



BABY,
I'M YOURS

KAREN TEMPLETON

Cherish[™]



Karen Templeton

Baby, I'm Yours

Аннотация

Baby, be mine! Kevin Vacarro just found out he was a father to a five-month-old! He'd fought to overcome his troubled past, but it was nothing compared to the battle he was about to wage for his child's future. Julianne McCabe had no intention of giving up her sister's child – the one she loved as her own – without a struggle. Yet that was before Kevin started bonding with his daughter. Before he awoke feelings that made her long to share more than late-night feedings. But was she ready to risk her heart again to be the wife Kevin needed? To become the family they both wanted?

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“How can you be mad as hell at me one minute and look like you want me to kiss you the next?”

Her head jerked back. “What makes you think – ?”

The question ended in a shudder when he palmed her jaw, dragged his thumb across her lower lip. “You want a minute to think about your answer?”

“Yes,” she whispered, closing her eyes as their lips met. But she was pretty sure a grin flashed across his mouth an instant before touchdown, even though she was equally sure – if not more so – that he hadn’t said all that simply to manipulate the moment. Not Kevin, who was –

His free hand cradled the back of her head as his mouth – warm, firm, insistent – moved over hers before shifting to place little kisses at the corners of her lips, her cheeks, *that* spot behind her ear.

– completely guileless.

Incredibly good at this, but guileless.

Stupid, Julianne thought, in sync with his heartbeat, so strong and sure underneath her hand. *Wrong. Pointless. Crazy.*

KAREN TEMPLETON

A bestselling author and RITA[®] Award nominee, Karen Templeton is the mother of five sons and living proof that romance and dirty nappies are not mutually exclusive terms. An easterner transplanted to Albuquerque, New Mexico, she spends far too much time trying to coax her garden to yield roses and produce something resembling a lawn, all the while

fantasising about a weekend alone with her husband. Or at least an uninterrupted conversation.

Baby, I'm Yours

Karen Templeton



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To Jack

who really is the World's Greatest Dad.

(And a pretty good husband, to boot.)

Chapter One

Kevin Vaccaro slouched behind the wheel of the rented compact, his left arm sizzling in the early-June sun. His stomach felt like that poor kid's must've on the last leg of his flight, right before the twerp hurled into the barf bag.

It's not too late to turn back.

He shifted out of the searing sun, watching the house. Ignoring the voice. On the surface, he was ready. He'd ditched the ragged jeans and baggy, wrinkled T-shirt he'd traveled in for a striped polo and khakis he'd borrowed from one of his brothers. He was

combed and shaved and generally as presentable as he was gonna get without help from those gay dudes on that makeover show.

Inside, however, was something else again.

The house sat there, inscrutable. Aloof. Two stories. Yellow stucco. Recently painted white trim. A Spanish Territorial jewel, sparkling against a sky so bright it hurt to look at it, one gem among many in Albuquerque's casually upscale Country Club area near the river. Kevin had only seen it once before, when Robyn had taken him by to see where she'd grown up. It had been Halloween; they'd sat across the street for more than an hour, watching her father open the door over and over to dozens of trick-or-treaters—mostly kids minivanned in from other, poorer neighborhoods, she'd said—handing out full-size Butterfingers and Snickers and Twix instead of those wussy bite-size things.

He remembered the almost wistful envy in her voice. Weird, he'd thought at the time, through the haze of assorted controlled substances. Still weird, he thought, now stone-cold sober.

Whether Victor Booth was there now, he had no idea. The man wasn't exactly listed in the phone book. In fact, despite his regular appearances on one of the morning talk shows a few years back, even though you could hardly go into Costco and not see his face plastered on a stack of hardbacks, it was next to impossible to find out anything about "Dr. Vic." Apparently the paparazzi had bigger, blonder, boozier fish to fry.

A breeze nudged aside the heat clinging to Kevin's skin, rustled the cottonwood leaves, shimmering coins in the clear

midmorning light. He sucked in a breath. Then another. Two thousand miles was a long way to come to possibly run into a dead end. But he had to find Robyn, to apologize for running, even if at the time he'd felt he had no choice. Then maybe he could finally get on with something resembling a real life. How he was supposed to go about that...not a clue. But for sure his Peter Pan days were over.

A grinning golden retriever edged into his peripheral vision, a toned matron in a sleeveless shirt and cargo shorts marching smartly behind. The woman glanced at the parked car, curiosity buzzing from behind bumble-bee-eye sunglasses. A second later, she flipped open her cell phone, tossing another furtive glance over her shoulder as she soldiered on. On a weary sigh, Kevin unfolded himself from the car, giving the woman—clearly keeping an eye on him—a little wave and smile.

She jumped, nearly tripping over the dog as she scurried away.

Feeling moderately cheered, Kevin hauled in another steadying breath and started across the street, thinking it was a shame Hertz didn't provide barf bags as part of the rental fee.

“What on earth are you watching so hard, Julie-bird?”

Ignoring her father's much-loathed pet name for her, Julianne McCabe shifted slightly at the living room window. All the better to see the tall, lanky male—the last vestiges of boyhood clinging to his loose-limbed gait—heading toward the house.

“See for yourself,” she said, removing her glasses to clean the lenses on the hem of her sleeveless blouse. Pointlessly, as it

happened, since her father, in his usual summer uniform of loose linen shirt and Dockers, had already hobbled across the room to peer over her shoulder. Smelling of aftershave and peppermints, like all good daddies should, Victor Booth was supposed to be in his office, working or resting the pulled muscle in his back or something. Not here, hovering. Being “there” for her.

Julianne pushed her glasses back on, wincing slightly when the corners of the steel frames caught in her too-long bangs. When had she last worn her contacts? Or makeup? Had the energy, or inclination, to fix herself up?

“Who the hell is that?” her father muttered a moment before the young man vanished behind the massive, obscenely blossomed Spanish broom blocking their view of the front entry. A second later, the doorbell rang.

And wasn’t it a sad commentary on what she’d let her life become, that a stranger at the door should produce something almost like a thrill? Over the ripple of self-disgust, she said, “Guess we’re about to find out.”

“Don’t bother. It’s probably just somebody trying to either sell us something or save our souls.”

Too late on that last thing, Julianne thought as she shook her head, aiming an indulgently patient look in her father’s direction. The sort of look adoring and/or grateful daughters were supposed to give doting fathers. Especially fathers with the confidence-inspiring visage that sold books and filled auditoriums—the thick, tweedy hair and crinkly blue eyes, the precisely clipped

hedgerow of also-tweedy whiskers edging a Dudley Do-Right jaw.

“Since he’s empty-handed, I think we’re safe,” she said, heading toward the door, amazed to find herself almost awake. “And besides, he’s been sitting in his car watching the house for ten minutes.”

A cane shot out in front of her. “Stay here.”

Julianne crept into the tiled entryway behind her father, who was shuffling toward the door as fast as his pulled back muscle would let him. Although what she hoped to see, she had no idea, since his Mack-truck build easily blocked the doorway. Gus, their older-than-dirt chocolate Lab, dozed on the warm, unevenly textured clay tiles in a blurred pool of sunlight from the clerestory over the doorway. *Wouldn't mind spending my days like that*, she thought, her arms folded over her stomach, only to realize she pretty much did. Except for—

“Sorry to intrude, Mr. Booth,” said a strong New England accent. “My name’s Kevin Vaccaro. I’m, uh, a friend of Robyn’s? She here, by any chance?”

Julianne sucked in a breath over her father’s, “No, she’s not,” his words riddled with grief, anger, regret—the same triad of emotions that had battered Julianne’s soul, in never-ending waves, for far too long. Dad shifted to lean heavily on the three-pronged cane he’d already sworn to burn. “Robyn died three months ago, Mr. Vaccaro.”

Blood drained from a face downright Michelangelo-worthy.

No surprise there, given her sister's penchant for the cute but clueless, each hook-up less connected with reality than his predecessor, every one summarily dumped before they could dump her.

Except this one, who'd beaten her to the punch.

"I'm...so sorry," Kevin said, shock turning to horror in guileless brown eyes. "I didn't know.... I should go—"

"No," Julianne said, elbowing past her father, in a split second making a decision that would in all likelihood rock her universe.

"No, come in—"

"Julie!"

"For heaven's sake, Dad, he's in shock! We can't just send him away!"

Confusion cramped Kevin's face as Julianne's presence seemed to finally register. Dimly, it occurred to her how she must look, the epitome of the haggard young widow who doesn't give a damn anymore.

"You know who I am," Kevin said.

"You bet your ass I know who you are," her father said. Not budging. Not forgiving. "And you are not welcome in my house."

"Dad. It wasn't his fault."

That much Julianne knew, even if her father still couldn't accept the truth: that Kevin's leaving Robyn, while not doing her any favors, had played little part in her inability to shake a substance-abuse problem that had been in place long before his involvement with her. Julianne also knew she'd win this battle.

Although whether because Dad wasn't as adamant about his plan as he'd have her believe, or because he wouldn't deny her anything reasonably within his power to give her, she couldn't say. Nor did she care. At the moment she'd play whatever hand had been dealt her and deal with the consequences later.

"Can I get you something?" Julianne asked inanely, as she led Kevin past the quivering, gray-muzzled dog, the family photos lined up against a taupe wall—the Gallery of Illusions, Robyn had called it—into the brightly lit living room cluttered with corpulent leather furniture, local artwork, Southwestern native crafts. "Coffee? Water?"

"A beer?" her father said behind them, deliberately provoking.

Irritation flashed in toffee-colored eyes. Kevin was younger than she, she knew. Not by much, a few years. Enough to make a difference, though, to someone who felt old as Methuselah. His shirt was a little too loose, his pants rode a trifle too low, the hallmark of a guy who hadn't yet figured out that size mattered. Still, she thought—hoped?—she saw the signs of someone playing a hard, fast game of catch-up.

"I'm a recovering addict, Mr. Booth," Kevin said softly, reaching down to scratch a panting, grinning Gus between his ears before meeting her father's lockjawed expression. "I've been clean for more than a year." He turned to Julianne, wearing the slightly blank look of someone unsure of his next line. At the moment, the dog was probably registering more on his radar than she was. "And thanks," he said, "but I'm good."

Then he dropped onto the sofa's edge, his hands clasped between his knees as he stared at the floor, clearly trying to absorb the news. Finally he lifted his eyes to Julianne's father. "What happened?"

Victor's gaze bounced off Julianne's, scrupulously avoiding the baby monitor on the coffee table not two feet from where Kevin was sitting. Not that it was likely he'd make the connection, but still. "I don't have to—"

"I came here for answers," Kevin said, his voice surprisingly strong. Unintimidated. "No, actually I came to apologize to Robyn, but now that I'm here..." His hands clenched. "Now that I know..."

"This is private family business. We're not obligated to tell you—"

"My sister was killed in a swimming accident," Julianne said quietly. "While we were on vacation in Mexico."

Kevin swore, softly and bluntly, his reaction genuine enough for Julianne to feel a spurt of sympathy. Robyn hadn't loved him, she knew that much. Oh, she'd been pissed when he'd left, but that had been more the wounded pride of an emotionally scarred, and very young, woman outraged at being the dumpee. What Kevin's feelings had been for her sister, she had no way of knowing, of course. Not that she blamed him for leaving. Few people would have nominated her sister for a congeniality award.

Her father's eyes cut to hers, pleading. Unflinching, she returned his gaze, shaking her head.

Even though she knew what her act of defiance would cost her.

“Was she using?” Kevin asked, shattering Julianne’s thoughts.

“Yes,” she said over her father’s “What concern is that of yours?”

“Of *course* it’s his concern!” Julianne said, startled at her own vehemence. It had been a long time since she’d felt vehement. Since she’d felt much of anything. “It’s always been his concern! He has a right to know! He’s—”

“*Julie!*”

The cane jabbed into the carpet as her father advanced on her, his anguish colliding with hers. Her only excuse, perhaps, for not having fought him harder before this about ending the lie. But, oh, dear God—how incredibly out of whack their lives had been these past few months, focusing on loss instead of gain, on separation instead of connection. A crippling confederacy of negatives Julianne was now determined to overthrow—

“Don’t do this, Julie-bird. Don’t tell him.”

—whether her father was on the same page or not.

“Don’t tell me what, for God’s sake?” Kevin was on his feet, his bewilderment clawing at her sense of decency. “Would someone please tell me what the *hell* is going on—”

Kevin’s gaze jerked to the monitor, crackling with the distinct sounds of a baby waking up from her nap.

“Robyn was pregnant when you left,” Julianne said quietly, her heart splitting in two as she watched her words slowly register in toffee-colored eyes.

When, all those months ago, good sense—and an awakening survival instinct—had finally shoved Kevin off the track to nowhere, he'd naively believed the temptation to backslide would never be an issue. At least, after those first few days. Weeks. Then it would get easier, right? Only he hadn't counted on fate lurking in the shadows, waiting for an opportunity to send him to his knees.

Because to be completely honest, he thought, as he gripped the rails of his baby daughter's crib, at that moment the sickly sweet promise of escape sounded pretty damn good. Except he knew there was no such thing as just one drink, just one toke, to dull the edge. Not for him. No more than he could take one step off a cliff and not end up smashed at the bottom. Literally.

The crazy thing was, he'd never really understood what had driven him off that cliff to begin with. His family was nuts, sure, but no worse than anybody else's. A lot better than most, actually. Why he'd hurt them, hurt himself, he had no idea. But even through the fog of shock, as his baby—oh, dear God: *his* baby!—fixed her calm, blue-gray gaze on his and smiled, pumping her chubby bare legs as she lay on her back, Kevin knew he would never, ever, do anything to hurt *her*.

Pippa, they called her. Short for Phillipa. Where Robyn had come up with that name, God only knew. Still, weirdly, it seemed to fit, he thought as he lowered one hand into the crib, his own smile far shakier than the baby's. Five chubby fingers curled around his index finger, snaring it in a death grip. Rosebud

lips pursed, eyes went huge, chunky little legs ratcheted up the pumping to the next level. Despite Robyn's sister and father being right out in the hall, arguing—about him, no doubt—a soft chuckle broke the vise constricting his lungs.

He almost couldn't blame Robyn's father for not telling him. Hell, in his place Kevin wasn't sure he wouldn't've done the same thing, if somebody'd knocked up his daughter and then fled the scene of the crime. *But it wasn't like that, and you damn well know it*, a faint, barely comforting voice put in.

Yeah, well...

His finger still locked in his baby's hand, Kevin propped his other elbow on the crib rail to cradle his overstuffed head in his palm, as bitterness, disbelief and helplessness threatened to undo more than a year's worth of hard work.

Yet another tick-mark in the Kevin-screws-up-again column, he thought, heartsick. What the hell was he going to do? He barely felt confident enough to take care of himself, let alone anybody else. Yeah, he was beginning to think about settling down, focusing on the foreseeable future, but he wasn't there yet. At the moment he had no job, no home of his own and no funds, except for a small stash left over from what he'd earned helping his brother Rudy fix up his newly purchased inn in New Hampshire. How in the name of all that was holy was he supposed to take care of a *baby*?

Not that, if the heated discussion outside the door was any indication, Pippa's grandfather was about to let him.

Kevin shoved the heel of his hand into his forehead, trying to push out the dizziness. Talk about your one-two punches. First, Robyn's death, then—

“Are you all right?”

He hadn't heard Julianne come into the room. Or noticed when the arguing had stopped. Still, he definitely caught the slightly off-key note of judgment in her voice. Obviously, since she'd bucked her father about letting Kevin know about Pippa, she'd felt compelled to set the record straight. Didn't mean she was happy about it. Happy about him.

On a shuddering sigh, Kevin dropped his hand. “Not really, no,” he said, his eyes still on his daughter.

“Sorry. Stupid question.”

He almost smiled. “Where's your father?”

“Downstairs. Regrouping.” She paused. “But don't get any ideas about grabbing the baby and making a run for it. He'd be all over you in a New York minute.”

He shifted enough to catch Julianne's gaze, riveted to the baby. *And so would you*, he thought. But all he said was, “Yeah, I bet that cane could inflict some serious damage. Not to mention Killer, there.”

Wagging his tail—after a fashion—the barrel-shaped dog hobbled over to lick Kevin's fingers, then collapsed at his feet with a sigh. Which Julianne echoed. “Okay, so Gus probably isn't much of a threat. But never underestimate a man who can still bench-press two hundred and fifty pounds. On his better days,

at least.”

“I take it he’s pissed at you for going over his head?”

“He’ll get over it,” she said, unexpected steel underneath the softness. Another pause. “I know what you’re thinking. But believe it or not, Dad’s not a bad man. Just a hurting one. And I don’t mean his back.”

Kevin let the words settle into his brain, one at a time, before he said, “Believe me, you have *no* idea what I’m thinking.”

“No,” she said after a moment. “I don’t suppose I do.” Outside, a couple of doves hoo-hooed, off-sync. “She’s a miracle, you know.”

Kevin finally tore his attention away from the baby to really look at her aunt, still by the door. Sticklike arms pretzled across a white, shapeless top, over a pair of those pants that looked like brown paper bags with legs. Behind steel-rimmed glasses, pale blue eyes regarded him warily from deeply shadowed sockets. Cripes, the woman was so fair you could practically see straight through her, her shoulder-length hair as blond and fine as a little girl’s. Even at her most wasted, Robyn hadn’t looked that bad. A few brain cells wondered what her story was, even as he said, “A miracle, how?”

“If Robyn hadn’t broken her ankle in a fall right after you left, Dad might not have known she was pregnant until it was too late to intervene.” Her gaze never left Kevin’s, a bird keeping a steady, watchful eye on the thing that might eat her. “We basically strong-armed her into rehab, then refused to let her out of our

sight for the rest of the pregnancy. If we hadn't..."

Another sour pang of frustration erupted in the center of his chest. "The baby's okay, then?"

"So far, so good," she said, her gaze shifting back to the baby. "She was a couple weeks early, but a good seven and a half pounds at birth. And she seems to be developing a little ahead of the curve. So we're hopeful."

Hopeful, but not sure. Now panic wiped out the frustration, that maybe she'd need special help down the road, and what if he didn't know what to do? Or couldn't afford it—?

"Dad was only following Robyn's lead, by the way," Julianne said. "About not telling you. She was convinced you'd abandoned her."

Kevin gnawed the inside of his cheek. "Since I didn't exactly leave a forwarding address, she wasn't that far off the mark. Even so, I wouldn't've left if I'd known she was pregnant. Even at my worst, I was never a total scumbag."

"Did you love her?"

He rubbed the baby's tummy, stalling. "Nobody was talking in terms of forever, if that's what you mean. Even if either of us had been capable of thinking more than five minutes ahead. Not something I'm proud of, but I'm not gonna lie about it, either. And Robyn swore she was on the pill."

"And you believed her?"

One corner of his mouth ticked up. "I hedged my bets, okay? But there was one night—"

“It doesn’t matter,” Julianne said quickly. “But in any case, it would have been difficult for Robyn to tell you since she didn’t know herself. At least, I’m assuming her shock was real when the doctor delivered the news. What can I say? Logic was never my sister’s strong suit. However, that’s all water under the bridge. The only thing that matters now is the baby. Specifically, if you w-want her.”

Kevin felt like he’d been sucker punched. Not because of her question, but because he couldn’t immediately shoot back the “right” answer. Instead he sucked in a deep breath and said, “Wanting her isn’t the issue.”

“Of course it is. You either want to be a father or you don’t.”

Blood rushed to his face. “For the love of God, I just found out about this! I’m no more prepared now to be somebody’s father than I was when the condom broke! Granted, my brain’s less pickled than it was then, but I’d still figured on having more than five minutes before I had to start thinking about school districts and college funds. Maybe you have no clue what it feels like to have your life completely turned upside down, but right now I feel like rats are runnin’ loose in my brain. So how about backing off and giving me a second to absorb a few things, okay?”

His heart thumping so hard his chest hurt, Kevin twisted around, his gaze dipping back to the baby, who was looking at him with wide, slightly worried eyes. *Way to go, bozo. Nothin’ like scaring the pants off a five-month-old.*

A moment later Julianne crossed the room to clamp bony,

blunt-nailed hands around the crib railing. A thin, diamond-studded platinum band loosely circled her left ring finger.

“Sorry,” she breathed out, not looking at him. “I guess I’m still in a bit of shock, too. That you showed up out of the blue. I—we...just...want what’s best for her. That’s all.”

Kevin looked at her profile, incredulous. “And you think I *don’t*?”

“Sorry,” she said again, tears in her voice. Brother. Was he batting a thousand today or what?

“Yeah,” he breathed out. “Me, too. For yellin’ at ya. Especially considering if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t even know about her.” A pause. “Have you been taking care of her all along?”

Julianne reached into the crib, stroking the baby’s cheek. “Yes,” she whispered at Pippa’s bright smile in response. “From the moment she was born.” She angled her head at him, her lips slightly curved. “You can pick her up, if you like.” When Kevin hesitated, she added, “Just make sure to support her head—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” He sucked in a breath, then slipped his hands underneath Pippa’s back and head, scooping the surprisingly solid little girl out of the crib to nestle against his chest. A whole mess of emotions slammed through him as she skootched around, her peach-fuzz head tickling his chin. But definitely topping the list was a gut-wrenching sensation of connection, that she was his, and he was hers, and nothing could alter that simple fact.

“You’ve done this before,” Julianne said.

“I’m the youngest of six. Lots of nieces and nephews.” Kevin shifted Pippa so her diapered tush rested in the crook of his arm. She started to fuss. Nothing major, just a few little eh-eh-ehs. Kevin gently jiggled her in his arms and she stopped.

“Is your family close?”

There it was, that same wistfulness he’d hear in Robyn’s voice in those rare, unguarded moments when she slipped on her rebellious streak. “Closer than some of us might like,” Kevin said, his lips twitching. “My three oldest brothers and their families all live within a cuppla blocks of my parents.”

“And where is that?”

“Springfield, Mass.”

“Ah. That accounts for the accent, I suppose.”

“What accent?” he said, and she almost smiled.

“And your other siblings?”

She was avoiding the issue. The “what comes next?” part of the conversation. And thank God for that.

“My sister Mia’s about to marry one of those hedge-fund dudes in Connecticut, over the July Fourth weekend. And my next oldest brother, Rudy, and his wife, Violet, just started runnin’ an inn in New Hampshire.”

Then there’s me, he thought. *The caboose running his ass off to catch up.*

“Are they all happy?” Julianne asked.

“Sure, I guess. In an *Everybody Loves Raymond* kinda way. We yell, we fight, we screw up. Obviously,” he said, with a self-

deprecating half shrug. “Some of us’ve put our folks through the ringer more’n others. And my dad was a cop. It musta killed him sometimes, watching us learn things the hard way. But we’re there for each other. Can’t ask for more than that, I s’pose.”

She watched him for a moment, expressionless, before walking over to dump out a laundry basket, full of tiny-footed sleepers and those one-piece undershirt things that snapped at the crotch, on top of the changing table.

“So what about you?” he asked, feeling the baby slump against his collarbone, drifting back to sleep. When Julianne glanced over at him, her brow pinched, he added, “What’s your story?”

“My...story?”

“Yeah. You’ve been here for, what? A year, at least. But you’re wearing a wedding ring. Does your husband live here, too?”

She pulled out a sleeper, quickly folded it. “Robyn never talked about me, then?”

“Not much, no.”

“I’m a widow,” she said quietly, not looking at him as she continued folding. Embarrassment cringed in the pit of Kevin’s stomach.

“Oh. Hello. I’m sorry.” Shrugging, Julianne opened the drawer to a plastic bin on the changing table’s second shelf, sticking in clothes as she folded them. “Was he sick? Unless you don’t wanna talk about it—”

“My husband was killed by a drunk driver, Kevin,” she said, the words oddly stripped of emotion. Kevin closed his eyes, bile

surging in his throat.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, lamely.

“Yeah. Me, too.” Now bitterness trickled in to fill the void. “Gil and I had gone out to dinner. To celebrate my getting pregnant. It was pouring rain. Per usual for Seattle in the fall. We never even saw the oncoming car.” Finally she looked at him, dry eyes screaming with unhealed grief. “So, actually, I know exactly what it’s like to have my life turned upside down.”

A silent, but potent, four-letter word exploded in his brain. “I can’t believe Robyn didn’t tell me.”

“Clearly the two of you didn’t have that kind of relationship,” Julianne said, shoving more folded clothes into a second drawer. “And anyway, she and I weren’t close. She...she wouldn’t let anybody *get* close.”

“You got that right,” Kevin muttered, even as he caught the frustration, the disappointment in her voice. “But you didn’t come out here right after, then?”

“Dad wanted me to. Well, after I got out of the hospital. There was a month of hell,” she said dryly. “But I was determined to pick up the pieces of my life where I’d last seen them. It wasn’t working, but I was being too stubborn to admit it. Then Dad discovered Robyn was pregnant, and it was obvious he’d never manage with her by himself, and I thought, okay, a diversion. Something to take my mind off...things.”

Inside Kevin’s brain, two and two slammed together hard enough to make his ears ring. “Even though...”

“Yes, even though I’d just lost my own baby a few months before. But Dad needed me. Robyn needed me. And God knows, later on, Pippa needed me. What can I tell you? It felt good.” She paused. “It still does.”

Pippa was down for the count. Kevin turned to lay her back in the crib, for the first time noticing the pale lavender walls, the border of carousel horses prancing underneath the ceiling. As if reading his mind, Julianne said, “Robyn decorated the room all by herself.”

“So she—”

“Wanted the baby? I’m not sure she knew what she wanted, to tell you the truth. She liked the idea of having a little girl to dress up. Being a mother, though...not so much.” Julianne hesitated. “Dad and I have no idea where she got the stuff. In Mexico, I mean. Or when. But—” her lips flattened “—but there’s a reason why Dad didn’t want to tell you about Pippa.”

“He can’t possibly blame me for Robyn’s habit.”

“No, but you didn’t exactly help things, did you?”

“I tried, Julianne,” he said, hating, even as he weirdly understood, how he’d ended up the logical target for Julianne’s and Victor’s frustration and grief. “Believe me, I tried. But you gotta understand, every time I suggested maybe she go into rehab or get counseling or something, she went ballistic on me. Like you said, she wouldn’t let anybody get close. Including me. And I finally realized I was having enough trouble keeping my own head above water at that point. So I ran. Except...” He streaked

a hand through his hair. “The longer I was straight, the more I kept feeling like...I don’t know. That I gave up on her too easily or something. Like maybe I *shoulda* pushed harder for her to get help.”

“Even though you didn’t love her?”

“Just because I wasn’t *in* love with your sister didn’t mean I didn’t care about her, for cryin’ out loud. When I started to get my act together, I really did want to help her go straight, too. Only she wasn’t gonna go without a fight, and I just didn’t have enough fight in me for both of us. Not then.”

Her steady gaze felt like it was gonna prick his skull. “The success rate for addicts—”

“Is, like, twenty percent, I know. Believe me, you can’t throw a statistic at me I haven’t heard a thousand times already. But what can I tell ya? You’re lookin’at one of those twenty percent, okay?”

Her face colored. An improvement, frankly, over the ghost look. “Dad will still fight you for custody.”

“Yeah, like that’s a news flash. Well, here’s another one—I may have made a crapload of mistakes in my life, but walking out on my own kid ain’t gonna be one of them. No matter what I’ve gotta do to prove myself worthy of being part of her life.”

After another long glance at his daughter, Kevin pulled out his wallet, extracting a plain white business card with his name and cell number. “I need some time to think, to figure out what the next step is. But I’ll be back. And tell your father to not even

think about taking my daughter away so I can't find her."

Julianne's mouth fell open. "He wouldn't do that!"

"Yeah, well, he already tried to keep us apart, so let's just say I'm not exactly feelin' the love here." He handed her the card. "You can reach me at that number. Anytime, day or night. And you can tell your father..." He hauled in a quick breath. "The pain I saw in his eyes, when he told me about Robyn? Why would he think I'd feel any different about Pippa?"

Then he walked away before the pain in Julianne's could fully register.

Chapter Two

"It's the best solution, Dad. And you know it."

From across the tempered-glass table on the flagstone patio, Julianne's father shot her an irritated look. "For whom?"

"All of us," she said, slipping Gus a piece of deli ham from her salad. Wide-eyed and very awake in one of her many baby seats, a just-fed Pippa babbled at the bouncing shadows cast by the thousand-fingered wisteria strangling the redwood trellis overhead. From the nearby pool, a chlorine-scented breeze danced around them like an attention-seeking child, as though trying to wick away at least part of the morning's turmoil. Fat chance of that.

"Bull," her father said. "And stop feeding the dog."

Her father had insisted on making lunch, despite it taking him three times longer than usual. Stubborn old fart. "It was one bite. And I'm eating. See?" Julianne shoved a forkful of red leaf

lettuce into her mouth. It tasted, as everything had in the last eighteen months, like paper. Limp, oily paper. Blech.

“You haven’t touched your bread, either,” he said. “And it’s the good stuff, from the bakery. With the chewy crust.”

Julianne stared at the thick slice of bread her father had laboriously cut for her, fast morphing into a slab of concrete in the humidity-starved air. The bread stared back, baleful and unwanted. “I’m not that hungry.” She twiddled her fork amongst the leaves, feeling petulant and out of sorts. *More* out of sorts. The sort of out of sorts that makes people say things they shouldn’t. “I’m also not five.”

“And you also don’t weigh much more than you did when you were five. So, eat, dammit, unless you want me to drag you to the doctor.”

Fine. So maybe she’d gone down a size—or two—since Gil’s death. But if she wasn’t hungry, she wasn’t hungry. And anyway, what was the point of eating when you just ended up dead, anyway?

Okay, even for her that was probably a tad too morose.

And her father had changed the subject. She speared another chunk of ham. At her knees, Gus—definitely not in danger of starving anytime soon—whined softly and licked his chops, hopeful. The ham suspended in midair, Julianne regarded the top of her father’s head, feeling, as usual, lost in the jungle of emotions being around him provoked. More often than not, though, once she’d machete’d her way through the frustration of

living with the spokesperson for implacability, how could she not feel profound compassion for a man who'd never wanted anything more than for his children to be happy? That he'd been powerless to make that happen for either of his daughters...

Well. The least she could do was let the man make her lunch.

"It's just as well that Kevin found out now and not later," she finally said, steeling herself against the sting. "It would have only been worse for us—and Pippa—if he had. And now that he knows, he's not going to go away. Or forget about his own daughter. And the sooner you accept that the easier it's going to be."

Her father's fork clattered to his plate as his gaze slammed into hers. "And *damned* if I'm going to let some junkie take my granddaughter!"

At his sharp tone, Pippa began to whimper. Gus—who took his role as mother's helper very seriously—thoroughly licked the baby's blobby little feet, distracting her.

"He's not a junkie, Dad," Julianne said softly, helplessly smiling at her niece's recently discovered belly laugh. "At least, not anymore. And anyway," she added, returning her gaze to her father, "even Robyn said his major problem was alcohol, not drugs."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"No, of course not. But if he's been clean for a year—"

"We only have his word on that, you know."

Julianne shakily set down her own fork, her half-eaten salad

jeering her as she folded her arms across her stomach. She looked out over her father's lawn and much-prized garden, scrupulously avoiding the pottery studio he'd had built for her shortly after her arrival. *Screw water conservation*, screamed the lush, bright green, weed-free grass, the dozens of rosebushes in copious bloom, the masses of deep purple clematis and azaleas and rhododendrons camouflaging the eight-foot-tall privacy fence. Dad spent hours out here during the long spring and summer, coaxing humidity-loving plants to grow in a high-desert climate. The same love-doesn't-give-up mind-set, Julianne mused, that had made him the darling of the self-help circuit.

If you care enough, you can make it work, make it happen, make it bloom.

She returned her gaze to her father, thinking, *It must be hell, living a lie.*

Pippa started fussing again; Julianne slid out of her chair to heft the baby into her arms, Gus hovering to make sure she didn't drop her. As she inhaled Pip's sweet, baby-shampoo smell, she remembered Kevin's awestruck expression when he held his daughter for the first time...the fierce look in his eyes when, after the initial shock wore off, he realized he was going to have a fight on his hands. That second look, especially, had pierced straight through the vast dead space inside her, rudely jolting her out of her nice, safe, bland cocoon.

Bastard.

"I know a year isn't very long in the scheme of things,"

Julianne said. “That Kevin could backslide. But he is Pippa’s father, Dad. He has the right to know his child. Which I’ve said all along.”

That merited far too many seconds of her father’s trenchant gaze. “You’re projecting,” he said gently.

“Because I lost my own baby, I’m empathizing with how he’d feel if he lost his? You betcha. But trust me, Kevin’s not going to simply take off with her.”

“You can’t be that naive.”

“I’m not. But you weren’t in the room with him. I was. And I promise you, that man is no more ready to be a full-time dad right now than Gus.” At the sound of his name, the dog waddled back to nuzzle aside Pippa’s thigh, laying his head on Julianne’s lap. She gave him another piece of ham, ignoring her father’s glare.

He stabbed at his salad, winced, then shoved the bite into his mouth. “Then why on earth would you want to encourage him to *be* ready?”

“Would you rather he show up with a court order and just take her away?”

Her father’s brows crashed together. “But you just said—”

“I didn’t say he didn’t *want* to be Pip’s father. I said he wasn’t *ready*. Once the dust settles, however, I have no doubt he’ll change his tune. And if he does press the issue, I can’t see where he wouldn’t be within his rights. Pip is his daughter, after all.”

“According to Robyn.”

“So we’ll do a DNA test. I doubt Kevin will object. But what

did Robyn have to gain by telling us Kevin was Pippa's father? Especially since she didn't want him to know." Julianne fiddled with her lettuce some more, then lifted her eyes to her father's. "Be truthful—are you really up to a custody battle? Because I'm sure as hell not."

"So we should just hand Pippa over without a fight?"

"I don't want to lose her any more than you do. It's the fighting part I'd just as soon avoid."

Victor carefully leaned back in his padded chair; Gus the Fickle hobbled over to him, his long tail whapping Julianne's bare knee. "What do we even know about this kid? Aside from his dragging your sister down into the pit with him, I mean. Is he working? Does he even have any way of taking care of Pip?"

Julianne pulled the baby closer as she worked to bring her breathing under control. It wasn't that she didn't understand where her father was coming from. Or why. Losing Robyn—first to drugs, then to death—had nearly wrecked him. And God knew how Julianne would have gotten through the last year and a half without his support. But while her dad might have been the go-to expert on mending other people's family rifts, he could be spectacularly obtuse when it came to mending—or even acknowledging—his own.

"I'll grant you, maybe his earlier behavior wasn't the most mature in the world," she said at last. "And maybe we don't know what he's really like now, or if he's really changed. Or even if he is able to take care of a child. Even so, he didn't have to come

all the way out here, just to check up on Robyn. So I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, even if you're not."

She leaned forward. "But you have *got* to stop using Kevin as a scapegoat for what happened to Robyn. He said he tried every way he could think of to get her into rehab, but she refused. And yes, I believe him," she said before her father could argue with her. "After all, she didn't exactly go meekly for us, did she? And we weren't trying to get our own heads straight at the same time. There was only so much he could do, Dad. Even you have to see that."

A bruised shadow passed over her father's features, followed by a sigh. Of acceptance? Resignation? Julianne had no idea.

"You always were the soft-hearted one, Julie-bird."

"Because I don't have it in me to keep a father and child apart? Then, yeah. Guilty as charged. In any case, the more obstacles we throw up between Kevin and Pippa, the worse it's going to be for all of us. But if we let Kevin stay with us..." She shrugged. "It's a win-win situation."

"And how do you figure that?"

"Because if he's here, we can keep an eye on him. Get to know him while he gets to know his daughter. But at the same time, maybe..."

"What?"

She turned Pippa around; pudgy, shapeless feet dug into her thighs as the baby pushed herself upright, Julianne's hands firm on her waist. The baby had recently discovered the wonder of

noses. Now, with a drooly squeal, she batted at Julianne's, the little girl's innocent joy jostling loose—even if only for a few precious moments—the solid, putrid ache of loss. “Maybe,” Julianne said softly, locking eyes with her niece, “if we *don't* fight him, he'll realize she's better off with us, after all.”

Her father's sharp silence finally brought her eyes to his. He slowly pushed himself to his feet, angrily grabbing for the cane. “I've already lost two people I didn't fight for hard enough,” he said, leaning so hard on the cane Julianne worried he'd topple over. “Damned if I'm going to let the same thing happen to my granddaughter. Maybe I can't stop Kevin from seeing Pip. But live in my *house*? No damn way.”

As her father lurched off, grumbling, the dog slogging beside him, Julianne found herself sorely tempted to chuck the slab of rock-hard bread at his head.

Blinking until his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Kevin stood inside Felix Padilla's upholstery shop, thinking, *Welcome to my brain.*

Crammed into the narrow space like corralled sheep awaiting shearing, Victorian love seats in threadbare velvets mingled with Americana wing chairs, sets of Danish modern dining chairs with faded burnt-orange seats, camel-back sofas in worn brocades. Damn place looked like a 3-D encyclopedia of Ill-Advised Decorating Styles of the Twentieth Century. Just like it had the first time he'd seen it, more than a year ago. He followed the barely three-foot-wide walkway to Felix's workshop in back,

where the jumble disintegrated into flat-out chaos.

“Felix!” Kevin called out, his pupils cringing again at the stark daylight lurking outside the open loading-dock door. Mind-numbing eighties rock blared from a dusty boombox on one corner of the massive cutting table; tools, swatch books, industrial sewing machines, bins of welting and studs and upholstery nails littered what little space wasn’t taken up by a dozen sofas and chairs in various stages of resurrection. This was seriously the lair of a madman. A half-deaf, insanely talented madman who hadn’t been without work since 1965.

“Felix!”

“Over here! Behin’ the settee!” A bald, caramel-colored head popped up over the love seat, upended like a dead animal in an advanced stage of rigor mortis. “So,” Felix shouted over the music. “You were gone a long time. What’d you find out? An’ don’t sit on that chair, it’s jus’ finished. The las’ thing I need is a dirty butt print on it.”

Kevin pointlessly turned down the radio: half-deaf men didn’t know how to whisper. He’d met Felix through AA; he’d never forget the pride shining in the old guy’s black eyes that night when he stood and announced—loud enough for God to hear—that he’d been sober for “seven t’ousand, two hundred an’ thirty-six days.” A week later, in a huge act of faith, he’d taken Kevin on as an apprentice, until they both realized heavier-duty intervention was called for. It was Felix who knew somebody who knew somebody else who got Kevin into the facility in Denver where

the tide finally turned for good.

There were other people in Albuquerque Kevin could've hit up for a place to crash for a few days, but Felix was the only person he could trust. Who'd understand what he was going through.

The short, barrel-chested guy now cussing out his arthritic knees as he struggled to his feet had been uncle, confidant and rock-steady support to the messed-up hombre who'd finally swallowed his pride enough to admit he needed help. Felix had known all about Robyn. Had even suggested—sorrowfully, to be sure—that maybe Robyn was one of those people who'd have to hit rock bottom before she was ready to turn her life around.

Kevin leaned his backside against the cutting table, his palms braced on either side of his hips. After an hour of aimless driving around town, the double whammy had only begun to sink in, about Robyn, about Pippa. For the hundredth time, a white-hot jolt of adrenaline shot through him.

He met Felix's eyes. "Robyn's dead."

The old man sucked in a breath. "*Muerta?* No! *Dios mio*—when?"

"Three months ago."

"What happened?"

"Swimming accident. Down in Puerto Vallarta." Kevin could tell by Felix's eye roll that he'd mangled the pronunciation. "According to her sister, she'd been clean for months, but—"

"Her sister?"

"An older sister. She's staying with their father." His throat

worked. “To help take care of the baby.”

“The baby? What baby?” Another sucked-in breath preceded, “You got a *kid*?”

Kevin had long since stopped being spooked by Felix’s Olympiquesque knack for jumping to conclusions. Actually it took some of the pressure off, not having to spell everything out. “A little girl. Nearly five months old.” He screwed a palm into his eyelid, then let it drop. The sympathy in the dark eyes in front of him made his own burn.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

The old man dragged a worn ottoman from underneath the cutting table, commanding, “Sit!” before waddling over to an ancient fridge and pulling out two Cokes. “You, my frien’,” he said, handing Kevin one of the cans, “need a plan.”

Kevin took a pull of his soda, nodding as the carbonation exploded against the roof of his mouth. “What I need is a job. And transport of some kind, since I hadn’t planned on keeping this rental for more than a few days. So I can hang around for a while until I figure out what comes next.”

“You got it,” Felix said, slapping Kevin’s knee. “Orlando, my assistant, he suddenly had to go back down to Juarez to look after his sick momma, I got work coming outta my ears. An’ I jus’ bought a new truck. You can use the old one if you want. She looks like crap, but she still runs, an’ that’s what counts, right?”

“That would be great, thanks,” Kevin said, relieved.

Upholstery wasn't his first love—he much preferred working on houses to recovering sofas—but he was good at it. And work was work. As wheels were wheels. He smiled. “Funny, you don't look like an angel.”

A row of very bright, very straight teeth glinted from underneath a brush-roller mustache. “Are you kiddin’? You're the one who'd be saving my ass. So maybe I see God's hand in this, no? An' you can stay with me an' Lupe as long as you like. No, no, no,” he said, his head swinging as one hand shot up. “No arguments. Maybe our place is no five-star hotel, but it's free. An' the food is great, yes? As long as you don' mind dodging Frannie's little rug rats. Her husband's done a runner on her again, the bastard.”

Kevin smiled, wondering how it was that the people with the least to give were so often the most generous. The Padillas lived in a tiny, three-bedroom adobe in the South Valley, which would have been fine if it'd just been the two of them. But invariably one or more of their grown kids—with their kids—were in residence, too. Not that Kevin had issues with sleeping on the futon in their living room, but he hadn't planned on staying more than a night or two.

Yeah, well, he hadn't planned on discovering he was a father, either.

Another jolt. Damn, he was beginning to feel like a rat in a science experiment, getting a shock every time he went the wrong way in the maze.

And didn't that pretty much sum up his life?

A glance around the jumbled shop confirmed that Felix's offer hadn't been out of pity. "Okay, I'm in. At least until Orlando gets back."

"Put it there, my frien'," Felix said, hand extended, teeth flashing. He chuckled. "Only please tell me you can start right away. My back is killin' me."

"Deal," Kevin said, thinking, *One problem down, only five million left to go.*

Several hours later, after helping Felix make several deliveries, Kevin begged off to go apartment hunting. Not that he didn't appreciate his friend's offer, but obviously Kevin was going to need a place of his own. And soon. Someplace he could take his daughter. As it was, prying Pippa away from Victor wasn't gonna be easy. Without a job and/or a home? Fuggedaboutit.

Even if settling in Albuquerque hadn't been part of his plan. Okay, *plan* might be stretching it—truth be told, Kevin hadn't really thought much past squaring things with Robyn. Even so, although he liked the Duke City well enough, he'd always thought of it as part of his drifting phase. In terms of *then*, not *now*. And having finally mended a fence or two with his family, he'd begun to seriously consider returning to Springfield, give in to his sisters-in-laws' blatant attempts at fixing him up with assorted friends, sisters, cousins. Finding peace right in his own backyard and all that.

He hadn't told his folks about the baby yet. Although, after

forty years of parenthood—not to mention all the hell *he'd* put them through—he sincerely doubted this would even register on the “You did *what?*” scale.

Pippa would make their fourteenth grandchild. Not counting the three extras Rudy and Mia brought to the table by virtue of falling in love with people who already had kids. There were towns in New Mexico with smaller populations than the Vaccaro clan, Kevin thought with a slight smile...one that flattened as he slowed down in front of, then drove past, yet another sullen-looking apartment complex that offered month-to-month rentals.

Sure, there were knockout apartments in the city, with stunning landscaping and pools and the like, places he knew Victor Booth would approve of. Places Kevin didn't dare sign a lease for until he nailed down a steady job. Not to mention, he thought, idling at a stoplight, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel as hip-hop vibrated from the car radio, all the baby crap he'd have to buy. Cribs and changing tables and strollers and...things.

And then there was the whole day-care issue. Finding it, paying for it, worrying about it.

Although...he could take the baby back home, he supposed. His parents certainly had the room, and there'd be more baby stuff than he could shake a stick at, and day-care options, and family, and he could probably find work without too much trouble, doing construction or renovation or whatever. And it wasn't like anybody could say anything. He was the baby's father

for godssake.

So why didn't this feel more like a solution? Why, instead of feeling another layer of worries peel away, did he suddenly feel like hurling?

The truck's wheels scraped the curb as Kevin swerved into a parking space alongside one of the many little parks dotting the city. The door shoved open, he stumbled out of the car, gulping for air as he staggered toward a pool of shade underneath a large ash tree close to the brightly colored playground. Long, thick grass soothed his palms, cushioned his backside when he dropped onto it, tucking his head between his knees for a moment until the nausea passed. A bunch of little kids, under the watchful eyes of their mothers chatting at a picnic table nearby, took turns zooming down a blue twisty slide, screaming, thrilled.

One of the mothers reminded him of Julianne. Slender, blond, with glasses. Shapeless clothes. But a lot more lively—and louder—the woman's unfettered laughter carrying across the park.

Kevin forked both hands through his hair, remembering the look in Julianne's eyes when he'd handed Pippa back to her. When she'd told him about losing her husband. Her baby.

Holy hell, he thought as the light dawned—it wasn't *Victor* who'd be the biggest obstacle between him and his little girl.

And the longer she stayed with Julianne... the harder removing Pip was going to be.

He dug out his cell phone, his heart slamming against his rib cage for several seconds before he finally flipped it open.

His father answered on the first ring.

Chapter Three

Almost every evening—once the sun was at a kinder tilt—Julianne plopped Pippa in her stroller and took her for a walk around the neighborhood. The excursions did both of them good, getting Pippa used to different sounds and sights and getting Julianne out of the house—out of herself—without having to deal with the tiresomeness of being sociable. Occasionally they'd pass a lone jogger or cyclist, an older couple fast-walking their way back to youth, but for the most part it was just Julianne and the baby and the quiet. She loved the quiet.

When she didn't hate it, that is.

Because while the quiet brought peace, it also provided a far-too-fertile ground for memories. For reflection. For the nagging little voice asking her exactly how much, and for how long, she intended to let herself rot away. This evening, of course, the stroller shimmying over the bumpy sidewalk as they headed back to her father's house, Kevin Vaccaro had joined the ranks of Stuff to Worry About. As in, what *would* he do? Would he take the baby...? *When* would he take the baby...? Would Julianne ever see her again...? Was there any way to solve this without somebody getting hurt? That sort of thing.

Sunlight flashed off a windshield as they turned the corner. Julianne slipped her cheapo sunglasses back on over her regular glasses, pushed the stroller hood forward before Pippa's squawk of annoyance could rev up to a full-out wail and thought, *Nobody*

told you to tell him the truth, dimwit.

A sigh scampered to catch up with the thought. Because, damn her goody-goody conscience, she could never have lived with herself if she'd deliberately ignored the chance to do what was right. Now all she could do was trust that Kevin Vaccaro would do what was right, as well—

The sunspot on that windshield gradually diminished, revealing who was standing beside the from-hunger pickup surrounding it.

Well, hell.

“How'd you know we weren't inside?” she called before her brain alerted her throat to close and her stomach to knot.

In worn jeans and a loose T-shirt, Kevin leaned against the truck's dented front fender, ankles crossed, arms folded across his chest, watching their approach through a pair of badass sunglasses. Julianne reminded herself she'd never been a big fan of badass. “I passed you on the way,” Kevin said, in a voice deeper, and far more resolute, than she remembered. “You didn't notice?”

Julianne shook her head, releasing the stomach-knotting signals. *Amazing, the difference a measly eight hours makes*, she thought, halting in front of him, vaguely noting that the jeans were a huge improvement over the khakis. Because somewhere between then and now, the scraps of leftover boy still clinging to him that morning had slunk off into the sunset, leaving this... this badass.

“What...” She swallowed, started over in a more normal voice.

“What are you doing here?”

“I said I’d be back.” He removed his sunglasses, briefly met her gaze, then crouched in front of the stroller, his smile for his daughter absolutely heartbreaking. “So I’m back,” he said in a voice as silky smooth as baby powder, setting off a fine trembling throughout Julianne’s entire body that she could have gladly done without, thank you very much.

Oh, hell. He was making her nervous. Which, he supposed, was the whole point to gaining the upper hand. Except, dammit, it was like scaring a whippet.

She’d led him through the house, out onto the covered patio. Flowers everywhere. Kick-ass trees. Lots of grass. Not a cactus or yucca in sight. Fair-size pool. Largish shedlike building in a far corner, a workshop, maybe.

“Have you eaten?” she asked, unstrapping the baby from her stroller.

Kevin turned, his gaze glancing off a straight ponytail, straight back, straight, shapeless sundress. Which probably wouldn’t be shapeless if she’d eat something. Fill it out a bit. Yes, he knew some women were naturally skinny, but somehow he didn’t think that was the case here. And what was with the gracious-hostess routine?

“I did, actually. After the meeting.”

“The meeting...? Oh.” She turned. “The meeting. Gotcha.”

He almost smiled. “Yeah,” he said, eyeing his daughter,

contentedly gnawing her fist in Julianne's arms. He'd needed the extra boost, even after talking to his parents. Up until two minutes ago, he'd planned on telling Julianne and Victor right up front what his intention was. Partly so they wouldn't have time to react, partly before he lost his nerve. Now, however, he was thinking maybe the balls-out approach might not be the best way to go. That maybe it wouldn't hurt to sell the idea, little by little. "I just go to meetings when the mood strikes. But the ones who make it usually keep it up for the rest of their lives. You mind if I hold her?"

After a momentary startled look, Julianne's mouth twisted, like she was annoyed with herself. "Not at all," she said, her sandals slapping against the flat stones as she crossed to him, did the transfer. Pippa never noticed, far more interested in her knuckles than who was holding her. Julianne stepped back, arms crossed. Keeping an eye on him. "Maybe you should sit."

"I'm not gonna drop her, for cryin' out loud."

"Still," she said, eyes round with worry behind her glasses. Kevin sat. "What goes on at the meetings?" she asked. Still standing.

"Didn't Robyn tell you?"

"We had her in a private clinic. And if it hadn't been for the mandatory family group sessions, we would have known next to nothing. And besides, as I said...my sister wasn't interested in sharing."

"*Sharing* is the key word, actually," Kevin said, turning the

baby to face him. “People share their stories. Their personal hells.” Man, was this a strong kid or what, her head not even wobbling on that little linebacker neck. What he could see of the neck for the chins, he thought, grinning. Petrified. Still gumming her fist, shiny with baby spit, Pip grinned back; Kevin’s heart did a triple forward somersault. “And their triumphs,” he said quietly. “Even the littlest ones count. When you’re climbing up from rock bottom, every step back up is a biggie.”

After a moment Julianne eased over to perch on the end of a chaise across from him, her arms still tucked against her ribs, knees pressed tightly together, eyes fastened on the baby. She almost seemed to be shrinking into herself, like she was trying to become invisible. Panting, the Lab plodded over to sit heavily on one hip at her knees. One slender hand reached out to stroke the space between his ears, and Kevin thought, *Screw working up to this*. But before he could open his mouth, she said, “You’re taking her, aren’t you?”

He couldn’t meet her gaze. “Yeah.”

“When?” she whispered.

“I promised this upholsterer friend of mine I’d help him out of a bind, so probably not for at least a week.”

“A *week*? How can you possibly make arrangements to take care of a baby in a week? This morning you said—”

“I know what I said this morning,” Kevin said, finally looking at her. “But since then I’ve talked to my folks. I can live with them indefinitely. They’ve got tons of room, Ma’s agreed to take

care of Pip while I look for work—”

“With them? In Massachusetts?”

“It’s where my family is. Like I said, we’re close. Pip’d have a million cousins to play with—”

“So, what are you saying? Quantity trumps quality? That because it’s just the two of us, Dad and I don’t count?”

Aw, man—those eyes were killers. “Of course I’m not sayin’ that. But I’m Pip’s father. She belongs with me. And I’m gonna be honest with you, I have a far better chance of makin’ it work back home, where I’ve got connections and a place to live, than I ever would here.”

“Living with your *parents*?”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s working for you, isn’t it?”

Her face went bright red. A second later she bolted from her seat and back toward the house. Muttering an obscenity, Kevin took off after her, cupping the baby’s head as he followed her through the French doors into the living room. “Julianne! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

She whirled around, as though realizing she’d left the baby with him. “You have no idea,” she said, trembling, “what it’s been like for us. For me. Dad and I were just piecing together the scraps, trying to make a real family for Pippa! What’s so awful about that?”

“Nothing! But my finding out about Pippa changes everything. I mean, you had to know, when you told me, what would happen!”

“Julie?” her father said, hobbling into the room. Julianne flew to him, crumpling against his chest. Wrapping one arm around his daughter, Victor glared at Kevin over the top of her head. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I’ve decided to take Pip back with me to Massachusetts, Mr. Booth,” Kevin said quietly. “In about a week.”

Victor’s deep blue gaze lanced Kevin’s. “Before we get DNA verification that she’s really yours? Over my dead body.”

Okay, so maybe he’d been wrong about the Julianne-being-his-biggest-obstacle thing. Not that Kevin was about to back down, but at least he now knew where to focus his fire. “So we’ll do the spit test,” he said, jiggling the baby when she began to whimper. “But as soon as we know—” he forced down the grapefruit at the base of his throat “—she’s mine.”

A still-shaky—and, Kevin was guessing, somewhat sheepish—Julianne extricated herself from her father’s arms. “Are you all right?” Victor murmured, worried, one hand on her shoulder. She nodded, shoving tears off her cheeks, and nausea walloped Kevin all over again.

“It’s Pippa’s bedtime,” she said, fixing Kevin with watery eyes, her expression a weird mix of sympathy, resignation and an anguish so deep Kevin’s heart squeezed in response. “Besides, the tension’s not good for her.”

Since the baby had begun to cry for real, even Kevin had to concede that point. Especially since he figured things were only going to get more intense. Julianne wiped her palms down her

dress, then held out her arms. “You can check on her before you leave. Promise.”

Kevin handed Pip over, then watched them leave. “Do you even love her?” Victor asked behind him.

Startled, Kevin turned. “What?”

“Pippa. Is this about loving her, or just staking your claim?”

“Any reason it can’t be both?”

“Julianne said you looked scared to death when you first saw her.”

“Hell, I felt like I’d been knocked into next week with a wrecking ball. That doesn’t mean I don’t love her. Or don’t you believe in love at first sight?”

“You’re not going to rack up any points by being a smart-ass, Mr. Vaccaro.”

“And if it’d been up to you, I would’ve never even found out about my daughter. Believe me, winning points with *you* is the last thing on my mind.”

“I ran a background check on you, young man,” Victor said, his gaze never leaving Kevin’s. “Long before you showed up. So I know that in the past ten years, you haven’t held down any job for longer than six months. That you haven’t stayed in one *place* longer than six months. That you’ve had your license suspended twice for DUI and were busted once for possession.”

“Then you knew exactly where to find me all along, didn’t you?” When the older man didn’t answer, Kevin let out a dry laugh. “Well. Look on the bright side—at least I never applied

for the job of son-in-law.”

Victor’s mouth pulled even tighter. If that was possible. “I was only thinking of Pippa’s welfare—”

“Because you think I’m scum. Got it. And to be fair, I can see where you’re coming from. Sort of. But unless you hired a really crappy P.I., you also know I successfully completed a three-month rehab program and that my record’s been spotless since. And the DUIs were years ago. Or doesn’t any of that count?”

“I’ve already lost Pippa’s mother,” Victor said. “Damned if I’m going to lose Pippa, as well.”

A splotch-faced Julianne inched back into the room, still hugging herself, clinging to her composure with everything she had. Kevin wished like hell there was some way to keep her from being part of the collateral damage.

“You don’t have to stay, Julie-bird. Kevin and I can handle this—”

“I’m fine. And anyway, this concerns me, too.” Her eyes touched Kevin’s. “Right?”

“Absolutely,” Kevin said before her father could protest. Then he pushed out a breath. “Okay, maybe on paper I don’t come across so good. And I know I’ve got this problem with shootin’ off at the mouth and sounding like I don’t take things as seriously as maybe I should. But I would think if anybody would recognize a defense mechanism, Mr. Booth, it would you be you.”

Victor’s brows lifted, and Kevin thought, *Gotcha*. “Yeah, I’ve read a couple of your books. My counselor in rehab was a big fan.

Surprise, right? But it's like I told Julianne earlier—I'm not that idiot kid anymore. Haven't been for some time. Which means I *know* my present situation isn't exactly ideal. In fact, since I found out about Pip this morning? I've been pretty much a mess, trying to figure out how to make this work. But the only thing I knew, the only thing I still know, is that I'm not about to duck my responsibility." He hesitated. "Not like Robyn's mother did to her. To both of you," he directed to Julianne, who looked like she'd been clobbered over the head with a large stick.

A deathly quiet fell over the room. "Is that what Robyn told you?" Victor finally said. "That her mother killed herself to *duck her responsibility*?"

"I'm guessing that's how Robyn saw it," he said, realizing his mistake as it finally registered how much this family had been through. "Whatever the reasons, that had to be rough on a twelve-year-old. No wonder she was so messed up."

Of course, her father's obsessive determination to make up for what Robyn had seen as her mother's betrayal had a lot to do with Robyn's behavior, too. Even Kevin could figure out that the harder Victor had tried to compensate, the more stubbornly she'd withdrawn. But that was a road probably best left unexplored, at least for now. "Look, all you know about me is what you see in those reports—"

"And what my daughter said about you."

"No offense, sir, but Robyn probably wasn't entirely objective when it came to me. We didn't exactly have an amicable

breakup.”

“He’s right, Dad,” Julianne said, and Kevin’s eyes cut to her profile. “You know yourself Robyn’s talent at shaping whatever she said to fit the moment.” Then, to Kevin, “It’s true, she never really did get over our mother’s suicide—”

“Julie, this is none of his business—”

“Of course it is,” she said with surprising strength. “Like it or not, Pippa’s existence makes Kevin part of the family. And he deserves to know as much about Robyn as we can tell him. Especially if...if he’s going to take her to the other side of the country.”

Was the chick wack or what? It had to be killing her, to back him up like this. So why the hell was she doing it?

“Even on her good days,” Julianne said, “Robyn wasn’t known for her objectivity. After Mom died...” She sighed. “She was still a kid. And no matter how many times we told her that Mom had been sick, that her death had nothing to do with anything we did, it was obvious she never quite believed us. Of course, I don’t suppose it helped that Mom had promised to take her out for a rare just-the-two-of-them shopping and lunch spree the next day.”

Kevin groaned, even as he caught the sag of failure in Victor’s shoulders. “Yeah,” Julianne said, “it was pretty bad. How do you convince a child not to take something like that personally?”

And how did you take it? Kevin wondered, watching her. “From then on,” Julianne continued, “every slight, real or

perceived, got blown completely out of proportion. And she *hated* being the one broken up with.”

Gus nosed her hand. Smiling slightly, she gave him a pat, then looked back at Kevin, her brow pinched. “However valid your reasons for leaving her may have been, no matter how she really felt about you, all Robyn saw was that you’d screwed her over. That sent you straight to the top of her *S*-list,” she said with a slight smile. “So you’re absolutely right—she definitely wasn’t a reliable source. Especially about you.”

Not exactly a wholehearted endorsement, but better than a kick in the ’nads. “Mr. Booth,” Kevin said after a moment, “it’s not like I *don’t* understand how this is hard for you. Especially since you don’t know me worth squat. You also don’t know my family, who were every bit as hurt by what I did as you were with Robyn. Believe me, if I go back there? If they thought I was even thinking about slipping back into old habits, *they’d* take the baby away from me. They’re good people, Mr. Booth. They don’t live in fancy houses or drive expensive cars, and all the kids go to public schools, but dammit...”

His eyes burned. “They *never* gave up on me. Even at my lowest point, I knew that. You know what my father used to say? ‘When a kid comes in all muddy, you don’t throw him away, you wash him off.’ Somehow, I’m betting you’d agree with him.”

After a very long moment the older man released a long, shaky breath. “Yes. I would.” Then his jaw locked again. “But for all I know, you could be pulling a major con on me.”

On a dry laugh, Kevin shook his head. “You know something? For somebody who preaches about forgiveness and healing as much as you do, you sure don’t seem real good at practicing it.”

Victor looked taken aback. But only for a moment.

“Ten thousand.”

Kevin frowned. “Pardon?”

“Ten thousand dollars. If you agree to stay for a month. Providing you live here, in this house, so I can see for myself that you’ve changed.”

“Dad!”

“It was your idea, Julie-bird,” Victor said, and Kevin thought, *What the hell?* His eyes ping-ponged from Julianne back to Victor.

“Excuse me,” he said when he could breathe again, “but I don’t have to prove a damn thing to you. Not after the stunt you tried to pull on *me*—”

“*Twenty* thousand,” Victor said, unfazed. Determined. “Deposited into your bank account at the end of the month to spend as you choose. If you agree to stay the month.”

Incredulous, Kevin snorted a laugh. “And I cannot believe you’re trying to buy my daughter.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake—how stupid do you think I am? The only thing I’m trying to ‘buy’ is a month of your time. To make sure Pippa would be in good hands with you. You say you love that little girl, but I *know* we do. If you’re determined to take her, then at least give us a chance to get used to the idea. To get to

know you.”

“Never mind that nobody gave *me* time to get used to the idea of being a father.”

Victor’s mouth tightened. “Touché. Still. We both know you’re not in a position to turn down the money. Even today, twenty grand can go a long way when you have a child to take care of.”

Kevin narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t that stupid, either. Or that much of a fool. He knew damn well that Pippa would be more than taken care of, whether Kevin agreed to go along with Victor Booth’s plan or not. He’d be very surprised if the trust fund wasn’t already set up. Besides that, though, the old guy wasn’t about to jeopardize his granddaughter’s welfare to get back at Kevin. And after talking things over with his own father, he felt a lot more certain that while Victor might make noises about hauling Kevin’s ass into court, his chances of gaining custody weren’t all that great. Because the minute Victor brought up Kevin’s past, he’d be asked how he knew. And the minute *that* came out, it’d be pretty clear he’d deliberately kept Pippa’s existence a secret.

Sure, maybe Kevin’s record wasn’t exactly stellar, but he hadn’t used for more than a year, he would be taking Pippa into a stable environment—at least, one stable enough for all reasonable purposes—and, oh, yeah, he was Pippa’s father. He would submit to the DNA test to shut the old man up, but he wasn’t worried about the outcome. God knows, Robyn may have had her issues, but Kevin and she had been virtually living together for the month before they broke up. He’d bet his life the baby was his.

However, he'd also be lying if he said twenty grand wouldn't come in handy. He could invest it, use it as a nest egg to maybe start his own renovation business. Sure, part of him wanted nothing to do with Victor Booth's money. But another part of him felt like, you know, the dude owed him. Pride was all well and good, but there was a fine line between pride and idiocy.

And at least, if he was in residence, nobody could play the "he hasn't been part of the child's life" card against him.

Kevin slid his hands into his front pockets, looking Victor straight in the eye.

"You swear that after a month, I can take her? No arguments, no threats?"

"You have my word."

"Oh, I'll need more than your word. I want this in writing, signed and notarized. About the money, too."

Victor's eyebrow raised, like he didn't expect Kevin to be that much on the ball. "Then...you won't mind if I add a paragraph stating that if you backslide, even once, we get her back?"

"Not at all. Because that's not gonna happen." Kevin extended his hand. After a moment Victor took it.

And Kevin prayed like hell that this time, he'd made the right decision.

Chapter Four

Trailed by Gus the Ever-Faithful, Julianne followed Kevin outside, as though she was in one of those dreams where her limbs seemed to have minds of their own. She only went as

far as the end of the walk, however, watching helplessly as he continued walking to that pathetic excuse for a truck, only vaguely wondering—or caring—what had happened to the rental car. In the mauve light, an almost chilly breeze rustled the cottonwood leaves, released the broom's heady, spicy scent. "I swear I had no idea that was coming," she finally croaked out, hands fisted in her dress pockets.

He turned, smirking. "Even though it was originally your idea?"

So much for hoping he'd missed that part of the conversation. Dear God, if he had any idea what had motivated her initial suggestion... "Only your staying with us. The money thing was all Dad."

"And right now you're thinking, *Nice to know he can be bought.*"

Gus let out a soft, whiny woof. Frowning, Julianne glanced down the street at that woman who clearly used her poor golden retriever as cover for her snooping. Then she looked back at Kevin. "If he'd offered you twenty grand to leave Pip with us altogether," she said, knowing Ms. Snoop was too far away to hear, "would you have taken it?"

"*What?*" he squawked. "I wouldn't've left her behind for a hundred times that. Are you nuts?"

His indignation made her smile. "Then you're not a man who can be bought. Bargained with, maybe, but not bought."

The truck door groaned when Kevin swung it open. "No

matter how you look at it, this is a crappy situation.” His gaze, opaque in the dusky light, drifted to hers, “And nothing’s gonna change in a month, which makes it even crappier.”

“Why do you say that?” she said, propelling herself onto the sidewalk, a thousand thoughts jostling for position in her brain. Gus stayed behind, benignly observing the retriever. “Why couldn’t you find work here? Permanent work, I mean. A place of your own. I know it’s not ideal, but...between what you want and what Dad wants, maybe there’s a compromise?”

A slight smile poked at the corners of his mouth. “Maybe there is. Like you said, I’m a man who can be bargained with. As long as there’s no question about my daughter living with me, I don’t suppose *where* I—we—live matters.” Then the smile stretched. “But let me get this straight—you thought I should stay in the house, only then you changed your mind—”

“Actually, it was Dad who shot down the idea,” Julianne said quickly, playing the conversational equivalent of three-cup shuffle. “So technically he changed *his* mind.”

“Man,” Kevin said, frowning slightly, clearly trying to figure out which cup hid the truth. “He really must be desperate. Considering that whole I’m-scum thing.”

“It’s not that bad,” Julianne murmured, suddenly much warmer than the temperature warranted.

“Yeah, it is. But it’s not like I can’t relate. Your father and I might be on opposite sides here, but we both want what’s best for that little girl. If his gut’s churning over this half as much as

mine is...I just get where he's coming from, that's all. What I can't figure out, though, is you."

Julianne flinched. "Me?"

"Yeah. First, why you took my side when you obviously don't want to give Pippa up any more than your father does. Second, why you looked like you'd just been hit over the head with a frying pan when your father came up with his little 'deal.'" His eyes turned into slits. "Call it a stretch, but I'm guessing you're not all that hot on the idea of me being around."

Not a stretch at all, she thought, then said, "What I want is neither here nor there. I defended you because somebody had to. Because Dad's grief over losing Robyn has made him completely myopic. He wants somebody, anybody, to be the bad guy here. And unfortunately you walked right into the line of fire. And Robyn...well. We already covered that ground."

She shivered. "Still. I may be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but that doesn't mean you're off the hook. Not by a long shot."

Irritatingly, one side of his mouth lifted. "Message received," he said, then finally slid behind the wheel, slammed his door, drove off. He was all the way to the end of the block before Julianne realized her knees were locked in place.

She unlocked them, went back inside. Her dad was in his office, at his computer. Probably working. He hated being interrupted. Ask her if she cared.

"Geez, Dad," she said, plopping into the armchair across from

his desk. Gus collapsed at her feet, worn-out. “A little warning might have been nice. Twenty *grand*? Are you out of your *mind*? Why on earth would Kevin be inclined to leave Pip with us now?”

Her father plucked off his glasses, then leaned heavily into in his high-backed leather chair, rubbing his eyes. When he looked at her again, she saw a weary resignation in those eyes that almost frightened her. “He’s right, you know. As long as he’s clean, I don’t have a chance in hell of winning a custody battle. But there might be a slim chance that your idea *will* work, that he’ll decide after a month she is better off with us.”

So Kevin was right—her father *was* desperate. Grasping-at-straws desperate in a way she’d never seen him before, not even right after her mother died. With that, the fight drained out of her. “I wouldn’t hold my breath on that.”

“I’m not. But at least this way our butts are covered. A lot can happen in a month, Julie-bird.”

Suddenly she got it. “You don’t believe he’ll stay straight, do you?”

“You know how many alcoholics actually stay on the wagon?”

“Yes, actually. But why do you automatically assume Kevin won’t?” And why was she still defending him? “He already has a year under his belt. And that was without any outside motivation. Now, with Pippa...” Her eyes got itchy. “I’m just worried you’re setting yourself up for a major disappointment, Dad.”

The sharp ache of failure glittered in her father’s eyes. “We thought we were home free with your sister, too. That even

though we'd forced her into recovery, for her own child's sake she'd want to *stay* clean. And look how that turned out."

After a moment, Julianne propelled herself to her feet, dislodging the sixty-pound foot warmer. When she got to the door, however, she turned around, her brow knotted with the effort to focus her thoughts into words. "You know, it's not exactly in my best interest, either, if your theory about Kevin proves to be wrong. And yet I can't see myself sitting around, waiting—hoping—for Kevin to fall on his face just so you'll win, either. There's something about him..." She shook her head. "He's not Robyn, Dad."

Dad sighed. "He talks a good talk, honey, I'll give you that. But that's no reason to feel sorry for him."

"I don't feel *sorry* for him, dammit! I'm not even sure I like him all that much, to be honest. I just think he's a guy trying to fix his mistakes, who wants to be with his own child. He's not the bloody devil, for crying out loud!"

"Julie-bird—"

"And for the love of *God* will you stop calling me that? I'm not a freaking child!"

She waited a moment to absorb her father's stymied expression before leaving the room.

Kevin tossed his duffel onto a plaid club chair in Victor's guest room, next to a heavily draped window overlooking the backyard. The room was okay, if kinda impersonal. Inoffensive. Like what you'd find in a better-grade motel, maybe. But the bed

—queen-size, with one of those fourteen-inch mattresses—was a damn sight better than Felix’s futon. Place was a helluva lot quieter, too.

Speaking of whom... Felix definitely had a lot to say about this most recent development. Tact wasn’t exactly the old guy’s strong suit. Except, Kevin frankly wondered if his friend’s loud objections weren’t due more to his losing what he’d hoped was a buffer between him and Lupe than to Kevin’s moving into Victor Booth’s house.

Kevin unzipped his bag to load his few shirts, a couple pairs of jeans, into one of the cedar-scented bureau drawers. A clotheshorse, he was not. Wear it, wash it, repeat until replacing was the only option, was his motto. Somehow, he doubted the girl child snoozing peacefully next door was going to subscribe to the same fashion philosophy, if the piles of baby sleepers and what-have-you he’d seen Julianne folding earlier was any indication. Not to mention his nieces, all of whom could sniff out a mall from fifty miles away.

“Here.”

Kevin turned to see Julianne standing in the doorway, bearing linens and ambivalence, a grinning Gus at her side. “Thanks,” he said, crossing the springy Berber carpet to take them. The linens, anyway. Man, that conflict in her eyes *stung*. But whatever was going on underneath that pale blond hair—aside from the obvious, that his being there threatened her status quo as far as Pip was concerned—was off-limits. For the next month he was

under her father's microscope, and he had no intention of letting anything, or anybody, distract him from the task at hand. Which at the moment was to make up his bed. He whisked off the tailored, earth-toned spread to reveal a thickly quilted mattress cover.

“Want help?”

He flicked a glance in her direction. Damn, she looked ready to keel over. “I meant it when I said I could do this myself.”

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