest to her. He was alone. Scared. And wanted his mom. Or someone to make him feel safe again.

In three long years, she hadn't felt safe. Everything she believed had been tossed in the air and come down in pieces the day her husband had committed suicide and killed their baby with him.

As she checked Gino's diaper to see if that was why he was crying, a rush of memories of Layla flooded her brain again. Except this time they weren't happy. This time, she heard her baby crying, calling for her, and suddenly she was face to face with her worst fear. The fear that morphed into guilt. The guilt her therapist had told her was pointless.

No one knew if Burn had deliberately put Layla into the car with him when he'd decided to kill himself by sitting in the vehicle while the garage filled with carbon monoxide. Speculation was that he'd put Layla into her car seat to go somewhere, but when he'd gotten behind the wheel he just couldn't force himself out into the world. He'd sat in their garage long enough for the fumes to begin to get to him and was soon mentally too far gone to remember he had the baby with him.

That explanation had soothed everyone but Whitney. If everyone accepted that Burn's depression and mounting mental illness were reason enough to forget he had their child in his car, then shouldn't she have realized he was too sick to care for her baby?

Layla.

Why hadn't she recognized Burn's growing troubles?

Why hadn't she protected her baby?

What had been so important in those months that she'd missed all the signs that Burn was tumbling over the edge?

Tears filled her eyes as Gino began to cry, drawing her back to the present. She wanted to cuddle him, to love him, but her memories of Layla were still morphing into memories of Burn's suicide, Layla's death and the horrible, horrible feelings of guilt.

She couldn't deal with the guilt.

She changed Gino's diaper but rather than hold him, she returned him to the baby carrier. He looked at her with sad dark eyes.

She blinked back tears, hoping for his sake that the trouble she had holding him was only temporary. It wasn't his fault her family had died. Plus, Missy had wanted her to care for this little guy—

Remembering the envelope her dad had given her, she rose from the sofa to retrieve it from her jacket pocket. After fumbling with the seal, she pulled out the slim sheet of white stationery. Pacing in front of her sofa, she read ...

Whitney ...

It's funny to be writing this because I don't think you'll ever read it. Actually, I hope you never do read it. But we're having wills drawn up today and we have a baby. Plans have to be made for who will care for Gino just in case something happens. Stephone said he wanted Darius to have custody, but I didn't think that was such a good idea. I know Darius will never marry and that means Gino will never have a mom. But I also recognized I couldn't talk Stephone out of naming Darius as guardian. All I could do was suggest making you co-guardian. So that's what we did. If something happens to me and Stephone, Darius will be Gino's dad and you will be Gino's mom.

Love him, Whitney. I'm not sure Darius knows how. Missy

Whitney swallowed and sank to the couch. The note was short and to the point. A mother's simple plea. Love her baby. Because she wasn't sure his older brother knew how to love. Hadn't she already guessed that?

She glanced at Gino. The baby blinked at her dubiously. This little boy had gone from his parents' home in Greece to Whitney's parents' home, and now he was being passed to her. It had undoubtedly frightened Gino to be passed from one set of strangers to the next. He had to get into a stable environment. *She* had to get him into a stable environment. Without her, there was no guarantee

Gino wouldn't be raised by nannies or at boarding school. Worse, there was no one to prevent Darius from seeing Gino more as a vote at a director's meetings than as a baby.

She had to do this. She had to be a part of this little boy's life. She had to care for him. She had to *love* him.

She popped the pacifier into Gino's mouth again. "This has been a rough couple of days for you. But you're safe now. I'm going to take good care of you."

An arrow sliced into her heart. How could she promise she'd take good care of this little boy when she hadn't even been able to protect her own child from her husband ... the baby's father?

Darius gave himself another minute to collect himself, then stepped into the hall and instructed the receptionist to let Attorney Ross know he was ready.

Pacing the rich red Oriental rug, he waited for Ross to return. When the side door opened, he spun toward it to see only Whitney enter. She held Gino in the basket-like carrier. A big duffel bag and a diaper bag were slung over her shoulder.

"I know I said I could begin working for you today, but I just realized there's no one to care for Gino. Plus, I have no baby things at my home," she announced casually as she stepped inside. "No crib, no high chair, no swing or rocker."

Darius's male senses perked up. Probably because he and Whitney were alone for the first time. He caught the scent of her perfume on the air, noticed her legs were long and shapely.

"I was thinking I should probably make arrangements to get all of that shipped to my apartment."

Darius almost said, "Sure," if only because his immediate reaction was to give her anything she wanted. But that was his attraction talking, agreeing so she'd like him. He had to resist that. He wanted this little boy in his life. He also needed Whitney to teach him how to be a father. The only way he could see that working out would be for her and the baby to live with him—at least for the first few weeks.

"I've been thinking about this deal and I'm not sure either one or the other of us taking him is the right thing to do."

She blinked at him. "You want to leave him at a hotel?"

He chuckled, hoping she was joking. Surely she couldn't think he was that inept. "No. I'm saying we need a plan."

"We'll hammer out an agreement of some sort eventually. But he needs somewhere to stay tonight. It's already close to five and neither one of us owns a crib. We should also hire a nanny." She caught his gaze. "Unless you've got baby experience I don't know about."

Heat whipped through him. This attraction wasn't going to be easy to ignore. But he was a very strong man. "Actually, I'm going to need a little help getting accustomed to him."

She turned away, fiddled with something in the diaper bag. "We both will in the beginning."

Rats. She wasn't getting what he was driving at. He didn't want her to know just how baby-stupid he was, and he couldn't tell her without putting himself at a disadvantage. He wasn't accustomed to negotiating from anything less than a position of strength. But sometimes the best way to win an argument was to use the element of surprise. Just come right out and propose the ridiculous.

"Or we could live together."

She spun to face him. "What?"

"Look, I inherited my father's estate on Montauk. There's a house big enough that we wouldn't even have to run into each other. This way we'd both see the baby every day and we could discuss any issue that came up the minute it came up."

She didn't say anything. Darius wasn't sure if he'd taken her so much by surprise that she was speechless or if his suggestion was so ridiculous she didn't know how to respond. So he pushed on.

“It doesn’t have to be forever. Only the first few weeks. That way the little guy wouldn’t be shuffled from one of us to the other before he got to know either of us. Plus, we’d have servants. We wouldn’t be doing this on our own.”

Whitney surprised him by saying, “How many servants?”

He shrugged. “Well, if I remember correctly there are several maids. My dad also always had a cook. And an estate manager, Mrs. Tucker.”

Her expression went from strained to thoughtful to sort of happily surprised. Victory surged through him. But she hadn’t actually consented. The battle wasn’t over yet. He needed a deal sealer. Something that would put her totally on his side.

On impulse, he walked over to her and glanced down at the baby carrier. The brown-eyed boy blinked up at him over his pacifier.

“He’s cute.”

“He’s very cute.” She paused for a heartbeat then said, “Do you want to hold him?”

“Yeah. That’d be great.” How hard could it be? Not only was he trying to get on Whitney’s good side, but he had to be a dad to this kid. There was no time like the present to begin learning how.

She set the carrier on her father’s black leather sofa, unbuckled the strap that held Gino in and lifted him in front of her. Eye-to-eye with the baby, she said, “Gino, I’m giving you to your big brother.”

Darius laughed. “Was that an introduction?”

“No. That was me preparing him to be taken by a stranger.”

“He’ll know?”

Her gaze met his over the baby’s dark head. “Of course, he’ll know.”

Her eyes were the most wonderful color of gray-blue. A sort of sexy, yet innocent shade that sparked his attraction to life again. Something sharp and sweet stabbed him in his middle. He was wishing that he didn’t need her so he could follow this compelling urge he had to pursue her, when she presented Gino to him and fear immediately knocked every other thought out of his brain.

But before he had a chance to panic over his first-ever attempt at holding a baby, his hand brushed Whitney’s as she gave him the baby and pinpricks of awareness lit up his skin. He’d never felt an attraction this strong, this gripping. A warning stirred in his brain, but Whitney let go and suddenly Darius was supporting Gino’s full weight.

“Whoa!” He bobbed him a bit before he got control. “He’s heavier than I thought.”

Whitney smiled slightly. “Yes. Most six-month-olds aren’t quite that . . . sturdy.”

Feeling painfully awkward, but determined to get the hang of this, Darius laughed uncomfortably. “We are a family of big eaters.”

She looked away.

Not sure if she was totally disinterested in him and his family or uncomfortable at being so close to him, Darius casually said, “How about if we swing by your apartment and gather some things so we can spend the weekend in Montauk? My dad and Missy might have only popped by the house for a few weeks a year, but after Gino was born they had to have created a nursery. So at least he’ll have somewhere to sleep tonight. That way you can take a look around the place and see that I’m right. The house is big enough that we could live together for a few weeks without getting in each other’s way.”

Whitney’s skin pricked with fear, trepidation and possibility. She couldn’t picture herself alone with Gino tonight. Well, actually, she could. She saw herself paralyzed with grief as he lay in the crib sobbing. Darius’s suggestion that they spend the weekend together would have been the answer to a prayer, except he wouldn’t be any better with Gino than she was.

Of course, he had staff and eventually they’d hire a nanny.

Still, it could take weeks to hire someone. Especially since they had to find someone willing to go back and forth between her Soho loft and Darius’s estate. If they didn’t have a nanny tonight, there

would be no hiding the fact that she was having trouble being around the little boy. Trouble holding him. Trouble smelling him. Trouble just being in the same room.

Of course, if she had a breakdown in front of Darius it might be bad for her, but it would be good for Gino, because at least there'd be someone to pick up the ball. No matter how inexperienced. With a few quick baby lessons she could probably turn Darius into a moderately competent caregiver.

As if to confirm that idea, Darius jiggled Gino on his arm, as he cooed and goosed at him, and Gino playfully slapped his face. They liked each other. They almost appeared to have some kind of natural family bond.

Blessed relief swelled through her. It wasn't a perfect idea, but it was better than her being alone with Gino. In the name of teaching Darius how to do his part for the little boy, she could hand over most of the tasks that might cause her to burst into tears.

Plus he had staff. Gino would be surrounded by people who could care for him until they found a nanny. And if Whitney played it right, she wouldn't even have to have a panic attack to get assistance. Gino was so adorable, every maid, cook and butler would want a turn at holding him, feeding him, rocking him to sleep.

She sucked in a breath, caught Darius's gaze, and said, "Okay. We'll spend the weekend at your house."

He smiled at her, reminding her of the other teeny, tiny thing she'd forgotten to add into the equation. They were attracted. And about to live together.

Luckily, his house was huge. And she wasn't stupid. She'd keep a cool head and everything would be fine.

## CHAPTER THREE

ON THE DRIVE OUT TO Montauk, Darius called ahead to let the staff know they would be arriving.

Clicking off his call, he faced Whitney. “There’s a nursery.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“Yes. My father and Missy had been staying at the house when they were in the accident.”

Sadness tiptoed through her at the loss of her friend, but she focused on the job she had to do for Missy. “So there wouldn’t happen to be a nanny?”

“No. Their nanny was a young woman from Greece. She went home immediately after the funerals.”

“Too bad.”

He shrugged. “Not really. I’m sure we can easily hire someone.”

Whitney smiled noncommittally, then her gaze fell to Gino who was asleep in his car seat. She should have started Darius’s baby lessons the minute they got into the limo. She knew what to do and his hands could be the hands that carried out her instructions tonight. But now Gino was asleep and probably wouldn’t awaken until they arrived. And when he awakened, he’d be crying. Then Darius would see her struggle and fumble.

Sucking in a soft breath, she told herself not to borrow trouble. Everything would work out if she just kept a cool head.

The limo pulled up to an iron gate and the driver used a combination on a keypad to open it. As they drove up the wide, circular drive to get to the enormous house, Whitney’s heart kicked into overdrive. With bare tree branches blowing in the January breeze the estate had a cold, deserted feel to it. An ominous mood that almost made her shiver. And definitely made her wonder if this was the right choice. Darius Andreas was a stranger and she’d agreed to live with him.

Whitney unbuckled Gino as the driver opened the door. He helped her out and Darius stepped out behind her, then reached inside for the baby.

Refusing to panic or let her imagination run wild over the cold, empty feeling that surrounded her, Whitney followed him to the front door, where he hit a few buttons on a hidden security panel, then opened the door.

They walked onto white marble tile in the echoing foyer. A curved stairway led the way to the second floor. A huge crystal chandelier awakened with light when Darius hit the switch as an older woman wearing a tidy black suit walked into the foyer to greet them.

“This is Mrs. Tucker,” Darius said, turning to Whitney then Mrs. Tucker with a smile. “Mrs. T, this is Whitney. She’s Gerard Ross’s daughter.”

Mrs. Tucker nodded once. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Whitney returned her smile. Though her parents hadn’t had servants while she was growing up, and she herself had never had anything more than a cleaning service, her parents now had a full staff for their home on Park Avenue. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, too, Mrs. Tucker.”

“You’re in the guest suite in the right wing upstairs. Geoffrey will get your bags from the limo.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Tucker turned to leave, but a thought struck Whitney and she stopped her. “Where’s the nursery?”

“In the left wing beside the master suite and Mr. Andreas.”

“Will the nanny also be beside the nursery?”

“Yes, ma’am. The nanny’s quarters are on one side. Mr. Andreas’s are on the other.”

That just didn’t sit right. Not because of the unexpected jealousy that slithered through her at the thought of another woman being a door or two away from Darius’s bedroom, but because she

felt as if she were being eased out. She hadn't questioned Darius talking her into living at the house in Montauk. Her fears had actually caused her to be relieved he'd thought of it. But now that he'd assigned her to a room across the house from the nursery, suspicions rose in her. He wanted the baby at his house, wanted her at the other side of the mansion. What was he up to?

"Why am I not near the nursery?"

Holding Gino in the baby carrier, Darius stepped forward, caught her arm and directed her to the stairway as Mrs. Tucker scrambled away, obviously glad Darius would field the question.

"I thought you'd prefer privacy, particularly since Mrs. Tucker has agreed to sleep in the nanny's room to help with Gino until we get a regular nanny."

He sounded sincere, genuine. But this was a skilled negotiator, a smart businessman, a charming man. And her fears about caring for Gino had blinded her to the way he'd been calling the shots. That ended here. That ended now.

"Isn't there another suite close to the nursery?"

"Yes, of course."

"I'd like that one, then."

Darius stopped walking. His black onyx eyes snared hers, she was sure, in a show of strength, ready to meet her challenge. But within seconds the expression in his dark orbs shifted from serious to sensuous.

As if he only now realized how close they were standing beside each other on the stairs, he pulled in a breath. Tension rose up, shimmering through her. This man was attracted to her. There was no better aphrodisiac for a woman than the realization that a powerful, sexy man wanted her.

*Her.*

And she'd just insisted she be in a room closer to the nursery, *closer to him.*

She almost told him to forget about her request for a room change, but knew that if she did he'd realize it was because of their attraction. She also remembered it was her responsibility to love Gino and maybe even to protect him from overbearing Darius, and by God, she intended to. If that meant she needed to be close to him too, she'd handle it.

She smiled, hoping to appear to be a woman who hadn't even been slightly affected by the way he'd looked at her. "I take my responsibilities seriously, Darius. Though I'm glad Gino will be close to the nanny we hire, I want to be close too. The will says we share custody. I was given a job. I intend to do it."

His serious eyes suddenly filled with mischief that sent her pulse scrambling. "So you want to be across the hall—" he smiled "—from me?"

She stared into his sexy dark eyes with every nerve ending in her body humming and the blood in her veins virtually singing. Her voice squeaked when she said, "Yes."

"So be it. I'll have Mrs. Tucker tell Geoffrey to put your things in the room across the hall from mine."

With that he pulled out his cell phone, turned and walked up the stairs. Whitney nearly collapsed on the stairway. She heard him speaking on the phone, instructing someone to ready the room across the hall from his, and guessed he was talking to Mrs. Tucker. She hastily climbed the stairs with shaky legs and followed Darius to the nursery. But two steps inside the door, she froze.

A mobile over the cherrywood crib zapped her back in time. She could have been standing in Layla's nursery. The colors of the wall were different, but most of the furniture and lots of the toys were the same. So were the scents.

Darius carried the baby inside. "I think he needs a change. I'd offer to do it," he smiled engagingly, "but I've never changed a diaper in my entire life."

Smothered by thoughts of her baby, Whitney couldn't get her legs to move or her mouth to form words. Memories rolled through her mind. In perfect Technicolor she saw the vision of Layla standing up in her crib, holding the bars, crying for her mother. She remembered the Christmas gifts

she had bought and hidden in the closet as if little Layla would somehow know to look for them. It had been almost a year before she had been able to clear out the nursery, if only because she couldn't step inside without crumbling.

But Darius didn't seem to notice her paralysis. Pulling Gino out of the baby carrier, he said, "I'd be happy to do it, though, if you want to teach me."

Whitney cleared her throat. "Sure." Relief swamped her. For as much as she didn't want Darius taking over Gino's life, with her grief perilously close to the surface she simply couldn't handle touching Gino right now. Whether she liked it or not, take-charge Darius was saving her.

She glanced around until she saw the changing table. She pointed at it. "Take him over there."

Darius carried the sleepy baby to the changing table.

Whitney frowned. "We left the diaper bag in the car."

"Geoffrey will get it. But there should already be diapers here somewhere. I told the staff to make sure the nursery was stocked." With one hand holding Gino in place on the table, he opened the doors of the cupboard beneath it. "Ah. There they are." He reached in and pulled one out with a smile. "The staff is very efficient."

She took a cautious step to the changing table. "So I see."

"Now what?"

Forcing back the memories, she pulled in a slow, cleansing breath. Her grief subsiding, she strolled closer. "Unsnap his pajamas and slide him out."

He unsnapped the one-piece pajamas but was a little rough in getting Gino's arm out. She laid her hand on top of his. "Gentler."

"Okay." He peeked over at her and smiled stupidly. "His skin is soft, like velvet."

She remembered thinking that very thing the first time she held Layla and swallowed back the grief, pushed back the memory of the nurse laying her brand-new baby girl into her arms. "I know."

When Gino was out of his pajamas and wearing only his diaper, Whitney pointed at the tabs of his diaper and said, "Yank on those to open the diaper."

He yanked on the tabs and to everyone's joy, the diaper was only wet.

Darius said, "Whew."

Whitney couldn't help it. She laughed. "Okay, toss that in the container beside the changing table." She motioned to the available diaper pail. "Slide another diaper under him, fasten the tabs, put him into clean pajamas and you're done."

Darius followed her instructions, needing another reminder about being gentle with Gino's little arms and legs as he tucked them into pajamas. But again he only smiled when she told him.

Her suspicions about Darius came tumbling back. He was too nice. Too eager. Once again she wondered if he wasn't trying to edge her out. "I'm surprised you want to learn all this."

He caught her gaze. "Gino is my family now."

"Oh. So you're really getting into the daddy thing?" Her voice dripped with skepticism as she asked the question, but she couldn't help it. A single man—a single *rich* man—who wanted to care for a baby was more than an anomaly. It was downright weird.

"My dad didn't have a lot of time for me." He peered over at her. "Or my brothers, and I don't want that to happen to Gino. If I'm to be his male influence, I want to do my end of the duties."

"So you're going to learn how to do *everything*?"

To her surprise, he wasn't insulted. He laughed. "Hey, I just changed a diaper. I think my commitment has been proven."

Not even close. Particularly since she didn't understand why he was making such a hands-on commitment.

Sure, he didn't want Gino to grow up without a dad. She got it. But there was more here. Her lawyer's instincts had gone from suspicious to downright positive there was something here she was missing.

“Okay, then tomorrow morning, we’ll hit the ground running with your baby lessons.”

He laughed, but Whitney wasn’t kidding. Not just because she was afraid to touch Gino too much, but because she wanted to push Darius to the wall, give him so much baby time he would own up to what was really going on.

When the baby was dressed, Darius pulled him off the table and gave him a quick hug and kissed his cheek. “Good night, little guy.”

Then he handed the baby to Whitney. Preoccupied with his motives, she didn’t realize what he was about to do and had to scramble to catch Gino.

But the second the yawning baby was in her arms, the feel of his ultra-soft pajamas and smooth skin kicked her back in time again. Especially, when she brought Gino to her and hugged him. The second the little boy was snuggled against her, sadness overwhelmed her. The hollow, empty feeling of loss. Echoes of Layla’s giggles rolled through her brain. Memories of her lifeless body haunted her.

She pulled Gino away from her shoulder and swallowed. Then, for Darius’s benefit, she offered the baby a wobbly smile. “Good night, Gino,” she whispered hoarsely, hoping Darius didn’t notice she was trembling.

Because she wanted to cry. She missed her baby. She yearned for the life she’d lost. Was that so bad? So hard to understand?

She stopped. No. That wasn’t so bad. Or so difficult to comprehend. In fact, the smart way to handle her situation with Gino might be to *tell* Darius about Layla and Burn. She didn’t want his sympathy, but it was clear now that she would have difficulty getting adjusted to caring for a baby. Soon Darius would notice. It would be better to get the story out in the open and solicit his help than to have him see her stumble and question her ability to care for his little brother.

But tonight wasn’t the night for that conversation. With his motives now in question, she knew she had to wait a bit, see what he was up to before she bared her soul. If he was trying to get the baby away from her, she didn’t want to hand him over on a silver platter. She’d wait. See if he didn’t tip his hand or, alternatively, convince her that his motives were good.

Once the baby was in bed, Darius caught Whitney’s arm and turned her to the door. “It’s late. I’ll show you to your room then we can have dinner.”

Exhausted, confused and aching for privacy, she woodenly said, “I’m too tired for dinner.”

“Really?” As they stepped out of the nursery and into the hall, he closed the door behind them. “I instructed Mrs. Tucker to have the cook make chicken and dumplings.”

She turned, startled. “Chicken and dumplings?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

How could he know her favorite food?

“I called your dad while you were in your apartment packing for the weekend.” he said, undoubtedly answering the expression of confusion on her face, and directed her to walk to a door a few feet down the hall. “I figured if you could be kind enough to let me have at least the weekend with the three of us at my home, I could be gentleman enough to assure you ate well.”

She quickened her steps down the hall, wishing he hadn’t done something so nice when she was so tired, but at least slightly more comfortable with him. “I’ll have some for lunch tomorrow.”

She wasn’t sure why she expected him to argue, but her suspicions were allayed even more when he simply said, “Good enough.”

He stopped at a door only a few feet from the nursery. “Your suite?”

Feeling a tad foolish, she retraced her steps and stopped in front of him. He smiled slightly. Sexily.

Strange schoolgirl nervousness swept through her, reminding her of the first time she’d ever stood by a door with a boy, knowing he was about to kiss her goodnight. Awareness tingled through her bloodstream. Her breathing went shallow and her legs turned to rubber. It had been so long since she’d reacted to a man that she’d forgotten the wonderful discomfort.

But Darius caught the doorknob and twisted it, opening the door, revealing a soft green-and-yellow room to her. Beyond the sitting room furnished with a sage-colored sofa and chair, accented by a cherrywood armoire with matching cherrywood end tables, was an open door leading to a bedroom. She could see patches of a yellow-and-sage-green bedspread. See the closed yellow drapes.

Her heart skipped a beat. The suite was calm, soothing. So different from her cool aqua and brown bedroom in her condo that she felt as if she was entering another world.

“Is something wrong?”

She spun to face him. “No. It’s—” Warm, inviting, comforting. She swallowed. “—Lovely. I’m sure I’ll be fine here.”

“Let me make sure everything really is ready before I leave you.” He stepped inside the sitting room, casually looking from left to right as he made his way to the bedroom.

Confusion buffeted her as she followed him inside. From a cursory glance into the room, it was clear that while she and Darius had been in the nursery, Mrs. Tucker had sent the staff to ready the room. He had no reason to check their work, unless he was stalling. Or unless the staff was so new to him that he didn’t trust them?

That had to be it.

When he stepped inside the room she’d be sleeping in, a fresh ripple of unease passed through Whitney. It felt odd, uncomfortable to have a man who’d clearly had a sexual reaction to her standing beside the bed she would sleep in. Her chest tightened. Stupid nervousness rose up in her again, reminding her that it had been a long time, maybe too long, since she’d been alone with a man.

But his gaze was casual, touching the queen-sized bed, the bare dresser, the pale sage club chairs arranged by the window for reading.

After he’d seen everything in the bedroom, his peek into the master bath caused his expression to turn puzzled, and she had no idea why. The vanity was white oak with a glass countertop. The floors were Calcutta marble slab. A separate custom-glass tile shower was utilitarian, but the oversize, extra-deep soaking tub almost caused her to sigh with joy. She could have a bath. A nice long bath to ease away the tension and grief of this long, long day. That tub would be her haven tonight.

He glanced at her then quickly away. His expression was so odd that she peeked into the bathroom again. Her gaze lit on the huge tub and suddenly her face flamed with color.

Of course, a woman saw the tub as a haven. A man saw it as a playground.

Their eyes met and the warm syrupy feeling she’d had when she’d first seen him returned. She reminded herself he was handsome. Reminded herself that being attracted to him made her normal. Even congratulated herself on finally, finally, being attracted to someone again after three long years of mourning her deceased husband. But she concluded with a reminder that she didn’t want to get involved with anyone—ever. She’d never again give another person that much power over her life.

Plus, she had custody of Darius’s baby brother. The little boy whose vote on his board of directors was hers. All this “attraction” could simply be Darius angling to get on her good side so she’d vote his way at directors’ meetings.

Darius rubbed his hand across the back of his neck and pointed at her door. “Since you’re tired and I have things to do, I’ll be going.”

“Oh.” That surprised her. Wouldn’t someone who intended to use their attraction stay? Flirt? Instead, it seemed he couldn’t wait to get away.

Disappointment flooded her, which rattled her. She didn’t want him to be attracted to her, but since he was, having him not act on the attraction was the second-best thing. She shouldn’t be disappointed.

She forced a smile. “Okay. Great.” She headed out of the bedroom too, walking with him through the sitting room.

At the door, he was even more nervous. When their gazes bumped, she knew why. They stood about a foot apart, at the door, saying goodbye. He looked down at her. She gazed up at him. Attraction

shimmied between them. The urge to kiss goodbye was like a physical thing. So strong, yet so foreign, it paralyzed her.

For the first time since her husband's suicide, she wasn't thinking about her broken life. In fact, it wasn't even getting half of her attention. His nearness dominated her mind. She couldn't think beyond the fear that he'd kiss her.

Then she realized she didn't fear he'd kiss her. She *wanted* him to kiss her. What she felt was glorious, spine-tingling anticipation. Not fear.

Dear God.

Curiosity and confusion combined and rumbled through her. How could she possibly be so attracted to Darius Andreas that she couldn't ignore it? That she wanted more.

But he didn't kiss her. He didn't even try. Instead he grabbed the doorknob at the same time that she did and their fingers brushed. Though she jerked away, the mere touch sent a maelstrom through her. It had been three long years since she'd been married, and for months before that her husband hadn't been interested in her. She hadn't been touched by a man she found attractive in nearly four years. Sensation after sensation poured through her, almost embarrassing in their intensity.

Darius quickly headed out the door. "I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow."

The door closed behind him before she could even answer. Knowing it was coming, she quashed her confusing disappointment when it was just a wisp, before it had a chance to fully form, because it was ridiculous. Stupid.

She shook her head. After that little episode by the door, she didn't have any doubt that Darius was attracted to her. After the way he ran, she also knew he didn't want to be.

And that was good.

Wasn't it?

She sighed with disgust at her foolish ambiguity. This weekend was not about an inappropriate attraction. It was about figuring out how they'd raise Gino together, about helping Gino grow accustomed to them as they got to know each other—

Worry gripped her. She couldn't tell Darius about losing her husband and child without making herself look like an empty, sad, still-grieving woman, who wasn't ready to help him with Gino. Though part of her knew that was true and she should be honest, the other part warned her to tread lightly with this man. He was rich, powerful. If she showed her weakness too soon, he could take her to court, seeking full custody, citing her incompetence. Then Gino would be raised by him. Alone. And she wouldn't be able to fulfill Missy's wish that she love her baby.

She couldn't let Missy's son be raised only by Darius. Hadn't he gotten her into his house and almost put her into a room on the other side of the mansion? He'd have poor Gino in boarding school before he was four.

The thought of sweet baby Gino in a boarding school shored up her defenses and she felt herself growing ready to protect him. She would fight to her last breath before she let him put that child in boarding school—ever. And that wouldn't be their only argument. She and Darius would have hundreds of fights over the course of raising his half-brother.

That thought caused her to fall to a chair in complete shock. In the confusion of the day, she hadn't carried this guardianship all the way through in her head. But it was suddenly abundantly clear that whether they wanted it or not, this child bound them forever.

They might as well be married.

Or divorced.

Good God.

What had Missy gotten her into?

Tonight was supposed to have been the night she did her laundry. Instead, here she was in the home of a virtual stranger, with a baby who made her relive the best and worst part of her life and a man she was so attracted to she sometimes couldn't breathe in his presence.

It would be a miracle if she survived the weekend, let alone a lifetime.

## CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN THE BABY AWAKENED at about three, Darius bolted up in bed. For a few seconds he was disoriented, then he remembered he was in the hideous floral and lace master bedroom of the house in Montauk. By the time he remembered Gino was in the room next door, the little boy's crying had stopped.

He got out of bed anyway, grabbed one of the pairs of jeans he'd had his staff pack and messenger to the estate and jumped into them. Heading out of the closet, he opened another drawer and snagged a T-shirt.

In a few long strides, he was at the door that connected his room to the nursery. Mrs. Tucker sat in the rocker feeding Gino, who gulped noisily.

He tiptoed into the room, but Mrs. Tucker laughed. "No need to be quiet now. He's wide awake."

Leaning against the crib, Darius crossed his arms on his chest. "And by the looks of things he's starving too."

Mrs. Tucker snorted a laugh. "They always are."

"Always? You mean this isn't an isolated incident? He's going to be getting up at three every night?"

"Maybe not on the dot, but, yes, he'll be waking somebody up in the middle of the night every night until he learns to sleep for long stretches without needing a bottle."

Staring at the dark-haired, dark-eyed little baby, Darius said only, "Hum." Gino was so sturdy that he looked packed into the green one-piece pajama. His hair sort of stuck up in all directions, making him even cuter.

Gino stopped sucking and Mrs. Tucker set the bottle on the table by the rocker. She lifted him up and he suddenly belched loudly. Mrs. Tucker laughed. "Well, now that takes care of that."

She reached for a tissue in the box also on the table beside the rocker and wiped away white gunk from Gino's mouth.

Darius winced. "Am I ever going to get the hang of this?"

"Eventually." She caught his gaze and smiled. "And just when you do the rules will change."

Darius's face fell. "What rules?"

Settling Gino on her lap to rock him, Mrs. Tucker laughed again. "Not exactly rules, but the things you'll need to do. He's a baby now. In a few months he'll be a toddler. Then there are the terrible twos—"

"Terrible twos?"

"You don't want to know about that yet."

He did but he also didn't. Because right now, falling asleep in Mrs. Tucker's arms, Gino looked like an angel. Darius swallowed. Strong, protective feelings rose up in him, feelings more intense than anything he'd ever felt.

He pushed them down. He might intend to be a part of this kid's life, but these feelings were weird. They had to be wrong.

Mrs. Tucker rose from the rocker and settled the sleeping baby in the crib. "Better go back to bed. Morning comes quickly when you have a baby."

Darius headed for the door. "Good night."

Heading for the opposite door, Mrs. Tucker whispered, "Good night."

In his room, he crawled back into bed. He didn't like the idea that Mrs. Tucker had to do double duty, as his estate manager and the temporary nanny, so he set his alarm for six, hoping he'd get up before the baby.

When it went off a few short hours later, he didn't balk or linger. He quickly pulled on the jeans from the night before and a fisherman-knit sweater and, paying no mind to his bare feet, raced to the nursery.

"Good morning."

Dressed in jeans and a pretty blue sweater that brought out the blue of her eyes, Whitney stood on the far side of the crib, watching Gino, who was still asleep.

"Do you want to learn how to feed him this morning?"

He took an instinctive step back. He and Whitney had shared a powerful few minutes at her bedroom door the night before, but she didn't appear to be any the worse for the wear. Like him, she seemed to want to ignore their chemistry.

And he did want to feed the baby. But before he could say that, Gino's eyes fluttered open. He yawned and stretched and then let out with a yelp.

"That's your cue," Whitney said with a laugh. "Change his diaper, while I get a bottle."

Whitney calmly walked to the small fridge in the room and retrieved a bottle, which she put in the warmer.

Not wanting to jeopardize the peace between them or have Gino wake poor, sleeping Mrs. Tucker, Darius carried Gino to the changing table and simply did the things he'd done the night before when he changed the baby's diaper and put him into a clean sleeper.

Gino wasn't really happy about the arrangement and he began to scream. Darius noticed that Whitney was preoccupied with staring at a bottle warmer that seemed not to need her attention. It confused him that she didn't react to Gino's crying, but he wanted to learn how to care for this kid. He also wanted Whitney's help. He wanted them to get along, be a team. He couldn't complain about the tasks she gave him to do. He had to do them.

When the light on the warmer went out, Darius was already on the rocker, holding screaming Gino over his shoulder.

Whitney winced. "Do you still want to feed him?"

In spite of Gino's screaming, Darius casually said, "Sure. But you're going to have to tell me what to do."

"Arrange him across your lap so that his head is supported by your forearm."

Peeling crying Gino off his shoulder wasn't an easy task. He stiffened his limbs and refused to settle on Darius's lap.

Whitney handed him the bottle. "Here. Take this. Let him see the bottle is coming and he'll calm down."

With both hands busy with the baby, Darius didn't have a clue how to take the bottle, but he secured Gino as best he could with one hand and managed to get the other free to take the bottle.

He would have criticized Whitney for not helping, except as soon as he had the bottle in his hand, Gino began to calm down.

"Now, just press the nipple to his lips and he'll do the rest."

To Darius's complete amazement, as soon as he nudged the nipple against Gino's lips he not only stopped crying, he also started suckling loudly.

He laughed with relief. "Wow. That was different."

"Babies *are* different. They can't talk so you have to understand their crying and sometimes watch their body language."

"There's a lot to learn."

As Gino greedily gobbled his milk, Whitney walked away from the rocker and paced the room. Darius watched her for a few seconds, confused. She was in the room, but detached. Not like someone who didn't want to help, but like ... well, a stranger. That was when he realized she might not know Gino any more than he did.

"So why did Missy make you guardian?"

She faced him, her expression rye. “You mean aside from the fact that she wanted to make sure her baby had a female influence?”

He laughed. “Yes. Why you?”

“Missy and I were very close from university until the day she met your dad.”

“Really?”

“Her dad had left her mom before Missy was six, and her mom was an alcoholic who went in and out of rehab. Because she had money enough to have a maid, somebody who by default took care of Missy, no one ever realized how alone Missy was. So after we met, she began to come to my parents’ house with me on weekends and holidays.” She shrugged. “We were like sisters.”

“And then she met my dad and none of us saw either one of them again.”

She laughed sadly. “Missy really loved your dad.”

“And he loved Greece.”

“And that’s where they lived.”

They fell silent again. When the baby was done eating, he showed Whitney the empty bottle. “Now what?”

“Now you have to burp him.”

“Burp him?”

“You hold him like this,” Whitney said as she lifted Gino from Darius’s lap up to his shoulder. “And pat his back.”

As she said the words, she demonstrated by patting the baby’s back. He burped noisily.

Whitney smiled and set Gino on his lap again. “That feels better, doesn’t it, little guy?”

This close, her smoky, sexy voice curled around Darius and he nearly squeezed his eyes shut. That voice would be trouble if he heard it for several weeks with her living under his roof. Even the way she’d refused dinner the night before had been breathy and sensual. And then there was that tub. And the look that had passed between them.

He bounced out of the chair. “So do we take him down to breakfast with us or what?”

“Is there a high chair by the table?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Then I think we should keep him with us.”

“Okay.”

After all the time he’d already spent with the baby, Darius didn’t feel uncomfortable holding Gino, but that in itself was odd. The powerful feeling he’d had the night before came back full force. Sacred, reverent, it squeezed his heart and made breathing difficult.

Since his father’s death, everything had happened so fast that he hadn’t had time to think anything through.

But suddenly everything seemed so real. He had a child to raise, responsibilities beyond money and food. This kid would take up his time, change his morning routine, break into his afternoons, want his evenings. The understanding of what he’d taken on was so overwhelming that he felt as though he needed a minute.

He held Gino out to Whitney. “Could you hold him while I grab some shoes?”

She hesitated and Darius nearly groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was give her the impression he didn’t want the task of caring for the baby. He wanted her to see his commitment.

“You know what? Never mind. I’ll take him into my bedroom with me.”

To his surprise, Whitney smiled. “And what will you do with him while you’re putting on your shoes?”

He sucked in a breath. “Good question.”

She took Gino from him. “Go get your shoes.”

Relief poured through him. He raced into his bedroom, slid into socks and shoes and was back in the nursery in less than two minutes.

Noting that Gino was in the playpen, he frowned. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Yes.” She reached down and lifted Gino out of the playpen, then handed him to Darius casually, smoothly, but as he took the little boy, she wouldn’t look at him.

He hadn’t expected her to put Gino in the playpen or to immediately pass him back when he returned from getting his shoes. But her not being able to look at him was actually more perplexing.

The night before, he’d walked away from the opportunity to kiss her without any hesitation, even though she was throwing off you-can-kiss-me signals. He’d hoped that walking away would show her that even though he was attracted to her, he didn’t intend to follow through. Yet she still behaved in an overly cautious manner around him.

She strode to the door as if nothing were amiss and held it open while he came through with the baby. Following her down the steps, he stared at her stiff back. He’d never met a woman who was so hot one minute and so cold the next. It was almost as if she could turn her emotions off.

Which, in some ways, was good. They didn’t want to be attracted to each other. It didn’t work for either of them. And he was turning off his feelings for her every bit as much.

So why did it bother him?

In the breakfast room, which was actually one of several sunrooms along the east wall of the house, she took the tray off the high chair and instructed Darius to set the baby on the seat.

“But don’t let go,” she said, rummaging along the edges of the seat until she found what looked like seat-belts. “We have to buckle him in.”

“Got it,” Darius said, eager to learn. Especially when she didn’t even seem to realize she was giving him lessons.

Another good reason to persuade her to live here with him permanently, not just for a few weeks.

Cook entered the sunroom with coffee and asked what each would like to eat. Darius ordered pancakes. Whitney chose a bagel and cream cheese.

“And should I make the baby’s cereal?”

Darius glanced over at Whitney, who winced. “Wow. It’s been so long since I was around a baby that I forgot that some kids start eating cereal around six months or so.”

Cook proudly said, “He’s been eating cereal for a few weeks now.”

“Then get us the cereal.” She faced Darius. “Sorry about that.”

“Hey, I didn’t even know babies ate cereal.”

Cook walked in with a small bowl and a tiny baby spoon. As if recognizing his bowl, the baby slapped his hands on the tray. Cook handed the bowl and spoon to Darius who set them on the table then edged his seat closer to the high chair.

He didn’t even consider opting out of learning how to feed Gino. He wanted to know everything. “So you’re ready for this, huh?”

Gino screeched with joy.

Whitney said, “Just put a little bit of cereal on the spoon and very easily guide it to his mouth.”

Darius did as instructed. Gino greedily took the bit of cereal and smacked his lips. The second bite was a little messier, but Darius just used common sense about getting the spoon and the cereal into Gino’s mouth. After a few spoonfuls, when Gino tried to blow bubbles with it instead of eating it, Darius knew he wasn’t hungry anymore.

“If you’re playing in it rather than eating, I’m guessing you’re done.”

As he set the spoon down, Mrs. Tucker walked in. “Cook didn’t want to start your breakfast until you were free to eat it. So, I thought I’d take Gino upstairs and play with him a bit. I’ll walk through the kitchen to let Cook know she can make your breakfast now.”

Darius rose and helped her get the baby out of the high chair. “Sounds good.”

When she left, the little room fell silent.

Finally, Whitney said, “It’s beautiful here.”

Darius looked out at the steel-gray ocean, the deceptively blue sky. Though the day seemed calm, he knew winds off the sea would make it freezing cold out there. “Yes. I’d forgotten.”

“Did you come here often?”

“After I turned eighteen I did.”

“Why do I get the feeling you were forced?”

Her perceptiveness made him wince. “Because I was. My father gave me access to a five-million-dollar trust fund when I turned eighteen. He told me it was mine but he wanted me to go to college and work for Andreas Holdings. He hadn’t as much as visited after he left my mom, then suddenly he was in my life, ordering me around. Our time here wasn’t always pleasant.”

She toyed with a salt shaker. “I liked your dad.”

He laughed as Cook brought in his pancakes and Whitney’s bagel. When she was gone, he reached for the maple syrup and said, “Most people who didn’t have my dad for a lover or a parent did like him.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s probably true.”

Surprised by her answer, he set the maple syrup on the table. “I thought for sure you’d sing his praises.”

She snorted a laugh. “I know what it’s like to deal with a person who has a public personality and a private one. I had a husband everybody loved.”

His brows rose. So she’d been married? He hadn’t even considered the possibility since she’d kept the last name Ross. But having been married, maybe even having been hurt by a divorce, might explain why she was so nervous around him.

Better than that, though, she’d opened the door for him to question her about her past. He’d been so focused on the baby that he hadn’t really given much thought to the woman who shared custody beyond asking why Missy had chosen her.

Pretending great interest in his coffee, he said, “Everybody loved your husband but you?”

“Oh, I loved him. He loved himself too.” She reached for the cream. “So what are your plans for the day?”

He recognized a change of subject when he heard it and realized that though she’d opened the door to talk about her past, she hadn’t done it deliberately. He was curious about her, but he also knew asking about a husband she no longer had was a tad intrusive. It had no bearing on their situation and was none of his business. And if he wanted to convince her he was harmless, it would be wise to follow her lead and let the subject change.

“Actually, I want to spend as much time with the baby as I can.”

She set her bagel on her plate and studied him. Her narrowed eyes were both suspicious and skeptical. “So, you weren’t kidding. You really want to be a good dad?”

“I want to be a *great* dad.” The words rolled through him. Now that he’d spent time with Gino, they meant so much more than they had even the day before. Now, he knew the cost. He was taking responsibility for another person.

It didn’t confuse him as it had the night before or overwhelm him the way it had in the nursery that morning, but he was smart enough that it still sort of scared him. Especially since he’d vowed that he wouldn’t be a part-time, no-show dad the way his father had been. Deep down inside, he had to admit he wasn’t entirely sure he could do that. The only role model he’d had was a poor one.

Still, that wasn’t something he could confide to Whitney. Technically, she was still a stranger. So, taking his cue from her when the conversation turned to something she hadn’t wanted to tell him, he also changed the subject.

“What are *your* plans for the day?”

“I’m working on a class action case with my dad. Depositions are in. He’s read them. I haven’t.” She grimaced. “That’s never happened before.”

Knowing he could get Mrs. Tucker to help him with Gino that morning and eager to make Montauk a comfortable home to Whitney, he turned his attention to his pancakes. “There are three offices in this house. You can have your choice. And you can spend the whole day if you need it. Mrs. Tucker and I will take care of Gino.”

Relief saturated her voice. “Thanks.”

She worked all day, stopping only to have lunch around two, long after Darius and Gino had eaten so she didn’t have to interact with either one of them. But she couldn’t get out of dinner. She arrived in the formal dining room at seven, dressed as she had been all day in jeans and a bulky sweater.

Darius, who was already seated at the head of the table, rose.

He still wore the fisherman-knit sweater and jeans he’d put on in the morning. Holding out the chair at the place beside his, he explained, “I assumed you’d be too busy to change.”

She sat. “Yes. Thank you.”

“My father insisted everything be formal. I’m more accommodating.” He shook out his napkin. “I hope you like Italian.”

“Actually, I love most foods.” She risked a glance at him and fought a quiver of attraction. That morning she’d noticed that he looked very good in the casual clothes, but tonight he hadn’t shaved. The scruffy stubble on his chin and cheeks made him sexy in a disreputable, sinful way. The man was simply too handsome for his own good and she was vulnerable. She hadn’t interacted with a man like this—single and attractive—since she’d met her husband. She was out of practice, attracted and needy. A deadly combination when three feet away from a gorgeous man. Especially when she didn’t want to get involved with another man.

But she couldn’t be a total grouch or, worse, an unappreciative guest. “You don’t have to worry when it comes to me and food. I’d eat constantly if I didn’t have work to keep me busy.”

He laughed. Pinpricks of delight raced up her spine. It had been so long since she’d made a man laugh in simple conversation that she’d forgotten the joy of it.

“I don’t believe it.” His gaze rippled down the lines of her body and lingered on her breasts. “Your figure’s too nice.”

Good Lord! He was flirting with her!

The desire to flirt back shoved at her. It rattled through the recesses of her brain like a prisoner banging the bars of his cell, longing for release. Especially with the joy of having just made him laugh taunting her, reminding her of what it felt like to be normal.

But it had been so long since she’d done anything even remotely like flirt, and he was absolutely the wrong guy to experiment with—

Or was he? They both needed each other too much professionally to cross any lines. He’d walked away from the perfect opportunity to kiss her the night before, proving that he might be attracted to her, but he didn’t intend to follow through. And she was too frightened of relationships to let anything she attempted go any further than flirting. He might actually be the perfect person to practice on.

She smiled, trying not to look obvious, trying not to look self-conscious, trying desperately to look simply like a single woman flirting with a single man. “I’ll bet you say that to all the girls.”

He laughed again. “Only the really pretty ones.”

Joy exploded inside her. She’d done it! Or maybe *they* were doing it. Flirting. Getting her back into the real world. What was a simple conversation for him was turning into a monumental event for her. But she hoped to God he didn’t realize that.

A younger woman served dinner, standing off to the side to attend to their every need, precluding any possibility that the conversation could become intimate. The flirting stopped, but the discussion stayed casual, neutral and she relaxed totally.

At the end of the meal, Darius rose. “How about a game of pool?”

“Pool?”

“You know balls, sticks, table with green felt?”

She laughed then marveled that she had. Maybe her dad was right. Maybe it was time. She wanted so badly to be normal again. Real. Honest. Just herself. And Darius seemed to have the power to help her take the steps.

Still, no good would come of pushing things.

“I don’t think so, I’m—”

“Tired? Really, Ms. Ross? I’m about to suggest you take some vitamins.”

She laughed again, feeling light, young, incredibly carefree. Memories of her other life, her sadness, nudged at her, but she shoved them back. She needed this. She *wanted* this.

He directed her to the door on the right. “Come on. This house is filled with things to entertain us. It would be a shame not to take advantage. Particularly since we’re going to be spending lots of time together over the next eighteen years. We should get to know each other.”

Fear and elation collided, creating goose bumps on her upper arms. Getting to know each other didn’t have to be something to be afraid of or even something sexual. He wanted the same thing she did. Nothing sinister. Nothing difficult. Just a simple evening spending time together. To get to know each other. Because they had joint custody of a child.

Inclining her head in acceptance, she ignored the fear and tamped down the elation and reminded herself that spending time getting to know each other didn’t have to be a big deal. She didn’t have to tell him about her family that night. She could wait for a more suitable time. Tonight, he was only asking for a game of pool.

“All right.”

The room with the pool table was a huge den. Cherrywood walls and leather furniture gave the space a totally masculine feel.

“Your dad’s room, I assume,” she said, walking to a wall lined with sticks, as Darius gathered and racked the balls.

“Got it in one.” He ambled over to choose a stick. “But before you begin feeling sorry for Missy, take a look around. They might have lived in Greece, but they spent time here. Her influence is all over the place.”

“Really?”

“She’s redone at least three rooms.” He winced. “Including the master bedroom.”

“You don’t like her taste?”

“If you’re asking if I like floral bedspreads and lacy curtains, then no.”

She laughed, glad she’d agreed to spend some time with him. Over the next half hour they played several games of pool and he handily beat her.

“You’re a ringer.”

“Ringers make you believe they’re terrible so they can persuade you to bet them, and then they take your money. I haven’t done that.” He shrugged. “We’re just having a nice friendly few games.”

“With me getting my butt beaten.”

He racked the balls and broke, scattering the colorful orbs across the table with a clack and clatter. In an uncharacteristic turn of events, none of them fell into a pocket.

“Hey! Looks like I get a turn this time.”

She walked around the table, sizing up potential shots. When she found one she liked, she angled her stick across the table, levering her body in sync with the stick.

“No. No. You’ll never make the shot that way.” He strode around the table to her. “Let me help you.” He lowered himself over her, his one hand covering hers on the stick, his other circling around her so he could guide her hand on the handle.

Her nerve endings exploded at the contact. Rivers of molten need rode her blood. And she remembered why they had to be careful. Even about becoming friends. Their attraction was like nitroglycerin. One bump and they could go up in flames.

As if realizing how close he'd put them, he turned his head and caught her gaze. Their faces were only millimeters apart. His warm breath fanned her face. Longing burst inside her. Her fingers itched to touch the stubble on his cheeks and cruise his throat. Just a brush. Just a touch to feel the warmth of another's skin. To feel the pulse of another heartbeat, to know that *she* was alive.

His hands shifted from the stick to her shoulders and he lifted her from the awkward position of leaning across the table. For a few seconds, they stood there, barely a foot apart. She watched myriad emotions play across his face, as if he were arguing with himself about whether he should kiss her. It crossed her mind to say something. It crossed her mind to run. This attraction they felt was nothing but wrong, but curiosity and need warred with common sense. This entire night had been an experiment of sorts for her. A return to life. To people. She didn't want to stop. She almost couldn't stop. She needed him to kiss her as much as she wanted it.

Slowly his head descended, as if he were giving her plenty of time to step back. She considered it, but stayed frozen, mesmerized, hoping, and in seconds his mouth met hers.

A tsunami of need flooded her, a yearning so strong she shook from it. His hands smoothed from her shoulders, down her back to her hips and nudged her closer. The longing to be held, to be loved, to be touched percolated through her. He satisfied it with another nudge that brought her fully against him. Her breasts nestled against his chest, pebbling her nipples. His mouth moved over hers simply, smoothly, and temptation turned into action as her mouth instinctively opened under his and he deepened the kiss.

Desire thundered through her. Warm, wet need. Her limbs weakened. Her breath hitched. And her brain clicked on again, like a light switch being flipped in a dark, dangerous room.

*This is wrong! This is wrong! This is wrong!*

The words were a litany in her brain. Not only was she not ready for anything beyond a chaste, experimental kiss, but the night before she'd sensed there was something wrong in his behavior. Something he wanted from her. Or maybe that he was trying to trick her. She shouldn't be kissing him, clouding the issues.

The sound of someone clearing her throat entered the room and Whitney jumped back like a guilty teenager.

Joni Johnson, the girl who had served dinner, stood by the door. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Andreas, but Mrs. Tucker asked me to get you. The baby is sick."

## CHAPTER FIVE

DARIUS AND WHITNEY raced behind Joni, who led them up the back steps. When they reached the nursery, Darius pushed ahead, not caring about decorum, and ran into the room.

Gino lay in the crib, crying. Darius reached down and scooped the little boy into his arms. “Hey, little guy. What’s up?”

“I’ve already called the pediatrician,” Mrs. Tucker said, wringing her hands. “He said he’d be here as soon as he can.”

Gino snuggled against Darius and cried harder.

“I couldn’t get him to drink his evening bottle and now he won’t stop crying.” Mrs. Tucker’s voice was strained and anxious. “I’m not a nanny and my only child is over thirty. It’s been so long since I cared for a baby that I have no idea what’s wrong.”

Whitney peered at Gino over Darius’s shoulder. “Can I hold him?”

Darius caught her gaze and the instant he did, he regretted it. Thoughts of their kiss devoured his mind and desire arched between them. He couldn’t believe he’d broken the promise he’d made to himself not to kiss her, but he had. Part of him wasn’t sorry. They had chemistry that just wouldn’t quit and if they were in a position to pursue it they’d probably set his bedroom on fire. He couldn’t resist a taste.

But they weren’t in a position to pursue it, and there would be consequences. Especially for this little boy if he didn’t handle the situation correctly.

He swallowed and handed Gino to her. “Here.”

After laying the baby across her arm, she studied his face, pressed her hand to his forehead, looked into his mouth. “I think he’s getting a tooth.”

Furious that she could be so flippant, Darius pinned her with a hard stare. “I think we should let the pediatrician decide.”

“Oh, of course!” she said, handing the baby back to him. “I’m just saying that there’s no reason for us to panic while we wait for the doctor to arrive.”

Mrs. Tucker visibly relaxed. “I should have thought of that. But it’s just been so long since I’ve had kids.” She sank into the rocker. “If I may make a suggestion, sir, I think we should get a nanny here as soon as possible.” She sighed heavily, as if having trouble getting her breathing to regulate, and Darius realized just how worried poor Mrs. Tucker had been.

But his eyes narrowed in on Whitney, the woman he shared custody with, and he suddenly wondered how she knew so much about babies. She’d said she’d been married, but she hadn’t mentioned children. If she’d had them and her husband had gotten custody, there had to be a reason for that. If there was something god-awful in her past that made her husband a better candidate to have her children than she was, he wanted to know what it was.

“I’ll just go back to the kitchen, then,” Mrs. Tucker announced, rising from the rocker and heading for the door.

“Sure,” Darius said. “We’ll be fine.” Plus, he wanted some time alone with Whitney. Since the day they’d met at her dad’s office, he’d been so preoccupied with getting along with her that he’d let all the inconsistencies in her life slide. That ended here. That ended now.

Darius sat on the rocker. Gino snuggled against him, sniffing, but relaxing against his sweater as if seeking comfort. His heart warmed with emotion. He was falling in love with this kid. In only two days, the little boy was getting to him.

But that was all the more reason to make sure he knew Gino’s “other” guardian. His dad might have approved Whitney, but his dad hadn’t planned on dying. He might have simply decided to placate Missy and agreed to appoint Whitney as shared custodian. Given that she was the daughter of his friend and the friend of Gino’s mom, he might not have checked into her past the way he should have.

“So, are you going to tell me how you know so much about babies?”

She walked away from him toward the window, but didn’t answer his question.

“I can have you investigated, you know. Or maybe even guess. A woman who was married but lost custody of her children to her husband probably has a skeleton in her closet.”

She sucked in a breath, refusing to look at him. Darius squeezed his eyes shut. Damn it! If he hadn’t needed her help so much, he would have realized something was off with her before this. He wouldn’t have silenced his instincts, and he would have confronted her.

“You know what? Don’t tell me. Go back to your room and pack. Because I’m going to contest that damned will. I’m getting you away from my baby.”

“Don’t.” She turned, her eyes filled with tortured pain. He could easily guess why.

“Why not? Don’t want a courtroom full of people to hear why you shouldn’t be around a child? Why you don’t have your own?”

She swallowed. “It’s not what you think.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

Whitney’s limbs began to shiver, then her entire body began to shake. She had absolutely no doubt in her mind that he intended to check in to her past. When he did, he’d discover she’d had a child who had died. She’d wanted to tell him, but she’d wanted it to be on her terms, so she didn’t look incompetent or grief-stricken. But it appeared *this* was the time.

She opened her mouth, debating what she would say, how she would say it, but the only thing that came out was, “I had a daughter.”

Darius said nothing, only snuggled his baby brother closer as if protecting him from her, and her heart shattered. “I would never do anything to hurt Gino.”

“Really?”

“My *husband* hurt my daughter.” Her shaking intensified. Tears filled her eyes. “My husband *killed* my daughter.”

Darius stopped rocking.

“He intended to kill himself.” Her tears spilled over her lower lids, trailed down her cheeks. Memories of that day and all the days after it when she’d wondered, berated herself, lived in an ocean of guilt, filled her brain, stopped her tongue, clogged her throat with tears.

She swallowed hard. Once. Twice. Three times before she could speak.

“No one knows if he’d forgotten he had the baby in the car seat when he realized he could simply sit in the running car in the garage to eventually kill himself.” Her lungs expanded to painful proportions. Sobs screamed to erupt from her chest, but she held on.

“His company had failed and though money wasn’t an issue, his pride suffered.” She turned, faced Darius, opened her hands in supplication. “It was his third company. He’d bragged that number three would be the charm. But it wasn’t. His father was angry with him for wasting his time. His brothers were making names for themselves on Wall Street and Burn did nothing but fail.” A sob escaped. “He was the family embarrassment.”

Darius swallowed, visibly shaken by what she had told him. “I’m sorry.”

Her sob turned to muffled weeping. “Everyone’s sorry.”

He rose from the rocker. “Maybe no one knows what else to say?”

She turned away as her crying took her. There was a place she went, a soft, comfortable place, where emotion took control of her body. Problems weren’t solved. Trouble didn’t disappear, but tension eased. Tears and sobs provided a welcome release not just for the pain, but also for her tight muscles and limbs. And she wanted to go there now. She wanted to go to her own room, sink onto the bed and let the crying soothe her.

“You weren’t at fault, you know.”

She spun to face him as sadness morphed into anger. “Really? I couldn’t have noticed my slightly depressed husband tumbling into full-fledged mental illness? There were no signs? You’re sure?”

“No, but—”

“You wouldn’t accept my diagnosis of Gino. You insisted on waiting for the pediatrician. So now I’m telling you to stop diagnosing me. Back off.”

The door opened and Mrs. Tucker entered with a short, gray-haired man behind her. “Dr. Sullivan,” she announced as she stepped aside and let the man shuffle over to Gino.

“Hey, Gino,” he crooned, taking the baby from Darius’s arms. Obviously familiar with the little boy, he hugged him before he said, “I hear somebody might be getting a tooth.”

He laid the little boy on the changing table and began to examine him.

Silently, Whitney slipped behind the group huddled around the baby and out the door.

Darius watched her go, cursing himself for pushing her and cursing her husband.

She’d had a daughter. A little girl. A baby who was probably the light of her life. He squeezed his eyes shut in misery. He’d brought all that back for her, made her relive the worst days of her life.

The doctor examined Gino and told Darius and Mrs. Tucker there was very little that could be done for a baby getting a tooth. He gave them some gel to numb his gums and advised them to get a teething ring.

Luckily, Gino fell asleep almost immediately after the doctor left, but Darius stayed by his crib, angry with himself for forcing Whitney to talk, but more concerned about the baby.

Finally, around midnight, he went to bed. But what seemed like only two minutes later, Darius heard the sounds of the baby waking and he popped up in bed. Glancing at his clock, he saw it was only just after two and groaned.

Still, not wanting Mrs. Tucker to have to deal with a cranky baby alone, he jumped into jeans and a sweatshirt and raced into the nursery. As he entered through the side door, Whitney bolted into the room from the main door, wearing a fluffy pink robe over white pajamas.

Their eyes met across the nursery and everything inside him stilled. He’d forced her to relive the worst days of her life the night before, but at least with that out in the open she had to know he didn’t doubt her anymore. He wouldn’t be making good on his threat to contest guardianship.

Gino screamed again, reminding him that if he didn’t pick him up and tend to him, he’d wake Mrs. Tucker. Beating Whitney to the crib, he lifted the little boy out and hugged him, patting his back to soothe him.

Whitney stood a few steps back. Concern brought her close enough to see what was going on, but not so close that she was actually part of it.

Things would have probably been a bit stilted and awkward between them as they worked through the aftermath of that conversation and her memories, but ultimately they would have been okay—if he hadn’t also kissed her.

He couldn’t believe he’d done that, but the temptation had been so strong he couldn’t resist. He’d thought that one kiss might take the edge off. Instead, the taste of her stayed on his lips all night.

Turning away, she said, “I’ll warm a bottle.”

She took a bottle from the small refrigerator, set it in the warmer and waited, all with her back to him.

Guilt suffused him. He should have been kinder with her, gentler.

Whitney walked over with the warm bottle, motioning for Darius to sit in the rocker. “Once he drinks this, we’ll put the gel on his gums again so he can fall back to sleep.”

Panic rose in him. He might have fed Gino before, but he really didn’t trust himself to feed the baby when his mouth was sore.

Obviously seeing his hesitancy, Whitney said, “Arrange Gino across your lap, but lift his head a little higher than you normally do.”

In three or four movements, Darius had the little boy across his lap and halfway between sitting and lying on his arm.

“Now, put the nipple to his lips and he’ll do the rest. His hunger will supersede the pain in his mouth.”

Darius did as instructed and Gino latched onto the nipple as if he was starving.

Whitney stepped away. “I understand how his being sick would make you nervous.”

Of course she did. She’d had a daughter. He’d brought up those memories for her. In the silence of the nursery where he’d confronted her, the most natural thing to do right now would be to apologize for pushing her to tell him about her daughter.

So he did. “I’m sorry.”

She ambled to the side window. Though it was the middle of the night and she probably couldn’t see anything, she stared out into the darkness. “For not knowing how to care for Gino?”

“For pushing you into talking before the pediatrician got here.”

Her eyes never left the window. “You had no idea. You were worried about Gino. I accept that.”

Just as he’d suspected, his mistake was something she’d probably faced before. She wouldn’t hold a grudge or make something out of it he hadn’t intended. Things might still be awkward for awhile, but ultimately they’d be okay.

The baby nudged the nipple out of his mouth and Darius pulled the bottle away. He sat him up a bit then waited a few seconds before he offered it again. Gino latched onto the nipple, and the room became eerily silent. This time he couldn’t blame it on the repercussions of his pushing her into talking about her baby. There was a second elephant in the room and he had to get rid of it, too.

With a glance at Gino to make sure he was still suckling, he said, “I’m also sorry I kissed you. It won’t happen again.”

She stared out the window, saying nothing, and he wanted to groan at his stupidity. Kissing her had been a ridiculous, in-the-moment impulse that he should have thought through. Instead, he’d let his hormones rule him.

But rather than tell him to go to hell, or that he was an immature ass, she quietly said, “How do you know it won’t happen again?”

He had no option but the truth. “Because it’s not a good idea for either of us. We have to spend the next eighteen years dealing with each other as we raise this baby. If we started a relationship that fizzled, one of us would end up angry or hurt and that’s not good for Gino.”

Whitney stared outside though she didn’t actually see anything. It was the second or third time he’d given Gino preference in a conversation. It had surprised her the morning before when he’d said he wanted to be a great dad. But after the way he’d behaved while waiting for the pediatrician—protective, strong—she knew he wasn’t faking it, wasn’t saying these things to make himself look good or get her into his corner. He intended to be a good father to his half-brother.

She peeked over at him. He wore jeans and a baggy gray sweatshirt and looked absolutely gorgeous in a casual, athletic way. His short hair wasn’t exactly mussed; it simply wasn’t combed as it usually was for a day of work, and wisps fell to his forehead boyishly. His typically stern face was relaxed. Neither a frown nor a smile graced his mouth.

She’d kissed that mouth.

He’d held her against him.

She’d faintly felt his heart beating beneath the fisherman’s sweater.

She could have tumbled over the edge the night before, could have done something really out of character, really wrong. But fate had stopped them. He’d said he didn’t want it to happen again, and she believed him. Not just because his first priority was Gino, but because of the conversation afterward. He now knew she came with baggage. She might as well have dressed in dynamite. There’d be no way a man who could have any woman he wanted would go near a woman with her kind of past.

Which was good.

Sad, because she'd finally begun to relax around someone; but good because she'd panicked the night before. She hadn't known how to stop. She'd gotten in over her head. If Joni hadn't come in, she could have messed up royally.

Her priority was to uphold Missy's wishes and to do that she had to be objective. Not get involved with her co-guardian. She also wasn't ready for a relationship. Burn had hurt her. No, Burn had cost her her ability to trust. As nice as Darius Andreas seemed to be, as good as he clearly wanted to be with Gino, an intimate relationship was a totally different thing. God only knew *if* he had the ability to have one. And God only knew *when* she'd be ready to have one.

Glancing at Gino's bottle, she saw it was empty, and walked over to the rocker. "Here," she said, easing the bottle out of Gino's mouth and Darius's hold. "You have to burp him now."

Darius sat perfectly still. Didn't let her perfume affect him. Wouldn't let himself wonder if her skin was as soft as it looked. Wouldn't let his mind wander back to the kiss the night before. He'd made a promise of sorts to her that she would be safe in his company, and he intended to keep it.

"Lift him to your shoulder the way I showed you yesterday morning."

He did as she instructed, but kept his gaze averted. They really were like gasoline and a match when they got too close, and the best way to handle it would be to keep their distance. But if he wanted her to teach him about the baby, that wasn't possible. His only alternative was simply to control himself.

"Now, pat his back."

He brought his hand to the baby's small back and lightly patted twice. Gino burped.

Whitney stepped away. "He's a good eater and a good burper. That's usually a sign of a very healthy child. He'll probably have this tooth in before we know it."

Relief washed through him and he rose. But once he was standing, he realized had no idea what he was supposed to do.

"Does he go back to bed now?"

Whitney laughed softly. "Let's hope. Otherwise, it's going to be a long night. First let's put some of the gel on his gums."

Darius winced. "Sorry, I forgot."

"You're new and there's a lot to remember." She found the gel and gently applied some to the baby's gums. He spat and fussed, but she persevered.

As she stepped away, Darius asked, "Should I lay him in the crib?"

"Actually, the best thing to do would be for you to stay on the rocker. Position him the same way you had him while you fed him, so that he's not lying flat but is upright enough that he can breathe more easily, and just rock him until he falls asleep."

Darius sat and positioned Gino on his lap. "Hey, little guy."

As he set the rocker in motion, Whitney leaned against the crib. "Don't talk too much or he'll never go back to sleep."

"What should I do?"

"Just keep rocking him." She smiled. "You could also sing him a lullaby."

Darius winced. "Yeah. Not in this lifetime."

She laughed. "Eventually, you'll sing. Everybody does."

"Not me."

"Just wait. The day will come when you're desperate and you'll sing."

Chuckling softly, Darius shook his head.

In a surprising move, Whitney pushed off the crib and stooped down in front of him. He noticed that she didn't touch either him or Gino, but she started to sing.

"Hush little baby, don't say a word, Papa's going to buy you a mocking bird ..."

Her voice was soft, lyrical. Gino blinked his heavy eyelids and rolled his head to the side so he could look at her.

“And if that mocking bird don’t sing, Papa’s gonna buy you a diamond ring. And if that diamond ring turns brass, Papa’s going to buy you a looking glass. If that looking glass gets broke, Papa’s going to buy you a billy goat.”

As if by magic, Gino’s eyelids drooped. Whitney’s voice softened even more, and she slowed the song, as if lulling him to sleep.

“If that billy goat won’t pull, Papa’s going to buy you a cart and bull. If that cart and bull turn over, Papa’s going to buy you a dog named Rover.” Her voice softened again, the words she sang slowed to a hypnotic pace. Gino’s eyelids drooped until eventually they stayed shut.

Her song finished, Whitney rose. She nodded at Gino. “He’s asleep.”

Mesmerized by the sweet expression on her face and the casual way she’d lowered her voice and softened the song to lull Gino to sleep, Darius only stared at her. “He is?”

“He is.” She headed for the door. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Darius rose and put Gino in the crib. Sadness seeped into his soul. He’d bet she’d been the perfect mother.

Sunday morning, when Darius heard Gino cry, he popped up in bed again. He jumped into the same jeans and sweatshirt he’d worn the night before and raced into the nursery just as Mrs. Tucker finished changing the baby.

“He’s feeling a lot better this morning.” She caught

Darius’s gaze. “I’m sorry I didn’t hear him wake up last night.”

“That’s okay. Whitney and I took care of him.”

Before Mrs. Tucker could answer, Whitney entered the room. Their eyes met across the nursery and all he could think of was her singing to Gino the night before. The sweet motherly affection he’d heard in her voice. The easy way she’d used the song to lull Gino to sleep. And he suddenly understood why Missy had chosen her for her baby’s guardian. Whitney was born to be a mom. She really would be Gino’s mom. Not a substitute, not a guardian, but a real mom.

Just as he intended to be a real dad.

He could picture them two or three or even six years from now, as the perfect parents. He could see them standing with their arms around each other’s waists, waving to Gino who rode his bike along the big circular driveway in front of the house.

He shook his head to dislodge that image. It was one thing to parent a child together. But they didn’t need to have their arms around each other’s waists. They had to be objective. They couldn’t have a relationship. He had a conglomerate to run. A life that kept him so busy he’d barely have time to squeeze this baby in. But he would. Gino would become his family. And after that there would be no time left for anyone else. Which made him the absolute worst choice of men for Whitney to get involved with. Now that he knew her past, he also knew she needed someone to love her, to understand her, and he simply had too much on his plate already. He would ignore signs that she needed to talk, or signs that she was feeling sad, or signs that she simply needed to be held. And he would hurt her.

She broke eye contact and strolled a little closer to the baby. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Mrs. Tucker chirped. “Here’s the bottle,” she said, offering both the baby and the bottle to Whitney.

Darius raced over, understanding now why she hesitated. Being Gino’s guardian was probably a living hell for her, yet she’d accepted the job and planned to do it. “I’ll take him.”

Mrs. Tucker put Gino in his arms and glanced at her watch. “If you don’t mind, I need to go now. Two of the maids are new and we don’t really have a schedule yet.” She smiled like the happy employee that she was, causing Darius to notice just how weary, how sad Whitney was in contrast. “If you need me, I can be free again after breakfast.”

With the baby and the bottle in Darius’s hands, Mrs. Tucker turned away and walked out of the nursery.

He sat on the rocker and gave Gino the nipple as he had the other times he had fed him. Gino latched on greedily and sucked down the milk. Whitney walked around the nursery, glancing at toys and knickknacks scattered on the shelves. She didn't say anything and, try as he might, Darius couldn't think of anything to say either.

When Gino was finished with his breakfast, Darius burped him like a pro then rose from the rocker. "So what do we do now? Put him back to bed?"

Whitney smiled slightly. "I'm guessing he just woke up before we walked in. So he should spend some time downstairs."

Panic fluttered through him. "Downstairs? With his gums just waiting to put him in severe pain again?"

"Of course. He still needs his cereal and I'm guessing he'll want to play a bit. In fact it's good to entertain him and make him happy for as long as we can."

Panic was replaced by fear. Yes, he'd rocked this kid, fed this kid, even changed a diaper—much to his horror—but he wasn't capable enough to be alone with a potentially sick baby all morning.

"Ready?"

He peeked over at Whitney. "You're coming with us?"

"Sure."

That's when he saw it. The sadness that hummed through everything she did was sometimes eclipsed by very normal behavior, but it was still there.

And everything she did for Gino undoubtedly reminded her of the baby she'd lost.

## CHAPTER SIX

DARIUS WAITED UNTIL they were seated at the table in the sunroom for lunch, while Gino was napping, before he broached the subject they'd come to Montauk to discuss—how they'd share custody of Gino. The wall of windows brought in the broad expanse of the ocean, sloshing sloppily, with no rhyme or reason or organization, against the shore. The scent of warm clam chowder wafted around them comfortingly, but Darius felt more like the ocean. Disjointed. Uneven. Unable to get his bearings.

Not only did he feel uncomfortable about pushing her to tell him about her family, but he also felt awful for her loss. Technically, he and Whitney would be connected for the next eighteen or so years of their lives, maybe longer. Gino would love her as a mother, and, he hoped, love him as a father. But their lives were so different he wasn't really sure it was possible for them to find common ground.

She'd been married, been a mom and now lived in a loft in Soho and worked at a law firm. He'd spent his entire adult life running from marriage and being groomed to manage a huge conglomerate. He also had an apartment in the city, but Gino had a nursery at this estate, so Darius genuinely believed it was better for him to get rid of his apartment and live here. If Whitney really wanted to make the commitment to Gino that Darius believed she should make, then she should want to give up her loft and live here too.

The three of them living together was the only way to ensure that Gino saw both of his guardians and also lived something of a normal life. Still, he couldn't hit her with that yet—especially not after the way he'd pushed her the night before. The way he had this figured, the best thing to do would be try to get her to agree to stay another week, or maybe two weeks, and then continue to tack on a week or two at a time until she realized, as he had, that Montauk was Gino's home.

Because the following day was Monday, the end of the weekend, there was no time left for delay. He had to persuade her to stay an entire week or maybe two and he had to do it now.

He casually picked up his napkin. "I'm glad we decided to spend the weekend here, getting to know the baby."

She met his gaze, her pretty blue eyes cautious.

"It was good for him to be in a settled environment—especially since this is his home, or had been when his parents came to New York."

She didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely."

"So you wouldn't mind saying a little longer?"

"How much longer?"

With her being so agreeable, it seemed a shame to ask for a week or two, when a month would be better for Gino. "How about a month?"

"A month!"

"Or six weeks." Going with his usual tactic of surprising his opponent by asking for more rather than backpedaling, he forged on. "This is Gino's home. He needs to be somewhere he feels safe. Since he spends half his day sleeping, I also think it's important he be in his own crib. We're adults. I think we can make an adjustment or two for him."

"Okay."

She surprised him so much he forgot they were negotiating. "Okay?"

"Yes. We have to hire a nanny, and I need time to turn my spare bedroom into a nursery. So, yes. It makes sense to keep Gino here where he's happy until I can get some of that done."

Dumbstruck, he said nothing.

She ate a spoonful of soup. "Layla liked being in her own crib. Especially when she was sick."

*Layla.* Her casual use of the name shook him. But the very fact that she'd said it so nonchalantly told him he had to be every bit as casual. Not make a big deal out of it. Not ask questions that didn't fit into their conversation about Gino. Even though he was burning up with them.

How could a man not remember he had his child with him?

How did a woman deal with the grief, the guilt, of not noticing her husband was slipping over the edge?

Though he tried to hold them back, they tore at him until he couldn't stop himself from asking, "How did you deal with it?"

"What?"

Recreation roared through him, telling him he shouldn't push her again, but he was unable to stop himself. "Your loss. How did you deal with such a monumental loss?"

She glanced up at him. "Therapy."

He shook his head. "Dear God. It must have been awful. I am so sorry."

She set down her spoon. "Actually, that's one of the reasons I held back from telling you. I don't want you to feel sorry for me. I want you to know. You *have* to know. You have to understand. But if I really want to get on with the rest of my life, you can't feel sorry for me. You can't treat me differently than you would have when you thought I was just a thorn-in-your-side lawyer."

He laughed. "I never thought you were a thorn in my side."

She smiled at him. "Of course you did. You probably always will. We're not going to agree on how to raise Gino. We might as well admit up front that there will be disagreements and maybe set some ground rules for how to handle them."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, for instance, there could be some deal breaker things. Like I don't think he should get a new car at sixteen."

He laughed, not just at the absurdity of talking about something that wouldn't happen for fifteen-and-a-half years, but also at the absurdity of depriving Gino of something he'd need.

"Really? No car at sixteen? In case you haven't noticed, I'm rich. I can afford to get him any kind of car he wants. And he'll want one. It's the only thing he'll talk about the entire time he's fifteen."

"Doesn't matter. Kids that age aren't good drivers. We should have as much control as possible about when and where he drives. The best way to do that is for him to have to ask permission to take a car."

He gaped at her. "I have ten cars. He could easily take one without my permission."

"Then you're going to be busy keeping track of them. Because, to me, the car is a safety issue. And a deal breaker."

He scowled, remembering his own driving at sixteen, and realized she was right. "Okay, but then one of my deal breakers is pink."

"Pink?"

"No matter that you call it rose or mauve or some other flaky name, I don't ever want him dressed in pink."

She blinked, then frowned, then burst out laughing. "That's your idea of a deal breaker?"

He turned his attention to his soup. "Give me time. I'm sure I'll think of more."

"So will I. But that's kind of the point. We should balance. You know I'm right about the car, so you didn't argue once you understood. I get it about pink." She rolled her eyes. "It's a pet peeve and I respect that. But most things won't be so black and white. We're going to have to learn to discuss issues as they come up and respect each other's viewpoints."

He put down his spoon and motioned with his hand between them. "So this kind of works?"

"The fact that we're both objective parties?"

He nodded.

She smiled. “Give us a few years. We won’t be quite so objective. The first time he looks at us with real love, we’ll both melt.” She caught his gaze. “That’ll probably happen within the next day or so, so get ready. You and I are about to become mom and dad to that little boy.”

The truth of that swooped down on him, reminding him of the things he’d thought the day before. He sniffed a laugh. “I already figured that out.”

“Well, good. That makes you ahead of the game.”

“What about you?”

“I’ve been through this before. I know exactly what I’m in for in the next year and a half. I’ve even thought ahead to the next twenty-five years. Kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school..., university ... marriage.”

Of course she’d thought ahead to the next twenty-some years. She was a planner. She’d probably thought of every special event in her daughter’s life, previewed it, then suffered through the memories of her plans when her daughter was gone. He’d love to ask, not because he wanted to know her dreams for her daughter, but just because he suspected she needed to talk about some of this. But they weren’t really friends. They were two people bound by someone else’s wishes. He didn’t feel he had the right to be so personal. Yet he also couldn’t think of a way to change the subject or even what to change it to. Nearly everything to do with Gino would remind her of her baby. After that there wasn’t much for them to discuss.

They were quiet for a few seconds then Whitney said, “This soup is wonderful.”

Ah, food. She’d said she loved food. That was as good a topic as any. “Cook worked for my dad for the past few decades. Every time she tried to quit he doubled her salary.”

She laughed. “I can understand why.”

Her laughter pleased him and reminded him of how relaxed she’d been the night before at dinner and while playing pool. She actually seemed happy now. Relaxed.

So once again, he talked about food. “You should see what he paid the pastry chef.”

Her eyes widened. “You have a pastry chef?”

He laughed. “*My dad* had a pastry chef.”

His laughter scared her. She knew he was being kind, but the sound of his laugh filled her chest with syrupy warmth. It wasn’t love. But closeness. Companionship. Ease. They’d known each other a few days. Yet they were not only comfortable enough to discuss Gino and his future rationally, but she’d also told him about Burn. About Layla. Now he was laughing with her and making her laugh.

*And he’d kissed her.*

She shoved that to the farthest corner of her brain. He’d promised he wouldn’t kiss her again, so that couldn’t come into play. She had to forget all about that, the way he’d promised he would.

“If we stay here a whole month, I’ll weigh two hundred pounds before I go home.”

“You could stand to gain a pound or two.”

His comment reminded her of the way he’d looked at her the night before when she had been practicing flirting. Yearning seized her, but so did the memory of how much trouble that longing had gotten her into.

“No woman believes she can stand to gain a pound or two.” She set her napkin on the table and rose. “I need to work this afternoon.”

He smiled slightly and rose politely. “Okay.”

Walking back to the office, she congratulated herself. She hadn’t exactly run away, but there was no point in hanging around when they had no future. She’d sealed her fate with him by explaining her past. He’d even told her he wouldn’t kiss her again. Yet she still had crazy feelings around him. Which, now that she thought about it, was preposterous. They didn’t even really know each other. So, whatever she felt, it was based purely on animal attraction.

On the up side, the fact that her feelings were wrong gave her a reason or a way to control them. From here on out, every time the attraction rose up in her, she'd simply remind herself she didn't know him. So anything she felt was purely physical. Something to be ignored, not pursued.

On Monday morning, they drove into the city together, leaving Gino with Mrs. Tucker. Reviewing files from his briefcase, he didn't talk. Not even to discuss the job she'd be doing for Andreas Holdings in Gino's stead. She'd been quiet at breakfast, stilted, and he'd gotten the message. She might have agreed to live in the same house, but she wanted her space. Which was fine. Probably smart. He wanted her to be happy. If being left alone made her happy, then he'd leave her alone.

Eventually, she'd come around on her own terms, soften to the baby and to him. When she did, he'd see it. And he wouldn't exactly pounce, but he would capitalize on the moment and suggest that they make their living arrangements with Gino, at his house in Montauk, permanent.

When they arrived at Andreas Holdings, he directed her to follow him to his office—formerly his dad's office. Cherrywood paneling and a wall of bookcases gave the room an old-fashioned, stuffy feel, but there was nothing he could do about that. He hadn't yet had a chance to redecorate.

He walked past the brown leather sofa and chair, directing her to follow him to his desk. Keeping with the all-business tone they'd established that morning, he handed her a stack of files. "These are contracts I'd like you to review and summarize for me."

"Okay."

He pressed the button on his phone and paged his assistant, who was at the door in seconds. "Minnie will show you to your office."

She left the room on the heels of his assistant, and Darius stared at the door that closed behind them, hoping he was doing the right thing.

He met her at the limo for the ride home and immediately retrieved files to review, so they didn't have to talk just because they were commuting together. He even let her go up to her apartment on her own to pack the things she would need for the upcoming weeks.

They talked about nannies at dinner. That morning, she had called the service she'd used when she'd hired a nanny for Layla and they had emailed résumés of potential candidates. She'd narrowed them down and had scheduled interviews with all four the next day. Because Whitney would conduct the initial interviews at the headquarters for Andreas Holdings, Darius had consented to sit in on at least five minutes of each interview and, acknowledging how busy he was, she'd accepted that. Before dessert she excused herself, saying she needed to go back to the depositions from the case she was working on with her father.

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