



MIRA LYN KELLY

Waking Up Pregnant



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Аннотация

The night that changed everything! Waitress Darcy Penn is the smart, sensible type – flirting with the extremely cute guy in the bar just isn't her usual style. As for ending up in his hotel room...? Definitely not! Sneaking out whilst he's in the bathroom to avoid the post-sex awkwardness...? Much more like it...If Darcy had stuck around Jeff Norton could have told her about their 'epic latex fail'. So he shouldn't be quite so shocked when, months later, Darcy turns up at his classy LA office and throws up in his wastepaper basket. She's got a bad case of morning sickness, and she's here to find out what he's going to do about it!

“I’m a fun date. You’d have a good time. There’s got to be somewhere in town you’ve always wanted to go but haven’t gotten around to. Tell me what it is and I’ll take you tonight.”

Darcy was about to shut him down, but as she stood there looking at that half-playful, too tempting smile all she could think was how long it had been since she’d really had fun. Of all the things she’d told herself she’d get to some time but had never managed to do.

Now her time was up. She was leaving tomorrow.

Jeff was offering her a chance to—God, was she seriously considering this?

She never said yes. Never gave in and did the fun thing for fun’s sake. Maybe tonight, after living the straight and narrow for so very long, just this once she could afford to break the rules without worrying about tomorrow.

“I’ll think about it.”

Dear Reader

It’s no secret that I’m all about the Happily Ever After. I like my true loves and for evers big, beautiful and wrapped up with a gorgeous bow—preferably the kind that comes with a sparkly diamond ring or maybe even a baby on the way.

Now, normally I make my heroes and heroines work for those fairytale accompaniments. But for some reason when I started playing with the idea of best friends Connor Reed (WAKING UP MARRIED) and Jeff Norton (WAKING UP PREGNANT)

I couldn't resist mixing things up by giving these guys the traditional happy endings at the beginning of their stories!

Of course a ring alone or even a baby on the way doesn't guarantee for ever . . . But with heroes as charismatic, determined and resourceful as these two you can bet they'll be pulling out all the stops to earn that hard-won Happily Ever After we dedicated romantics thrive on.

I hope you'll enjoy reading Jeff and Darcy's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

All my best

Mira

PS If you haven't read **WAKING UP MARRIED**, no worries. While the stories are loosely tied together by one fateful evening in Vegas, they can most definitely stand alone.

Waking Up Pregnant

Mira Lyn Kelly



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MIRA LYN KELLY grew up in the Chicago area and earned her degree in Fine Arts from Loyola University. She met the love of her life while studying abroad in Rome, Italy, only to discover he'd been living right around the corner from her for

the previous two years. Having spent her twenties working and playing in the Windy City, she's now settled with her husband in rural Minnesota, where their four beautiful children provide an excess of action, adventure and entertainment.

With writing as her passion, and inspiration striking at the most unpredictable times, Mira can always be found with a notebook at the ready. (More than once the neighbours have caught her, covered in grass clippings, scribbling away atop the compost container!)

When she isn't reading, writing or running to keep up with the kids, she loves watching movies, blabbing with the girls and cooking with her husband and friends. Check out her website—www.miralynkelly.com—for the latest dish!

This and other titles by Mira Lyn Kelly are available in eBook format from www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Eleanor, Joyce, Jessica, Elizabeth and, kicking off the fourth generation ... Jacqueline

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ONE

Within the fast closing walls of his downtown L.A. executive office—a modern, stylized space reflective of his personal tastes, professional achievements and global priorities—Jeff Norton watched the limitless sky of his future crack and crumble as the woman in front of him doubled over, one arm clutching his trash can, while the other shot straight. Her hand alternating between a traffic cop’s stop signal and a single finger indicating it was going

to be a minute before she got to him.

“Not a problem, Darcy,” he managed in a voice barely recognizable even to himself. “Really. Take all the time you need.”

The sounds of distress emanating from the depths of his violated wastebasket ceased and the Vegas cocktail waitress he’d found too tempting to resist three months ago pinned him with a watery stare before rolling her you-did-this-to-me eyes in disgust.

Which was almost enough to pull a laugh from him, except, yeah, that look said it all. This was the end of days.

Probably.

Because while it wasn’t any great mystery as to why this woman was seeking him out now, months after those fateful few hours they’d spent together that ended with him staring down in abject horror at what could best be described as an epic latex fail, whether the hormone-wreaking miracle behind this reunion was, in fact, his, or whether his portfolio simply made him the most obvious solution to a problem which might be laid at the feet of any number of other candidates, was still yet to be seen.

Though even as he thought it, something inside him rebelled at the idea.

Three months.

If she’d been here after one... Hell, if she’d still been there that first night when he came back from the bathroom...

He swallowed. Sucked a deep breath, only to realize what a monumental mistake he’d made when the smell permeating

his office—his sanctuary, his power position, his godforsaken happy-place-no-more—had his stomach contracting in some kind of sympathetic reflex.

Darcy looked over the plastic liner at him and, seeming to catch the wayward direction of his stomach, tightened her hold in a move very obviously saying, Get your own can, buddy.

Nice.

His molars ground together. This was the mother of his child. Maybe.

Crossing to his desk, he dialed his assistant's extension. "Charlie, I need a bottle of mouthwash, a toothbrush and paste and a dozen trash liners. And if you can get it all in here in the next five minutes I'll cut you a check for a thousand dollars today."

Darcy pinched her eyes shut a moment and when she looked back at him, it was with reluctant gratitude. "Thank you."

"Suppose it's the least I can do...." Considering what he'd maybe, probably done already.

He watched the rise and fall of her shoulders as she struggled for her composure.

"I'm sorry—"

He waved her off, but her eyes narrowed so he let her go on. "About springing...this on you. It must...be a shock."

More so now than it would have been two months ago. "We can talk about it after you've had a minute to yourself. There's a private bathroom back this way. Charlie's freakishly efficient—"

As if underscoring his point, a knock sounded as the office door swung open for the fastest man in the West, who'd somehow managed to collect a tray of the requested items along with an unopened sleeve of saltine crackers in a matter of seconds. Considering Charlie normally coordinated international business meetings, spoke seven languages and had an MBA from the top school in the U.S., the toiletry run wasn't perhaps the best use of his time. But for Jeff, the guy had just come through in what ranked up there with a life-and-death emergency.

"Charlie Litsky, this is Darcy—" And there it was, the glaring reminder he didn't even know her last name. Right. Moving on. "Darcy, Charlie," he said, leading them back to the private bathroom in the far corner of the office.

"Why don't I take this?" he said, relieving a sallow-cheeked Darcy of the trash can at the door. "Before you leave today, I'll give you Charlie's contact information. If you need to get ahold of me, or anything else, he'll be able to help you."

But then Charlie produced a card of his own, already inked in with a private mobile number. The man was worth his weight in gold. Proven even more so, when they excused themselves to leave Darcy at the bathroom and Charlie eyed the trash Jeff was holding at arm's length.

"Can I take that for you?"

Jeff blew out a humorless laugh. More than anything he wanted to say yes. But whatever the actual protocol for vomit in the office was, Jeff couldn't stick this with someone else.

Holding out a hand for the liners instead, he shook his head. “This is my mess. Think I’d better be the one to clean it up.”

* * *

Darcy Penn glared into the mirror in front of her, scrubbing the foul taste off her teeth and tongue with a vigor fueled by humiliation and outrage. One that wasn’t going to get her anything but gums that wouldn’t grow back if she didn’t ease up a little.

The nerve.

He’d referred to her as “his mess.” And offered his assistant’s number in case she needed to get ahold of him.

What an ass.

And to think she’d been afraid of seeing him again. Worried she’d find herself susceptible to the same judgment-obliterating spell she’d fallen under that last night in Vegas when she’d found this guy so unbelievably compelling, she’d essentially broken every rule she had, just for a few hours with him. Anxious the man whose easy charm and demanding kisses infiltrated her dreams with nightmarish frequency would be as irresistible as she remembered him. And once again, he’d tempt her toward the kind of destructive fantasies she’d made it her life’s mission to avoid.

Nope. Whatever freaky mojo he’d been working back in Vegas wasn’t in play today.

Not even a little.

Well fine, maybe a little.

There'd been an instant when Jeff opened his office door and she'd seen something hot in his eyes—but that was before she'd lunged past him making a practiced grab for the nearest garbage. Before the horror replaced the heat. And all the walls she'd suspected were there from the start slammed into place.

Now not even a little.

Which was good. Because her plate was more than full enough with this serving-for-two fate had dished her without having to worry about some weird chemistry snaking through the air between them. It distracted her with a momentary feel-good buzz she was too much of a realist to think might actually last, when she needed to focus on working out the details that would impact not just the rest of her life, but her child's, as well.

Their child's.

Her frenetic brushing slowed and she spit the paste.

God, what was he going to want? The mess cleaning reference didn't exactly suggest an instant, joyfully embraced, paternal connection. And how she felt about that...she didn't know.

On the one hand, her child would be lucky to have the kind of emotional security afforded by two parents who wanted it. But on the other, did either she or her baby really need to be tied to some overgrown kid who, by all appearances, didn't know the meaning of the word no? The man had made a desk of some repurposed airplane wing and a conference table from a disassembled jukebox topped in glass, for crying out loud. Essentially turning his workspace into a playground filled with

the toys of a boy's heart.

And, yes, that boyish, world-on-a-string mentality packaged within a rugged all-man's body may have held some appeal when she first encountered it in Vegas. He'd known how to laugh. How to grab life with both hands and live in the moment without overanalyzing every move he made, without weighing every decision. And for a few incredible hours he'd shown her how to do the same.

But now, as that same mentality applied to the father of her child and with her body as exhibit A as one of the consequences to that just for fun mindset?

She let out a slow breath. Reached for the mouthwash, went for a bracing swish and spit.

Not so much.

Darcy placed a hand over her still flat belly, her emotions caught in a tug-of-war between awe over the precious life within her and resentment directed at herself. Disappointment. Frustration.

She'd known better. She'd spent years saying no to every temptation, because she'd had no one to count on but herself. No net to fall back in. No desire to allow herself to be trapped the way her mother had been.

She'd always been so relentlessly careful.

So how was it, this time, this one night, this guy...she'd said yes?

TWO

Three months earlier...

And here he'd thought he might be bored.

Within the swank Vegas lounge, Jeff Norton folded his arms over the tabletop, leaning forward in what had turned out to be a ringside seat for the crash-and-burn All-Stars playing out before him as a table of guys tried to score on the leggy blonde who'd just served him his Scotch.

He couldn't believe the one kid was throwing her a line after the world-class freeze she'd laid on the last chump. And his friends were encouraging him. Forget that on the hot scale, this woman ranked so far out of the kid's league, they weren't even on the same planet, let alone page. But hadn't they seen her eyes? The flat, wholly uninviting, all-business expression leaving zero wiggle room for misinterpretation: not interested. Period.

Probably not. These guys had a just legal look about them, which, coupled with their collection of empties lined up like trophies on the table, and the frequent "Vegas, baby!" fist pumps suggested they hadn't made it past the admittedly dynamite body before their brains blew out.

Live and learn, boys.

Thirty seconds later, the kid was taking a round of conciliatory back slaps from his cohorts and Jeff was back to waiting for Connor. His best friend fresh off a broken engagement and the reason behind this "guys' weekend" in Sin City.

Where the hell was he anyway?

Checking his texts, Jeff cursed seeing it was going to be at

least another hour.

Screw it. He wasn't interested in watching guys, age twenty-one to ninety-three line up to strike out while Connor wrapped his call with Hong Kong. Flagging another server, he handed her his still full drink then pulled out a few bills for the table.

He was halfway to the door when feminine laughter, rich and warm, spilled down the hall beside the bar. The full-bodied sound of it snared his senses and had him cranking his head around to catch a glimpse of the source.

He stopped dead, his eyes locking on the silky blond ponytail streaming over one shoulder. The legs. The hourglass curves, and finally the softest, warmest, twinkling gray eyes he'd ever seen, crinkled at the edges as his cocktail waitress peered up at the ceiling laughing at whatever it was the shorter, redheaded server adjusting her shoe had said.

Gone was that untouchable, unattainable, disinterested, cold set of attractive features. And in their place was this woman.

No way.

And no wonder she'd kept that laugh under wraps. She could barely make it across the lounge as it was without some bozo putting a move on her. If anyone saw her like this...

Well, hell, their thinking would probably follow the same as his.

How do I get her to laugh like that for me?

They'd never leave her alone.

The redhead sauntered deeper down the hall and the leggy

blonde with the killer laugh straightened her apron and turned—pulling up short at the sight of Jeff standing there.

The warmth and light from her eyes blinked off as she schooled her features back into a mask of utter disinterest. The one that probably would have been easier to take if it were utter contempt because at least then a guy would know he'd made her radar. Damn, she was good.

Yeah, Jeff wasn't going anywhere.

“Another Scotch when you get a minute,” he said, flashing her a grin before starting back to his table.

It wasn't like he'd come to Vegas with some plan to score. He hadn't. Only now the part of him that couldn't resist a challenge, the part that got off on getting what no one else could have—the fastest time, the highest grade, the biggest trophy, the most successful company—that part wanted to stake a claim on the secret prize so effectively hidden away, he wouldn't have believed in its existence if he hadn't heard the seductive, tantalizing sound of it himself.

And as it happened, he had an hour to kill.

* * *

Whatever the deal was with the guy from table twelve, Darcy didn't have time for it.

To think she'd pegged him as harmless.

Not in general, no. He definitely had the whole devastating male magnetism thing happening with those roughed up looks and his buttoned-down suit. Every set of female eyes in the place

and probably half the men had homed in on him the second he entered the bar. But he hadn't been on the make—and she'd clocked enough hours in this lounge over the past two years to be able to tell. So she hadn't paid him much mind. At least not until she turned around to find him watching her with some half-cocked gotcha grin, looking like he'd busted her with her hand in the cookie jar.

Because he'd caught her laughing.

Something she didn't let happen very often at work as it tended to give the male clientele the wrong idea about what kind of good time she might be interested in having.

But then, tonight of all nights, what did it really matter?

Leaning a hip against the bar, she waited for Mr. Not-So-Harmless-After-All at table twelve's fresh Scotch.

This was her last night on the job. Her last—she checked her watch and felt a surge of excitement—two hours. And then she was through.

Sheryl Crow echoed through her mind, singing about leaving Las Vegas, and it was all Darcy could do not to put a little swing in her step as she pushed off the bar. Two more hours of tables to turn, drinks to serve, tips to make. And then she'd move on to life's next adventure.

Though even as she thought it, the word seemed an off fit to the relentlessly conservative way she managed her life.

Adventure implied risks and unknowns. Challenges. Excitement. That wasn't exactly how Darcy rolled. She couldn't

afford to. Not after the steep price she'd paid to ensure her independence. She knew the suffocating experience of being at the wrong man's mercy and she'd been willing to sacrifice her education to facilitate that escape. Drop out of high school and get the job that set her free.

She'd sworn never to allow herself to be in a position of dependence again, which meant she took care of herself. She played it safe. Stayed in control. Lived within her means. And if the cost inherent to a life that felt safe was adventure of the tall, watered-down variety? She'd gladly pay it.

Stopping at table twelve, she leveled him with a flat stare. "Your Scotch, sir. Anything else?"

His speculative look had her wondering what this guy's game was exactly.

And then his focus lowered to her mouth, causing an unfamiliar dip and roll deep in her belly. One she met with a stern frown because oh, no, she was not going to be tempted by this guy. No way.

* * *

"Relax, Darcy. I get it. Not interested. Couldn't be more clear if you were wearing it on a T-shirt like the table of bridesmaids over there."

Her gaze shifted to the three women and the corner and her mouth twitched, making something in his gut fire up. Though just as quickly she had the impulse tamped down.

"I'm not hitting on you," he assured. "This is about filling

some hang time. You're my temporary hobby."

A slender brow pushed up. "How's that."

"I like the smile I saw. And I want one of my own."

That smooth hip of hers rocked out to one side. "You want a smile? I'll save you the hassle." She flashed him a grin barely a step above the flat business she doled out to every Tom, Dick and Harry who rolled through her section and Jeff shook his head, giving in to his own more sincere version.

"Nice try. But you're not going to put me off with some cheap imitation. I've seen the real thing, and now I want one for myself. An honest to goodness, hard-earned, full tilt smile. Bonus for the laugh. And no pity grins, either."

She opened her mouth to say something—probably another dismissive shutdown, but then pulled her mouth to the side as she studied him.

"So you want to work for it?" she asked.

And hot damn, was she actually going along? "I'm not into easy."

Her eyes were definitely on his now. Engaged in a way almost as satisfying as her elusive smile had been.

"Look—"

"Jeff," he supplied, without trying to take her hand because touching her would probably get him slammed up against an impenetrable wall of "no" faster than he could blink.

"Look, Jeff, you're interesting. Which is a nice change from the norm. But I'm working so I can't really hang out and be your

hobby or anything else.”

“Not a problem. I know you’ve got to work. So on average, how much time do you think you allot each customer outside of taking their actual drink order? I mean for the niceties: Hello, how’s your day? Good, yours? Good, know what you want? Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera...”

“Fifteen seconds.”

Nice try. “I’m talking the chatty ones.”

“Forty-five.”

“And if they’re ordering, you’ll give them the time?”

As if sensing a trap, she answered hesitantly, “Yes.”

“Great. I’d like to send an order of white chocolate martinis to the bridesmaids over there. But tell them it’s from the manager or something, not me.”

When she just stared at him, he stared back. “I think our forty-five seconds are up. I mean, unless you’d like to sit down. You’re welcome to stay for a drink. Take a break.”

“This is because you’re bored?” she asked, those steely gray eyes narrowing on him in a way that said he had her focus completely.

Had he really said he wasn’t into easy? Because this was shaping up to be just that...and there wasn’t a single molecule in his body or thought in his head, not totally into where it was going.

Jeff shrugged, raising his Scotch before taking a swallow. “I like to keep busy.”

THREE

“Consider it a public service.”

Darcy set the Scotch on a fresh napkin and, fighting her threatening smile with everything she had, slid it in front of Jeff. The guy who was making her last night in Vegas one she'd never forget. “Letting you take me out? Okay, let's hear it.”

“Are you really going to make me say it?” he asked with a look all but begging her to make him do so.

She should walk away. She didn't date the customers and never gave into even this much interaction. But there was something about him. Something that wouldn't let her put him off the way she did with every other guy who crossed her path.

Even now, she could feel the corner of her mouth nearly betraying her as it threatened a smile. And Jeff knew it. He was watching, one brow raised. And then his eyes were locked back with hers. “Almost had you.”

Yeah, it had been close.

“Okay, I give. How is my going out with you a public service?”

Satisfaction lit his smile.

“Because of my ego.”

When she crossed her arms, he went on. “You've seen it. It's absurd. Honestly, the size is almost a handicap.”

This was going to be good. Her brow pushed up, wanting more, but unwilling to open her mouth to ask for fear she'd break down laughing.

“If you crush this beast— Darcy, I'm not going to be able to

drag it out of here.”

“That big?”

“Like you really need to ask.”

This guy was trouble. And exactly the kind of fun she deserved on her last night in Vegas. So long as it didn't go any further than a little flirtatious back-and-forth.

“I'm telling you, it'll be flailing around on the floor. Going boneless when I try to pick it up.”

“Wow, almost like another person.”

He offered a nod. “I call it Connor.”

“An ego named Connor.” Now she'd heard everything...and somehow it only made her want to hear more.

He let out a short laugh and rubbed a hand over his mouth as if trying to push the smile off his lips before going on. “And here's the problem. That ego's going to need some serious stroking to recover from your rejection.”

Her eyes started to narrow, but he waved her off.

“It'll demand I hit on every female to cross my path. Forcing me to turn on the charm, we're talking full blast—”

“Like a fire hose?” she supplied, knowing she shouldn't have said it, but—well, she kind of couldn't help it.

Jeff's mouth was open, halfway to the next ridiculous part of his pitch when he froze. Cranked his eyes over to hers, the look in them one of amusement and warning.

“Exactly like a fire hose.”

But for the way this guy was working her, there was something

about him that seemed safe. Whatever it was, it was tempting her to push what she knew better than to play with. “So after you spray all these women down with your big hose. What happens then?”

“Widespread devastation. Women weeping everywhere. Broken hearts littering the streets. They’re all going to fall in love with me, but all I’m really looking for is a date. Nothing serious. Just some fun.”

Ahh, the circle back to her and suddenly eye contact seemed more than she could handle. “And this is what happens every time a woman turns you down?”

Jeff shrugged, reaching for his Scotch. “Wouldn’t know. It hasn’t happened yet. Seriously, what kind of decent woman would want that kind of emotional carnage on her conscience?”

Darcy looked this guy up and down, taking in the details she’d glossed over before. The overly thick shock of dark hair with a mess of unruly cowlicks at total odds with the serious, straight cut of his classic suit.

But if the hair and suit were a working contradiction, they were nothing compared to his face. The heavy, squared-off jaw and single flashing dimple. The rough look of a nose that had seen a break or two and the ridiculously long fringe of dark lashes over eyes a soft, earthy hazel. On looks alone, this was a man who could keep a girl guessing. Add his confidence and charm to the mix and she imagined most women wouldn’t mind playing Jeff’s guessing game for as long as it was on offer.

Yeah, he was definitely more dangerous than she'd given him credit for.

Time to clear things up.

“Look, Jeff. I'm flattered, but I don't date customers. Ever.”

“I noticed when I came in. I like it.”

Mmm, and this she was definitely familiar with. “Because it makes me a challenge?”

“Yeah,” he answered with an unrepentant grin and glint of mischief in his eyes.

And okay. Not so familiar after all. “Wow, and honest, too.”

“It's the best policy. Eliminates the potential for all kinds of trouble. Ensures everyone is on the same page. But back to the issue at hand...I'm a fun date. You'd have a good time. There's got to be somewhere in town you've always wanted to go but haven't gotten around to. Tell me what it is and I'll take you tonight.”

Darcy was about to shut him down, but as she stood there looking at that half-playful, too tempting smile all she could think was how many things she'd told herself she'd get to sometime, but never managed to do. And how long it had been since she'd really had fun.

Now her time was up. She was leaving tomorrow.

Jeff was offering her a chance to— God, was she seriously considering this?

She never said yes. Never gave in and did the fun thing for fun's sake. Maybe tonight, after living the straight and narrow for so very long, she could afford to break the rules without worrying

about tomorrow.

“I’ll think about it.”

* * *

A few minutes later, Jeff was exchanging back claps with Connor Reed, whose call had been the typical success his buddy made of everything he set his mind to—the only glaring exception being a broken engagement from two weeks prior. One Connor wouldn’t acknowledge any kind of emotional reaction to whatsoever. Hence, the bromance intervention in progress.

Because Jeff had been there. He knew what it was to be blindsided with the realization that the perfect romance you were about to bet your future on—not so perfect after all.

“No, I don’t love him, Jeff. It’s not about him. Or you. It’s about me feeling trapped and doing something desperate to escape. I’m sorry.”

Yeah, it sucked.

So, they’d done the gambling bit the night before, hit a few clubs and bonded in the manly way guys were most comfortable bonding. Thereby ensuring the whole guys’ weekend spiel Jeff had lured Connor in with, wasn’t a total snow job. But the grunts and knuckle bump portion of the weekend was at a close, and their friendship being what it was, Jeff made no bones about it.

Pushing the Scotch he’d ordered in front of Connor, he jut his chin at the drink. “You might want to get a head start on that.”

Connor shot him the half smile he’d never quite figured out how to make whole. “Little old for drinking games, aren’t we?”

“Time to put your big girl panties on, man. I brought you here to talk feelings. Deep emotional feelings. And because you know I’m your best friend and always right, you’re going to sit there and take it like the man I know you can be.”

The half smile was gone. “Jeff, I told you—”

“Don’t bother. This is going to happen. But because I respect your stunted emotional intimacy boundaries, once I’ve said my piece we’ll have a few minutes of smack talk, just to get back on comfortable ground and then I’m going to give you your space and take off. Most likely taking the blonde bombshell who happens to be our server with me. Deal?”

Connor picked up the glass in front of him and took a fortifying slug. Then cocking his jaw to the side, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “Okay. Let’s have it. But make it fast.”

Jeff caught Darcy watching him from over by the bar, a little furrow marring the otherwise flawless skin of her brow. He cast her a quick wink and then folded his arms over the table returning his attention to Connor.

“Your wish, my command. So, let me set the tone... I love you, man....”

A few dozen old adages, choice idioms, apt metaphors and select bits of fortune-cookie wisdom later, Jeff’s work was done. There were things he’d needed the guy to hear, and things he needed to hear back. As it turned out, Connor hadn’t been so bad off after all.

At least not in the way he'd imagined.

Emotionally stunted, however, didn't quite cover it as far as the intimacy issues went. But that was a can of worms for another trip. Connor had given him his walking papers a few minutes ago and now Jeff leaned back against the bar, watching as Darcy worried her bottom lip.

No, she wasn't the unreachable, cold woman he thought at all.

"What about your friend? He looked really upset while you guys were talking."

Uncomfortable, yes. Upset, probably not. "Turns out the broken heart may have been more a case of dinged ego."

"You men and your egos. Does he name his, too?"

Jeff waved her in closer. "Guys don't tell other guys what they name their egos."

This time when he saw the little twitch at the corner of her mouth, he acted without thought and brought his thumb up to brush the vulnerable spot threatening to give him exactly what he'd been working for.

At the bare touch, her lips parted on a small gasp and their eyes met. Then quietly but firmly she said, "I won't go back to your room with you."

Jeff brushed that little corner of her mouth again and then withdrew his hand, parking it firmly in his pocket. "So when are we leaving?"

She searched his face as if looking for a reason to say no, and for one crushing instant when she ducked her head and glanced

away, he thought he'd lost her. But she was just untying her apron. And when she looked back at him, it was with eyes that were confident, clear and determined. Excited. "As soon as I get out of this uniform."

* * *

"Does this count as sweeping you off your feet?" Jeff shouted, the laugh lines branching from his eyes, deeply creased, and the grin promising pure mayhem, gone full tilt.

"I'm totally carried away!" she gasped around the elated laughter she'd given herself over to.

The night breeze whipped at Darcy's hair as she careened down to Fremont Street, gripping the security harness tight as she went and wondering if this rush of unadulterated exhilaration had more to do with the zip line or the man a few feet away.

Still decked out in his suit and rocking a very double-oh-seven vibe with the harness and wind and all, Jeff cocked his head in her direction. "Your turn to pick next, beautiful. I'm looking for some more local flavor. It better be good."

They'd been going back and forth for hours already, starting with a light dinner at one of the city's most coveted hot spots, where a twenty-second phone call from Jeff five minutes prior to their arrival scored them an immediate table complete with the VIP treatment and a breathtaking view. The restaurant had been her choice. One she'd only suggested because Jeff's cocky grin and wild assertion he could get them into any place she wanted to go had been a challenge she couldn't resist.

Turned out, there was more to the guy than talk.

Dinner, despite the upscale locale, had been casual and easy. The conversation varied and entertaining. Jeff was one of those men who seemed to know something about everything, and—whether the topic be movies, her wish list of travel destinations or the local economy—listened as much as he talked. And by the time they'd finished their coffees, Darcy had stopped second-guessing whether agreeing to go out with him had been a mistake, and was looking forward to finding out where they would go next.

From there they'd hit a rooftop roller coaster, stopped to get Jeff a snack at her favorite taco stand, driven out to the Neon Museum where the old signs of casinos past were put out to pasture, stopped to watch the choreographed fountains and then went on to walk the famous casino and hotel's gallery of fine art.

Along the way, Jeff seemed to make fast friends with everyone. He checked the score for big games with valets, and made small talk with old ladies when he held the door for them. He was the kind of smooth that normally had warning bells clanging in Darcy's head but for some reason, with Jeff, none of her typical knee-jerk reactions or default defenses were coming to the fore. In fact, she found herself letting go around him in a way she seldom did.

And the laugh he'd been working so hard to earn...well, once they'd left the casino, she'd given up the fight and had been paying with interest ever since. Laughing at his outrageous stories, at herself, at a last night in Sin City she never would

have expected. A night she doubted she'd ever forget. Because not only was she experiencing a side of Vegas that had been previously unavailable to her, but thanks to Jeff's curiosity about her tastes, she had a last opportunity to relish those old favorites, by introducing them to him and explaining what made each a standout on her list.

It was a getting-to-know-you game. One she never would have played if she hadn't been leaving. But there was a safety in knowing this was just one night. No risk of expectations getting away from her. Darcy knew the score. This was about a few hours of fun. It was safe.

At least that's what she'd thought until the zip line ended and her feet touched the ground. Jeff walked over and, catching her hand in his, pulled her gently against him in a hold that really shouldn't have come across as anything but casual. Only with the heat of his body seeping into hers, the steady, deep thud of his heart beneath her hand and the warm rush of his breath teasing through the hair behind her ear as he asked in that low rough voice of his if she was having a good time—casual had never felt so intimate.

Tipping her head back to meet his eyes, she nodded, swallowing past a wordless reaction she wasn't accustomed to. A displaced sort of tug low in her belly made her feel as though she were flying and falling all at once. Jeff's gaze searched her own, drifted lower. Her thoughts went to the moment when he'd touched her mouth back at the bar. To the words she'd said.

...I won't go back to your room...

And the question of whether she still meant them.

"Let's go find someplace to get a drink and figure out what's next on our agenda," he said taking a step back as he let her go. The move was so unexpected, Darcy nearly stumbled at the absence of contact.

For an instant she'd been sure he would kiss her. Even now as he scanned the surrounding area in search of their next stop, she couldn't believe she hadn't felt the press of his lips against hers.

More, she couldn't believe she'd wanted to. Because what kind of madness would that be?

Jeff reached around her, resting his hand at the small of her back and asked, "What's the best bar in a three-block radius?"

The light contact felt good, even if for a crazy moment she'd thought she might want more. This was quality date stuff and she wasn't in any hurry to lose it. But a bar... "How about ice cream? There's a creamery just up the way here."

At Jeff's speculative look, she answered his unspoken question. "It's sort of a trust thing."

There was no judgment in his eyes when he asked, "You don't trust me? Or, and since you serve drinks for a living, I'm going to guess this isn't it, you don't trust yourself to stop?"

She laughed, leading the way as they walked. "The only person I trust is me. So don't take it personally. I like to stay sharp because I don't want to find out the hard way who I can or can't trust not to take advantage."

The easy smile Jeff had been sporting throughout the night slid from his lips and something dark and protective pushed into his eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said with a knowing shake of her head. “There’s no horror story. At least not mine. In Vegas or probably any city, you hear things. I pay attention. And I’m just very...practical. I’ve always been like this.”

Jeff’s expression relaxed. “So you’re risk adverse.”

“Some would say to a fault.”

“But not you?”

“But not me. If I thought I was doing something wrong, living in a way that didn’t satisfy me or left me feeling like I was somehow missing out—I’d change it. Like I said, I’m pretty good at looking out for myself. I’m my number one priority. So I’m not really one to sit idle waiting for someone else to call out my problems or fix them for me.”

“So you’re a risk adverse woman of action, taking charge of your own destiny.”

The corners of her mouth curled beneath his succinct categorization of her.

She’d been called a lot of things, by a lot of guys when they hadn’t gotten their way with her. Cold, hard, icy. Names that indicated her lack of interest must stem from a shortcoming on her part rather than a simple lack of desire to pursue something with a guy making passes at her while she was at work.

She slanted Jeff a sidelong look. He was just that—a guy

making passes at her while she was working. And yet something about him struck her as so wholly different. Different enough, that as she kept telling herself the reason she'd agreed to go with him was because it was her last night in Las Vegas, some small part of her wondered if she would have gone with him whether she'd been leaving or not.

No. She shook the thought off, casting an inward scowl at the idea she'd do something that went against her principles after she'd just explained how keen she was on self-preservation.

“Strong and independent. A woman who knows her own mind. I like that.”

“Yeah?” she asked, turning around to walk backward as she looked at him. “And me?”

“I definitely like you.” He raked those big hands through the mess of his hair as he scanned the sky above them and then met her eyes with a straightforward stare. “I like the way you surprise me. That I didn't have you figured out within thirty seconds, or hell, even now, hours later.”

Her steps slowed and Jeff closed the distance between them, resting his hand over the curve of her hip. “And I like that I can make you laugh, because the sound of it—”

He shook his head, still holding her gaze. “When you give into it for me—” his fingers tightened against her hips in a brief possessive grip “—all I can think about is how I'm going to get you to do it again.”

* * *

“Jeff.”

If he'd thought her laugh knocked him flat, hell, it was nothing compared to the breathy sound of her voice when she said his name like that. Like maybe she wanted the very thing he'd been about killing himself not to press for.

Sure once he'd made up his mind about getting her to go out with him back at the lounge, he'd assumed the natural progression of the evening would lead to a physical conclusion. They were both adults and there'd been a chemistry between them.

And he wanted it.

Hell, yeah, he did.

But something kept holding him back through each of those crossroad moments where the opportunity to change the tone of the night presented itself. The conflict in her eyes was like none he'd seen before. And it spurred some deeply instinctual need in him to protect her.

This woman he'd thought had ice in her veins and could level a man with one look alone was vulnerable and for some reason, tonight, she'd trusted him to take her out, show her the good time she all too rarely got and give her the night she deserved without whatever had her worrying that lush bottom lip of hers between her teeth. They could be the simple, uncomplicated, good time the other remembered in the years to come.

He smiled, thinking Darcy would get a kick out of that bit of fire-hose-flexing ego.

Who the hell knew if she'd remember him next week, let alone next year. But he hoped she would. Because he'd remember her.

* * *

What was she doing, looking into this guy's eyes like she couldn't physically make herself look away.

She didn't make the reckless choice. Not ever.

She didn't give in to the feel-good moment.

She liked control. In her work, in her life, in her heart and mind.

But somehow Jeff with all his ego talk, comfort in his own skin, confidence in his actions...his going after anything and everything he wanted like it never occurred to him he couldn't have it, was tempting her to behavior she didn't indulge in.

Making her want something she knew she shouldn't take. The experience of surrendering to a feeling. The chemistry tingling across her skin, batting around in her belly and whispering temptations through her mind since the first moment their eyes locked, and she realized this guy had just seen something she didn't show to anyone. And he'd liked it.

Her belly knotted tight at the idea of stepping so far out of her comfort zone. She'd already made too many exceptions. Starting with the conversation at his table and ending with the two of them standing here looking into each other's eyes.

Because Jeff was like a desert mirage. The kind of fantasy that could drive a woman to lose herself in the futile hope of finding shelter within a cool oasis that was never really within her grasp

in the first place. Jeff was here for a single night. A few hours of fun.

She couldn't afford to lose sight of that because her pride wouldn't allow her to be one of those women who pinned all their hopes on the wealthy, jet-setting billionaire realizing the "good time" he picked up in Vegas—the city whose tourist industry had made a slogan of the promise that what happened in Vegas stayed in Vegas—was actually the woman he'd been waiting for his whole life.

No. The only way she could give in on any level, was if it was on her terms. With her eyes open and her expectations clear.

There was no tomorrow with this man.

"A lot of questions in those eyes tonight, Darcy." Jeff said, brushing her cheek with a single knuckle. "But there doesn't have to be. Tell me you're ready to call it a night and I'll take you home and thank you for an evening I won't soon forget. Or we can keep doing what we've been doing, without taking it any further at all. Stay up until morning. Watch the sun rise."

His eyes held hers as he asked, "What would you like to do next?"

Her heart raced. He was giving her a clear out. The easy goodbye.

She could tell him good-night. Take a cab home to her packed-up apartment. Sleep snug in the knowledge she'd cut things off before they'd gone too far. Before she gave in to the risks that pushed her beyond the boundaries of safe.

Or she could answer with the truth. That something about being with him made her ache for things she never wanted. Made her body shiver and heat. And most of all, want to grab hold of this moment and just give in to it. Surrender.

She reached for the open neck of his shirt and, letting two fingers curve into the gap between the button and plain white T-shirt beneath, pushed to her toes to meet his mouth with her own.

It was the barest of kisses. The lightest brush. Separated from a friendly peck only by a quiet, lingering beat promising what she hadn't found the words to say. Words she didn't need, based on the satisfaction in the eyes meeting hers as she stepped back into her own space. The wolfish smile as Jeff shook his head and, taking her hand, tugged her back against him.

"I've been telling myself no all night, Darcy," he murmured gruffly into her ear, rubbing his cheek against her hair. "If you're saying yes, that little kiss isn't going to be enough to tide me over until we get back to my room."

Her words were barely more than a trembling whisper. "Then you better take what you need now."

When he kissed her again, there was nothing tentative about it. Nothing friendly. It was firm and commanding. A decadent back-and-forth press of his lips against her own, deepening with every pass until she'd opened to him completely.

He licked into her mouth, his tongue gliding over hers in a wet velvet rub that had her fingers tightening in his shirt and a helpless whimper betraying her desire.

Her knees must have given out because he was holding her against him, supporting her in his powerful arms as he kissed her like she'd never been kissed before.

Senseless.

Breathless.

Taking her with the firm thrust of his tongue and—oh, that was so good—then again and again, until every part of her turned liquid and hot.

Needy.

Alive.

Another deep thrust and her belly twisted with a sensual hunger threatening to make her its slave. She'd been starved for this.

Jeff's arms snaked tight around her, one hand running the length of her back until it covered her bottom, firmed over her, pulled her in closer as he bent her back so she could feel him against her, and oh, yes, yes—

Abruptly Jeff broke from the kiss, setting her back a step even as he continued to support her. No!

“That was enough?” she asked, panting, her lips tender in a way that made her desperate for more.

“Not even close.” He rubbed a hand over his mouth, the look on his face one of pure bewilderment. “But based on that kiss, I don't think either one of us wants to risk what will happen if I get my hands on you in public again.”

Darcy wasn't so sure. For more of what she'd just had, she

might be willing to risk anything.

FOUR

Somehow they'd made it back to Jeff's suite. Barely. And when the door snicked closed, it was with Darcy against it. Jeff's hands braced above her head as he devoured the lush mouth he'd gotten only the cruelest taste of back on the strip.

She was so hot and wet and soft, and how they made it back without him pulling her across his lap in the cab or taking her against one of those mirrored walls in the elevator, he had no idea. Because once he saw the indecision gone from her eyes, and got his first taste of the heat she'd been keeping as much a secret as everything else—God help him, all he could think was more.

He rocked into her, nearly losing it at the sound of those desperate little noises she kept making. The humming and moaning. Catching her breath when he hiked her legs at either side of his hips and ground against her. Purring when, after she locked her ankles at his back and urged him on, he did it again and again and again—driving them both mad with the contact that wouldn't be enough until the clothes were gone and he was thrusting hard and deep inside her.

"Jeff, please," she whimpered against his jaw, her body taut as he pushed her closer toward the peak she'd be visiting about a half dozen times over the next few hours if he had his way.

"Like this, baby?" he asked, canting his hips so the hard shaft of his erection rolled over her sweet spot.

Another desperate cry and her fingers knotted in his hair.

He'd take that as a yes.

"Jeff!" she gasped a second before her body arched and her lips parted on a silent cry that held and held and held but never found its voice. One that invited him to take advantage, licking and nipping as he carried her through the last waves of pleasure. And then she was kissing him back, her lax body a satisfying contrast to his. Her eyes, heavy-lidded and soft like he hadn't seen them yet.

So gorgeous.

So damn sweet.

And for tonight, his.

Though even as he thought it, he realized one night wouldn't be enough. Hell, he'd known before she kissed him he'd be back.

"Darcy," he started, his mouth moving against the slender column of her neck. "This, tonight—"

Her fingers tightened in his hair as she urged him back to her mouth. "I know. It's perfect. Everything I didn't think I wanted."

She kissed him again, distracting him with the slide of her tongue playing over his and the wiggle of her hips as she unlocked her ankles and went back to her feet. Her delicate hand smoothing down the front of his shirt, over his chest and stomach, and down the jutting ridge of his erection still contained behind the confines of his suit pants. He pushed into her palm, groaning at the feel of her stroking him through the fabric and then curling her fingers into his belt and, walking backward, tugged him toward the bedroom.

Perfect.

It was the single thought in his head, reverberating with each step as he let her lead him toward the only salvation he wanted.

They pulled at each other's clothes, reveling in each new stretch of bared skin, tumbling onto the bed in a frenzied, desperate tangle of limbs. Darcy grabbed the condom he'd tossed up by the pillow and tore open the foil.

"I can't wait," she panted, her hands trembling as she began rolling the latex down his more than ready shaft.

"No more waiting," he agreed, positioning himself between her legs so he was notched at her slick opening.

Their eyes met, and he pushed inside her with the first shallow thrust. It nearly killed him to pull back, but he wasn't a small man and Darcy—heaven help him, she was so very tight. So he went slowly, carefully, penetrating by degrees until sweat beaded over his brow and his jaw clenched and finally he took her the way he needed to. Completely.

And then he was sliding full-length in and out of Darcy's tight, wet heat, letting her soft moans and broken breath lead him down the decadent path to her pleasure, answering the needy clutch of her body when he touched her just right, reveling in the helpless surrender of her eyes when he held her at the brink—

"Tell me what you want."

"Please, Jeff," she gasped, her heels digging at the back of his thigh as she urged him toward the contact he wouldn't give her until she gave him what he wanted first.

“Say it. Tell me and I’ll give you anything.”

Looking into his eyes, she gave up her fight for control, let her knees slide farther up his ribs and whispered, “Make me come.”

And then firmly he pushed her into oblivion...making sure not to follow himself. He wasn’t close to done with this woman.

* * *

Breathless. Boneless. Stunned and sated, Darcy lay within the damp sheets blinking at the ceiling as her body and mind worked in frantic concert to pull all the shattered bits of her back into some semblance of their previous working order. This wasn’t the way she was supposed to feel. Like something monumental had occurred. Like there’d been a sudden unexpected shift in her life. Like she’d had her first taste of incredible and from that point forward, nothing again would compare.

Because this was a one-night stand.

A date gone past midnight with a man who most definitely wasn’t her Prince Charming.

It was a one-off.

A last fling, because Jeff might be gorgeous, fun and devastating in bed...but he wasn’t offering her more than a good time.

They’d spent hours laughing and talking and working up to this last brash act, and for all the chemistry between them, for each glint in his eye that told her he was having as much fun as she was, there was another opportunity left untaken when he might have suggested the possibility of more. Asked about

another date. Implied he was even considering something beyond a single night of simply killing time together.

The man was smooth. Slick. And just because he had the ability to make her act out of character didn't mean tonight was anything out of the norm for him. For all she knew, Jeff hit a new bar each week, making his Friday night special the most hard-to-get girl in the place.

“Darcy, Darcy, Darcy.” Her name, rumbling against her neck like pebbled kisses, pushed all thoughts from her mind but one. It didn't matter what Jeff did every other Friday night. This one he'd shared with her had been perfect.

Jeff lifted his head, pushing up on his arms to ease the weight of his body over hers—a weight she hadn't been ready to give up and felt the immediate loss of as cool air slipped between the growing space between them.

Backing off the bed, he got sidetracked by her breast, which he stopped to kiss once at the side, then again on her nipple before casting her a wicked grin as he finished his retreat. “Give me a minute, sweetheart. Don't go anywhere.”

She watched him walk to the bathroom and close the door behind him. Heard the muffled sound of the running tap and waited as the seconds ticked past.

Alone in the bed, she glanced around at the suite, noting the luxurious accommodations for the first time. It seemed extravagant. Frivolous.

Sure it wasn't like he had sixteen rooms, but a suite, for one

man through two nights?

The moments stretched by. The water was still running.

Beginning to feel somewhat self-conscious she reached for the sheet at the side of the bed, but came back with a handful of blouse instead.

Don't go anywhere...

She looked at the sliver of light breaking beneath the door and then at the shirt in her grasp.

Don't go anywhere...

Five minutes ago she wouldn't even have considered it. She would have flopped back on the bed relishing the full-body fatigue that was the result of Jeff's thorough attention.

Obviously, she wouldn't have planned to stay forever. But she wouldn't have considered up and leaving while he was in the other room, either.

Except then he'd gone and said it, and a thousand and one thoughts started pushing into her mind. They'd had sex. It was over. And though Jeff might not want her to run off that second, it was obvious from his words he expected her to go shortly. Which made perfect sense, this being what it was. A little meaningless fun.

But as she sat in the middle of his big bed, the heat of their intimacy dissipated into the air around her, what had happened between them still fresh and tender in her mind—so good—she wanted to protect the memory of it. This night had been a gift to herself. And she didn't want to risk the simple perfection of it

being lessened by Jeff's inevitable dismissal.

Chances were, he'd be as adept at a goodbye as he'd been with everything else. And yet rather than wait, she found herself pulling on her shirt. Dragging the sheet off the bed with her as she sifted through the blast radius of discarded clothing, darting glances at the bathroom door as the water continued to run.

She didn't want to be the one clinging to their last minute together. The one waiting to be excused.

She'd known what she was getting with Jeff from the start. A few hours of fun. He'd made sure she understood back at the bar.

Another look at the clock.

It's why he'd chosen her in the first place. Because he'd recognized she had the sense not to get ideas where they didn't belong.

* * *

Jeff gripped the marble countertop, staring at his reflection as he tried pull himself together and figure out what to say.

Damn it, he always knew what to say. But he'd been off his game since about minute one with Darcy. Closing his mouth around a tongue inexplicably tied up over a girl he couldn't quite figure out. And hadn't had nearly enough of.

That's where his head had been when he dragged himself out of bed, walked into the bathroom with the intent to clean up and then come back with an offer of...something.

Something more than the cursory "thanks for the great time, have a nice life" that generally came as standard with the kind of

night they'd just indulged in.

He liked her. Liked the way she made him laugh and her unique perspective on—well, hell—everything. Sure she lived in Vegas, and this wasn't exactly a typical stopover for him. But if she was receptive, he'd been thinking about making it one. Or better yet, swinging by to pick her up and bring her down to L.A. once in a while. For an overnight or maybe even a weekend.

That's where his head had been until he looked down to discover the condom he'd been using had failed in a no-maybe-about-it kind of way.

Now? He was trying to figure out how to break the news to Darcy, rolling through the scenarios, imagining what he was going to see on her face when he told her. Accusation, fear, dread.

The idea he would cause her any of those things was like a blow to the gut. He wasn't that guy. Not to anyone.

Not after Margo, his girlfriend through most of high school and college, and the woman he'd assumed, like everyone else, he would marry. At least until the day she'd come to him red-eyed and blotchy-cheeked with the confession she'd slept with another guy. She'd felt claustrophobic, trapped by all the expectations of their too serious, too neat, too well-planned relationship. She'd wanted out and, though a phone call would have been less traumatic to all involved, she'd found her escape in the bed of some frat guy with a coke habit.

As a result of that lesson, Jeff had all but perfected the no-hold relationship. He was a safe guy. A good time. The lover who

always remained a friend after, because the romance never went too deep to come back from.

He kept his finger on the pulse of his affairs, making communication a priority. It was why he'd gotten his reputation as "Mr. Sensitive"—which was fine by him if it meant avoiding another blindside like the one he'd taken with Margo. Hell, yes, he'd talk about feelings. And the added benefit of that open dialogue? Nothing got too serious. No one got the wrong idea.

He was not the guy who put panic into someone's eyes. But that's what was about to happen. Because if ever there was a way to make a woman feel trapped, this was it.

Pulling it together, he reminded himself while this was the first time it had happened to him, it certainly wasn't the first time a condom had broken in history. Both he and Darcy were adults who understood prophylactics weren't 100 percent. Accidents happened. And this was an accepted risk inherent to sex.

They'd talk. He'd assure her he was compulsive about using protection and he was clean. She'd tell him that while she didn't generally go home with guys she just met, she was on birth control and also clean. They'd exchange contact information and stay in touch.

But whatever fantasies Jeff had been entertaining about going forward with a casual relationship had pretty well shriveled under the icy splash of reality offered in the form of a blown-out rubber. And now all he was thinking was he'd be damn lucky to make a clean getaway.

Tightening the towel wrapped around his hips, he headed out of the bathroom and froze with one hand midrub at the back of his skull, his mouth open and all thoughts of what he'd been about to say gone—just like the woman he'd been inside of less than ten minutes before.

FIVE

Present day...

Moments later the bathroom door swung open and the mother of what was presumably his child emerged.

The cool steely gray of her eyes met with his. Eyes he remembered warming through the course of those hours they spent together. Eyes he'd watched go soft beneath him, and had made him wonder if a single night was going to be enough. Eyes that had haunted him for weeks after he'd been back in L.A., until he'd forced himself to put them out of his head. Get a new game plan and move on.

Which is exactly what he'd done.

Olivia.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he gave his head a stern shake. One thing at a time.

Darcy took a nervous breath and then cleared her throat. "So, maybe we should start by getting a few things straight up front."

Jeff nodded, checking the legal pad he'd started making a list on. "Agreed."

Validate paternity.

Confirm/upgrade health care.

Establish child support.

Hire nurse.

Buy house with yard and security.

Start screening for nanny.

Private preschools (*gifted and talented programs?).

Top five universities in country.

Quality playgroups.

Safety reports *family vehicles.

“I don’t want to marry you,” she said abruptly, wincing almost as soon as the words left her mouth.

Jeff blinked.

Wait. She didn’t want to marry him?

He blew out a measured breath while mentally talking his ego down from the ledge. Because seriously, after slinking out of his bed without so much as a “thanks for the good time, sport,” that’s how she wanted to kick this conversation off?

“Not that I remember asking,” he said evenly. “But good to know we’re on the same page.”

Or maybe not quite so evenly after all, considering the slender brow arched in his direction, topping off an all too familiar look that did something to him not entirely bad, but not exactly welcome, either.

Their eyes held a beat before she glanced away. “And I’m not interested in picking things up where we left off.”

“Something the woman I’m seeing will appreciate, I’m sure.”

Yeah, and best to get that out there right away, even though he was fairly certain there wasn’t one thing about this Olivia was going to appreciate.

Especially if she ever got a look at Darcy. Because even having just spent twenty minutes losing her lunch, she was still a knockout. So far as he could see the pregnancy hadn’t done much to her body yet.

Before he realized where that thought was taking him, his attention was doing a slow crawl south of her neckline, roaming over the full curves and narrowing tucks of a figure that—

“That’s great about your girlfriend, but I’m not here to option my baby, either, so...” Her fingers came into his line of sight which happened to have stalled out around the navel he’d dipped his tongue into, snapping twice and then veering into the universal eyes up here mister flag. “...so whatever you’re thinking with that look on your face? Stop.”

“Optioning your baby?” he choked out. “Excuse me?”

Her shoulders squared up.

“Well, you were staring,” she shot back with an accusing jut of her chin. Then seeming to lose a bit of her bravado, she more quietly added, “With a sort of greedy, speculative look on your face. How am I supposed to know what you’re thinking?”

Jeff shook his head, opened his mouth once and then simply closed it again, because...

Really?

And then it was like the tension that had been accumulating since she'd first lunged past him...just snapped. And suddenly, all he could do was laugh. Which probably didn't do much to alleviate the whole greedy, speculative vibe he'd been putting off, but oh, well. Apparently there wasn't much lower he could sink to in Darcy's eyes.

So instead, he simply rubbed his palms over his cheeks and looked across at the woman who'd turned his life upside down in a single night, and just when he thought he'd put it back to rights, showed up and sent him into a tailspin.

One he needed to pull out of and fast.

"Relax. I got distracted by your body. It doesn't look like it's changed much." And at the risk of coming across like a jerk, he added the truth. "You look good, Darcy."

"Oh." Then after a moment she rolled her eyes as if making some painful, grudging acknowledgment herself. "Thank you. You look good, too. Even though it doesn't matter."

He couldn't help the grin, but as it turned out, she didn't seem to mind, answering with one of her own.

It caught him off guard, but he recovered quickly, suggesting they sit down and talk.

Darcy stepped away from the door and crossed over to the couch where Jeff set an empty can on the floor, out of the way but still within reach.

She looked down and her eyes fluttered through a few wet blinks. "You got a fresh can for me?"

She was looking at him like he'd just handed over the keys to a new Mercedes.

"I didn't want you to have to put your face in the old one."

Her hand moved to what was still the flat plane of her belly and she gave him a watery half smile he didn't quite understand, but sensed meant something important to her. "You're a thoughtful guy, Jeff."

And there it was. Reassurance. Because she had to be scared out of her mind right now, coming to him when he was virtually a stranger.

Reaching for her hand, Jeff gave it a brief squeeze and looked her in the eyes. "Hey, this is all going to work out fine. Don't be nervous." He sat back, legal pad in hand. "So, where should we start—after, you're pregnant, of course."

She winced almost as if hearing the words was still new and shocking to her. But then maybe that was the best place. "When did you find out?"

"I didn't know until a week ago. Which is late, but..." She offered a frustrated little shrug. "My cycle is irregular enough so I don't really wait around for it and, normally I don't have any reason to anyway. But the past few months...I've been running pretty much nonstop. I thought the stomach upset was nerves. Then it got worse and I thought I must have caught the flu everyone was talking about, except it didn't get better."

He was following her words, but a part of him was still stuck on this news being nearly as new to Darcy as it was to him. "Have

you been to a doctor yet?”

“For the blood test.” She opened her purse, retrieved the printout she’d gotten from the lab and handed it over. “But my first appointment isn’t until next week.”

Jeff scanned the paperwork before setting it on the small table beside his chair. “So, if you don’t want to get married, or pick things up from where we left off...I think it makes sense to ask, what do you want?”

“I’d like you to agree to a paternity test.”

* * *

Darcy could see the wheels turning in his head, the man stepping back from the prospect of fatherhood with the idea maybe this child wasn’t his.

“Jeff,” she said as gently as she could. “You should understand, I’m only asking for the test for your benefit because I don’t expect you to take the word of some woman you knew for a handful of hours three months ago. But there are no other options. This baby is yours. Once you have the confirmation from a lab, the decision you need to make is whether you want to be a father to it. That’s what I need to find out.”

Jeff was watching her closely, his eyes so intense she had to fight the urge to squirm under his scrutiny. For a guy who could do irreverent like she’d never seen it done before, there was another, more serious, side to Jeff to balance it. And in this moment, the balance was a comfort.

“No other options? You’re telling me you haven’t slept with

anyone else since we were together.”

She took a bracing breath, not insulted by his request for clarification. “I realize I haven’t given you much reason to believe this, but I don’t make a habit of going home with guys I just met. Or at all, really. There wasn’t anyone else.”

Jeff drew a long slow breath, his eyes still on her, but his focus seemingly directed inward. He nodded.

“Okay. So the test is basically a formality. I’ll have Legal look into it and set something up. In the meantime, I’m going to be a father. I may need to get used to the idea, but as to whether I’m up to the responsibility, there’s no deliberation necessary.” He pushed to his feet and walked back to his desk. “So how are we going to do this?”

“Could we start with the paternity test and go from there?” she asked. “This is still so new to me, too. I wanted to get in touch with you right away, but I haven’t worked out exactly how I feel about everything. I guess I just wanted to know where you stood before I started making too many decisions about a future you might want a say in.”

He let out a contemplative breath. “Okay. I can respect that. And I appreciate it. So we’ll take this one step at a time. Start with the test. You could think about whether moving is something you’d consider and we’ll set something up to talk in a week?”

She nodded, relieved by his easy accommodation and perhaps by the distance he’d established between them with that last parting comment. It would be an appointment. Because they

were going to handle this like business.

Exactly the way she wanted them to.

SIX

With his afternoon cleared, there was nothing Jeff would have rather done than call Connor. Tell his best friend he wasn't the only one to pick up a souvenir in Vegas. Talk out the changes ahead of him and have the guy—the only guy on the planet who knew him as well as he knew himself—tell him he had his back.

But Connor had just reconciled with his wife—a woman he'd married within hours of meeting that same night Jeff met Darcy—and even if Jeff thought he could live with himself for interrupting them...he was fairly certain the two lovebirds were still off the grid.

Just as well.

There was someone else who deserved to know what was happening first.

Olivia. The woman he'd started a relationship with five weeks ago. The something Jeff had found to fill the empty spot in his life he'd only become aware of after Vegas.

Jogging across the marble-and-glass atrium, Jeff caught the elevator to Olivia's top floor office.

How the hell was he going to explain this? And how would she take it?

Things had been going well with them. They'd been a smart fit from the start. Comfortable together, compatible.

She was open and pleasant. Harvard educated. Business savvy.

Connected.

Two hours ago, he would have given it six months at the outside before he popped the question. And only because it seemed like an appropriate time to wait. In Olivia he'd found a woman who was all the things he'd known he wanted for a partner in life from as far back as he could remember—from the first time he looked across the table at his parents and thought to himself, someday, I want that.

The business journal over morning coffee. The dinners at the club. The shared interests for their shared lifestyle. The sparkling hostess championing the charities and foundations they supported.

It sounded shallow as he itemized it in his head, but it wasn't.

He wanted the kind of good match that meant a lifetime of companionable, easy happiness. What his parents had up until the day five years ago when a heart attack took his father. The best man he'd ever know. The example Jeff had always hoped to live up to. Hell, he wished he was around to talk to about this.

Riding up to Olivia's, he couldn't help question what she would think when she looked at the woman he'd been with before her. The one who'd been his wake-up call about putting an end to the screwing around with women who weren't right for him and thinking about getting serious with one who was. Settling down. Starting a family.

Olivia would see everything she wasn't when she looked at Darcy.

And it would make her wonder.

Darcy had been a good time he hadn't seen coming. And the only reason she'd gotten under his skin the way she had was because of the way she'd left.

So the chemistry between them had been hot enough that even months later, he could feel the lingering burn of it, so what? That was sex. Not exactly a foundation to build a solid forever on. But neither was it something he could, in good conscience, ignore when it came to a relationship with another woman.

"Hey, Mel. She in?" he asked, when he got to her office.

"She's on a call. Should I interrupt?"

"No. I'll wait."

This was news he needed to tell her today and in person.

Sometime later, Jeff was searching stages of pregnancy on his phone, checking them against his calendar and travel commitments when Olivia's office door swung open and she walked out to greet him with a welcoming smile.

"Jeffrey, what a wonderful surprise!"

"Got a few minutes for me?" he asked, unfolding from the deep sofa to lead her back into the office. And once there, he closed the door behind them. "Is it private in here?"

Olivia's brow crumpled a bit at the question as she looked at the closed door behind him and then her neatly organized desk loaded with her current projects. "I was thinking you might be here to take me to lunch." Her nose crinkled before reluctantly meeting his eyes again. "But are you here for something...else?"

A bark of laughter escaped him as he realized the direction of her thoughts. She'd thought he was here for some kind of afternoon desktop quickie. Yeah, now he got her confusion. It wasn't exactly like that between them.

Shaking his head, he crossed to the cluster of club chairs across her office and held a hand out asking her to join him. "No, Olivia, I'm sorry. Something...unexpected has come up. We need to talk."

A little furrow had cut between her delicate brows as she lowered herself into the chair across from him. "You're worrying me, Jeffrey. What's happened?"

Looking at her guileless face and earnest eyes, he wished there was some way to sugarcoat the bitter news he was about to give her. But it wouldn't help either of them. "A couple of months before we met, I spent the night with a woman who came to my office today. She's pregnant."

Olivia sat stone still, her eyes gone wide. "Was there something between you?"

He opened his mouth to say no, but said instead, "It was one night."

"Who is she? Would I know her? Is she the type to keep quiet? What does she want from you?"

"I doubt very much you know her, unless you've spent more time in Vegas than you let on."

"She's a stripper. Oh, God, Jeffrey, please tell me she isn't a prostitute."

“No!” He raked a hand back through his hair. “No, she was the waitress at a bar I was stuck at waiting for Connor the night he met Megan. I was killing time and one thing led to another.”

He didn’t like the sound of his explanation, but the deeper, expanded version of the truth wasn’t something Olivia needed to hear.

“You just found out? So, there hasn’t been any time for conclusive paternity testing, then. This baby might not even be yours. I mean, Jeffrey, one night with some Vegas cocktail girl three months ago. We don’t know anything yet.”

A part of him wanted to agree. Tell her she was probably right and to give him a few weeks to sort it out. Only she deserved the whole truth. “We’ll have the DNA testing done, but I already know this baby is mine.”

She didn’t ask for details but he could see the understanding in her eyes. The way the hope shifted toward disappointment.

She swallowed, withdrawing her hands from his to tuck them around her waist. “Are you going to marry her?”

Darcy’s emphatic pre-proposal rejection came to mind, pushing a wry smile to his mouth. “No.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding slowly before meeting his eyes with a steel he hadn’t encountered in hers before. “Then cut her a check.”

He stared hard at the woman seated across from him, the one he’d thought might be able to share his life. “To what, go away? Disappear?” He couldn’t even voice the next alternative he hoped

to hell she wasn't suggesting.

Something roared inside him, as a protective instinct churned hot in his gut. "It's my child."

"And we'll raise it as ours," she said quickly, taking his hands. "We'll get married. Have a private adoption. We'll craft an explanation to suit us both."

Adoption. Of course, that's where Olivia's head would have gone first. Adoption and marriage. A neat package, except for the part where she'd completely discounted Darcy as a part of the equation beyond a dollar amount on a check.

"Jeffrey, we have something here. Something I've been waiting to find for a very long time. We could make this work."

Offering Olivia's hand a quick squeeze, he pushed up from his chair.

He needed to cut Olivia some slack. She'd jumped to the wrong conclusion, probably because the few details he'd parceled out pointed that way. She was trying to come up with a solution to a problem he'd dropped in front of them. It just wasn't the right one.

Walking over to the bank of windows, he rubbed his hand over his jaw. Darcy was right. They all needed a little time to get their heads around this new development.

"Darcy doesn't want to give the baby up. She was offering me an opportunity to be a part of its life. Not to...option it off. You don't know her."

Olivia sat back, watching him the way he watched guys from

across the conference table. Reading their tells and all the things their faces and bodies said without their mouths having to. “And you do?”

“Only enough to say, she wasn’t here to give her child up.”

“Okay. Then we’ll take it from there.” She followed him across the office, laying her hand gently over his arm.

“Olivia, I don’t know what this next year is going to bring. I think it might be better for everyone if we—”

“No. I’m not going to give up on us because things aren’t exactly the way I thought they would be.” She met his eyes. “We’re so well suited. So right. All I’m asking is you give us a chance before making any decisions. Please.”

Jeff wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She felt stiff against him. Like an off fit in a way he’d never noticed before.

Which he supposed made sense, considering he’d just put something between them neither of them knew exactly how to deal with. Now the least he could do was grant her request and give them a chance.

SEVEN

“You got the waitress pregnant?” Connor shook his head, rocking back on his bar stool as though the news had physically blown him over. “You’re sure? I mean, all the question marks...?”

Jeff nodded. “Had a DNA test pushed through, but even if I hadn’t—I’m sure.”

“A baby. How in the hell?”

At Jeff’s raised brow, the other man held up a staying hand.

“Don’t. I know how. Your dad did a bang-up job with the ‘talk’ back in high school. I just can’t believe—you—like this—now.” Then shooting him a concerned look, he asked, “Someone mentioned you were seeing Olivia Deveraux. That you two might be serious.”

“Before Darcy showed up at my office, I would have put money on a future with Olivia. But now.” Now, even two weeks later, he wasn’t any closer to knowing what their future held. Olivia hadn’t changed. “She wants it to work. Offered to marry me and adopt the baby.”

“Generous.”

“If Darcy were considering giving it up. But not for even a single second.”

He thought about her busting him looking at her narrow waist, and accusing him of trying to option her baby. Once again giving in to the reoccurring grin that stomped all over his face every time he thought about her outraged, accusing look, he held up his hands. “She’s going to be an amazing mother. You can see it.”

“Olivia?”

Jeff caught Connor’s stare and the subtle, unspoken question behind it. “Darcy. But, yeah, I’m sure Olivia would, too.”

Connor pushed his drink around in a neat square on the bar. “But you don’t see it with her?”

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