



HAVING TANNER  
BRAVO'S BABY

CHRISTINE RIMMER

*Cherish*<sup>™</sup>

Christine Rimmer

**Having Tanner Bravo's Baby**

«HarperCollins»

## **Rimmer C.**

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Could they make a family of their own? Crystal Cerise's secret affair was supposed to be just that. An affair. And a secret. So her world turned upside down the instant she discovered she was pregnant. Yes, she'd always been half in love with Tanner Bravo. But now she was having his baby! Tanner Bravo took his responsibilities ; and the mind-numbing chemistry he felt with Crystal ; very seriously. And he had a serious proposal: let's try a practice marriage. He had a feeling that practice would make perfect. . .

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## “It’s not nice to mock the mother of your child.”

“I was teasing, not mocking.”

She was falling for Tanner Bravo.

*Falling for Tanner...*

She was learning that what she felt for him was...more. More than just sex. More, even, than the huge reality of having his baby.

What was happening here? Crystal didn’t do the forever type of commitment.

But then again, she was having a baby. That was an enormous commitment. Maybe it wasn’t all that surprising that suddenly she found herself confronting the possibility of giving forever a chance.

Forever with Tanner. What next?

*Love.*

Could it be? Really?

They’d been so careful, all along, never to say the word. Tanner hadn’t said it, even when he got after her to be open to the idea of marriage.

*Love.*

Having his baby. And now this...

**Christine Rimmer** came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she’d been everything from an actress to a sales clerk to a waitress. Now that she’s finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining life experience for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day’s work is through: a man she loves, who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oklahoma. Visit Christine at [www.christinerimmer.com](http://www.christinerimmer.com).

## **Having Tanner Bravo's Baby** **Christine Rimmer**



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For MSR,  
with all my love.

## Chapter One

Crystal Cerise stood in the cute little kitchen area of her one-bedroom apartment, staring out the window over the sink at an uninspired view of the parking lot. She was two months pregnant. And that evening, over dinner, she intended to break the big news to the father of her child.

The salad was made and waiting in the fridge. The main course, lasagna, was almost through baking. Its tempting smell filled the air. Crystal looked down at the open loaf of Italian bread on the counter in front of her. Ready for the garlic butter. She picked up the spreader and began slathering it on, pausing for a glance at the yard-sale kitchen clock—a red vintage treasure with big deco-style white numbers that usually made her smile. Not today, however. Today it would take a lot more than a whimsical wall clock to make Crystal smile.

6:05 p.m. Twenty-five minutes until he arrived. Oh, she did not want to do this. But putting it off would only make the job all the harder in the end. Or so she kept reminding herself....

God. Having Tanner Bravo's baby. How could she have let this happen?

The answer was simple: chemistry. She and Tanner had it bad for each other. Neither of them wanted to be driven nuts with mutual lust. They constantly agreed that they'd never do *that* again.

And then they *did* do that again. And again.

Sadly, other than between the sheets, the two of them weren't a match in any way. She knew he considered her a flake, though he never actually used the word. Uh-uh. He would talk about her "woo-woo ways" and give her a hard time for the way she'd packed up her car and moved to Sacramento on what he considered a whim.

"Better a flake," she muttered, reaching for the paprika, "than overly serious and broody and grim." She shook the paprika onto the garlic-buttered bread. And controlling. Oh, yeah. Tanner Bravo was way too controlling.

She should never have had sex with him. Not the first time. Or the second. Or the third or the fourth.

She set the can of paprika down. Hard. And stared out the window some more.

Raging lust had made her careless. And now there was a baby coming. A baby she would keep, thank you very much. Crystal may not have been practical or thrifty or all that wise. She was scared to death she'd be a terrible mother.

And yet...well, she simply could not refuse such a huge gift of the universe. Especially not in light of what had happened when she was sixteen.

So. She would keep the baby.

Twice in the past couple of weeks, she'd tried to tell Tanner that there was going to be a baby and that she was keeping it. Both times, they'd ended up having sex. As per usual. And after the sex, well, she was so disgusted with herself for giving in to her crazy yen for him, yet again, that she never did get the words out.

Truth to tell, she *still* felt the urge to put off telling him. More than once that day, she'd found herself reaching for the phone, ready to call him and cancel this little get-together tonight. The desire to back out had been especially compelling at about two o'clock that afternoon—right after she'd quit her job. Because, please, who wants to be newly unemployed and telling a man she's pregnant, both on the same day?

Frowning, Crystal stared out the window some more—and blinked in surprise when a wiry gray head popped into view. It was Doris Krindle, who had the one-bedroom next door.

Frantically, Doris mouthed, "Nigel? Have you seen Nigel?"

"Omigod," Crystal cried in sympathetic distress. "He got out?"

Doris nodded, hard. Nigel, her enormous black-smoke Persian, was an inside cat all the way.

It was three steps from the kitchen sink to Crystal's dinky entry hall. She pulled the door wide on Doris's deeply tanned, wrinkled face and asked, "How long has he been gone?"

Doris pressed her bony hands to her chest. "Oh, I wish I knew for sure. I went to the store. When I got back..." She shook her head so her wiry silver curls bounced. "He's terrified of being outside. Usually, when I open the door, he runs the other way. But I've looked all over the apartment. He's gone. Just...gone."

Crystal took Doris by her thin shoulders. "Stop. Take a breath. Think thoughts of peace and positive outcomes. He can't have gone far."

"Oh, I do hope you're right."

"Come on," Crystal said briskly. "We'll find him. You'll see. We'll start by going through your apartment again." She turned Doris to point her in the right direction and gave her a gentle push along the concrete walk toward her apartment door.

Tanner Bravo rolled up the windows, killed the Mustang's engine, draped a hand over the steering wheel and glared out the windshield at the white stucco wall of Crystal's apartment complex.

She'd invited him to dinner. Why?

Since they were always planning *not* to have sex again, they never did things like going on dates or sharing a meal with just the two of them, alone. They would hook up without planning to at family events: his niece DeDe's dance recitals, Sunday dinners at his sister, Kelly's...

At least once a week, it seemed, they ended up in the same room together, surrounded by family. Simple proximity—that was all it took, though in front of the others they would fake complete lack of interest in each other for all they were worth.

Even when it was time to go home, both would try their damndest to keep up the pretense that they had no intention of getting naked and crawling all over each other the minute they were alone. They would say their goodbyes to his sister and her family and drive away in their separate cars.

And then one of them would weaken and call the other. The other, breathless, would say yes.

And after that? His place or her place, it was always the same: hot and wild and absolutely amazing.

Damned if he wasn't getting hard just thinking about it.

But an invitation to dinner at her apartment? That wasn't the way they did things. Something was up.

And what the hell was that noise? Some kind of alarm or something, coming from inside the building.

Tanner got out of the car. *Yeep, yeep, yeep, yeep...*

Sounded like a smoke alarm. It seemed to be coming from Crystal's place....

He raced the hundred yards or so along the walk to Crystal's door, the alarm growing louder with each step. When he got there, he raised his hand and knocked, yelling, "Crystal!" good and loud.

She didn't answer. But the door, not quite latched, drifted open.

Gray smoke billowed out. From inside, the smoke alarm shrieked. *Yeep, yeep, yeep, yeep...*

Tanner shouted, "Crystal, Crystal!" No answer.

Was she in there defenseless, unconscious from smoke inhalation? The thought made his heart pound the walls of his chest like a wrecking ball and his gut clench tight. "Crystal!"

Again, she didn't answer. So he pulled the top of his shirt up to cover his nose and mouth, dropped to his hands and knees to get under the worst of the smoke and crawled across the threshold, shouting her name.

## Chapter Two

Nigel was nowhere to be found.

Crystal and an increasingly freaked out Doris had searched every inch of the older woman's apartment about six times. They'd checked outside in the parking lot, under all the cars. They'd closely examined the small spaces between the photinia hedges that rimmed the walkways. They'd raced down the sidewalk between the complex's buildings and scoured the central courtyard, with its swathes of emerald grass and pretty weeping willow trees. They'd even gone all the way to the rec room, and opened all the cupboards and checked under all the furniture. They'd beat the bushes around the pool area, too.

No sign of an overweight pug-nosed, long-haired cat with a smoky-black outer coat and creamy fur beneath.

Finally, they'd returned to Doris's living room, where Crystal's neighbor wrung her hands and cried, "My poor, poor baby. Where have you gone?" A tear cleared the boundary of her lower lid and tracked a shining trail down her brown, creased cheek. "Oh, Crystal. He won't last a day outdoors. I know he's got an attitude. He thinks he's king of the world. But really, he's just a fat, fuzzy sweetheart with no survival skills beyond a crabby meow when he wants his dinner...."

"He's okay, I know it," Crystal insisted for the hundredth time.

"Oh, you're a darling to say so, but—"

They both heard the low, cranky "Rrreeow?" at the same time and turned in unison to face the open arch to the entryway. Nigel sat there, his expression aloof, his fuzzy explosion of a tail lazily twitching against the floor tiles.

"Nigel!" Doris cried. She ran to him and scooped him up, gathering him close against her heart. "Where have you been? You scared us to death!"

The cat let out another grouchy meow and acquiesced to be scratched under his almost nonexistent chin.

With the back of a hand, Doris swiped tears of relief from her cheeks. She turned grateful eyes Crystal's way. "Oh, thank you, thank you."

Crystal laughed. "For what? I didn't do anything. Nigel seems to have found *himself*."

"True, true." Doris laughed in relief and happiness. "He did, didn't he? But you were here with me while I was so afraid. I can't tell you how much that meant at a time like that."

"Well, I know you'd be there for me, too, if I needed you."

"I would. I swear it," Doris passionately declared. "Anytime." She stroked the cat's thick fur. "Oh, where *did* you get off to, you bad, bad boy?" The cat started to purr, a deep, rough sound. Doris sighed. "I suppose we'll never know..."

Now that the crisis was past, Crystal glanced at the small gold-and-ebony clock perched on a spindly side table. It was six forty-five.

"Oh, no," she muttered. "Tanner..." He was probably waiting at her door, thoroughly annoyed, wondering where the hell she'd gone off to now.

Doris frowned. "Excuse me?"

Crystal put on a smile. "Oh, nothing. Really. I invited someone over. I have to get going."

"Someone?" Doris hugged the fat cat, her still moist eyes now sparkling with interest. "A man? A date?"

"Uh, not exactly."

Still cuddling Nigel, Doris trailed her to the door. "Not exactly a man?"

Crystal laughed again. "Oh, he's a man all right. But it's not exactly a date...."

"Humph. Well. You've been here more than two months. It's about time you had a man around."

In lieu of an actual reply, Crystal made a noncommittal noise in her throat.

Doris said, “You have a lovely time, Crys. And thank you again.”

“Glad to help.” She pulled open the door and smelled...

“Smoke!” Doris sniffed the air. “I smell—”

“Yikes! The lasagna...” Crystal took off.

Doris called after her, “If you need me—”

“Thanks!” Crystal sent a wave back over her shoulder as she reached her own front door.

It was open. So was the kitchen window.

“Tanner?” She stepped cautiously past the threshold.

“In here.” He was leaning against the counter in the kitchen area, hard arms folded over his chest. The oven door was open. And the lasagna sat on the cooktop, burned beyond recognition.

“Oh, God...” Crystal groaned.

“I got here on time.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry...”

“I heard the alarm, smelled the smoke. I called your name—loud. When you didn’t answer, I thought you must be passed out from smoke inhalation. But when I got in here and got the windows open...no sign of you.”

She knew how his mind worked. He’d been a private detective for too long. “You probably thought I’d been kidnapped, trussed up in a burlap bag, and dragged off to who knows where, while my lasagna was left to burn.”

“Something like that.”

“Honestly, Tanner, I’m so, so sorry.” Ugh. She was not only pregnant and unemployed with four hundred twenty-three dollars and sixteen cents in her checking account, she’d made Tanner worry for her safety. And her apartment reeked of burned lasagna. Did it get any worse than this? She met Tanner’s dark, watchful eyes. Oh, yeah, it got worse. There was still the big news to break. She explained, “The neighbor’s cat ran away. I went to help her find him.”

He unfolded his arms and hooked his hands on the counter behind him. Mildly, he suggested, “Next time turn off the oven first.”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

“Did you find the cat?”

“We did. More or less—actually, the cat found us.”

“Ah,” he said, meaning he didn’t understand but didn’t really care, either.

There was a silence. They regarded each other. As always when she looked at him, she thought of sex—of the feel of his skin beneath her hands, of the fullness and warmth of his lips on hers, of the rough scrape of his beard-shadowed cheek against her own, of the rich taste of his mouth, of the delicious, complete way he filled her, of the way he moved when he was inside her...

His dark eyes had gone black as midnight. She knew his thoughts mirrored hers. Her body yearned for him. *Ached* for him.

Three steps separated them. It would have been so easy, just to take those steps, to wrap her arms around his strong neck, to offer up her mouth to his.

She cleared her throat and tore her gaze away.

“Crystal.” He said her name low and rough—but somehow gently, too.

“What?” She knew she sounded like a sulky child. And still, she didn’t face him.

“Look at me.”

“Right.” She sucked in a slow breath and made herself do it.

“What’s going on?”

*I’m pregnant. It’s yours,* she thought, but all that came out was, “I, um...”

He waited for her to say more. When she didn’t, he shrugged, a lazy movement that made her want to touch him, to spear her fingers into his nearly black hair, and drag those amazing lips of his down onto hers. Hard.

Crystal sucked in a steadying breath and silently reminded herself that no matter how much she wanted him, they were not having sex tonight.

Finally, he spoke. "I turned on the fan that goes with the heater and AC." Now that he mentioned it, she could hear the soft drone the fan made. "And I opened all the windows." He gestured beyond the counter that marked off the kitchen, toward the living area and the wide window that looked out on the lawn and the willow trees. "It should clear out the last of the smoke in no time." An almost smile tugged at one corner of that sinfully sexy mouth of his. "It's a...real pretty view, out that window. Real nice."

She felt worse than ever. He was actually making small talk. He didn't know what was bothering her, but he sensed something was. So he was trying to put her at ease—Tanner, who had been suspicious of her from the first day they met, who guarded his heart from her as fiercely as she did hers from him. Tanner. Who *never* made small talk.

But he was now. He seemed to sense that she had something huge going on. And since his mind always went down roads of darkness and destruction, he probably imagined the worst: she'd done murder or she was dying of some incurable disease.

Please don't worry, she wanted to tell him. It's nothing as bad as all that....

But then he would demand to know what "it" was.

And she would have to tell him, It's just a baby. Your baby. That's all.

Which was fine. Perfect. Exactly why she'd asked him there that night.

Yet still, she didn't say it.

He straightened from the counter and approached her slowly, as if he feared any sudden move might make her whirl and run. When he reached her, he lifted both hands and—oh, so gently—clasped her shoulders.

Crystal melted at his touch and ordered her traitorous body not to sway toward him. "Oh, Tanner..."

He looked deep into her eyes. "Something's wrong, isn't it? I mean, *really* wrong."

"Um, well, I..."

"It's not like you to invite me over for dinner. It's not...what we do."

"I know." It wasn't fair. On top of the killer hotness thing he had going, he was being so kind. So understanding...

"So what's up?" he asked. "Come on. Tell me. If there's something I can help you with, I'm on it. You can count on me."

You can count on me....

She believed him. Tanner was like that. Often brooding and grim. Suspicious by nature and by profession. But solid in a crunch. The kind of person who would never walk away from his responsibilities.

*I should just tell him.* Why couldn't she just tell him? She opened her mouth to do it.

"I quit my job today." The words kind of slipped out: the *wrong* secret, revealed in place of the one he really needed to know.

He let go of her shoulders and stepped back. "That's it? That's what's wrong? You quit your job?"

"Well." She looked down and to the side and then forced herself to meet his eyes again. "It *is* bothering me."

He gave her a puzzled frown. "You need a loan, is that it?"

She drew herself up. "Me? No way. I've quit jobs before. I'll manage until I find another one. I always do."

"But that's why I'm here, right? You invited me to dinner because you wanted to tell me you quit your job?"

"Uh. Not exactly. But I did. I quit. Today. This afternoon."

He raked a hand back through his hair. She watched his bicep bulge with the movement and imagined sinking her teeth into the silky skin there—but gently. Teasingly...

“Okay,” he said patiently. “Then...you’re going to tell me all about it?”

“About...?”

“Why you quit.”

“Long story.”

“I’m listening.”

Crystal needed a moment to gather some courage. “How ’bout a beer?”

“A beer.” He looked at her as if she’d lost a large section of her mind.

She wiggled her fingers in the direction of the living area. “Go sit down. I’ll bring it out to you. I have to put the garlic bread in the oven, anyway.” Her glance fell on the blackened slab of lasagna and she muttered, “I think we’re going to need lots of bread.”

Those piercing eyes of his scanned her face. Finally, he grunted. “Sure. Bring me a beer.” He turned toward the living area and the blue-covered futon that served as her sofa.

A few minutes later, she joined him.

He took the beer from her and set it on the coffee table without drinking from it. “Okay. Tell me. What’s up with you quitting your job?”

“Nuts?” She offered the bowl she’d brought from the kitchen.

He gave her a steady, unblinking look. “No, thanks.”

“Fine.” She set the bowl down. “It’s like this. Maybe Kelly told you. I hate my boss—I mean my *ex*-boss.”

“A law firm, isn’t it? You were working for Bandle and Schinker—family law, right?”

“That’s right.”

“They have a pretty good rep.”

“They seemed okay, as law firms go. It was my boss I hated. I took the job when I first got to town.”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“I hated it from the beginning. I don’t think I’m really cut out to work in a law office, even one with a good reputation. But I hung in, thinking I could make it last until I found something better.”

“I can see where this is going. Tell me more about the *ex*-boss you hate.”

She blew out a breath. “My former boss is tall, blond and square-jawed. Handsome if you don’t count his personality. Married. And a total weasel. He was always putting the make on me, in ways I’m sure he considered subtle. Until today. Today, he crossed the line and tried to kiss me. After I finished gagging, I told him I quit. That was it.” She tried a bright smile. “Not an especially original story, huh?”

Tanner did not smile. “What’s his name?”

His flat tone and the unreadable look in his eye told her way more than she wanted to know. “Uh-uh. No way. I know how you are, Tanner. And I’m grateful we’ve reached the point where I’m one of the people you feel responsible for. But in this case...you’re not.”

“You said he tried to kiss you. That’s harassment. The least you can do is sue the bastard.”

“Tanner. Listen.”

“What?”

“I only told you all this because...well, I don’t know exactly why I told you. But I do know I don’t need any help with this issue. I’ve done what I had to do, which is to quit. I’m finished. It’s over. End of story, time to move on. Are we clear on that?”

“Sure.” His voice was flat, his eyes more so.

God. What had possessed her to tell him about her horny jerk of an *ex*-boss? She never should have told him that. Incredible, the things people say when they should be saying something else.

"I want your word," she demanded darkly. "I mean it. I don't want you to find out who my boss was. I don't want you to track him down. I don't want you do *anything*. Except listen the way you just did. That's all I want. Honestly. Just for you to listen."

"That's crap."

"No, it's not crap. It's...a woman thing. Women actually appreciate a friend who listens. For a woman, sometimes it's all she needs. Someone to listen."

He picked up his beer then and poured about half of it down his throat. She watched his Adam's apple slide as he swallowed. Then he leaned back against the futon and studied her, looking the way she imagined a hungry panther might look as he regarded his lunch.

When he didn't talk for about thirty seconds, she said, "Don't give me the Clint Eastwood routine, okay? This is *my* business, which I *shared* with you. Mine. Get it? Mine. Nod if you can hear me."

A count of ten. And at last, with obvious reluctance, he dipped his head.

She said, "I mean it, Tanner. Promise me you'll stay out of this. Stay away from my ex-boss."

"I don't like it. It's not right. That SOB was out of line. Someone has to step up and show him what's what."

"Got that. Understood. And you are not that someone. Because this is not your business. Now, give me your word you won't try to find out anything about him, won't approach him, won't contact him, won't do *anything* to him."

Just when she was certain he wouldn't agree, he said, "All right. If that's how you want it."

"It's how I want it."

"Then fine," he grumbled, looking like he wanted to break something. "You have my word."

The buzzer on the stove went off. "That's the garlic bread," she said brightly. "Let's eat."

Crystal cut the lasagna, just to see if some of it might be salvageable. It wasn't. But at least there was plenty of bread and salad.

Crystal offered Tanner wine or another beer. He chose the beer. She left the bottle of wine on the counter.

He looked at her sideways. "You're not having any?"

It was a great opening. Or at least, as good a one as she was likely to get. She might have gently segued into how she wasn't having wine because she was having a baby....

But in the end she said only, "No, I'm not," and that was it. He didn't look at her strangely or ask if there was something she wanted to tell him. He only pulled out his chair and put his napkin across his hard thigh.

They ate. It didn't take long.

When the meal was over, he helped her to clear the table. She was bending to put the last plate in the dishwasher when he came up behind her.

Her breath tangled inside her chest, and her skin was suddenly all prickly and hot. She shut the dishwasher door. "Coffee?" she asked as she straightened up.

"No, thanks." He slid those big, warm hands of his under her arms and clasped her waist.

She stifled a silly, hungry little gasp. "I have these great cookies. Dark chocolate with white chocolate chips..."

He bent close. She felt the lovely heat of him. He was already hard. His erection brushed against the small of her back, making her yearn and melt for him.

"No cookies." He brushed her hair to the side and kissed her neck.

Oh, those lips of his...

She sighed, even though she tried not to. He ran his hands slowly along the twin outward curves of her hips. Her body went molten. What was it about those hands of his, about those lips, about the feel of his body touching hers?

Chemistry.

Oh, yeah. Chemistry. So good. So right...

“Tanner,” she said on a breathy, drawn-out sigh, bringing her hand up, clasping the back of his head, pulling him closer when she should have been pushing him away. His hair was so silky, so thick. She speared her fingers into it. “Tanner...”

“Mmm...” He stuck out his tongue and licked the side of her neck. Then he nibbled where he’d licked.

She couldn’t stop herself. She wiggled back against him and he groaned, pressing himself more tightly into her, letting her feel what he wanted to give her.

Oh, she was losing it. Losing it again... She groaned in arousal and frustration.

It was the third time Crystal had set herself the task of telling him, and the third time was supposed to be the charm, wasn’t it? She’d sworn she would tell him this time, no matter what. And yet, here she was, her hands in his hair, her body arching, her neck stretched to the side for him, inviting him to kiss her there some more.

He trailed nipping kisses upward and then licked her earlobe.

“Oh, God,” she whispered.

He made a low, masculine sound of arousal and agreement. “The feel of you,” he said rough and low. “The scent of you. You drive me crazy, you know that?”

“Oh, Tanner. I know. I’m so sorry.”

He made a low sound that might have been a laugh—or a groan. “Sorry, huh?”

“It’s the same for me.”

And then those amazing hands of his were on her shoulders. He turned her until she faced him. Her body instantly curved close to him. She lifted her mouth to his, helpless at that moment to do anything else.

He still smelled faintly of smoke from the ruined lasagna. But he also smelled...delicious. So tempting in a way she could never quite define. He smelled so very masculine. It was a clean scent. A scent that drew her, that made her yearn, made her forget all over again that he was all wrong for her.

She couldn’t get enough of him; at the same time as she felt shamed deep within herself. After all, she’d sworn, she’d *vowed*, that tonight was going to be different from all the other nights.

Yet here she was, willingly wrapped in his arms. What a total fool she’d been to imagine it could go otherwise.

And then he kissed her. His mouth covered hers, and the last wispy remnants of the real world, of her obligation to tell him he would be a dad, floated away. There was nothing but the feel of him, the taste of him, the strength in those hard arms around her, the softness of that beautiful mouth as he kissed her.

It was long and deep and wet and wonderful, that kiss. Like all his kisses, starting from the first one, on a night in early March outside the dance studio where his niece, DeDe, had just finished a recital. They’d gone to his place that night.

Afterward, they’d talked about how the night had been just something that had to happen, something they needed to do, to get their yen for each other out of their systems.

Something they would never do again...

He raised his head—but only to slant it the other way and kiss her some more. She could never get enough of those kisses of his. It was probably pointless to even try.

But then he lifted his head a second time. And when he didn’t immediately begin kissing her again, she let her eyelids drift open.

“Tanner?”

He was looking down at her, his eyes so dark—black as a night without stars. “When I touch you, I only want to touch you some more.” His arms encircled her and his magical fingers traced erotic patterns at the base of her spine. “It’s always like this. From that first day we met—the day Candy died, remember?”

Candy was his niece's dog. She'd been a sweet old mutt. "Yeah. I remember. I felt so sad about the dog. And DeDe was inconsolable. And then you came in... I wanted to jump you right there. I felt terrible about that. I mean, DeDe had just lost a pet she loved. And all I could think of was getting my hands on you. All over you."

His chuckle was low and much too sexy. "I was suspicious of you, showing up out of nowhere the way you did."

"I know."

"I also couldn't wait to touch you, to do all kinds of shocking things to you."

"It was the same for me." She ran her palm down the muscular shape of his arm. Below the sleeve of his black knit shirt, his skin was warm as living silk. She sighed at the feel of him.

His dark brows had drawn together. "But there's something on your mind tonight, isn't there?"

Her throat locked up. She gulped to clear it.

"Isn't there?" he asked again. "I mean, beyond your ass of an ex-boss who I'm not allowed to beat to a bloody pulp."

Her heart, which a minute ago had slowed to the deep, insistent rhythm his kisses inspired, was now thudding hard and hurtfully under her ribs. She had a sick, sinking feeling low in her belly. She was going to do it. Now.

She *had* to do it. Now.

"What is it? Just tell me." His voice was so soft.

And right then, before she could allow herself to back away from it again, she opened her mouth and pushed the words out.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

## Chapter Three

A baby...

Tanner gazed down into Crystal's wide eyes. She had the face of an angel, he'd always thought. Never more so than now. Her cheeks had flushed pink and a few strands of her long, curly hair had gotten loose from the golden mass and coiled over her left eye. He lifted his hand to tuck them behind her ear.

She caught his wrist, her grip fierce. "It's yours," she said, hitching her delicate chin high. "It's yours and I'm keeping it."

He waited until she let go, and then he continued the action, catching the soft strands, guiding them back into place. "Okay."

Her honey-brown eyes flashed at him. "Okay? That's all? Just...okay?"

"Crystal..." He wanted to comfort her somehow, or at least to reassure her that he would be there, that she could count on him.

But before he could find the words for that, she demanded, "*Okay*, you believe it's yours—or it's *okay* with you that I keep it?"

"Look, I..."

"What?"

"Both, okay? Both."

"Both," she whispered, doubting. Defensive.

"That's right."

A silence. Her full lower lip quivered. "I...I'm sorry. Suddenly, I'm kind of being a bitch about this, for no reason I can think of."

He shrugged. "It's okay. I can take it."

"It's just..." She heaved another ragged breath. "I've been trying to tell you for two weeks now. I was beginning to think I'd never work up the nerve. And now, all of a sudden, it's out, I've said it. You know." She stared at him, as if trying to decide what to say next. And then she added, "I'm sure it's...hard to accept." Strangely, it wasn't. She added, "So, if you want a paternity test—"

"No. I don't."

She blinked. "Just like that. You believe that it's yours?"

"I do."

It was more than mere belief. Tanner *knew* the baby was his. Because he knew Crystal. Yeah, she could be irresponsible. She really ought to take life more seriously. As of today she was out of work and he doubted she had more than a few hundred dollars in the bank. She never talked about her family, about her life before she met and became friends with Tanner's brother-in-law, Mitch Valentine, down in L.A. Tanner knew she kept secrets. But she wasn't a liar. If she said the kid was his, it was.

A kid. *His* kid...

How incredible was that?

She backed up against the sink counter. "We should...sit down, don't you think? Talk about this a little?"

"Right." He headed for the futon again. Aside from the dinner table with its two mismatched chairs, it was the only place to sit in the living area. She claimed she owned real furniture—she'd just left it behind for six months when she sublet her Hollywood apartment.

She trailed after him. They sat at either end of the long, lumpy blue cushion. The day was fading and shadows filled the corners of the room. She turned on the lamp that she'd borrowed from his sister.

Then she slumped into the cushion, letting her head rest on the back of the futon, and folded her hands on her still flat stomach. “I...sheesh. I hardly know where to start.”

He felt the same. But then he realized he did have a question. “Who else knows?”

It was a reasonable thing to ask. His sister, Kelly, was Crystal's best friend—and had been almost from the first day Crystal appeared at Kelly's front door looking for Mitch. Crystal considered Mitch to be the brother she'd never had; she claimed she'd packed up on the spur of the moment and moved to Sacramento because she “sensed” that Mitch needed her. So she very well might have told either of them—or both—that she was pregnant before she told Tanner.

Until then, she'd been keeping her eyes straight ahead, in the general direction of her small TV screen, which was flanked on either side by brick and board bookcases filled with books on things like reading tarot cards, feng shui and natural healing.

But now she rolled her head his way. “No one else knows yet. Just you.”

Her answer pleased him in some mysterious, deep way. “Well, okay.”

That curl of hair had settled over her eye again. She reached up and swiped it aside. “You keep saying ‘okay.’”

He shrugged. “It's all pretty new. You could say I'm at a loss for words.”

“Oh, yeah. I hear you there.” She was nodding, her irritation of a moment before gone as fast as it had appeared. “And now that you mention it, well, we *are* going to have to tell them, sooner or later....”

From the first time they ended up in bed together, Tanner and Crystal had agreed to keep this thing between them a secret. It had made perfect sense to both of them all along—after all, each time it happened was supposed to be the *last* time. And since Crystal hadn't told either Mitch or Kelly about the baby, chances were the other couple was still in the dark about the two of them.

It was just too damned weird to try to explain to the family that he and Crys didn't want to go out with each other, that they had nothing in common, didn't want to get anything started when it was so clear it was going nowhere—and yet somehow they couldn't help ending up naked together every time they saw each other.

He suggested, “Maybe we should wait until they get back from their trip to say anything about this.”

“Agreed,” Crystal said. “And I think I'll wait to mention losing my job, too. After all, it's their honeymoon. It's a time that's supposed to be all about *them*.”

Kelly and Mitch—recently reunited after years apart—were leaving the next day for two weeks on an island paradise somewhere east of Madagascar. Though they'd tied the knot a month earlier, it had taken Kelly several weeks to clear her calendar at work for the trip. Crystal would be staying at the house while the newlyweds were gone, looking after Tanner's niece, DeDe. Tanner, whose job often took him away from Sacramento for days at a time, was supposed to be helping out Crystal whenever his schedule allowed.

Crystal stared glumly at the dark TV again. “Strange. For two weeks, all I've thought about is how I had to tell you. And now that I have, I feel...I don't know. Limp. Numb. Like I don't know what to do next.”

“It's—” he almost said *okay*, but stopped himself just in time “—all right.”

She looked at him, forced a smile. “Just think. If I'd only kept my mouth shut, we could be having great sex right now, instead of sitting here on this futon not knowing what to say to each other.”

“I'm glad you told me,” he said gruffly.

Another silence fell between them. He heard her sigh. She stared across the room again as he considered the question of what to do next.

To Tanner, family was everything. And now this woman was having his baby. She wasn't the woman he'd planned to settle down with. Whenever he thought of getting serious with a woman, which he'd always imagined would happen eventually, he'd pictured a quiet, steady kind of person

at his side, a practical, thrifty woman—in short, a woman nothing like the one slumped next to him on the futon now.

Then again, he *was* thirty-one, and where was this ideal woman he'd always told himself he was looking for? Now and then over the years, he'd met women like the one he'd always told himself he wanted. He'd asked each of those admirable females out. They'd all bored him silly.

Crystal never bored him. Also, she was already more or less a part of his family. Not to mention the only woman he'd had on his mind—or in his bed—since she came rolling into town in that dusty red Camaro of hers two and a half months ago.

Most important, he had to think of the baby's welfare. Yeah, he wanted his kid to have his name. What man wouldn't want that? But even more than his name, Tanner wanted him to grow up in a real family, the kind he'd never had as a kid.

Crystal heaved a sigh. “Oh, well. It had to be done. You needed to know. And I'm glad I've finally told you.”

He stared at her profile, thinking that even in rippedout jeans and a red-and-white striped T-shirt she looked like a princess in some old-timey fairy tale. Her features were even and delicate, her skin that classic peaches and cream. And then there was all that gorgeous, curly hair. He liked to bury his face in it when they were making love, to wrap it around his fist....

She rolled her head his way again. “And one thing I really do want to make clear to you—I mean, I know how you are....”

He gave her the lifted eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? How's that?”

“You're a total traditionalist at heart.”

He already knew he wasn't going to like whatever was coming next. “So what if I am?”

She reached across and put her hand on his arm, as if to steady him for what she was going to say next. And then she laid it on him. “I need you to understand, right now from the first, that marriage is not on the agenda.”

Should he have known that was coming? Probably. He lowered his arm out from under her touch. “So there's an agenda, huh?”

“It's only a figure of speech—meaning ‘in the plan.’ Marriage is not in the plan. I want us to learn to work together to make the best life we can for the baby. I'm hoping that over the months and years to come our...connection as single parents will evolve.”

Evolve? She wanted them to *evolve*? Like something that crawled up out of the ocean and eventually learned to stand on two legs? Though he had a fine poker face and used it at that moment, it irked him no end that she said ‘in the plan,’ as if there was only one plan—the plan, meaning *her* plan.

However, it was enough for the moment that she'd gotten the truth out of that beautiful mouth of hers. There would be plenty of time later to discuss the marriage issue. For now he said, in the same neutral tone he'd been using most of the evening, “Well, all right.”

“Great.” She straightened up and gave him a bright smile and a brisk nod, as if their single-parent future was all settled.

It wasn't. Not by a long shot. True, the two of them were no match made in heaven. But still, maybe the marriage angle deserved at least a *little* consideration....

The shining black limousine was waiting at the curb in front of Kelly's house when Crystal arrived the next morning at ten. The windows of the big car were tinted, so she couldn't see the driver, but she knew there was one in there.

Mitch, an entrepreneur who owned companies in Dallas and in L.A., must have ordered the car to drive him and Kelly to the airport. He often used limos to get around, so the sight of it was no surprise.

Tanner's car was there, too, parked in the driveway. Not surprising, either. Of course, he'd want to be there to wish the newlyweds a great trip.

Crystal pulled in next to the black Mustang. He'd been so great about everything last night, so gentle and sweet and accepting. And so agreeable, too.

*Agreeable.* She smiled to herself. It wasn't a word she would have associated with the tall, dark and devastatingly sexy Tanner—until now. How wrong she had been.

She got out of the car and strolled up the front walk, enjoying the bright May sunshine, so warm on her back, admiring the red roses in bloom near the porch. Such a fine, fine day. And her life seemed to be shaping up. No, she didn't have a job. But she would find one, soon. And Tanner knew about the baby.

Things could be worse.

Then a harried-looking Kelly pulled open the front door. "You're here. Good." Her smooth brows were drawn together in a distracted-looking frown.

"What's going on?" Crystal stepped up into the entry hall.

"It's DeDe." Kelly shook her head. Deirdre was Mitch's natural child, the result of his and Kelly's high school love affair. But when Kelly had left town to live with her newfound brother, Mitch had broken off their relationship and disappeared—after which Kelly had discovered she was having his baby.

Ten years had passed before Kelly had found him again. Now Kelly had the man she'd never stopped loving. Mitch had the family he needed more than anything. And DeDe had her father, at last. Everything should have been perfect.

Kelly added softly, "She used to be the most levelheaded, easygoing kid around. But sometimes lately, I just don't know..."

"Where is she?"

"In her room. Throwing one hell of a tantrum. Mitch is in there with her. She's decided she doesn't want us to go."

Crystal made a low, sympathetic noise.

Kelly gestured toward the living room, and the kitchen beyond. "Tanner's here." All the old fondness was back in her voice when Kelly said her brother's name. Something had gone wrong between Tanner and Kelly when Mitch had come back. Neither of them would talk about it. But whatever the problem was, it seemed to be over now. "Give us a minute or two. We're trying to settle her down before we go."

"Courage."

"Thanks. I'll need it." Kelly disappeared down the hall.

Dropping her purse on the low bench by the big bay window as she passed, Crystal went through the living room. In the kitchen, she found Tanner sitting at the table with a full mug of coffee in front of him.

"Morning," he said, his deep voice sending the inevitable thrill coursing through her.

"Hi." She pulled out a chair.

"There's coffee..." He frowned. "Or is that off the menu now?"

"Pretty much. Not that I mind. I was never real big on coffee, anyway. Kelly's got some herbal teas—but maybe later." His hair was still damp from his morning shower. She wanted to touch it, to put her hand on the side of his freshly shaved cheek—but no. Kelly or Mitch might come in any minute. And they were keeping their relationship to themselves until after the honeymoon.

*Their relationship.* Crystal almost smiled. Now, with the baby coming and his easy acceptance of the fact, it seemed okay to call this thing between them a relationship. True, it wasn't your usual kind of relationship. They weren't headed for a lifetime of love and marriage or anything. But they were committed to the baby, and they were going to work together to be good parents. Now, by any definition of the word, they had a relationship. An important one.

And she found that it pleased her, to think of the two of them as more than just matching sets of wild hormones unable to keep from jumping each other at every possible opportunity.

“What’s up with DeDe?” She kept her voice low.

“Acting out,” he spoke out of the corner of his mouth. “Big time.”

“Should we do something, you think? I’d hate to see them postpone their trip.”

“Do something like what?”

She thought about that and shrugged. “Good question.”

“Don’t worry. They’re not backing out of the trip. Or so they said a few minutes ago....”

Right then they heard a door open in the hallway, then Mitch’s voice: “Come on, Kell. We have to get going....”

A cry—from DeDe. “Oh, Dad. How can you do this? How can you just go?”

“Stop it,” said Kelly. “Stop it now.”

“But—”

“Enough.” Kelly’s voice was flat and final. “Your father and I are going on our honeymoon and your behaving badly is not going to stop us.”

DeDe muttered something that Crystal couldn’t make out.

Then Kelly spoke again, in a tone that would tolerate no argument. “Wipe your eyes and blow your nose. And come out and say goodbye to us. Now.”

Footsteps in the hallway. Kelly and Mitch came in through the dining room, looking stressed out when they should have been happy and dewy-eyed, a pair of newlyweds heading off for two weeks of romance in a tropical paradise.

Crystal rose as they entered. She went and hugged them both, Kelly first. When she got to Mitch, she said, “Please don’t worry about DeDe. As soon as you’re gone, she’ll snap out of it, I’m sure.”

Mitch’s brown eyes were full of doubts. “Hold that thought. Because we *are* going and that’s that. The limo’s packed up and we’re outta here.” He took Crystal’s hand and pressed a check into it.

She looked down at it and shook her head. “It’s way too much. Food is only going to be—”

“Crys.” Kelly stepped in. “We want to be sure that everything’s handled. Extra is better than not enough.”

“Yeah,” Mitch added dryly. “Take the money. For once.” He was always trying to give her money—like the honorary big brother he was to her. He had a fortune and somehow she was always just barely scraping by. He never understood that it was a point of pride with her to pay her own way.

“Thanks,” she said, accepting that now wasn’t the time to argue about it.

Tanner said, “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of DeDe. She’ll be fine.”

*We?* DeDe’s care, after all, was to be mostly on Crystal. Tanner would be around when he could manage it. She sent him a questioning glance and he gave her a nod. Whatever *that* meant.

Then again, he would want them to know he had her back. She was glad for that. Truly.

More footsteps in the hall. DeDe appeared, followed by the scruffy brown dog she’d named Cisco, a stray Mitch had found and adopted after the loss of Candy. The dog dropped to its haunches and panted in contentment.

DeDe, on the other hand, had a red nose and a look of pure misery in her puffy eyes. She wore a purple leotard and tights to match.

“Goodbye,” she said glumly and held up her cheek to be kissed.

Mitch and Kelly exchanged bleak glances. But neither wavered. They hugged their daughter and told her they loved her. DeDe bore their attention with the brave determination of a tragic heroine condemned to a horrible and hopeless fate.

Kelly pointed out the calendar she’d made of DeDe’s numerous activities. It was mounted by magnet on the fridge, a list of phone numbers beside it. “Cell phone service will be undependable. But there are landlines in the suite. And if you call the resort’s main desk, they’ll track us down. So you can always reach us,” she said. “Anytime.”

Tanner stood. “We’re on it.” There was that *we* again. “Don’t worry.”

Kelly grabbed him in a hug. “I just want to be sure we’ve covered everything. You both already have keys....”

“It’s going to be fine,” Crystal promised.

They all moved toward the front door—even the sulking DeDe, who trailed behind the others, still angry but unwilling to let her parents go without giving them a final, reluctant wave goodbye. The dog followed DeDe, taking up the rear.

The four of them—Crystal, Tanner, DeDe and Cisco—stood out on the sidewalk until the limo rounded the corner. DeDe turned for the house first.

Inside, the nine-year-old went straight to her room, the faithful mutt at her heels.

Crystal started to follow, but Tanner caught her hand. He shook his head and said low, “Don’t get all over her now. Let her settle down a little.”

Crystal decided he was probably right. “Good point.” She pulled her hand free. It felt much too good tucked so warmly in his.

“She’s leaving in a few minutes anyway,” he said. “Some lesson or other, I think.”

Crystal went into the kitchen to double-check the calendar. Sure enough, a lesson at eleven and an afternoon at a friend’s to follow.

Tanner stuck his head in the doorway from the living room. “Am I right?”

“Yep.”

DeDe, wearing her purple backpack, trudged back in from the hallway. “I have to go now,” she said loftily. “I have modern dance at eleven. Mrs. Lu is picking me up. Then we’ll go to Mia’s after.” Mia Lu was in several of DeDe’s dance classes as well as in her class at school. The two girls were good friends. “I’ll be back by four. If that’s okay.”

Crystal gave her a smile. “See you at four, then.”

DeDe sniffed, a sound that was followed by a heavy sigh. “Well. Okay, then. Bye...”

Tanner nodded. “Later.”

“Cisco. Stay,” DeDe commanded. The dog gave a low whine and sat. DeDe went out the front door. By silent agreement, Crystal and Tanner moved to the bay window in the living room. They watched as Mrs. Lu drove up in her white van. DeDe got in and the van drove away.

Tanner grunted. “That kid. She used to be so reasonable.” He nudged her gently with his elbow. “Maybe you should chant to make her change her attitude.”

“Ha-ha.”

“Or maybe she needs a hot rock massage....”

She granted him a glance of cool superiority. “How many times do I have to explain to you that enlightenment is a personal journey? She has to *want* to change. That’s the first, all-important step.”

“Woo-woo,” he said.

“Tease me all you want, but deep down, you know what I’m saying is true.”

He put his arm around her, a fond sort of gesture, as they stood there gazing out the window together. She didn’t pull away. It felt good—companionable.

And he said in a musing tone, “Even as a baby, she would lie there making happy, cooing sounds. Hardly ever cried. I gotta say, the way she’s been behaving lately, I almost wish she was a baby again. I’ll take the loaded diapers and the feedings every four hours, any day.”

That’s right, Crystal thought. Kelly was still in high school when she had DeDe—and living with her big brother at the time. Tanner would know all about DeDe as a baby. The idea pleased her. He might be a tough, private eye type, but he did have experience with babies. More experience than she had, when you came right down to it.

She predicted, “I’m sure DeDe’ll get used to the changes having her dad around has made in her life. She’ll be her old self again in time, just watch.”

Tanner grunted. “I only hope it’s soon. Think. She’s almost ten. She’ll be a teenager before you know it. When that happens, all bets are off.”

Crystal's thoughts strayed back to the baby—*their* baby. "It's not easy, is it, raising a child?" He put on a dark look. "Hell, no." And then he grinned. "Haven't you heard? Only crazy people have kids."

She laughed. "Crazy. Right."

"That's us," he said low. "Out of our minds in a big, big way." And they shared a long look of what could only be called mutual understanding. Bizarre. Crystal and Tanner, all bondy together. But then he said, "Well, I guess we ought to bring our stuff in, get settled, all that..." He dropped his arm from around her shoulders and started for the door.

*Our* stuff? The good feeling fled. He *was* up to something.

"Wait a minute."

He turned back to her. "Yeah?"

"You just said *our* stuff?"

"That's right." His expression was way too innocuous—and Tanner Bravo was *never* innocuous. The vague sense of alarm she felt ratcheted up a notch. Then he said, "I gave it some thought last night after I left your place, and I realized that this was a great opportunity and we shouldn't let it pass us by."

She stared at him, not following. "A great opportunity?"

"Oh, yeah."

"For what?"

"To live together."

She still didn't understand. "But...why would we want to live together?"

"Oh, come on, Crys. You know it's a good idea."

"No. No, I don't. There's no reason we need to share a house."

"Yeah. We do."

"No. We don't."

"Think of it this way. It's like an experiment. To see how we get along, being around each other every day. Just in case."

She fell back a step. "Just in case...what?"

"In case we decide we want to get married, after all."

## Chapter Four

Tanner wanted to grab her and kiss her. He'd been wanting to take her in his arms since the moment she'd walked into the kitchen, before Kelly and Mitch had taken off.

But judging by the look on her face when he'd said the word *married*, kisses were not in the offing.

She said, so carefully, "Tanner. I thought I explained to you. There's not going to be any marriage."

"Yeah." He gave her a thoughtful nod. "You explained that."

Her cheeks were flushed. A pulse beat in the curve of her throat. Total frustration. It came off her in waves. "And...we agreed about not getting married. You said okay."

"Okay can mean a whole lot of things, Crystal. For instance, 'Okay, I hear you.' And I did. I heard you. Doesn't mean I agreed with you."

She folded her arms around herself. Tight. "I'm not going to marry you. That's that. You'd better get used to it."

He could have gotten irritated. But no. He'd thought this whole thing through. Any show of anger on his part would only make her more determined to resist him.

So he asked in a lazy, good-natured tone, "I've been wondering. What have you got against marriage?"

"Nothing," she answered, too quickly. Then she qualified her statement. "I mean, you know. In principle."

"You have nothing against marriage, in principle...."

"Isn't that what I said?"

"Only in reality?"

"No. That's not what I meant. I meant that I think marriage is great as an institution. I have nothing but admiration for couples who love each other and want to work together to build a life and all that. I just don't think you and I are cut out for it. At least not with each other."

"Why not give us a chance? We might surprise you."

She made a scoffing sound. "Oh, I doubt that."

"Hey, don't be so rigid."

She stiffened where she stood. "I am not rigid."

Tanner hid a grin. That one must have stung. Crystal prided herself on going with the flow and all that crap. She was the ultimate play-it-as-it-lays kind of woman. Calling her rigid had gotten her right where she lived. Which was what he'd intended.

He said gently, "Yeah. You are. You're being rigid. And that's not like you. You could...give it a chance, couldn't you? Kind of...roll with the punches."

She looked at him sideways. "*You're telling me* to roll with the punches?"

"Wild, huh?"

"Well, and what do you mean, give it a chance? I don't see marriage as something you...take a chance at. Like the lottery or the slot machines in Vegas. When and if I ever get married, I want to be sure I'm making the right decision. I want my marriage to last."

Patience, he explained himself. "I meant give the *idea* of you and me getting married a chance. Think about it. That's all."

She glanced away. He knew then that he was making progress. A moment later, she huffed out a breath. "I just don't...last night, you didn't even hint that you might be considering marriage."

He reached out, pried her top hand free where she had clutched it around herself and cradled it in both of his. "Be fair. You've known about the baby for weeks. You've had all that time to think about what you wanted to do."

Now she looked at him. Finally. A look of indecision, which was good. Excellent, even. “Well, yes,” she said. “I understand. Of course you need time...”

“Come on. Come here...” He pulled her to the couch and guided her down next to him. Then he said, using words she might have chosen herself, “I only want you to be...open to all the possibilities, that’s all.”

She cleared her throat. “Well, of course I’m open. But I don’t want to get marr—”

“Shh.” He touched her mouth, lightly. “Listen.”

“What?”

“I’ve made some calls. Got a couple of colleagues to take over the trips I had scheduled in the next two weeks—everything else I have working, the things I need to handle myself...they’re all right here in town, or within a fifty mile radius, anyway. And that means I can help you out with DeDe. I can stay here.”

“I don’t need for you to stay here.”

He let a moment of silence elapse before asking, “What are you so afraid of, Crystal?”

She pinched up her mouth at him. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

“I think you are. You’re afraid of marriage. And you’re afraid of me.”

“No. No, I’m not. I...I respect the institution of marriage. Someday, I might even get married myself. To the right kind of guy.”

“Which I’m not?” Okay. Now he was starting to get a little ticked off at her.

“No,” she said defiantly. “You’re not. Not for me—a fact which you know, as we’ve both agreed every time we had sex together that it was never going to go anywhere because we weren’t suited to each other, which is why we were never going to have sex again.”

“And then we did.”

“Not the point.”

“True.” He chose his next words with great care. “I just want you to realize that everything’s changed now that you’re pregnant.”

“But I do realize that.”

“Good. Now, all our past agreements about how we weren’t going to be together are just that. Gone. Done. Over. Now, I think we have a responsibility to see if, just maybe, we might be able to get it together for a lifetime, after all.”

That shut her up. For maybe five seconds. And when she did speak, she conceded. Sort of. “I... all right. I see your point. You never know. Anything’s possible and we should be open. We shouldn’t close off any avenue out of hand.”

“Good.” He rose. “Then it’s settled. I’ll stay.”

She gazed up at him, looking adorably puzzled. “Since when was that settled?”

“Since we decided that we’ve got a built-in opportunity here, to give living together a try, an opportunity we both agree we shouldn’t pass up.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that—I mean, not exactly.”

“Come on, Crystal. Stop waffling and give us both a break here.”

“I just...” And then she sighed. “It’s not as if I can stop you from staying here if you’re going to insist.”

“You’re right. You can’t. And I am.”

“But...”

“What?”

“Well, just for the sake of clarity. I get the guest room and we are not sleeping in the same bed. DeDe doesn’t need that. She’s confused enough already.”

Damn. He’d been looking forward to whole nights in bed with her for a change. But she had a point about DeDe.

Then again, his niece was gone a lot. She took a boatload of different dance lessons, and she had a whole bunch of friends. There was always a sleepover at somebody's house. He and Crystal would have plenty of time alone, just the two of them....

"Fine," he said, trying to look agreeable and harmless, which they both knew he wasn't. "It won't be the first time I've slept on the daybed in Kelly's office."

She frowned and he knew she was feeling guilty for taking the better bedroom. "You could use Mitch and Kelly's room...."

"Naw. The daybed will do fine." He held down a hand to her. "So what do you say? Let's bring our stuff in."

She looked at him sideways for a moment, and he knew she was thinking suspicious thoughts. But in the end she let him help her up and they went out together.

Back inside, he put his things in the office and sat on the daybed and thought how getting her to agree that he'd stay in the house had gone pretty well. He had two weeks to get himself a better sense of Crystal as a potential wife.

He'd also get a chance to break down her defenses against the possibility that they might get married. They'd even have a kid to take care of, to practice being parents. Maybe they'd get lucky and DeDe would go back to being her old easygoing self, now that her mom and dad weren't there to fight with. Hey, it could happen.

And no matter how it all shook out in the end, at least he'd talked Crystal into this much: They were sharing a house. He only hoped the next phase of his plan would go as well as the first.

A tap on the door. "It's open."

Crystal pushed it wide. "I'm heading over to Raley's, to get some things I need for dinner."

"Great. I'll go with you."

She blinked. He was sure she would try and blow him off. But then she said, "Well, sure. If you want to."

"I'll drive."

He was up to something. Crystal knew it. Something beyond the whole weird "practice marriage" deal he'd dreamed up. She could tell by the hooded look in those eyes of his when he jumped at the chance to drive her to the grocery store.

"Raley's is that way." She pointed to the left as he turned right.

"I know where Raley's is." He made the turn and drove on in the wrong direction.

"So how come we're not going there?"

He turned his head her way and the sun glinted on the black lenses of his wraparound sunglasses. "I have something to show you first."

"What?"

He turned to face the road again. "My office."

"Why?"

"Just wait. You'll see."

She considered arguing with him, pointing out to him that she was willing to be flexible, no matter what he thought. No, she didn't want to get married just because they were having a baby. And truthfully, she didn't think the two of them would ever make a forever kind of match.

But okay, she could accept that it wouldn't hurt for the two of them to see how they got along, day-to-day, sharing the same house. Especially since the perfect opportunity to do that had fallen right in their laps.

However, his saying he wanted to go shopping with her and then heading off for somewhere else without telling her what he was up to, well, that amounted to trickery and trickery was low. And wasn't it just like him to do what he wanted and not bother to consult her?

Still. It wasn't as if she needed to be anywhere in particular at the moment. She could afford a detour, even if he *had* manipulated her into it.

Plus, she knew damned well that if she called him on his little deception, he would only start in on her about being rigid and not going with the flow. She just didn't want to hear it. So she rolled down the window, enjoyed the feel of the warm wind on her cheeks and didn't say a word the whole rest of the way to Rancho Cordova, where Tanner had his office.

The ride took about a half hour. At last, he turned into the back parking lot of a flat-roofed, unremarkable two-story building. He pulled into a space, stopped the car and took off his sunglasses.

"Ready?" There was excitement in his voice.

She almost smiled. Really, it was kind of touching how eager he seemed. "Lead the way," she said.

They went in through a rear entrance and up a flight of stairs. On the second floor, they walked down two hallways lined with doors that led to the offices of lawyers and bail bondsmen and a few businesses whose names told her nothing about what went on inside.

At last, he stopped in front of a door with Dark Horse Investigations on it and his name beneath. He unlocked that door, pushed it wide and gestured her in ahead of him.

She stepped into a reception area, which included a desk with nothing on it but a phone and a water-cooler minus the water. The lone window to the left of the desk had cheap brown miniblinds and a view of the building next door. There was brown all-weather carpeting on the floor. A brown loveseat, two end tables and a couple of brown chairs waited next to the door.

Beyond the empty desk was another door. That one had only his name on it. "I take it your private office is through there?"

He dropped to the sofa. "You got it. Want to have a look?"

"This is your deal. Do you *want* me to have a look?"

"Go for it."

So she crossed the room and opened the door on more brown carpeting, another desk—this one with a computer on top as well as a phone. Two lonely brown guest chairs faced the desk. There were four tall file cabinets filling one wall and another window with cheap blinds—that one looking out on the street in front. Framed documents marched in a line across the back wall. She moved into the room to get a closer look. The documents declared him licensed to be a private investigator in the states of California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Arizona and Texas.

Crystal returned to the bare waiting room, shut the door and turned to find Tanner watching her. "Depressing," she said.

"What? You don't like brown?"

"I'm surprised you ever get any clients, with an office like this."

"When you hire a P.I., it's not for the decor. And the truth is, I hardly use this place. I have a twenty-four-hour answering service. I usually just pick up my calls and meet clients...anywhere. Starbucks. Their offices. Whatever."

The phone on the desk started ringing. Tanner didn't get up.

She asked, "You're not going to answer it?"

He waited for the phone to fall silent before he explained. "The service will get it and send me a text." Right on cue, the phone at his belt chimed out two notes.

She waited for him to check the display and slide the cell back into the carrying case before she asked, "Call me crazy, but I have to know. Why have an office if you don't need it?"

He lifted a hard shoulder in a half-shrug. "Seems more...professional, I guess. An office. And an assistant. Someone to take the calls during business hours, someone to be here, to greet clients, someone to keep the records up-to-date, do the books. All that." He slanted her a look. "I have *had* assistants. They never worked out. I'm used to going it alone and they always had too many damn questions about every little thing. But I'm willing to try one more time, especially if I can find someone who likes to make her own decisions, someone who's independent by nature...."

By then it was all so painfully clear. "You mean someone like me?"

“That’s right. Someone just like you.”

“I don’t believe it. You’re offering me a job.”

“Believe it. I am.”

“You are just full of big plans today, aren’t you?”

He gave her his broodiest look. “A man finds out he’s going to be a father, it’s his nature to start making plans.”

She leaned back against the shut door to his brown inner sanctum. “Tell me you’re kidding. You don’t really imagine that you and I could work together.”

“Seriously. Not kidding. I *can*

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