



Desire

THE CHILD THEY
DIDN'T EXPECT

Yvonne Lindsay

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The Child They Didn't Expect

«HarperCollins»

Lindsay Y.

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Surprise—it's a baby! After their steamy vacation fling, Alison Carter knows Ronin Marshall is a skilled lover and a billionaire businessman. But a father... who hires her New Zealand baby-planning service? This divorcée has already been deceived once; Ronin's now the last man she wants to see. But he must have Ali. Only she can rescue Ronin from the upheaval of caring for his orphaned nephew... and give Ronin more of what he shared with her during the best night of his life. But something is holding her back. And Ronin will stop at nothing to find out what secrets she's keeping!

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The sight of Ali with a baby in her arms stopped him cold.

She was settling into the rocker with Joshua. The night-light bathed her in gold. Her tumbled curls, the shadows of her curves beneath her nightgown. His body reacted, his senses coming to swift attention. She shouldn't be having this effect on him, yet he couldn't tear his eyes away.

"I'll take him. Go back to bed." His tongue thickened on the words. *Back to bed.* They opened a floodgate of memories of what they'd shared. Of what he wanted to share with her again.

She looked up at him, and saw what he knew was reflected in his eyes. Hunger. Desire. Need.

A little voice in the back of his mind urged him to draw her into his arms, against his aching body. To do with her all those things his flesh clamored for.

Would he listen?

* * *

The Child They Didn't Expect is part of the No.1 bestselling series from Mills & Boon® Desire™—Billionaires & Babies: Powerful men ... wrapped around their babies' little fingers.

The Child They Didn't Expect

Yvonne Lindsay



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New Zealand born, to Dutch immigrant parents, **YVONNE LINDSAY** became an avid romance reader at the age of thirteen. Now married to her “blind date” and with two fabulous children, she remains a firm believer in the power of romance. Yvonne feels privileged to be able to bring to her readers the stories of her heart. In her spare time, when not writing, she can be found with her nose firmly in a book, reliving the power of love in all walks of life. She can be contacted via her website, www.yvonnelindsay.com.

I'm always very grateful to the generous hearts and minds that help me with the finer details of my books and this one is no different. This book I dedicate to Ashwini Singh with sincere thanks. Any errors relating to newborn intensive care are completely my own.

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[One](#)

Ronin lay wide awake in the darkness, his body sated and relaxed, yet hyperaware of the woman sleeping in his arms—of the softness of her curves pressed against his skin, of the sound of her gentle rhythmic breathing. Her lush dark brown hair tickled his sensitized flesh but he didn't want to move from this place, lost as he still was in the intensity of their lovemaking.

He didn't do one-night stands. Not ever. Well, not until tonight. But there had been something about this woman—a fellow New Zealander—that had struck him from the moment he'd brushed past her in the beachfront restaurant of their hotel complex. An instant responsiveness he had never

experienced before had stirred in him. Something that saw him agree to the restaurant hostess's suggestion that Ali join him at his reserved table after she was turned away due to overbooking.

The same something that had seen them go on to dancing after dinner, and then to a walk on the moonlit sands of Waikiki Beach. And finally, they had made love in her hotel room with a spontaneity and passion he'd never permitted himself to indulge in before.

His friends would be shocked if they ever heard that he—the king of all that was analytical and organized—had fallen into bed with a virtual stranger, purely based on *feelings* and the impulse of the moment. It wasn't his way, not at all. It flew in direct contrast to his talent for deductive reasoning, to his clinical efficiency in being able to take a problem apart and put it back together, to his ability to fix all things falling apart through logic and rationality. There had been nothing logical or rational about the night he had spent with this woman. And yet, it had been...magical. Yes, that was the only word he could think of to describe it—a word too ephemeral for his charts and numbers world.

Ali sighed and turned on her side, shifting away from him. He was about to reach for her, to pull her back and wake her so they could build on what they'd already savored together, when the discreet but persistent buzz of his cell phone from the pocket of his trousers, somewhere on the floor, dragged his attention away.

He flicked a glance at the time on the digital display across the room as he felt around for his trousers in the dark. 5:10 a.m. It definitely wouldn't be his client here in Waikiki who was calling. That only left home—New Zealand. His mind swiftly made the calculation. That would make it 4:10 a.m. tomorrow there, which was hardly a typical time for anyone to call. It was either a wrong number...or an emergency. He swept the phone into his hand, identifying his father's photo and number on the screen, and moved quickly to the hotel room bathroom.

Pulling the door closed behind him, he answered the phone. His father's anguished voice filled his ear.

“Dad, Dad, slow down. I can barely understand you.”

“It's CeeCee, Ronin. She's dead. And R.J., too.”

The horrifying words came through loud and clear. An icy cold sensation flooded through his veins. Surely this was some kind of nightmare. His beautiful and vibrant baby sister—dead? It couldn't be true. She'd been the picture of good health, blooming in late pregnancy, when he'd left home three days before. Ronin's brother-in-law had teased him about potentially missing the birth of his first niece or nephew because he'd been called to troubleshoot for an overseas client, yet again.

“How, Dad? When?” Shock made his lips stiff and uncooperative as he tried to form the words. “Tell me what happened.”

“She went into labor. R.J. was driving her to the birthing unit. A drunk driver went through a red light. He hit them broadside, pushed them into a pole. They didn't stand a chance.”

His father's voice cracked with emotion. The enormity of what had happened overwhelmed Ronin, and he felt his eyes burn with tears. As much as his brain screamed at him that this wasn't happening, logic dictated that this was real, actual, true. And here he was, in Hawaii, far from his family when they needed him most.

“The baby?” he managed to ask through a throat constricted by the clutch of raw grief.

“He was born by emergency caesarian. He nearly didn't make it. CeeCee died during the operation. Her injuries were too great for the doctors to save them both.”

Amid excoriating pain that threatened to drive him to his knees, Ronin processed the news that he had a nephew and forced himself to grapple with the knowledge that the much-loved, much-anticipated baby was now an orphan. He dragged his thoughts together. “Is Mum all right?”

“She's in shock. We both are. I'm worried, Ronin. This isn't good for her heart. We need you, son.”

“I'll be there as soon as I can. I promise.”

He took some details from his father and then, telling him he'd be in touch as soon as he had flight information, he reluctantly severed the call. Leaning against the cool tile of the wall, he took in several deep breaths. Calm. He needed to be calm and organized and all those things that usually came to him as second nature. It was a tall order when all he wanted to do was weep for the senseless loss his family had just suffered. For the dreams his sister and her husband would never see fulfilled. For the child who would grow up without his parents.

When he felt he had himself under control, he slipped back into the hotel room and silently gathered his clothing from where he'd scattered it so mindlessly on the floor only a few hours before. He dressed as quickly and quietly as he could and then let himself out of the room with one thing and one thing only on his mind. He had to get home.

* * *

The flight back to New Zealand, via Brisbane in Australia, had been undeniably long. He could have waited for a shorter, more direct flight later that day, but he needed to be home *now* and this was the flight that would get him there first. Ronin had filled the time by making lists of what needed to be done when he arrived home, of people who would need to be contacted, the arrangements made. Through it all his heart ached with a pain that was not as easily compartmentalized as the lists and instructions he'd so assiduously written.

Finally, after fifteen-plus hours of travel and transit, he was back where he belonged—where he was needed most. He spotted his father's pale face in the Arrivals Hall the moment he stepped through from Customs. Strong, familiar arms clapped around him in a gesture that reminded him so much of when he was younger. And then he felt the shudder that passed through his father's body and knew the older man now needed his comfort far, far more than he'd ever needed his father's.

"I'm so glad you're back, son. So glad." His father's voice trembled, sounding a hundred years older than he'd been only a few short days before.

"Me too, Dad. Me too."

It was late, after midnight, when they drove from the airport to his parents' Mission Bay apartment. As they carefully traversed the rain-slicked roads, his father hesitating that extra few seconds as each red light turned to green, Ronin turned his thoughts back to the woman he'd left behind in Hawaii. He'd have to contact the hotel, to leave a message explaining where he'd gone. He'd been so focused on the task of getting home as quickly as possible it hadn't occurred to him until right now that he'd completely abandoned her.

When had she said she was traveling home again? He racked his memory but grief and exhaustion proved a barrier to his usually highly proficient brain. He made a mental note to get a message to her as soon as possible. But right now, he thought as they pulled into the underground parking at his parents' apartment building on Auckland's waterfront, his family—what was left of it—came first.

* * *

A touch of jet lag still weighed on her as Ali pulled up outside her business, Best for Baby. She knew she'd made the right decision to go to Hawaii for a vacation—it had been on her bucket list for years and she'd finally been able to tick it off. But she promised herself she'd be finding an airline carrier that offered direct flights at a more reasonable hour the next time she took the trip—cost be damned.

Of course it would have been more fun to share the vacation with someone else, but, in lieu of company, Ali had enjoyed the luxury of taking things at her own pace and being at her own beck and call for a change. Establishing her baby-planning business had taken everything out of her these past three years. She was proud of everything she'd accomplished, but it had taken a toll. She'd more than earned her holiday.

She should have returned reenergized and full of vigor. Instead, she was nursing emotional bruises that, logically, she knew shouldn't hurt quite as much as they did. It had been one night only.

A handful of hours at best. She'd gone into it with no expectations, and yet she felt cheated, as if something potentially special had slipped from her grasp.

It was ridiculous, she knew. The confused pain she was experiencing was nothing like the pain she'd felt five years before, when her husband had admitted he didn't love her anymore, or even when he'd admitted to having an affair with the decorator he'd commissioned to redo his offices and to now loving *her*. But still, it left a sting when a guy sneaked out on a girl after the date night that, for Ali at least, had been the most excellent of all date nights—and especially when she'd broken every single rule in her book by sleeping with him. It had been an unpleasant shock to wake up alone. If he hadn't planned to see her again, why had he suggested they have breakfast in the morning and then spend her last full day in Hawaii together? Would it have killed him to leave her a message? Anything?

She gave herself a sharp mental shake. *Let it go, Ali*, she censured silently. *Let it go*. She'd suffered far worse and survived. This was a blip on her personal radar—no more, no less—and it was about time she treated it as such. She had to be practical about it. She didn't want another relationship—ever. Her business now filled the hole in her life that her broken marriage had left behind. Romance wasn't in the cards for her again. And she was fine with that. She should have known better than to let a little moonlight and a handsome stranger confuse matters. The entire experience now proved to her that she should never break her own rules about getting close to another guy, no matter how strongly she was attracted to him.

Satisfied she had her head on straight, Ali walked through the front door and called out to her assistant and good friend, Deb, at the front desk. “Good morning! Did you miss me?”

“Oh my God, yes. I've been flat off my feet. I have so much to tell you, but first you must tell me about Hawaii. Is it as beautiful as it looks in pictures?”

“It certainly is beautiful,” she said with a smile. “Especially the sunsets. Here, let me show you.”

Ali retrieved her cell phone from her satchel and opened the picture gallery. Together they oohed and ahed over the shots she'd taken during the past week.

“Are you sure you didn't just photograph a postcard or something?” Deb asked dubiously as they lingered over a shot of the beach at sunset.

Ali looked at the screen of her phone, at the shades of apricot through to pink and purple that stained the sky and at the ubiquitous palm trees forming perfect silhouettes against it. That had been the night she'd met Ronin. The night she'd taken the plunge, thrown inhibitions to the wind and indulged in...well...*him*—the only man she'd ever slept with aside from her ex.

She vividly remembered everything about him from the first moment they'd brushed against one another. She'd just been turned away because the restaurant was fully booked, and as she was starting to leave, without looking where she was going, they had connected. She didn't so much *see* him, as get a series of *impressions* of him. The first, being his size. Not just his height exactly, but his bulk and presence. It was almost as if he wore his masculinity like a coat of armor, his strength and power as much a part of him as the cells that made up his body. The second impression was his scent. With the tangle of fragrances and aromas in the air the hint of his cologne had been a subtle contrast. Almost like the sea breeze that blew up the beach, yet with a cool freshness that tantalized and teased her senses.

Their arms had grazed one another with the lightest of touches, and her breath had caught in her chest. It had been so long since her body had reacted in that way—that buzz, that zing of total awareness—that she'd almost forgotten what attraction felt like, especially attraction on such a visceral level. She'd felt feminine in every sense of the word.

His voice had been deep and resonant as he'd excused himself and stepped away. Ali had remained silent, too stunned by her physical reaction to his touch to do any more than nod her acknowledgment of his apology. It wasn't until he was well past her that she'd realized his accent was just like her own—from New Zealand. She'd looked back over her shoulder and seen the hostess

smile at him and pick up a menu before showing him through to his table. Beachfront. For one. And then she'd been invited to join him.

She shook off the flash of memory before her ever-astute friend saw too much on her face. Ali forced a laugh.

“Yes, I'm sure.”

“And did you meet any hot guys? Please tell me you met someone.”

She managed to summon a smile from somewhere. “I didn't go there to meet someone. I went there for a vacation, and that's exactly what I had. Now, tell me about what's kept you so busy while I was away,” she finished, deflecting Deb's attention as effectively as she could.

Deb spent a good twenty minutes giving Ali the abridged version of what had been going on in her absence. Best for Baby, if requested, provided a range of services to expectant families, from baby showers to nursery shopping to interviewing and providing a shortlist of nannies, when needed. She'd had a slow start when she'd opened their doors three years prior, but over the past twelve months, referrals had begun to bring business with increasing frequency.

It was bittersweet work for a woman who knew she'd never bear a child of her own, but it was rewarding in its own way to create the perfect world for a new family.

A perfect world she'd never believed she wouldn't have.

As a child she'd been a little mother for all her toys. She loved children, and had always been eager to raise a house full of them—a dream that she had shared with her high school sweetheart, who had become her husband. They'd hoped to start building their family right away after their wedding...but it wasn't meant to be. Discovering she lacked the essential female ability to have a baby of her own had been a massive blow—one she'd believed she'd overcome with Richard at her side. But she'd discovered she was too flawed for him. So flawed that he'd stopped loving her—and eventually left her for another woman.

Over the past few years she'd become adept at hiding the pain her inadequacies caused her. As the youngest of four sisters, all of whom had children and had remained happily together with their spouses, it hadn't been easy, but she'd gotten there. Best for Baby had given her a sorely needed sense of purpose, and had gotten her through the worst of it.

“The Holden baby shower went really well. They loved the games, and the cupcakes,” Deb said, pulling Ali's focus to the here and now.

“Did you send flowers to the bakery with our thank-you note? The way they pulled that together on such short notice really saved us,” Ali said, remembering how, on the day of her departure to Hawaii, their usual catering supplier had let them down at the last minute.

“I certainly did. The owner called to say she'd be happy to continue to work with us in the future. Oh, and yesterday we got a new contract.”

“Don't you mean a lead?”

“Nope. A bright, shiny new contract. Signed and everything.”

“What? Just like that?” Ali asked in disbelief.

“Yup, just like that.” Deb looked smug.

Usually there was a process—meetings with clients, presentations of proposals, acceptance of ideas and terms, etc. You didn't *just* get a new contract straightaway like that. Or at least she hadn't, up until now. Her incredulity must have shown on her face.

“Yes, I know. I was surprised, too, but there's some urgency involved as the baby has already been born,” Deb said. “Because of complications he's still in hospital. The client wants the nursery completed before the baby is released to the family. And wait, there's more.”

“How much more?” Ali asked, doubtful about this sudden good fortune.

“You have carte blanche on the nursery. Your design, your budget.”

“No! Seriously? Are you certain this is legit?”

“Sure am. I emailed the contract to the client and it arrived back, fully completed and in duplicate, by courier the same day. Even better, the deposit landed in our bank account overnight.”

Ali accepted the clipped papers that Deb handed to her and quickly perused them. Everything seemed to be in order. She looked at the bold signature at the bottom of the agreement. She couldn't make out the name, but it appeared a company rather than an individual had contracted Best for Baby's services. She hadn't heard of REM Consulting before, but that didn't mean anything.

“Well,” she said on a slow exhalation of breath. “It certainly looks genuine.”

“They want you to go around to the house, today if possible, and start putting things in motion. It doesn't sound like they have the vaguest idea of what they want, which is a bit weird, but they need the job done quickly. I told them you'd be there at three this afternoon.”

Ali groaned inwardly. She'd hoped to spend all day in the office, catching up on email and correspondence, but it looked like some of that would have to wait until tonight. Oh well, it wasn't as if she had any grand plans for her evening, anyway. Work had been her constant companion in the past three years, so why should it be any different now?

“Okay, then. I'd better at least attempt to get up-to-date before I head out, hadn't I?”

“Lucky for you I left you a few things to do,” Deb said with a cheeky smile. “I'll put the coffee on while you go through your email.”

“Thanks, Deb. You're a lifesaver.”

The morning passed quickly. Ali ate her lunch at her desk while checking job sheets for clients before heading out to her appointment. She'd made steady progress today, with Deb fielding her calls for her. With taking work home, by tomorrow afternoon, she'd be fully back on deck and up-to-date. She looked up at Deb as she came into her office.

“I called the client to confirm the meeting and I've checked the traffic report. The southern motorway is slow, so you might want to head out soon if you're going to make it to Whitford on time.”

Ali glanced at her watch. “Thanks. I'll head out now.”

* * *

It took nearly an hour for Ali to reach her destination, and she sent a silent message of thanks to Deb for giving her the heads-up to start driving early. She prided herself on punctuality but was prone to getting wrapped up in a project, so she sometimes needed that extra nudge. Once she left the motorway and headed into the green and rolling hills of the rural area on the fringe of the city, she felt herself begin to get excited about the task ahead.

This was the first time she had carte blanche to create everything from the floorboards up. Usually clients had pretty strong ideas already about what they wanted by the time they came to her, so it was a little odd that the parents didn't seem to have any preferences. But, she rationalized, if the baby was scheduled to remain in the hospital for another few days then he was likely premature. The parents might have thought they'd have more time to make a final decision. And now, maybe they were simply too busy with their new arrival to want to even think about such matters.

She wondered what business the baby's parents were in that they could afford both to live out here and to commission a job that would command a very high figure from Best for Baby. Well, whatever they did, Ali was committed to providing an exemplary nursery. Her GPS alerted her to the turnoff coming ahead and Ali slowed her car to take a right into the driveway. At the entrance she announced herself to the console and drove through as the verdigris iron gates gracefully swung open.

The driveway itself was long, more like a private road, she thought as she drove along it. Cows grazed in fields on either side of the gentle rise and she caught a glimpse of a couple of ponds with a few ducks floating happily on the surface. This really was idyllic. The child who grew up here would be lucky, indeed. The driveway curved up the rise to reveal the home she was visiting. It was difficult not to feel a pang of envy for the owners of the beautiful property that spread out before her. Constructed with a steeply sloping gray slate roof, the cream-toned brick house was both imposing and graciously subtle at the same time. She'd barely noticed it from the roadside, and yet from up here,

it magnificently commanded an uninterrupted sweeping view right out over the Waitemata Harbor and out to the Hauraki Gulf.

Get with the program, she reminded herself as she parked her car near the front door. *You're not here to admire the scenery. You're here to do a job.* She gathered her things and got out of her car. An uncharacteristically nervous tremor passed through her at the prospect of meeting her new clients. Ali chalked it up to the unusual circumstances of the job as she rang the doorbell and then stood waiting in the portico, looking out at the expansive rural scene that spread before her.

Normally she'd have met with her clients at least twice before coming to their home. She liked to gauge how well they'd work together through preliminary meetings at her office before any contracts were signed. In a couple of cases, she'd even refused contracts because she'd known she wouldn't be able to get along with the people involved. This was such a personal business, everyone needed to be on the same page from the get-go. Would she get along with this couple? She hoped so. Her imagination fired to life as she waited, the natural setting and water beyond it already stimulating ideas for the nursery. It would be profoundly disappointing, and not just from a financial perspective, if she found she couldn't work with these clients.

Hearing the front door open behind her, she turned with a smile on her face. A smile that instantly froze in place as her eyes and her brain identified the person framed in the imposing entrance in front of her. As she recognized the stubby jaw, the spikey dark blond hair, the intense blue gaze.

Ronin Marshall. Her one-night lover.

The last man on earth she'd ever expected, or now wanted, to see again.

Two

Ronin did a swift double take before his brain and his mouth kicked into gear.

"Ali?"

He'd heard the voice on the intercom at the gate but he'd been distracted, not really listening. Ali stood before him looking as poleaxed as he himself felt, but she seemed to gather herself together a moment later. Dressed in a salmon-pink rolled-collar blouse and pale gray pencil skirt, she was the epitome of professional chic. The color of her blouse did amazing things to her gently sun-kissed skin and made the soft gray-blue of her eyes stand out. Strange, he hadn't noticed what color her eyes were. Well, not so strange when he considered they'd met at night and most of what they'd done together after that had been by candlelight or no light at all.

"There must be some mistake," she said hesitantly. "*You* contracted our services?"

"Yes. Well, technically, my P.A. organized it."

"But you want a nursery," she stated.

"Yes, yes. Please, come in." He stepped back and gestured for her to enter the foyer. "I had no idea it would be you," he said involuntarily.

"Does that make a difference?" Ali asked pointedly, almost with a hint of challenge.

There was a light in her eyes that implied she was angry about something. It confused him. What on earth did she have to be so mad about?

"Of course not. I'm sure you're very good at your job. I just never expected to see you again. I tried to leave a message for you at the hotel, but you'd already checked out."

She raised one perfectly plucked brow in response. It was clear she didn't believe him. He sighed. Believe him or not, they'd have to put their feelings aside. They had a job to do, and he badly needed her help.

The funeral that morning had been harrowing and his emotions were still raw, his thoughts uncommonly scattered. Seeing Ali here, in his home, compounded that confusion. It'd been a hell of a day so far and, judging by the expression on Ali's face, it wasn't going to get better any time soon.

"Look," he said. "I owe you an apology. Can we please start again?"

He put out his hand. She hesitated a moment before grasping it. The second she did, he was instantly struck by that jolt of awareness he'd felt the first time he'd met her. Despite everything that

had transpired since he'd left her bed, the connection between them remained. He wanted to cling to it, to her. The notion was both atypical of him and utterly compelling at the same time.

"Please don't worry," she said. She pulled free of his clasp with a jerk. "Now, shall we get down to business?"

"Business." He nodded. So that was how she wanted to play it. To act like they'd never met before. To pretend that they'd never touched or kissed. That he had never been buried so deep inside her body that he'd begun to lose all sense of himself, instead reveling in her glory. Was it really possible for her to forget all that? He knew full well it wouldn't be possible for him.

If he hadn't seen the telltale flush of color that bloomed at the opening of her blouse when they'd shaken hands, he might have thought she'd been unmoved by their physical contact. But that hint of color, that evidence of the heat that had burned between them, told him far more than her demeanor. He was the king of compartmentalizing things. Of course he could play it her way. That didn't mean he'd like it.

"Come this way." He led her over the foyer's parquet flooring and turned right down a short hall. He gestured for her to go ahead of him into the slightly less formal living room, where he spent much of his leisure time while at home. "Please, take a seat. Can I get you something? Tea, coffee? A cool drink?"

"Just water, thank you," she said as she settled herself into one of the comfortable fabric-covered chairs arranged conversationally around the large wooden coffee table.

It only took a moment to grab a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and a couple of tumblers. He returned to the living room and poured water for each of them.

"I appreciate you being able to come out at such short notice."

"We pride ourselves on our service, Mr. Marshall," she said primly as she unfolded the cover from a tablet. A light touch of her fingertip and he saw the device come to life, much like he had not so very long ago beneath that very same touch.

"Ronin," he corrected.

They'd been intimate together—so deeply intimate. They might be discussing business, but he refused to sit there and listen to her call him Mr. Marshall.

She inclined her head but still avoided using his name. "Now, what is it exactly that you need from us?"

"Everything," he said.

For a moment grief and helplessness surged to the forefront of his mind, but he resolutely pushed the feelings back. He had to keep control of himself...but his usual cool rationality had never been so hard to reach. CeeCee and R.J.'s funeral had been hell in every sense of the word. It had made everything so real, so final. His parents had gone directly from the wake to the hospital. He'd wanted to go, too, but this meeting took precedence. He couldn't bring the baby home until he had something to bring him home to.

A ripple of fear rolled through the back of his mind. What if he'd bitten off more than he could chew with the decision to raise his nephew himself? For the briefest second he considered what his cousin Julia had said to him after the funeral. Already a mother of two, she and her husband had offered to bring CeeCee's son up in their family. It made sense, she'd said. She was already geared up for small children, and with her, her husband and her two daughters—both in primary school—the baby would have a wonderfully stable home. As she'd pointed out, being the infant's guardian didn't mean he had to actually raise him. He could still make sure the little boy had the best of everything without having him directly under his roof. With his long working hours, frequent travel and lack of a wife or committed girlfriend to share the load, Julia had claimed that Ronin's life simply didn't have room for a baby in it.

But it had been clearly outlined in CeeCee's and R.J.'s wills that they had wanted him to care for any children of theirs should anything ever happen to them. Ronin raised a hand to his eyes and

swiped at the burning sensation that stung them. He owed it to his sister to fulfill her wishes. Besides, he'd assessed this from every angle already, and he was committed to seeing it through. And, as with any issue he troubleshooted, that meant getting the right people in to help with the job. People, who in this case, had turned out to be Ali Carter.

He continued, "Look, I don't have the first idea of what to do."

"Then it's a good thing you called Best for Baby," Ali said, oblivious to the turmoil that was churning inside him. "So, correct me if I'm wrong. You have absolutely nothing here in preparation for the baby."

"That's right," he confirmed. "CeeCee was fiercely superstitious about buying anything before the baby was born. And she forbade anyone else from buying things. There wasn't even a baby shower, at her insistence. We tried to persuade her otherwise, but she was nothing if not determined."

A small frown flittered across her face so swiftly he wasn't sure he'd seen it. She drew in a deep breath and let it go slowly.

"And when is the baby coming home?"

"He should be released in about ten days' time, if all goes well."

She typed a note on her tablet. Even though she hadn't commented on the short time frame she had to work with, he had the impression she disapproved somehow. He knew his request was unusual, but this had mostly been covered in the contract, so he couldn't believe she was surprised by it. But then what was the problem? Maybe she was still angry with him for walking out on her in Hawaii. He had never been one to leave issues to fester. This thing between them needed to be brought out into the open.

"Look, Ali, about that night—"

She looked up from her note-taking.

"That night? Oh, you mean *that* night. Let's not talk about it shall we." She gave him a smile that was no more than a mere upward twitch of the corners of her full lips, utterly devoid of warmth. "I'd prefer it if we could confine our discussion to the task at hand."

Well, he'd tried. She didn't want to talk about it. That was just fine. A pity though, he thought, as his gaze followed the chain of silver beads that slipped inside the neckline of her blouse. He had a feeling that getting to know Ms. Alison Carter all over again would have been a very interesting exercise.

* * *

Ali focused on the ten-inch screen she held in front of her, building a checklist of all the things she'd need to tackle if she took this job on. She gave herself a mental shake. Who was she kidding—*if*? Best for Baby wouldn't and couldn't turn down this job. Deb had shown her the signed contract. They were bound to work with this...this *man*!

A near overwhelming surge of fury threatened to break past her carefully controlled professionalism. How dare he cheat on his pregnant wife with her? How dare he cheat on his wife, period! Having been victim to an unfaithful husband herself, an affair with a married man was the last thing on this entire earth she would ever have willingly embarked upon. She'd rather die than be the other woman, than be the cause of the kind of pain and grief she'd gone through. Betrayal, on any level, was cruel—but this went several levels deeper than that.

Ali reached for her glass of water and took a long slug of the crystal clear liquid in an effort to tamp down the fiery anger that vied with sickening disgust deep inside her. *What a bastard*, she told herself. Yes, he was attractive. Even now her body, traitor that it was, virtually hummed with recognition, remembering his touch as if it were an imprint on her skin.

She drained her glass and set it back on the table with a sharp clunk. Attractive meant nothing whatsoever if it didn't come packaged along with a few other necessities to make up the man. Necessities like integrity, honesty and reliability—just to name the basics. Ali briefly closed her eyes

and searched deeply for the inner strength she needed to get through this meeting as quickly and efficiently as possible. It galled her to even have to breathe the same air he was.

She pitied his poor wife, and the baby as well. They both deserved better. Ali quietly resolved to get this contract over with fast. She didn't want to find herself face-to-face with the new mother, not with the guilt she was now forced to bear, hanging like a yoke around her shoulders.

"Right," she said as she opened her eyes again. "Perhaps you could show me the room that will be the baby's nursery so I can take some measurements."

"Sure," Ronin said, his eyes never leaving her face as he stood. "It's upstairs. Come with me."

Ali rose to her feet and followed him from the room. As he ascended the staircase in front of her, she tried not to let her gaze linger on how the finely woven fabric of his trousers skimmed his taut behind, or to notice how the crisp fresh scent of his cologne subtly trailed in his wake. Every breath of him reminded her of the one sinfully exquisite night they'd spent together. Night? No, it hadn't even been that. It had been no more than a few hours, she reminded herself. And she wasn't entitled to reflect on the memory of those hours now that she knew the truth behind his oh-so-alluring facade. Ronin Marshall was a married man and, therefore, completely off limits.

"There are several bedrooms upstairs. The nannies will have the guest suite at the far end at their disposal. It's fully equipped with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a sitting room and a kitchenette."

Ali just nodded. It wasn't unusual for her wealthier clients to employ a nanny, although it definitely sounded as if he was talking in terms of more than one.

Ronin continued down the hall and pushed open the door into a spacious and airy bedroom. "I thought this room next to the guest suite would be best as a nursery."

She looked around, taking in the high-quality furnishings that already filled the room. "Do you want to keep anything that's already in here? The bed, perhaps?"

"Will the baby need any of it?" he asked with a helpless expression in his eyes.

Ali fought back the urge to sigh. Hadn't he paid any attention during his wife's pregnancy? Surely he should know the very basics of what their own child required.

"Not right away, no," she said, controlling her voice so her disapproval wouldn't shine through. "I'd like to keep the bureau in here." She ran a hand over the provincial French chest of drawers. "But the rest can go into storage. The sooner the better, so I can get painters and paper hangers in here within the next couple of days."

"You have people who can come in that quickly?"

She arched a brow. "There are always people who can come in that quickly when the price is right."

He nodded. "That's good. I'll see to it that the furniture is out of here tomorrow. Do what you have to do."

"That's what you're paying me for," she answered, digging into her bag for her laser tape measure.

It only took a moment to record the dimensions of the room and the window. Together with the ideas she'd begun to dream up as she'd waited in the front portico her mind was brimming with enthusiasm. If only the client wasn't such a dirty, rotten, philandering creep, she'd be relishing this job. Instead, she couldn't wait to get back to the office and hand it off to Deb.

"Right," she said, with a brightness she was far from feeling. "I think that's everything. We'll be in touch."

"That's it?" he asked.

"For today."

"Okay, then." For a minute he looked nonplussed, but then his brow cleared. "Will you stay a while? Talk with me about the steps you'll be taking? I know I'm off to a late start, but I want to understand the task ahead, and what I can do to help it along."

"Mr. Marshall—" she started.

“Ronin. At least you can call me Ronin.”

She pressed her lips into a line and sharply shook her head. “I need to get back and get the ball rolling on this so we don’t waste any time.”

“Look, I’m sorry I didn’t leave you a message straightaway. I shouldn’t have—”

“Please, that’s not necessary. I’ll see myself out.”

She couldn’t stay there another minute and hear his empty platitudes or even ponder at the gall of him to make them. Nothing would change the truth. She’d done the unthinkable—slept with a married man—and he’d done the unforgivable in betraying his wife, and making Ali party to that betrayal. Ali moved quickly out of the room and down the stairs. Behind her, Ronin’s heavier tread was muffled by the carpet. He beat her to the door. With one hand on the ornate brass handle he faced her and offered her the other.

“Thank you for coming out. I do really appreciate you taking this on. Right now we have too many other things to focus on.”

“Yes, well, this is what we’re good at, so you can rest assured the baby will get the best of everything possible.”

She steeled herself to take his hand, determined to keep their physical contact to a minimum. It made no difference. Palm against palm, their touch all but sizzled. She quickly pulled away and walked through the open doorway to her car. He stepped out onto the portico and watched her leave—not moving back inside, she noted through the rearview mirror, until she was a good distance from the house.

It was so unfair, she thought as she drove through the iron gates and turned left onto Whitford-Maraetai Road. How could he have been so...so *everything* and so nothing all at the same time? Clearly she needed to hone her inner lie detector some more. First her husband, now this guy. What kind of message was she inadvertently transmitting to the universe that caused her to attract men for whom fidelity was a negotiable bond?

She might never know the answer to that, she told herself as she whipped along the road back toward the motorway interchange. But there was one thing she definitely knew—and that was that Ronin Marshall, and men like him, had no place in her life.

Ever.

Three

Two days later Ronin pushed open the door to Best for Baby and decisively rang the silver-and-crystal bell at the abandoned reception desk. Abandoned, no doubt, because he’d been fobbed off with *the receptionist* while Alison Carter hid from him here at her office.

He rarely lost his temper. In fact, he was known for being cool under pressure. But this had made his blood boil and, as did everything involving Alison Carter from the moment he’d met her in Hawaii, it churned up emotions that were both unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

The soft noise of a door opening made him wheel around to face her. He didn’t even give her a moment before he spoke.

“Why aren’t you at my house?” he growled, fighting to keep his voice level.

For a split second she looked taken aback, but her composure quickly settled back around her like an invisible cape.

“I sent my associate. Is there a problem?” she asked.

“Yes, there’s a problem. Your lack of professionalism is the problem.”

“My what? Are you complaining about the level of care my company is giving to your contract?” she answered, her face pale but resolute.

“I’m complaining that you’re not doing the job yourself.”

She squared her shoulders and lifted that dainty chin of hers a notch. “Deb has been with me since the firm opened, and she is equally capable of seeing to it that your nursery is completed on time.”

“Deb’s your receptionist, right?”

“Normally, yes,” she answered, with obvious reluctance.

“And how many contracts has she undertaken that are as time-sensitive as this one?”

“This is her first, but I’m still supervi—”

“Not good enough.”

“Your contract is with Best for Baby, not specifically with me,” she pointed out in what was, to his way of thinking, a totally unreasonable *reasonable* voice.

But beneath her sangfroid, though, he heard the tremor of unease. It gave him power he wasn’t afraid to use. Not when the ends justified the means. He wanted the best for his nephew, and that meant Ali Carter. If he had to make a stink to get her to handle his contract with her precious company personally, then a stink he’d darned well make.

“*You* will complete the contract with me, and only you.”

Or else ominously remained unsaid.

“Are you threatening me?” she asked, her voice obviously unsteady now.

“Do I need to? Your firm promotes itself as doing what’s best for baby. It’s your name behind that promotion. If I’m not mistaken, doing what’s best is the basis of your mission statement. Yes,” he said in response to the look of surprise that flitted through her blue-gray eyes, “I’ve done my research.”

“And your problem?”

Oh, she was good. He’d give her that. She’d pulled herself together, and if he hadn’t already heard that weakness just a few moments before, he’d have thought she had the upper hand right now.

“My problem is that I contracted with your company with the expectation that I would receive the best, not the second best.”

“I can assure you that Deb is as skilled and efficient as I am. In fact, she’s probably better for this contract, as she has no reason on earth not to be. *She’s* eager to work with you.” She left the words “*I am not*” unsaid, but they echoed in the air around them nonetheless.

“So you admit that you’re letting a personal issue stand in the way of your Best for Baby creed, as stated on your company website?”

“I...”

“Not terribly professional, is it?”

“I’m not compromising what my firm offers in any way by putting Deb on the contract.”

“But she’s not you. I want *you*.”

In more ways than one, he added silently. She picked up on the entendre, her cheeks draining of color before flushing pink once more.

“Well, we don’t always get what we want, do we?” she snapped back.

“Give me one good reason why you won’t work on this project yourself.”

“A reason?” her voiced raised an octave. She let out a forced laugh that hung bitterly in the air between them.

“Is that so difficult?”

His words became the catalyst that broke the crucible of her control.

“Fine,” she snapped. “You want my reason for not working directly with you, you can have it. Men like you who cheat on their wives and who expect the rest of the world to simply drop everything at their behest make me sick. Do you hear me? Sick! You’re scum. You swan around an exotic location under the guise of work and you pick up stray needy women. You betray everything about yourself as a decent human being and all the promises you’ve made before heading home—without so much as a goodbye, I might add—to your perfect life and your perfect wife. *That’s* why I won’t work directly for you. Satisfied?”

A lesser man might have staggered under her onslaught. He was not that man.

“I’m not married,” he said succinctly in the echoing silence that followed her unexpected tirade.

“Oh, and you think that makes it okay? Wife, partner—what difference does it make? You betrayed the mother of your child when you slept with me, which in my book makes you both a liar and a cheat.”

Ronin tamped down his increasing anger, forcing his voice to remain calm. “I repeat. I am not married. Nor am I currently in any kind of romantic relationship. The baby is not my son. Legally, he’s my ward.”

“Your...your ward?”

Ali clutched at the lapels of her blouse with a shaking hand.

“He’s my nephew. My dead sister’s son.” He sighed. Just saying the words ripped off the carefully layered mental dressing he’d been using to protect his emotional wounds. “Look, can we sit somewhere and discuss this like rational people?”

* * *

Ali let go of her blouse and gestured to the room behind her. “Please, come into my office.”

Her heart raced as her mind played over the appalling way she’d just spoken to him. She never lost it like that, ever. Not to anyone, and especially not to a client. But this was just a little bit too raw for her. The first time since her divorce she’d trusted anyone enough to even consider kissing them, let alone sleeping with them, and this had happened. She could be forgiven for jumping to the wrong conclusion, but she couldn’t be forgiven for the diatribe she’d just delivered. She’d be lucky if he didn’t rip up their contract right now and throw it back in her face.

Two facts now echoed in her mind.

The baby wasn’t his.

He wasn’t married.

“Take a seat,” she said, moving over to the carafe of iced water she kept on a credenza. She poured out two glasses and placed one on her desk in front of him. “Here. I know we both could probably do with something stronger, but it’s all I have on hand.”

“It’s fine,” he said. He reached for the glass and drained it with one long swallow.

“I apologize for jumping to conclusions, and for speaking to you like that,” she said as calmly as she could. She settled behind her desk and looked at him directly. “And I’m deeply sorry for your loss.”

Her eyes raked over him, taking in the shadows that lingered under his eyes and the fine lines of strain that hadn’t been on his face the first time she’d met him. She must have been too preoccupied to notice them when she’d seen him at his house the other day. He looked haggard, as if he’d been on the go non-stop.

“Thank you. It’s why I had to leave you so suddenly the night we met. My father called to say my sister and her husband had been in a fatal accident. My nephew was born by emergency C-section immediately before his mother died. I left your room on autopilot. I wasn’t really thinking clearly, I just knew I had to get home. By the time I realized how unfairly I’d treated you, I was already back here, and when I contacted the hotel, they said you’d checked out.”

“I understand,” she assured him, her heart breaking for the shock and pain he must have felt. She was close to her sisters and couldn’t begin to imagine how she’d feel if the same thing had happened to one of them. “I would have done exactly the same thing.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “It’s been hell this past week. So much to organize, so many people to see.” He swiped a hand over his face. “And the baby. It would have helped if CeeCee hadn’t been such a superstitious thing and had organized the nursery already. I could have simply transported everything to my house.”

“Or stayed at theirs?”

“No,” he shuddered. “That would have been too much. I couldn’t.”

“What about your parents? How are they coping?”

“They’re devastated. The stress is playing havoc with my mother’s heart condition.”

Ali felt her heart break a little at the note of sheer anguish in his voice. She could tell he was holding on by a thread. Had he even had the chance to begin grieving himself?

“Oh, Ronin. I’m so sorry. If there’s anything I can do, just name it.”

“There is,” he said, pulling himself together before her eyes. “Given the circumstances, you’ll understand why I need you to complete the nursery. I don’t want any mistakes or oversights. Everything has to be perfect.”

She was about to point out that she wouldn’t have put Deb on the assignment—with Best for Baby’s reputation hanging on it—if she hadn’t been confident that things would be done to his satisfaction. Instead, completely understanding how vital this all was to him, she murmured her assent.

“So you’ll come back on the job?” he asked, lifting his head and looking straight into her eyes. She could see the worry behind them and his concern that everything be perfect.

“Yes, but better than that, you’ll have two of us for the price of one. Deb will continue to assist—for good reason,” she clarified when it looked as if he might protest. “There is a great deal to be done in a very short time. Two heads will be better than one in this case. She’s already coordinating the work crews. I’ll get started on the nursery supplies and furniture tomorrow.”

The tension that had gripped his frame from the moment she’d laid eyes on him seemed to slowly leach out.

“Good,” he said on a harshly blown out breath. “Good. You know, I always imagined that one day I’d fill my house with a family. I just never thought for a minute it would happen like this.”

He got up to leave and Ali rose with him. At the main door to her office he turned to her, composed once again.

“I’ll be working from my home office tomorrow. Will I see you?”

Ali ran through a mental checklist in her head before giving him an affirmative nod. “Probably after lunch time. I’ll bring some curtain swatches just to make sure we’ve got the right match with the walls.”

“Fine. I’ll key you in to the biometric reader at the gate and the front door so you can come and go as you wish.”

She blinked at that.

“You’d trust me with that?”

“Why not? You aren’t going to steal the family silver, are you?”

“No, of course not,” she laughed in response.

“Then what’s the problem? It’ll be more convenient while you’re coming and going in the next few days.”

And, no doubt, it would ensure that it was her and not Deb going to the house, Ali thought after he’d gone. The idea wasn’t unappealing—now that she knew he wasn’t a dirty cheater.

He wasn’t married. As the thought came back to her, she couldn’t help it—an ember of longing flickered to life deep inside her once more.

* * *

As soon as Deb returned to the office, Ali explained she’d be back on the nursery outfitting as well. Her friend seemed unfazed about the change in seniority.

“Many hands make light work, and there’s certainly plenty of work on this job to go around,” Deb said, cocking her head to study her friend. “I get the feeling, though, that there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Ali tried to hold her gaze and refute the underlying question on Deb’s face but in the end she gave in.

“Look, I don’t want to go into details, but long story short, I met Ronin once a little while ago and we kind of hit it off, but nothing eventuated. Of course, when we got this contract and I saw him again, I assumed the baby was his and that he had been married when we first met.”

“Oh,” Deb said on a long sigh of understanding. “I get it. You must have been pretty mad, huh?”

“You could say that,” Ali responded. Her stomach twisted sickly with the memory of how she’d spoken to Ronin earlier that day.

“But it’s all sorted now, right?”

“It looks that way.”

“So are you going to, y’know, see him again? And don’t get all coy on me and say that naturally you’ll see him in the course of the job. That’s not what I mean, and you know it.” Deb smirked and crossed her arms.

Ali shook her head slightly. Deb knew her too well. That was exactly what she’d been about to say. “No. We won’t start seeing each other like that. He’s just been through the wringer with the loss of his sister and her husband, and he has the additional pressure of keeping an eye out for his parents—not to mention the worry of the baby.”

“Sounds like he needs a bit of distraction then, wouldn’t you agree?” Deb said with a slow wink.

“I think distraction is the last thing he needs right now,” Ali replied firmly, determined to close the subject. “Now, tell me, how did the paint finish turn out?”

They discussed the dove gray walls with white trim that had been painted that morning, and Deb showed Ali a couple of photos she’d taken with her tablet. Ali gave an approving nod at the contractor’s work.

“They’re fast and they’re good, aren’t they? We should pay a little over their premium for doing the job on such short notice. There’s a large enough buffer in the budget for that, isn’t there?”

Deb agreed, and they went on to check the list of items Ali had planned for her shopping expedition in the morning. They divided the lists. Deb was to purchase a diaper bag and supplies along with car seats—one for Ronin and one for the nannies—as well as a stroller and a portable crib in case the baby overnighted with his grandparents when he was a little older. Ali took on the nursery furniture and final decorations for the room, as well as the clothing and feeding necessities. She made a mental note to ask Ronin to check with the hospital about which formula the infant was being fed so she could make sure there was a sufficient supply at the house for when the baby came home.

By the time their working day drew to a close, she was feeling excited. It was because she would deeply enjoy the tasks ahead, she told herself firmly as she locked up the office and headed for her tiny apartment in Mount Eden. It had nothing to do with seeing Ronin again the next day.

Liar, she admitted to herself with an illicit thrill. Dressing the nursery was a fun job, but it had nothing to do with the slow moving heat that was spreading through her veins at the thought of being near him again. For all the words she’d bandied in Deb’s direction today, she couldn’t help but wonder—what would it be like if she and Ronin had another chance? Ali dismissed the question almost as swiftly as she’d thought it. She’d made her decision to remain single after the devastation her marriage had caused her. She didn’t want or need the complications that a relationship with a man like Ronin Marshall would bring. Not one little bit.

Four

Ronin huffed in frustration as the doorbell rang for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. He’d had no idea how disruptive changing one room over for a tiny baby could be, but he was certainly finding out. He’d thought he could work quite comfortably at home but the steady stream of courier deliveries had negated that possibility. Now he had boxes strewn all over his foyer and no idea what was in them or where they needed to go.

“Feeling a bit under siege?” Ali asked with a sunny smile as he opened the door to her and she espied the stacks of boxes around him.

Relief seeped through him. Thank God she was there. *Now I might be able to put my focus where it belongs and get something done.*

“You could say that,” he replied. “I could have done with you here from about ten this morning.”

“I’m sorry. I came as quickly as I could.” She hefted a book of curtain samples a little higher, and he swiftly reached out for the heavy item.

“Here, let me take that for you.”

“Thanks. I have a couple more in the car.”

“Seriously?”

She laughed at his obvious surprise and he felt his lips curl in response. “Yes, seriously. This is important.”

She spun on a ridiculously delicate high heel and went straight to her car. Ronin followed and accepted the additional sample books from her, all the while trying to keep his gaze averted as the fabric of her neatly cut trousers pulled across the curves of her backside as she reached down into the trunk of her car. It occurred to him that nothing she wore stood out as particularly high fashion, yet everything still managed to deliver a punch when she put it on. He shifted his focus to the heavy books in his arms.

“All this for one set of curtains?” he asked.

“Oh, there were more,” she answered with a sweet curve of her lips. “But they didn’t have what I was looking for.”

He followed her back into the house, where she paused in the foyer and inspected the labels on the various boxes that had accumulated there. She pulled her tablet out of her voluminous handbag and made some notes before stacking a couple of the smaller boxes in her arms.

“Shall we go upstairs? I’d like your opinion on the fabric swatches.”

“Really, I know nothing about color. I usually left all that to…” His voice tailed off as that sweeping sense of loss tugged hard at his heart.

Decorating had been CeeCee’s forte and her business, and she’d been exceptional at it. It was part of the reason he’d teased her so mercilessly about not doing anything for the baby’s room. She’d never been superstitious growing up, which begged the question—had she had some intuition that something was going to go wrong? He shoved the idea from his mind before it could bloom into something further. He’d never held with that way of thinking and never would. To him intuition was, more accurately, picking up subconscious clues. No clue on earth could have predicted what would happen the night CeeCee and R.J. were killed.

He realized that Ali was waiting for him to finish his sentence. “To others who are far more adept at it than I am,” he finished lamely.

“Well, if you’re happy for me to make the final choice, I’m okay with that. I just thought that since it’s your home we’re working on you might like some input.”

“I’ll take these up for you and leave you to it. I have a conference call with a client in Vietnam shortly that should take about an hour. Please don’t leave until I’m done. I really can’t afford any delivery interruptions during the call, so if you could take care of opening the gate and getting the door, I would really appreciate it.”

Ali smiled calmly. “No problem at all. I’ll be here all afternoon. The furniture will be delivered by three, and I’d like to set it up as quickly as possible.”

“Good, I’ll get your fingerprint programmed into the biometric reader when I’m finished on the call.”

They went upstairs and Ali pushed open the door to what was to be the nursery. Ronin was a little surprised at how much had already changed. He’d gotten his two part-time groundsmen to remove the furniture and store it in the loft above his multicar garage, together with the carpet square that had been in the room. Last time he’d looked in, the wooden plank floorboards had been covered with paint-spattered drop cloths and the walls had been a patchwork of the original off-white with an array of softer lemons, blues and grays. He was pleasantly surprised by the solid block of pale but warm gray that now covered the walls, offset by pristine white-painted trim on the deep skirting boards and the window frame.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d decided on in here, but I have to say I like it,” he said, laying the stack of curtain books on the floor.

“It looks great, doesn’t it? Initially I’d thought to go with the pale blue on three walls and then to have a farm scene mural painted on one wall, but you only need to look out the window to appreciate that view more than anything that could be painted in place. Deb and I decided the gray was best and would work as baby grows older, too. Removable borders can provide features anyway, and they can be changed more easily, too.”

Ronin tried to envision what she was talking about, but it all went right over his head. He was far more comfortable talking specifications and load-bearing structures than he was visualizing what was obviously so clear in her head.

Ali bent and rummaged through the fabric samples, extracting a sheer white gauze and then flipping back and forth through each of the other books. Their samples were, to his eye at least, much the same color as the nursery walls.

“Here,” she said, holding one book open to a self-patterned fabric swatch a couple of shades darker than what was already on the wall. “Could you hold that up for me over by the window? I want to see how it works with the rest of the room.”

He did as she bid and was surprised to see her shake her head vehemently. “What? Wrong color?”

“Totally,” she muttered, digging back through the samples again. “Here, try this one.”

To him they looked identical, but he dutifully held the sample up for her.

“Yes, that’s better,” she said, tilting her head slightly to one side and taking a step back. “In fact, I think that’s perfect. We’ll put the drapes against the window with the sheers on the bedroom side. That way the sheers will soften the effect on the whole room when the drapes are closed.”

“I know what you’re saying should make sense,” he laughed. “But it sounds like a foreign language to me.”

Her face broke into a wide smile and she gave him a cheeky wink. “Then it’s a good job you hired Best for Baby, isn’t it?”

She looked just as she had when they’d talked over the dinner table in Hawaii. He’d been reluctant, after a taxing day with a client, to share his solitude. But when the restaurant hostess had requested he allow someone she’d had to turn away to join him, and had pointed Ali out in the bar, he’d recognized her as the woman he’d brushed against in the crowded restaurant lobby. The woman who’d unwittingly triggered a startlingly visceral reaction. His initial resistance had been demolished and he’d said yes.

He wanted that again. That carefree easiness between them. That sense of being on a voyage of discovery together.

“Ali—” he started, taking a tentative step toward her.

“Yes?”

God, he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and kiss her. To revisit that exquisite oblivion they’d shared the night they met.

“I—” He broke off with a muttered expletive as his phone chirped in his trouser pocket. He identified the number of his office on the screen. “I’m sorry, but I need to get this.”

“No problem. I’ll be around here or downstairs if you need me.”

She took the sample book from him, and as she moved away again he caught the fresh floral sweetness of her perfume. It was so subtle he was unsure he’d even smelled it at all, but it had a very immediate effect on his body. Need bloomed low in his groin. The phone in his hand continued to chirp. He forced his attention away from the woman who’d ensnared him and fought his libido under control. This kind of thing didn’t happen in his normally rigidly structured world. Yes, he knew desire—what man didn’t? But he’d never known it like this.

He barked a greeting into his phone. Walking from the nursery, he forced himself not to wonder why each step away from Ali felt as if it were a mile rather than a mere yard.

* * *

Well, that was intense, Ali thought as she watched Ronin leave the room. For a moment there she'd thought he was going to close the gap between them and kiss her. His eyes had darkened to a deep denim blue and fixed on her, as if the world had narrowed to only contain the two of them. Her heart still thumped in her chest, pumping blood to her extremities and heightening her awareness to a fever pitch.

She bit down on her lower lip. A lip that tingled in anticipation of his caress. A lip that mourned the caress that hadn't happened. Obviously their initial attraction was still there just as strongly as it had been an entire hemisphere away—their more recent contretemps notwithstanding.

She closed the sample books and stacked them on one side of the room. It was getting more difficult every time she saw him to remind herself she didn't want to go there again—that she was totally wrong for him. She had to stay professional. He was her client and she was contracted by him to do a job—a job that involved a helpless, parentless infant. Something deep inside her ached at the thought. What she wouldn't give to be that parent—to be that special someone to nurture and raise and love the child.

When she'd discovered she couldn't bear children of her own, she'd imagined that she and her husband would adopt, but he'd been opposed to the idea. She had thought he just needed a while to adjust to the idea of their dreams taking a different shape. She'd tried to give him space and time—space and time he'd used to go behind her back and fall in love with the woman he'd left her for. His lover had represented a new start for Richard, a second chance on the path to the life he'd planned...while Ali was clearly nothing more to him than a dead end.

It had been a painfully hard lesson to learn. Never in their years of courtship, or their marriage, had he even intimated that his love for her was contingent on her ability to produce and raise a family with him. That knowledge had been even more hurtful than the news that she was infertile.

Infertility was something they should have been able to deal with together. Thousands of couples the world over did every day. While she'd railed against the unfairness of it all—especially when faced consistently with evidence of her three sisters' abundant fertility and happy marriages—it had been her husband's rejection of *her*, and his twisted belief that it somehow reflected on him as a man, that had been her undoing. Those scars still ran deep—still made her feel vulnerable and inclined to withdraw from placing herself in that position a second time.

She reminded herself she was not, and probably never would be, ready to put herself out there again. There was no way she would run the risk of being rejected again. Hadn't she learned her lesson? She'd already felt dreadful when Ronin had seemingly abandoned her after their night together. What if they did get together and he did let her down again?

"Talk about getting ahead of yourself," she muttered to the empty space around her. "Very shortly he's going to be incredibly busy raising a child. He certainly won't have time for you. Nothing's happened and nothing will happen."

But there was a piece of her that *wanted* something to happen, that wanted Ronin Marshall with an ache that went deep down to her core.

* * *

Ali busied herself over the next few hours unpacking the boxes that had been stowed in the foyer. Some of the items needed assembly, so she retrieved her tool kit from her car before kicking off her heels and starting to put together the change station and the crib. After a short time, even without all the finishing touches, the nursery began to look like a baby's room. Just doing this, creating a safe and loving haven for someone else's unknown child, filled the echoing hollow inside her. Even if only briefly. It was why she loved doing what she did.

A sound at the door made her look up from where she was kneeling on the floor, reading the final instructions on the change station. Heat flushed her skin when she saw Ronin. She scrambled to her stocking feet, only to feel at a disadvantage as he towered over her.

"Is everything going okay here?" he asked, his eyes scanning the room.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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