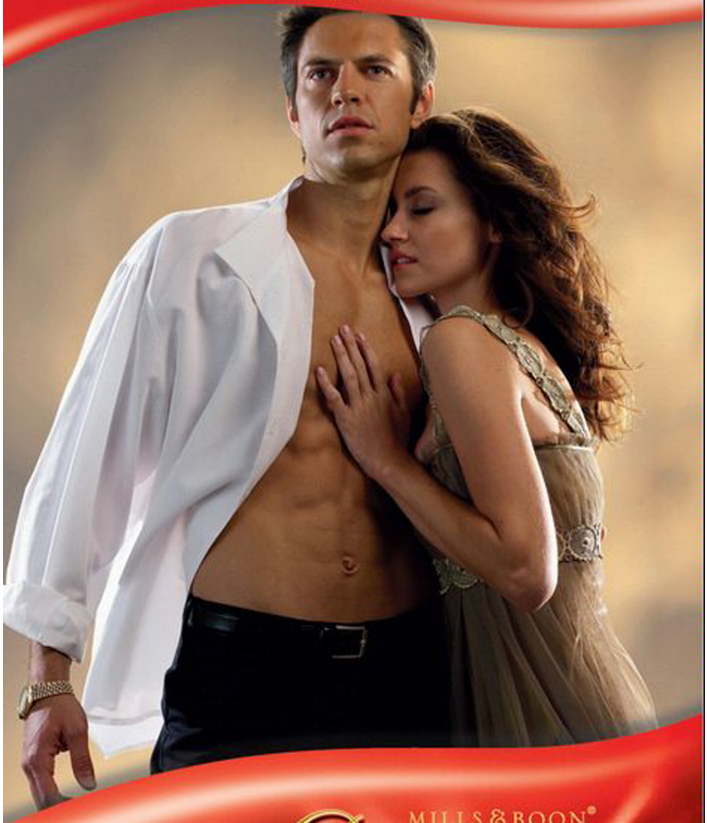
Marrying for King's Millions

Maureen Child

The Spanish Aristocrat's Woman

Katherine Garbera



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Maureen Child
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Marrying for King's Millions / The Spanish Aristocrat's Woman: Marrying for King's Millions

Аннотация

Marrying for King’s Millions Maureen Child Millionaire Travis King handpicked a temporary and on-his-terms bride – home-town girl Julie O’Hara. The woman was an old friend and shouldn’t give him any trouble. And, as per their contract, she’d do exactly what he wanted…The Spanish Aristocrat’s Woman Katherine GarberaWhen Count Guillermo de la Cruz announced his engagement to plain-Jane heiress Kara deMontaine just minutes after meeting her, the jet-set gaped in shock. But no one was more stunned than Kara. Could she tame this royal playboy?

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Marrying for King's Millions by Maureen Child



"Maybe you've been playing me all along, Julie."

She blew out a breath, frustrated. If he was going to continue to believe that, then this year was going to be misery. "I told you, Travis, I wouldn't do that."

"I'd like to believe you," he was saying, reaching out with a finger to play with one of the straps on her dress. "But I'm thinking I need some convincing."

"I don't know what more I can say."

"No more talking."

"Then what…"

He slid one of her dress straps down her shoulder and smoothed his thumb over her skin. Her gaze locked with his, Julie's breath caught and her blood began to pump, thick and hot and urgent.

"I paid a hundred thousand dollars to marry you today," Travis said, dipping his head to kiss her bare shoulder.

Julie sucked in a gulp of air.

"Now," he said, straightening up as his finger slid along the line of her bodice, dipping down to caress the valley between her breasts. "How about you show me what I paid for?"

The Spanish Aristocrat's Woman by Katherine Garbera



"Rumour has it you're engaged," Gui's friend Tristan said.

"Yes," Gui said. He would have to convince Kara that the engagement was real for now. No way would he expose her to society's snide comments, by admitting that a moment of weakness had made him claim her as his own.

"Kara's a good choice for you."

"She is?" He knew nothing about the woman except that she had the softest lips he'd ever tasted. When he kissed her, he forgot that all other women existed.

Not a bad start for an affair, but marriage… Damn. Was he really considering marrying her?

As his friend's words echoed in his mind, he realised that, yes, he was.

Marrying for King's Millions

MAUREEN CHILD

The Spanish Aristocrat's Woman

KATHERINE GARBERA



www.millsandboon.co.uk

MARRYING FOR KING'S MILLIONS

by

Maureen Child

MAUREEN CHILD

is a California native who loves to travel. Every chance they get, she and her husband are taking off on another research trip. An author of more than sixty books, Maureen loves a happy ending and still swears that she has the best job in the world. She lives in Southern California with her husband, two children and a golden retriever with delusions of grandeur.

You can contact Maureen via her website: www.maureenchild.com.

Dear Reader,

I've always loved a marriage-of-convenience story. So when I came up with the idea for the KINGS OF CALIFORNIA series, I decided I would give each of the King brothers a marriage of convenience!

You've already met Adam and Gina. *In Marrying for King's Millions*, it's middle King brother Travis's turn.

Travis needs a wife to help his business. Julie O'Hara needs a hand getting her own future started. When they agree to marry

for a year, neither of them has any idea just how quickly things will get out of hand!

I love stories where old friends see each other in a new light. I enjoy the challenge of taking two characters who've known each other for years and showing them that there are still surprises to be revealed.

I do hope you're all having as much fun with the King family as I am! You can keep up with my new coming releases by visiting my website at www.maureenchild.com.

Happy reading!

Maureen

To the best plot group in the known universe – Susan Mallery, Christine Rimmer, Teresa Southwick and Kate Carlisle. Thank you all for sharing your friendship, your quick wit, your brilliant ideas and your never-ending well of patience.

One

"No way. Sorry, Travis, I just can't marry you." Julie O'Hara leaned against the closed door and kept her voice pitched loud enough so that it would carry to the man on the other side.

Clearly, he heard her.

"Oh, yes you can," he said, and even through the door, his voice was all steely determination. "Now cut the dramatics and open the damn door."

Julie's head dropped back against the door and she rolled her

eyes to look at the high, beamed ceiling. Sunlight slanted in through the windows across the room and the golden wash from the sun created shadows on the walls that looked eerily like the bars on a cell.

Coincidence?

She didn't think so.

This was a huge mistake. She knew it down to her bones. The bad feeling that had been taking root inside her for the last month had suddenly blossomed into big, black flowers. Ooh, there was an image.

"Travis, think about this for a minute."

"Not really the time for any more thinking, Julie," he said. "The guests are here, the minister's waiting and we *are* getting married."

Her stomach did a slow pitch and roll and she clenched her teeth together and took a few deep breaths through her nose. Didn't really help. How in the heck had she gotten herself into this? Julie's eyes flew open when Travis King's knuckles rapped on the door again and she looked around the room with a frantic gaze, futilely searching for an escape route.

But there wasn't one and she knew it. She was trapped in this plush guest room in Travis's castle like house on the King Vineyard. Just like the rest of the house, it was gorgeous, elegant and so far away from her ordinary world she felt like a servant girl who'd sneaked into the mistress's room to try on her clothes. Bad, bad feeling. And it was all her own fault.

She'd walked into this stupid situation with her eyes wide open. "Idiot."

"Open the door, Julie…."

"It's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding," she said.

"Uh-huh. Don't think that matters so much in our case, so open up."

Our case.

Of course their case was special. Because this wasn't your ordinary, everyday wedding.

It had all seemed so simple a month ago, she thought and instantly remembered just how she'd gotten to this place in her life.

"I need a wife," Travis had said. "You need a future. It's perfect."

Julie had looked at him, sitting across from her in a red vinyl booth at Terri's Diner in the heart of downtown Birkfield, California. In a small town, the diner was the one place where everyone eventually showed up. Julie had practically grown up sliding across the red vinyl seats.

Her first date had brought her here. She'd nursed her first broken heart over four double-chocolate shakes. And now she was getting a marriage proposal here.

Shouldn't there be a plaque?

"It's not perfect," she argued, thinking that at least one of them had to be logical here. Travis had always been more impulsive than she—well, except for that one time when she'd married a

man she thought loved her, only to find out too late that he hadn't. See where impulsiveness had gotten her?

Firmly, she said, "There's an easier solution, Travis. Just go find another distributor for your wines."

He shook his head, dark brown hair flopping across his forehead in a way that made her want to reach across the table and smooth it back for him. She resisted.

"Can't. Thomas Henry is the best and you know I never settle for less than the best."

True, he never had. Travis had grown up as a member of one of the wealthiest, most powerful families in the state. He'd long ago grown accustomed to being on top. Being number one. And there was nothing Travis cared for more than King Vineyards. Ever since taking it over from his late father, he'd put in the time and effort required to make King wines known all over California.

Now he'd set his sights on not only distribution countrywide, but also eventually international exports, as well. Apparently, Thomas Henry was key to Travis's plan for world domination.

"Okay, but you don't have to marry me to get him."

"No." He sat back in the booth seat with a disgusted scowl on his face. "I don't. I could marry one of Henry's hideous daughters instead. I told you, Julie. The guy's kind of eccentric. He's a self-made millionaire and now his big goal in life is to get his girls married. I'm single. Rich. Therefore, I'm prime husband material."

She smiled. “He can’t force you to marry one of his daughters. This isn’t the Middle Ages.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him to try.” Travis smiled wryly. “But if I turn down his ‘darlings,’ he can—and will—refuse to handle my wines. I can’t risk that. King Vineyards is poised for the next big step. Getting the distribution deal with Henry would put me on the right path. All I need to make it all happen is a temporary wife. If I’m already married, he won’t be tossing his daughters at my feet, will he?”

“Why me?”

He grinned…and Travis smiling was pretty spectacular. She’d had a crush on him when she was a kid. But then, Travis was gorgeous, charming and his smile had been known to melt a woman’s resistance at fifty feet. Good thing Julie was immune. All it had taken was marrying a jerk and being dumped. Just because she could admire Travis’s smile didn’t mean she was going to turn into a puddle of mush at his feet.

“A couple of reasons,” he was saying and Julie listened up. “First, because we know each other and I know you need this, too. Second, because I trust you to stick to our agreement and not try to bleed me for extra cash.”

She knew he was wary of most women because King men attracted gold diggers in greater numbers than the gold rush had back in the day. “But if I marry you, what makes me different from any of those other women? I’ll still be marrying you for your money.”

"Yeah, but on my terms," he said with a smile.

Hmm. He might think that was funny, but she didn't see the humor. Julie watched women throw themselves at Travis for years. And all of them had had one eye on his exceptional behind and the other eye on his bank account. If she allowed him to pay her to marry him, wasn't she just another member of a very large, mercenary crowd?

Julie groaned inwardly and sucked at her chocolate shake. When tumultuous times struck, always have chocolate handy. A good rule of thumb for life's little miseries. She didn't like the idea of people thinking she was after his money.

"I don't want or need a husband," she pointed out, even though she distinctly felt herself losing the battle.

"Maybe not, but you do need the money to start that bakery you've always wanted."

True. God, she hated that he was right. She'd been working like a dog and saving every spare dime for years and still she was light years from having enough money put away to open her own bakery. She couldn't get a loan because she had no collateral, and if things stayed as they were, she'd be at retirement age before she could afford her dream shop.

But was that any reason to get married?

Hadn't she turned down Travis's offer of a loan before this? She'd known him her whole life. Her mom had been the cook on the King ranch until she'd married the gardener and hung up her apron when Julie was twelve. As kids, Julie and Travis

had been friends. That had lasted until high school, when Julie'd first heard the laughter about the rich kid hanging out with the nobody. Their friendship had gradually cooled down, but they'd remained "friendly."

Now that they were grown, they weren't exactly close anymore, but the memory of that friendship was strong enough that Julie hadn't wanted to borrow money from him and muddy up their relationship.

Wasn't marrying him even worse?

"It's one year, Julie," Travis said, tapping his fingertips impatiently against the white Formica tabletop. "One year and I'll have the distribution deal I want and I give you financial backing in the bakery. Everybody wins."

"I don't know…." She still wasn't convinced. And it wasn't just the thought of marrying for money that had her hesitating, though heaven knew, it should have been enough. Nope, there was something else bothering her as well. "And when the marriage ends, that would leave me a two-time divorcée."

How tacky was that? God, thirty years old and a two-time loser? Oh, if she could step back in time a year or two, she'd avoid Jean Claude Doucette like the plague. Unfortunately, she couldn't do that and that French rat was going to remain a part of her past forever.

"Yeah, but that first marriage lasted what? Two weeks? It hardly counts," Travis argued. "Besides, who cares?"

"Me."

"Don't see why. So you made a mistake. Big deal. You wised up, got a divorce…"

Yeah, she thought, after Jean Claude dumped her and arranged for a quickie Mexican divorce.

"Put it behind you, move on," Travis finished. "Anyway, he was French."

Julie laughed.

"And, I offered to beat the crap out of him for you," Travis reminded her.

"I know." She really liked having Travis as a friend. Was she ready for that to change? "And I appreciate it."

"So then marry me already."

"What would your family say? Oh, God, what would my mother say?" she wondered aloud, knowing even as she asked it that he'd have a ready answer. "This is coming out of nowhere and—"

"Hell," Travis said on a laugh. "They'll understand. We tell my family and yours the truth of the situation, but no one else. And let's remember how Gina and Adam got married last year, huh? It's not like this idea has never been thought of before."

"Yes…." Travis's brother Adam had married his neighbour Gina for all the wrong reasons, but their marriage had turned into something wonderful. Now Gina was pregnant and Adam was walking around looking like the emperor of the world. "But Travis…"

"No one but our families know the whole truth, though," he

insisted, leaning across the table to look directly into her eyes. "This has got to look real, Julie. To everybody. Thomas Henry needs to believe it. So we'll play the perfect married couple. We can do it. It's only a year."

A year. A year with Travis as her husband. Oh, God, she was weakening and she knew it. Visions of a bakery with her name over the door were dancing before her eyes. Then something else occurred to her.

"What about…"

"What?"

"You know." When he just stared at her, she blew out a breath. "Sex?"

"Oh." He frowned for a minute or two, then shook his head. "No problem. Married in name only. I swear. Trust me, I can resist you."

"Gee, thanks. Don't I feel special."

"Besides, it's only a year." He said it again as if trying to convince not only her, but also himself, that they could do this. "How hard could it be?"

She hadn't expected to get married again. Ever. Jean Claude ensured that she'd never trust any man that completely again. But this was different. It wasn't as if she was going into this marriage all starry-eyed, expecting love to last a lifetime. This was business, plain and simple. And if she was going to do it, why not marry a friend? A man who didn't expect anything from her? A man who was going to help her make her dreams come

true at the end of one tiny, tiny, year.

"So what do you say?" he prompted.

"Okay," she'd said on a sigh. "Yes, I'll marry you."

"Idiot," Julie said again the memory fading. She was back in the guest room, wearing an ivory wedding dress and trying to find a way to successfully chicken out.

"Damn it, Julie," Travis implored from the other room and she heard the banked temper in his voice. "Open the damn door so we can talk about this."

She shot a look into the mirror behind her and then tossed the lacy edge of her veil over her shoulder. Steeling herself, she took a breath and flipped the dead bolt. Travis opened the door a second later and moved into the room, closing the door behind him.

He looked amazing, of course. The bridegroom of every woman's fantasy. He wore an elegantly tailored black suit with a crisp white shirt and a bold red tie. His dark brown hair was swept back from his face and his chocolate brown eyes were pinned on her. In an instant, he looked her up and down. "You look gorgeous."

"Thanks." She looked the part of a bride, even if she didn't feel like it. Her dark red hair was piled up on top of her head, with a few careless ringlets pulled free to lay against her neck. The lace-edged veil was elbow length and tickled her bare shoulders. Her floor-length gown flowed around her in a soft cloud of gossamer fabric. Strapless, the gown dipped low over her bosom

and hugged her narrow waist. She knew she looked good—she only wished she felt as good as she looked.

"I don't think I can do it, Travis," she admitted and laid the flat of her hand against a stomach that was spinning and churning with nerves.

"Oh, you're *going* to do it," Travis told her and took her shoulders in a hard grip. "We've got a garden full of guests out there and the musicians are tuning up. Reporters are standing out on the drive and security just caught a photographer sneaking in over the paddock fence."

"Oh, God…." He'd always been a favorite of the paparazzi. They followed him everywhere, taking pictures of Travis with whatever woman happened to be hanging on his arm. It just hadn't occurred to Julie that now *she'd* be a photographer's target. Her whole life was about to change and she wasn't sure she could go through with it.

"You're just nervous."

"Oh, boy, howdy," she said, nodding frantically.

He tipped her chin up, stared into her eyes and said, "You'll get over it."

"I don't think so," Julie said, willing her stomach to settle. "I've really got a bad feeling about this, Travis. It's all so much… more than I thought it would be. This is marriage, Travis. Even if it's only temporary, it's *marriage*. I can't do this again."

He frowned at her. "If you think you're backing out now, you're nuts. A King wedding is big news. A King being stood up

at the altar is even bigger news and that's not going to happen."

"Fine," she said, snatching at his words desperately. "Then you dump me. I don't care. I'll explain that you've changed your mind and—"

"What's this all about?" he interrupted and stared down at her.

Julie refused to be swayed by the soft brown of his eyes. Instead, she steeled herself, stomped across the room and pointed out the window at the elegantly decorated garden below. There were two hundred people, sitting in rented white chairs on opposite sides of a white carpeted aisle.

A minister waited at the head of that aisle in a gazebo draped in brilliantly shaded roses and a quartet of violinists were off to one side, playing classical music for the waiting guests. Farther in the distance, a white tent, strewn with yet more roses, awaited the reception party.

"That, Travis," she said, swallowing hard against the ball of nerves jostling the black flowers of death in the pit of her stomach. "That's what this is about. I can't face those people and *lie*. I'm a terrible liar. You know that. I get blotchy and start to giggle and then it gets *bad*."

"You're making too big a deal out of this." He strolled across the room, as if he had all the time in the world. "Think of it like a play. We're a couple of actors, saying our lines then celebrating with a party."

"A play. Great." She threw her hands high, then let them slap against the cool silk of her gown. "The last time I was in a play,

I was a strawberry in the fourth grade pageant."

He sighed. "Julie…"

"No," she said, repeating herself now and not even caring anymore. "I can't. I'm really sorry, Travis."

"Oh, well, as long as you're *sorry*." His mouth tightened up and Julie frowned right back at him.

"I warned you that I was no good at this."

"You signed a contract," he reminded her.

Yes, she really had. He'd put their little agreement into writing and one of a fleet of King lawyers—or was that a herd?—had notarized her signature. So technically, she was stuck. Emotionally, she was still looking for a back door.

"This was a bad idea."

"So you said."

"It bears repeating."

"Maybe," he said and took her hand in his. "But it's the one we agreed on. So pick up your bouquet, we'll go downstairs and get this over with."

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

His eyebrows went straight up. "I believe that's the first time a woman has gotten nauseous at the thought of marrying me."

"First time for everything." Julie looked out the window again and her gaze seemed to arrow in straight on her mother and stepfather. Her mother was worried. Not hard to tell even from a distance, since she was wringing the handle of her new purse. Her stepfather looked uncomfortable, tugging at the collar and

tie strangling him.

They didn't approve of what she was doing, Julie knew. But they were there for her. Supporting her. Her gaze slipped to the other side of the aisle where the King family took up the first two rows. There was Gina, pregnant and glowing, with Adam standing beside her, waiting to take his place as best man. Jackson, the youngest of the King brothers, was seated beside Gina and there were King cousins and aunts and uncles there as well.

Everyone was waiting on *her*.

But no pressure.

Beside her, Travis whispered, "Think of the future, Julie. Your future. In a year, you'll have your bakery, I'll have my distribution deal and everything will go back to normal."

She wished she could believe him. But that bad feeling inside wouldn't go away. And that, more than anything, warned her that "normal" might not be what either one of them were expecting.

Two

The ceremony was over fast and Travis was grateful. Hard enough standing there holding Julie's hand and feeling her nervous tremors rocking through her body. But as promised, when she said her vows, her voice had shaken and she got the giggles halfway through.

She really was a terrible liar, he thought, watching her dance with his younger brother, Jackson. But the deed was done now. He glanced down at the plain gold band on his left ring finger.

Idly, he rubbed the ring with his thumb and tried not to feel like the small circle of gold was somehow a tiny noose shutting off his air supply.

This had been his idea after all, despite the fact that Travis had always avoided marriage. Generally, he stayed with a woman until she started getting that let's-get-married-and-make-rich-babies-so-I-can-get-a-fat-settlement look in her eye. Then he was off, moving on to someone new. It kept life interesting. Kept him footloose, which is just the way he liked it.

Now, he was married and looking at a sex-free year.

Hmm…

"Second thoughts?"

Travis turned his head to meet his brother Adam's curious gaze. In the last several months, there'd been a change in the oldest King brother. Oh, he still looked the same, but his attitude had shifted. He wasn't concentrating solely on the King ranch anymore. Now his life revolved around Gina and their coming baby.

"Not at all," Travis answered and thought that he was a much better liar than Julie. What did that say about him?

"She's a nice woman." Adam glanced out to the crowded dance floor where Jackson was spinning Julie around until she laughed out loud.

"Yeah, she is." Travis reached for his glass of merlot and took a long drink. "And she knew what she was getting in to, so don't start with me."

Adam lifted both hands and shrugged. “I didn’t say a word.”

“Yet.”

He nodded. “Fine. I’m just saying that Julie’s not like your other women. She doesn’t have a heart of stone, so be careful.”

One of Travis’s eyebrows lifted into a high arch. “I think this is where the old saying about the pot and the kettle comes into play.”

Adam took a sip of champagne and let his gaze slide to the table where his six-months pregnant wife was sitting with her family. Then he looked back at Travis. “Exactly. When Gina and I got married, it was a straight-up business deal. Just like you and Julie.”

“Big difference,” Travis interrupted, not willing to hear a lecture or—God help him—advice. He didn’t need any help here. He and Julie would do just fine. Their agreement was nothing like the one Adam and his wife had had. “Gina loved you. Always did, though God knows why.”

“Very funny.”

Travis shrugged. “It’s different with Julie. We’re friends. Hell, we’re not even *good* friends. This is business for both of us. Nothing more.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t even go there,” Travis warned, draining his wine and setting the glass down on the table behind him. “When the year’s up, so’s the marriage. End of story.”

“We’ll see.”

Travis stared at his older brother and said, "What is up with you? Discover you love your wife and now you want the rest of us in your boat?" Grinning, he clapped one hand on Adam's shoulder and said, "Forget about it. I'm just not a one woman kind of guy, Adam. When Julie and I are finished, it's back to serial monogamy for me."

The song ended and almost before the last note drifted away, the band moved into another number. This one slow and dreamy. Music spilled from the stage, swept across the crowd and drew even more couples onto the floor.

Adam shook his head and said, "This is not going to be as easy as you think it will be, Travis. But I guess you'll find that out for yourself."

"Guess I will," Travis said, completely confident that *his* plan would work out just the way he intended.

"Now, I'm going to go dance with my wife," Adam told him. "Maybe you should do the same."

When his brother left and headed for Gina, Travis let that one word roll through his mind. *Wife*. He had a *wife*. Sounded as odd as the gold band on his ring finger felt. He turned his gaze to the dance floor and watched as a tall man with dark blond hair and a wispy moustache cut in on Jackson to dance with Julie.

Julie looked up at the blonde and her features froze in appalled shock. Something inside Travis jolted. He'd already started moving toward the couple when he saw Julie try to pull away even as the blonde leaned in closer to her, whispering something

in her ear. Whatever he said had made quite the impression on Julie. She looked like a balloon, slowly deflating.

The crowd separating them seemed to get thicker as Travis moved faster. Instinct pushed him on. He slipped past people, pushed others out of his way and got to Julie's side just as she finally managed to shove herself out of the blond man's arms. She stared up at the guy as if he were a ghost and the blonde was enjoying her shock.

"Julie, you okay?" Travis came up beside her.

"Travis. Oh, God…." She covered her mouth with one hand and kept staring at the other man as if she couldn't really believe he was there.

And just who the hell was this guy? A reporter? A photographer who'd somehow made it past security? But where was his camera? Instinctively, Travis pushed Julie behind him as he faced the tall, lanky man who was looking at him with what could only be glee shining in his pale blue eyes.

"What's going on here?" Travis demanded, keeping his voice low enough that even the other dancers around them couldn't hear him over the music.

The blonde gave him a half bow and smirked. "I've only come to offer my congratulations on your wedding," he said, his English flavored with a very thick French accent.

Travis shot a look at Julie.

She swallowed hard and shook her head. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know."

"Know what?" Travis said, turning back to the guy silently laughing at him. Something was going on here and he was damned sure he wasn't going to like it. Hands fisted at his side, he demanded, "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Ahh…" The guy held out his right hand and said softly, conspiratorially, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jean Claude Doucette. And you must be the man who has just married my wife."

"I'm a bigamist," Julie muttered and the word tasted foul in her mouth. Well, this certainly put her "bad feeling" from earlier in perspective. Compared to now, that debilitating trepidation was like a day at Disneyland.

This was a nightmare. One she couldn't seem to wake up from. One where *both* of her husbands—dear God—were facing off like a couple of well-groomed pit bulls. Although, if she had to bet on who would be the winner of this weird contest, she'd put her money on Travis. The Frenchman who stood so calmly at ease had no idea just how much danger he was in.

"Yes, my dear," Jean Claude said, from his place beside the cold hearth. He looked suave and sure of himself, as always. His blond hair was swept back from his forehead. His pale blue eyes were locked on her and even from across the room, she read the humor in his gaze. He wore a well-tailored gray suit with a pale yellow shirt and a steel-gray tie. He looked relaxed, completely at home, as if he were enjoying himself immensely.

Julie had never hated another human being as much in her life.

Still watching her, Jean Claude leaned one elbow on the intricately carved wooden mantel. “You are indeed a bigamist. Such a shame, really. And so very…embarrassing, I think is the word. At least, it is potentially a very public embarrassment for your new husband.”

It really was. The papers had been full of the wedding for the last month. Society columns were filled with speculation about the marriage of one of California’s wealthiest bachelors. She could just imagine what would happen if they got wind of this news.

That distribution deal Travis was so concerned about would no doubt disappear and the humiliation would cling to him forever. Oh, God, she wanted the floor to open her up and swallow her whole.

Or better yet, swallow Jean Claude.

If her legs hadn’t felt like overcooked spaghetti, she might have walked over to Jean Claude and slapped him. As it was, all she managed was a wince before she dropped into a wing-backed chair. The wide window beside her overlooked the front of the house. At least she didn’t have to sit here and stare out at the wedding party.

They’d left the reception, where their friends and families were dancing and laughing, to come to Travis’s study. Despite the room’s size, its dark green walls, thick, colorful rugs and countless bookshelves gave the study a warm, almost comforting feel.

But it would take way more than the room's ambiance to comfort Julie at the moment. Her heart was galloping in her chest and her stomach kept twisting, as if a giant, unseen fist was squeezing it mercilessly. She shot a look at Travis and nearly groaned at the expression of pure fury on his face.

The three of them were caught together like survivors of a shipwreck. And two of the survivors looked as though they were each willing to throw the other out of the lifeboat.

Could this get any worse?

Oh, she really shouldn't have thought that question.

"I believe I saw some reporters stationed outside this… winery," Jean Claude mused aloud. "Perhaps I should go and have a quiet word with one or two of them."

Reporters.

Julie's head ached anew and the tumult in her stomach stepped up a notch.

"You won't be talking to any reporters," Travis muttered tightly.

"This is, as you Americans are so fond of saying, a free country, is it not?"

"Not where you're concerned," Travis told him, then added, "You start talking to reporters and my lawyers will be on you so fast, they'll take everything from you but that ridiculous accent."

Jean Claude's eyes narrowed, but as Julie watched him, all she could think was that he was so far outclassed in the whole really furious competition. Anger radiated off of Travis in heavy waves

that seemed to swim through the room, making the air almost too thick to breathe.

"You are in no position to dictate terms to me," Jean Claude warned.

"Mister," Travis answered. "This is my house. I do what I damn well want and right now, I want to hear everything you've got to say. So start talking."

For a moment, it looked as though the smaller man might argue, but then, he conceded and gave an indolent shrug, as if none of this was consequential at all.

"It is quite simple really," Jean Claude said in what Julie realized was a reedy, almost whiny voice. "The delightful Julie and I were never really divorced. So you have married a married woman, my good man."

Julie's heart stuttered a little, but she swallowed hard and pulled in a deep breath. She couldn't really believe this was happening, but it was hard to avoid the truth.

From a distance, the muted sounds of her wedding reception were nothing more than a soft, white noise. She glanced down at the gold, diamond-studded band on her left ring finger. Sunlight caught the channel-set stones and winked with a dazzling shine and glitter. Travis had only put it on her an hour ago. Why the devil hadn't Jean Claude stopped the wedding before it was too late? Groaning quietly, she buried her left hand in the folds of her wedding gown so that she wouldn't have to look at the ring again.

"I'm *not* your good man," Travis was saying and his voice was

low, deep and threatening enough that if Jean Claude had had a brain in his head, he would have been backing up. Instead, he only picked up the glass of wine he'd poured for himself and sniffed in distaste.

"I am the injured party, *mon ami*," he said, taking a mouthful of the cabernet and swallowing as if he'd had to force it down. The insult to King wines was unmistakable. "Surely you can see that?"

"What I see—" Travis said "—is a guy trying to work a shakedown."

"Shakedown?" Jean Claude walked around Travis, came to Julie's side and laid one long-fingered hand on her shoulder.

She flinched and ducked out from under his touch. Jumping to her feet, she only swayed a little before locking her knees and lifting her chin. Damned if she'd let Jean Claude demoralize her again. Once in a lifetime was more than enough.

"I am only here because it is the right thing to do." He smiled, set the glass of wine down and looked around as if searching for something better.

"Oh, I'm sure that's the reason," Travis said and slanted a quick, hard look at Julie.

She met his gaze squarely and tried to tell him silently that she hadn't had a part in this. Whatever it was Jean Claude was up to, he was doing it on his own.

Smoothly, Jean Claude strolled around the room, inspecting the knickknacks, leaning in to check the signature on a painting

of the vineyard, as if completely unconcerned about Travis's mounting anger. And, he probably was, Julie thought. The man was single-minded, she'd give him that. He saw only what he wanted to see.

"Why are you here, Jean Claude? Really." Julie asked the question because she wanted him gone. And the only way to accomplish that was to finish whatever he'd come to start.

"Why?" Jean Claude turned and gave her a smile most people reserved for a particularly bright three-year-old who'd managed to *not* spill his juice. "Surely that is clear, *chérie*."

She didn't bother to glance at Travis. She knew what he was feeling, because that anger of his was still vibrating into the room. Instead, she stared at the man she'd once promised to love and cherish, and she saw only a stranger. "Spell it out for me, Jean Claude."

He sighed. "Very well. You see, when I read about the wedding of my sweet Julie to one of the powerful King family, I knew it was only right for me to come."

"Uh-huh," Travis said, moving to stand beside Julie, arms across his chest, long legs planted in a wide stance as if he were ready to do battle. "And the reason you waited until *after* the ceremony to speak up?"

Jean Claude gave him a pleased smile. "Why, speaking up beforehand might have alerted the press." He smiled. "Something I'm sure you would rather not chance."

The press. Julie could just imagine what the media would

make of this. *Vineyard Tycoon Marries Bigamist*. Oh, wouldn't that be great? Or maybe *King's Queen a Counterfeit*. Her insides went cold and still. Jean Claude had come to blackmail Travis. It was the only explanation.

Travis sneered at him, raking the other man up and down with a scathing look that bounced off Jean Claude like bullets off of Superman. Clearly, Travis had come to the same conclusion Julie had. But when he turned that same sneer on *her*, she made a supreme effort to get past the disgust riddling her and find her own sense of fury.

"I had nothing to do with this," she told him, meeting his icy gaze. "Travis, you can't believe I would *help* him! You know what he did to me. How I felt—"

"Ah, *chérie*," Jean Claude murmured. "There is no reason for you to explain yourself to him. And what was between us has nothing to do with this man. You are after all, *my* wife."

"Oh, good God." Julie shot her gaze at the blond man who had once captured her heart, and wondered what she had ever seen in him. Now she looked at him and saw him for what he was. An oily, sneaky, evil little troll.

A troll who looked totally pleased with himself.

"All right," Travis announced, his voice commanding attention in the otherwise still room. "Cut to the chase here, Pierre—"

"Jean Claude," he corrected.

"Whatever," Travis snapped. "What the hell do you want,

exactly?"

Jean Claude smiled. "My demands are small," he said with a slight shrug. "I only wish my due as an abandoned husband…."

"*Abandoned?*" Julie's temper finally overcame her humiliation. She charged Jean Claude and would have slapped him silly if Travis hadn't reached her side in time to stop her. Still, even with his hand on her arm, holding her in place, she hissed at the other man. "You no good, lying snake in the grass. I didn't abandon you. You left me. Remember? You said you would get a divorce in Mexico. And then you wrote me a month later and told me it was done. That you were 'free of me.' Don't you stand there and—"

"*Chérie*," Jean Claude cooed, his pale eyes twinkling as if he were enjoying himself tremendously. "Clearly, you are overwrought."

"Over—" She hauled her right arm back and Travis gripped both of her arms before dragging her away from the other man.

"Did you ever get a copy of the divorce decree?" Travis whispered the question into her ear.

Julie shook her head, disgusted with herself as much as with Jean Claude. She'd been a complete idiot. Not only in marrying the worm, but also in trusting him to end the marriage, too. Her only excuse was that she'd been so hurt. So totally crushed, she hadn't really been thinking at all.

"No. He told me he would make me a copy but he never did." She shot daggers at the man standing there smirking at her.

"And you trusted him."

"Yes. Damn it."

Travis's grip on her arms loosened and when he set her aside, she could see there was still fire in his eyes. His mouth was set and a tic in his jaw let her know exactly how hard he was working to keep his temper under control. "We'll talk about this later," he said, then turned to face the other man again. "How much?"

"That's very crass."

"It's expedient," Travis argued. "Let's hear it. How much for you to keep quiet?"

Jean Claude nodded once. "Very well, be it as you wish. I believe—" he said calmly as he shot his cuffs "—that one hundred thousand dollars will convince me to not seek out the press."

"One hun—" Julie gaped at him, then turned to face Travis. "You can't seriously be thinking about paying him off. You can't do it, Travis. It's *blackmail*."

"I prefer to think of it as paying for privacy," Jean Claude mused.

"You stay out of this." Julie stabbed her index finger toward him.

"Julie," Travis said. "Let me handle this."

"No. You can't." She grabbed his forearm and felt the corded muscles in his arm bunch beneath her hand. "Travis, he won't stop. This will just be the beginning."

Travis lifted her hand off his arm and Julie could only watch as

he walked slowly across the room to his desk. Opening a drawer, he pulled out an oversized checkbook and glanced at the other man. "One hundred thousand. And if you go to the press anyway, I will bury you."

Jean Claude gave him a brilliant smile. "But what reason would I have to slay the golden goose, *mon ami?* No, your—pardon, *our*—secret will stay with me, I assure you."

Not looking at him again, Travis grabbed a pen, scrawled across the check, then ripped it free. He stalked across the room, folded the check in half and tucked it into the other man's breast pocket. Jean Claude lifted one hand to his suit pocket to pat the check, as if assuring himself it was there.

"Make no mistake, Pierre," Travis said, pushing his face into Jean Claude's until the other man pulled his head back and, at long last, looked worried. "Open your mouth and you'll regret it."

"But of course," the other man said and bowed elegantly. He stepped back, then crossed the room to the closed door. He opened it, then stopped and turned to look at Julie. "I'd forgotten, you know."

"Forgotten what?"

"Just what a lovely bride you make."

"Get out," she said, fighting the darkness that was rising up inside her like a toxic spill. The coldness swamped her, cutting off her air, spreading chills along her body until she was nearly quivering. "And don't come back."

He smiled again, then left, quietly closing the door behind him.

Seconds ticked past before Julie could force herself to look at Travis. She'd known him her whole life and yet, she had no idea what she would see on his face. When she finally faced him, though, his expression was blank. His familiar features no more than a hard mask, hiding whatever it was he was feeling from her.

And the cold rushing through her turned icy.

"Let's get back to the reception," he said.

"Are you serious?"

"Damn right I am," Travis told her, coming across the room to stand in front of her. "And you're going to smile and laugh and dance like you haven't got a care in the world. Understand?"

"I don't think I can. I'm so furious—"

"*You're* furious?" He laughed shortly but there was no humor in it. Just as there was no shine of amusement in his eyes or in the hard flat line of his mouth. "I just found out my new wife already has a husband. A blackmailer no less. And *you're* furious? Trust me when I say I've got you beat."

Yes, he probably did. Watching him, Julie felt his rage and understood what he must be feeling. But damn it, she'd been lied to, too! "I didn't know about this."

"I said we'll talk about it later." He took her upper arm in a firm grip and led her across the room to the door. "For now, we're going back to the party. We'll smile for the photographers. We'll dance and we'll eat wedding cake and we will not let anyone else even guess that there's something wrong. You understand?"

"I get it," she said, and was forced to agree with him. She so

didn't need any more drama today. "More acting."

"Exactly."

"Fine." It wouldn't be easy, but with enough wine, all things were possible. "But then what?" she asked, looking up into dark brown eyes that looked as cold and empty as an abandoned well.

"When the party's over, we head to Mexico. To get you a damn divorce so we can get married again."

Three

Travis checked his wristwatch for the tenth time in as many minutes, then looked up at his brothers. Adam and Jackson stood side by side, looking so much alike they might have been twins. But then, Travis knew that all three of them were carbon copies of each other. With only a year separating each of them, they'd grown up close and had gotten even closer over the years. The King brothers were a unit. So much a unit in fact, that it was nearly impossible for one of them to hide something from the others.

For example, without even looking into their eyes, he was fully aware that they knew something was up.

"The vineyard manager, Darleen, should be able to keep things running around here while I'm gone," he said, glancing around the nearly empty garden area. The wedding and reception were over, the guests were long gone and now the catering crew was cleaning up. A veritable squad of workers was stacking the white chairs, dragging down the garlands of flowers, packing away crystal and china and whatever food was left over.

A low hum of anger still throbbed in Travis's gut. This should have been a good day. One to celebrate the fruition of his dreams for the winery. Instead, his dream was fast becoming a nightmare.

Shaking his head, he dragged his thoughts back to the business at hand and turned his gaze back to his brothers. "But if she needs help…"

"We'll be around," Jackson assured him. "Well," he corrected with a wry smile, "Adam will be. I've got a flight to Paris lined up."

Jackson ran the King-Jets operation for the family. Building luxury jets and leasing them to the wealthy of the world. They had plenty of trained, experienced pilots on the books, sure, but Jackson enjoyed taking some of the runs himself. Nothing he liked better than heading out to wherever the wind blew him. The job suited him. Jackson never had been one for staying in one place too long.

"And after Paris, it's Switzerland," Jackson continued. "Should be gone about three weeks, so Adam'll have to step in if Darleen needs anything."

"I'll be here," Adam agreed.

"Of course you will," Jackson said with a laugh. "According to Gina you're never more than five feet from her and you watch her like she's a hand grenade about to explode."

Adam scowled at the youngest of them. "Talk trash when the woman you love is pregnant. Then we'll see where we stand."

"Never gonna happen," Jackson assured him with a friendly slap on the back. Then he glanced at Travis. "Where did you say you and Julie were going on your honeymoon?"

"I didn't," Travis told him. "But we're taking one of the jets to Mexico."

"Mexico?" Adam silenced Jackson with a look. "Julie told Gina you were heading to Fiji."

"Changed our minds," Travis said with what he hoped was a careless shrug. He didn't want to get in to this with his brothers. There was no time for a long, drawn-out battle and no way would they have given him anything less. Travis checked his watch again, wondered what the hell was taking Julie so long to get changed.

"This have anything to do with the French guy who crashed the party?" Jackson's eyebrows lifted as he shoved both hands into his slacks pockets.

"Julie didn't look too happy to see him," Adam agreed. "I'm thinking he's her ex?"

"Damn it." Travis bit the curse off, low and hard. He'd hoped to just avoid all of this, since he'd rather *no one* knew about the blackmail. Especially his brothers. The Kings weren't the type to bow to extortion. And he wouldn't have gone along with it himself if he hadn't had to buy time, as well as Frenchy's silence. "Just had to be observant, didn't you?"

"Actually," Jackson mused, his features tight as he began to get the picture that something was off. "I wasn't paying attention.

It was Nathan who cued me in."

"Great." So it wasn't only his immediate family that had their radar tuned in. Travis could only hope that the rest of their guests hadn't noticed anything odd.

The trouble was, there were too many damn Kings, Travis thought. His father had been one of four brothers and those brothers had spread out and created at least three sons apiece. Now they were all running different aspects of the King dynasty. Couldn't throw a rock in California without hitting at least one King cousin.

Nathan's company built personal computers and made them so well and so affordable, King PCs were threatening to take over the world. "What'd he say?"

"Nothing much," Jackson said and stepped out of the way as a catering crew member staggered past him carrying an oversized coffee urn. "Just that Julie looked like she was going to be sick and you looked like the top of your head was going to explode. Me—" he added with a sly grin "—I'm so used to seeing that expression on your face, it never registered."

"Thanks." Travis shook his head and ground his back teeth together. Nathan had noticed too much. "He tell this to anyone else?"

"Nope. Well, wait. Cousin Griffin and his twin Garret were there, too. So they know you were pissed. So what? You're always pissed about something, big brother."

He supposed that was true, but this was different and

apparently, Adam sensed it. Jerking his head to the side, Travis's oldest brother shifted farther away from the rest of the cleanup crew. Adam didn't speak again until the three of them were standing in the shadows of the main house, surrounded by overgrown hydrangea bushes. "What's going on, Travis? Who was that guy? And what's he got to do with you and Julie?"

"He's an irritant." The hairs at the back of his neck bristled and Travis felt the urge to howl or hit something. His perfectly laid plans were threatening to crumble down around him. All because of one greedy bastard.

"Care to explain?" Jackson asked.

Travis glared at him. "Not really."

"Do it anyway," Adam said.

He blew out a breath and surrendered to the inevitable. "Name's Jean Claude Doucette."

Adam whistled. "So I was right. He's Julie's ex?"

"Well, that's tacky as all get out," Jackson muttered. "Why the hell did he come to the wedding?"

As the workers went on about their business, the muted sounds became nothing more than white noise. But Travis still kept his voice pitched low. "Because as it turns out, he's not as ex as we thought."

"Explain," Adam said.

He did. While Jackson and Adam threw astonished glances at each other and then him, Travis told his brothers exactly what had happened after the wedding. Watching their reactions, Travis

felt his own anger begin to bubble fresh in the pit of his stomach.

"You *paid* the bastard?" Jackson demanded. "Are you nuts?"

"Had to," Travis said. "No choice."

"There's always a choice," Jackson told him, then paused and cocked his head. "You hear that? Sort of a low rumble?" When neither of his brothers said anything, Jackson said, "That's the sound of dad spinning in his grave."

Travis nodded. "Yeah, helpful. Thanks."

"You never pay a blackmailer, Travis," Adam said. "You should have called the police."

"Right. Because cops showing up to my wedding would look so great in the papers." Travis shook his head again and dearly wished he hadn't quit smoking two years ago. He'd only quit then to prove to himself he could do it. That his own will was stronger than the siren's call of nicotine. Well, fine. He'd proved his case. Now he wanted a damn cigarette.

"He'll only come back for more," Adam warned.

"Think I don't know that?" Travis shifted his gaze from his brothers to the remnants of the party. A tablecloth lifted lazily into the wind and a napkin skipped across the lawn, tossed by a breeze that rifled the leaves of the bushes where they stood. The sun was sliding down toward the horizon and painting the slivers of clouds in the sky a pearly sort of dark peach. And he was taking note of all of this in an attempt to not think about what his brain was chewing on.

Pointless.

Turning back to his oldest brother, he said, "I paid him because I wanted to buy myself some time. We're going to Mexico to arrange for a divorce and a quick—quiet—wedding. When we get back, I'll take care of the little creep."

"What do you want us to do?" Adam asked and Travis was suddenly grateful for his family. Sure, they argued and fought him and let him know when they didn't agree with him, but when it counted, they stepped up to help in any way they could.

"Keep an eye on him. Watch where he goes. Who he's with." Travis had been thinking about this for the last couple of hours. Even when he stood beside Julie to cut the cake. When he'd posed for pictures he didn't want. When he danced with her to thunderous applause. During all that time, he'd been planning his next move. He'd decided to hire a P.I., but this was better. His brothers would never betray him and the fewer outsiders who knew the truth, the better for him.

He checked his wristwatch again. Whether Julie was ready or not, it was time to go. "Look in to this French guy's past. I don't care how you do it but get me some information on him. I'm thinking this isn't the first time he's pulled this stunt."

"What?" Jackson almost laughed, then sobered up again fast. "You think he marries women then goes around blackmailing 'em? Gotta be easier ways to make a living."

"I don't know about that, but I'm thinking blackmail's not new to him. He was really smooth. Wouldn't surprise me to find out it wasn't his first time."

"We'll do it," Adam said softly, shooting a look at the house behind them. "But what about Julie?"

Travis went cold and still. "What about her?"

"You don't think she was in on it, do you?"

"The million-dollar question," Travis said, turning so that he could look up to the window of the bedroom where he knew she was changing clothes, preparing to leave. "I don't know if she's a part of this. But I intend to find out."

"I don't like this a bit."

"I know, Mom," Julie said as she tried to fluff hair that refused to be fluffed. She gave herself a quick once- over in the mirror and thought that despite everything that had happened that day, she looked pretty good. Her red hair was flat, but her sleeveless, dark green dress looked great. Frowning a little, she tried to tug up the bodice, but it fell back into place again, displaying a little too much cleavage for comfort.

Too late to change now, though. She was already behind schedule and if there was one thing Travis appreciated it was a tightly run ship.

"Why was Jean Claude here?" her mother asked from her seat on the edge of the queen-size bed.

Julie looked into the mirror at her mom's concerned features and for just a minute or two, she considered confessing all. But what would that serve? All she'd do was worry her mother. It wouldn't solve the problem. Wouldn't make it go away. So, no point in opening this particular can of worms.

"To wish me luck," she said instead and forced a smile.

"Hmm…" Her mom wasn't buying it, but she wasn't arguing, either, so that was good.

"Look, Mom," Julie said, spinning around to face her. "I know you don't approve of my marrying Travis—"

"I have nothing against him," her mother interrupted sharply, getting to her feet and coming closer to Julie. "You know that. The King boys all have good hearts."

"See?" Julie argued. "It'll be fine."

Her mom wasn't finished, though. "I know the two of you were close when you were children, but people change and—"

"Mom, that was a long time ago." Julie's memories rose up in a rush, though. In seconds, she saw herself and Travis as kids, sneaking out to the barn to give the horses apples. Hiding from Jackson when he wanted to play with them. Following Adam around until he chased them off. They had been close. But that was childhood. This was now. "We're two consenting adults and we know what we're doing."

"But marrying a man you don't love and letting him *pay* you for it—"

"Wow, when you say it like that, it sounds really bad," Julie said.

"It is really bad, honey," her mother said and took both of Julie's hands in hers. "You've already had one miserable experience with marriage. I want more for you. I want you to love and be loved."

"Maybe one day that will happen," Julie said, sighing a little, since this wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation. "But this isn't about love. Travis needed a wife and I get my bakery. It's a simple business deal."

"Hmm…" Her mother's features twisted into a disapproving frown and Julie knew that Mary O'Hara Hambleton would never be okay with this situation.

But it was a done deal now. Or was it? Since she was still married to Jean Claude, she wasn't married at all to Travis, so—Oh, she really didn't want to think about any of this anymore.

"Mom, I've got to run. Travis will be waiting."

Her mother swept her up in a hard, tight hug and kissed her soundly on the cheek. Cupping Julie's face in her palms, she said, "Don't get hurt again, Julie honey. I don't think I could bear it if I had to see your heart broken like it was before."

Julie didn't want to see that again, either. As miserable a creep as Jean Claude actually was, once upon a time, Julie had thought herself desperately in love with him. And when he'd tossed her aside, the bruises had been soul deep. She wasn't interested in ever going through an experience like that again. Which is why this "marriage" to Travis would work so well. Neither of them were even pretending to be in love.

Julie hugged her mom, then stepped away and headed for the bedroom door. Her suitcases had already been loaded into the car, so all she had to carry was her slim, green leather clutch bag. Her high heels were soundless on the thick carpet and the cut-

glass doorknob felt cold against her palm.

At the door, she turned to look at her mother and tried not to dwell on the worry in her eyes. “I won’t be hurt, Mom. This isn’t about love, remember? It’s business.”

Travis hardly spoke to her for the first hour of the flight to The Riviera, Maya, Mexico.

It shouldn’t have surprised her any, but a part of Julie wished he would just say what he was thinking instead of sulking with a glass of scotch. Although, the fact that he was drinking expensive, single malt scotch, instead of his beloved wine, was an indicator that he wasn’t looking to relax. He was looking to cloud his mind. So maybe she should be grateful for the quiet after all.

The flight attendant, who was wearing a crisp, navy blue skirt and short-sleeved white blouse, came through and offered Julie a drink. After a moment’s hesitation, she ordered a margarita on the rocks. With the day they’d had, she deserved a little mind-numbing herself.

The attendant left a frothy pitcher of margaritas within easy reach of Julie, then disappeared into the cockpit to join the pilots, leaving the newlyweds alone. Great. Because being alone with a man who was so angry he wasn’t speaking was sure to make the honeymoon trip a good one.

With a sip of her drink, Julie distracted herself by looking around the plane and eased back into the soft-as- butter, pale blue leather chair. The carpets were sky- blue, as well and there were two couches, as well as several wide chairs such as the one

she'd claimed. At the back of the plane, there was a bedroom, complete with king-size bed, and a bathroom that made the one in her apartment look like a broom closet.

There was a plasma television screen affixed to the front wall, and a tiny kitchen tucked into a corner. There were a few paintings hung about and a vase, attached to a low table, boasted a stunning bouquet of fresh spring flowers.

It should have been ideal. Romantic. In any other circumstance.

But the quiet, broken only by the low, insistent roar of the engines, began nibbling at Julie's nerves and soon she was glancing at her new, would-be husband. Travis was stretched out in a chair closer to the front of the airplane. His long legs were crossed at the ankle and the only muscle he'd moved in an hour was his right arm, as he lifted his glass of scotch to his mouth.

She took another long gulp of her margarita and swallowed the Dutch courage before asking, "So are you permanently mute or is this just a temporary condition?"

Slowly, Travis swiveled his head to look at her then, almost lazily, he swung his chair around until he was facing her. His brown eyes were narrowed and the shadow of whiskers darkened his jaw. "What would you like to talk about?"

Good question. She didn't really even want to think about Jean Claude, let alone talk about him. But she knew that conversation was coming. No way to avoid it forever, but putting it off for a few hours didn't seem like a bad plan, either. She didn't want

to talk about the money he'd paid Jean Claude, either, because that just infuriated her and she was fairly certain that Travis was still furious about it, too. Should they talk about how they weren't really married and that if that fact came out they'd both be publicly humiliated?

No thanks.

So what did that leave?

"Um, nice plane?" Lame, Julie thought. Seriously lame.

He snorted, shook his head and took a sip of his drink. "Thanks."

She wasn't willing to give up on this so soon. Now that she had him talking, she wanted to keep it that way. Julie had never been an "easy" flier. Normally, she was too busy praying frantically to keep the plane in the air to enjoy anything of the experience. Today, though, it was different. She hadn't bothered with prayer because she figured the day had been so bad already, karma wouldn't allow this plane to crash.

"I've never ridden a plane where I didn't have the guy in front of me leaning back into my lap. This is much nicer."

He glanced around at their sumptuous surroundings and shrugged in dismissal. "I haven't flown commercial in so long I've forgotten what it's like."

Wow. More than a couple of words. They were closing in on an actual conversation. "You're not missing anything. Trust me on this."

Instantly, his gaze shifted back to her. "Well now, that's the

thing, isn't it, Jules?" He was using the nickname he'd given her when they were kids, but there was nothing friendly in his gaze. "I don't know that I can. Trust you, that is."

Four

The ride to the hotel was a silent one. Travis kept his thoughts to himself, which was just as well, since they were black enough to form storm clouds inside the limousine.

Julie sat beside him, but they might as well have been in two separate cars. He felt her nerves like a living thing in the limo and he was feeling just cold enough himself to do nothing to dissuade them. She should be nervous, damn it. Hadn't been *his* fault they'd had to trek to Mexico to clear up her past before someone in the media found out.

He closed his eyes as that thought settled in tight. He could just imagine the field day the press would have blasting this little piece of news across the front pages of their rags. The King family name would be trashed and any hopes he had of moving his winery into the upper echelon of the business would have to be put on hold for years.

He simply wouldn't allow it.

He'd worked too hard, come too far for his plans to be disrupted by an oily Frenchman with a penchant for greed.

Slanting a look at the woman beside him, Travis watched her face as she stared out the window at the passing landscape. The streets of Cancún were nothing more than a colorful blur, shaded by the tinted windows as the limo sped through traffic.

But he didn't need to look at the scenery. He'd been here so many times, there was nothing new or interesting to catch his attention. Yet, Julie sat there like a kid at the circus, her gaze flitting over everything, despite her nearly palpable anxiety.

His last words to her repeated in his mind. *I don't know that I can trust you, do I?* He'd seen her face, the shocked hurt in her eyes, and still, he hadn't called those words back. It was just too neat that she had agreed to marry him so quickly only to have her soon-to-be ex-husband show up on their wedding day.

She had to have been in on it with the Frenchman.

The question was *why?*

With the agreement they'd made, she stood to make considerably more than a hundred thousand dollars at the end of their marriage. So why would she risk it all for a quick fix?

"It's beautiful here," she said now, and her voice shattered the silence.

"I guess." He didn't want to talk to her right now, but he also was tired of thinking, so he supposed he was grateful for the reprieve.

She turned to look at him and exasperation glittered in her eyes. "Y'know, Travis," she said quietly, "I'm not the enemy."

"Well now, that's yet to be decided, isn't it?"

"Apparently." Julie sat back against the seat, crossed her truly great legs, shook her head and flashed him a glare. "I've never lied to you."

"So you say," he admitted with a nod even as his gaze locked

on the slide of her legs.

"That's right, I do. We've known each other since we were kids, for crying out loud. Do you really think I'd *blackmail* you?"

"We used to know each other," he pointed out, still trying to look away from the legs she kept crossing and recrossing in an obvious show of nerves.

"What I can't figure out is why you're so willing to believe Jean Claude? You've never seen him before but you're willing to take his word over mine?"

"Why would he lie?"

"He's a blackmailer and you think lying is beneath him?"

"Why bother?"

"To make you *pay* him?" she asked.

"He didn't need to name you as a conspirator to get the cash. So why would he?" He watched her and saw a flash of fire in her eyes. So she wasn't all nerves. There was temper there, too.

"Because he's a creep and he wanted to do everything he could to make sure I was miserable and you were furious." She crossed her arms under her breasts and that movement was enough to pry his gaze from her legs. Her crossed arms plumped up his already excellent view of her cleavage. His gaze lingered for a long minute, until she was uncomfortable enough to ease her arms away.

"Seems like a lot of trouble for him to go to," Travis mused.

"Didn't take much on his part at all to turn you into an über-jerk," she said.

Now his own temper flashed and his was a hell of a lot more intimidating than hers. “Jerk? I think I’ve been pretty damn considerate, considering,” he pointed out. “We’re here, aren’t we? Going to get you that divorce and get married again so that the deal still holds and nobody else is the wiser?”

“Yes,” she said, turning her gaze from him to stare out at the passing sights. “And you’ve been a delightful companion so far, too, so thanks very much.”

He fumed silently. She wanted him to be a companion now? Friendly banter? He’d had potential disaster tossed at his feet on his wedding day and she wanted good company? To hell with that.

Thankfully, their debate ended soon after that. Travis sat up as the limousine approached the hotel. Castello de King, or King’s Castle, was opulent, over-the-top luxurious and owned by family, so it would give him exactly the privacy he required.

It was a huge building, taking up half the block. The walls were a soft pink stone that seemed to shimmer in the late afternoon sun. There were round tower rooms on every corner and leaded glass panes of the windows winked with the sun’s reflection. Built more than a hundred years ago by an American businessman who’d imagined himself royalty, the castle had been purchased by the King family several decades before and turned into a hotel.

But it was only in the last five years or so that the castle had been “discovered” by the famous and infamous.

Travis had always liked the place, and since his cousin Rico

had taken over the castle, it had become one of Travis's favorite vacation spots.

Cameramen and tourists lined the front of the hotel, each of them trying to get a picture of someone interesting, and they all moved reluctantly out of the limo's way as the driver steered the car onto the property.

Travis imagined how Julie was seeing the place and took it in himself as if for the first time. The driveway was wide and circular, and swept past banks of tropical flowers in every imaginable color. A towering fountain stood in the center of the courtyard and water fell from its tip to dance in its base in an unceasing cascade. Doormen in full white livery waited to serve the wealthy guests who flocked here looking to be spoiled in secure, lavish comfort.

Travis could almost feel the lenses of the paparazzi stationed on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Their cameras were no doubt focused in to help them in their quest for an embarrassing or incriminating photo of celebrity lives. But they were kept off hotel property by a fleet of security guards, who protected the guests privacy at all costs, which was only one of the reasons Castello de King was such a popular resort for the wealthy.

The limo pulled to a stop and before Travis could get out on his side, one of the doormen had opened Julie's door and offered her a hand. She stood, turning in place and admiring the view, as Travis got out of the limo to join her.

The look on her face was one of wonder—sort of what he

imagined a child might look like at her first sight of Disneyland. And he was willing to bet that the paparazzi were getting quite a few great shots of the latest King bride. As long as no reporter thought to check into her background, they might be all right. God help them both if someone got nosy and discovered the truth.

"Señor King, it is good to have you with us again." The older man had skin the color of milky coffee, snow-white hair and pale green eyes, crinkled at the corners.

Travis nodded. Over the last few years, Travis had become well known to the hotel staff. "Esteban, good to be back. Is my cousin here?"

Of course Rico was here, Travis told himself. His cousin rarely left the hotel that he'd single-handedly built into one of the most sought-after vacation sites in the world.

"*Sí*. Would you like me to call him for you?"

"Not necessary," Travis said. "But thanks." He'd look Rico up himself as soon as he got Julie settled in one of the penthouse suites always kept in reserve for visiting family.

"Hello," Julie interrupted. "I'm Julie O'—King." She held out one hand to the doorman, and he took it, surprised a little that she would take the time to introduce herself.

Travis frowned a little and she gave him a smile that told him she wasn't going to be ignored. He imagined the cameramen stationed out in front of the gates were now busily clicking off shots of he and Julie together. And they probably didn't look real

happy with each other.

That thought paramount in his mind, he took her elbow, nodded at the doorman and led her into the sanctuary of the hotel —away from prying camera lenses.

"That was rude," she muttered, pulling her elbow from his grasp.

"I don't ordinarily introduce my companions to the doorman," Travis muttered and laid his hand on the small of her back.

"God, you're a snob."

"I'm *not* a snob," he whispered, irritated at the jab. "But Esteban has his job and he doesn't expect to be pals with the guests."

"I didn't say I wanted to have lunch with him, but he knew *you*. No reason why he couldn't know who I am." Her heels clicked musically on the polished marble floor until she stopped abruptly. "Unless of course, you're ashamed of me."

"Hmm," he mused, stopping alongside her. "Ashamed of being married to a bigamist. Why would that bother me? I wonder…"

Her eyes narrowed on him and her jaw went tight. "That wasn't my fault."

"So you keep saying." He glanced around and caught the eye of several people watching him and Julie with open curiosity. Perfect.

He lowered his voice even further. "I'd appreciate it if you'd just keep a low profile until things are cleared up."

"Ah. Low profile? Like the stretch limo?"

He blew out a breath and looked at her. Her grass-green eyes were practically snapping with nerves and anger. Her mouth was tight, and her chin was lifted in defiance. Her breath rushed in and out of her lungs and her breasts strained against the deep vee neckline of her dark green dress.

She looked ready for battle and so damned edible, his body went hard as a rock almost instantly.

A sex-free year with a woman who managed to turn him on even when he was furious.

Damn it.

"Look," he said, forcing a smile so no one in the lobby would guess that he and his new bride were ready to shout at each other. "We don't need to announce our presence, all right? Let's do what we're here to do and move on."

"I'm just saying, I won't be ignored."

"Fine. Point taken."

"Good." Now she smiled, curving that luscious mouth up at the corners. Only he was close enough to see that there was no answering warmth in her eyes.

Muttering vicious curses under his breath about marrying women he couldn't sleep with and couldn't kill, Travis hooked her arm through his and continued on to the reservations desk. A young woman with dark brown hair piled atop her head smiled at him.

"Señor King." She practically purred his name and beside

him, Travis felt Julie stiffen.

"Welcome back to the Castello," the clerk continued, dismissing Julie with hardly more than a glance. "We have the room ready for you and your…companion. As you requested."

"Thanks, Olympia." He was polite, but completely uninterested in whatever other games she might be playing. Travis wasn't an idiot. He knew women were drawn to money and power and he'd been flirted with by the best. He'd also learned long ago that the best way to handle the situation was to simply ignore it.

The woman's coy smile and big brown eyes might have worked on any other man, but Travis was immune.

"Do you know everyone here?" Julie whispered as she leaned in close to his ear.

He smiled as if she'd said something tempting, then leaned back and murmured, "She's wearing a name tag."

"Oh."

"Will you be needing reservations at the restaurant this evening?" The woman still avoided looking at Julie, instead giving Travis alone the benefit of her wide-eyed stare.

"No, thanks," he said, tapping his fingertips as he waited to sign for the room.

"And your…*companion*," she asked quietly. "Will she be staying with you for your entire visit?"

"What?"

"Yes," Julie said for him, leaning one arm on the reservations

desk as she glared at the girl now watching her warily. "I *will* be here for his entire visit, since I'm not his 'companion,' but his *wife*."

"I see," the girl muttered, hurrying now with the details of check-in.

Travis bit the inside of his cheek and enjoyed the show as Julie set the little flirt down flat. There was something damned attractive about watching her sail into battle. And he couldn't help admiring the fact that she wasn't afraid to stand up for herself.

"And no," Julie said firmly. "We won't be needing your assistance with a reservation, thank you so much."

"Of course, señora," the girl whispered, ducking her head to avoid the icicles shooting out of Julie's green eyes.

Her point made, Julie's voice softened. "Now, if you don't mind, we're on our honeymoon and we'd like to get to our room." Then she leaned into Travis and ran her fingers over the front of his shirt for good measure.

And just like that, every last drop of amusement drained out of his body to be replaced with a heat that was powerful enough to make his eyes glaze over. Even though he knew she was putting on a performance, Travis hissed in a breath as his body tightened even further. Damn, if she kept this up, he was going to have a hard time walking to the elevator.

He looked down into her green eyes, and noted that she was completely aware of what she was doing to him. She ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip and everything in him fisted.

What the hell game was she playing?

Sliding a glance at the clerk again, Julie smiled and said on a sigh, "I'm sure you understand that we're anxious to be…alone."

"Yes, yes of course." The last of the girl's flirtatious attitude disappeared and she hurried through the rest of the paperwork.

Julie was still plastering herself to his side and Travis told himself that two could play this game. Once he'd signed in and received his key, he wrapped his arms around her, dragged her in tight and kissed her hard and fast.

That kiss sizzled through his bloodstream, tightened his erection to the bursting point and left Julie speechless. Objective attained.

"Thanks," he said, nodding at the clerk before leading Julie toward the elevator.

Julie's mouth was still burning an hour later.

As if she could still feel Travis's lips pressed to hers.

Fine, she hadn't liked the way that woman at the desk had been leering at Travis as if Julie weren't standing right beside him. Although, maybe she shouldn't have laid it on so thick after shutting the girl down. Teasing Travis was something like waving a raw steak in front of a hungry lion. Not surprising then that he'd kissed her in response. What was surprising was the quicksilver flash of heat and need that had rushed through her the moment his mouth claimed hers.

Had he felt it, too?

Or had he just been pretending?

Of course he was, she chided herself silently. He was playing his part and doing a darn fine job of it, too. She tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but once she was finished unpacking her clothes, she was free again to think about things she really shouldn't be even considering.

But could she help it if her body was on fire?

Oh, boy. She might be in some serious trouble.

Leaving the smaller of the two bedrooms in the luxurious suite, she walked into the living room and paused on the threshold just to admire the view. The room was wide and long, decorated with sheer elegance. Four low-slung white couches formed a circle around a fireplace set in the middle of the room in a stone ring. A huge flatscreen television hung on one wall. On the far side of the room, was a massive wet bar and accompanying wine cooler, and beautiful paintings adorned the rest of the soft yellow walls.

Brightly colored rugs were scattered across the glossy, honey-colored wood floor, and terrace doors leading to a balcony almost as big as her bedroom stood wide open. A cool breeze blew in from the nearby ocean and carried both the scent of the sea and the fragrance of the tropical flowers that surrounded this amazing hotel.

Standing on the terrace, Travis waited, his back to her and their room. Looking him up and down, she fought the swirl of attraction she felt. It wasn't easy. He'd discarded his suit jacket and tie and now wore only his slacks and a crisp white shirt.

His dark hair ruffled in the breeze as he poured two glasses of champagne from the bottle chilling in what was probably a sterling silver ice bucket.

Steeling herself, Julie lifted her chin and started forward, the sound of her heels on the floor the only sound in the room. She stepped out onto the terrace and instantly felt the cool wind surround her. Goose bumps lifted on her arms, but she paid no attention. Instead, she focused on the lights below and the darkening sky above.

"Unpacked?" Travis asked.

"Yes," she said, accepting the champagne flute he handed her and taking a sip. The margaritas she'd had on the plane were still with her and she really should eat something before she had anything else to drink. But she glanced down at the munchies he'd ordered from room service and knew she couldn't swallow anything else at the moment. "It's a beautiful place."

"Yeah, it is."

"I guess you come here often," she said.

He shrugged. "It's a family hotel. Everyone comes here often."

"Uh-huh," she said, with another sip of the bubbly wine. "And I'm guessing you usually have a 'companion' with you?"

"Jealous?" he asked, turning his head to look at her. One dark eyebrow was arched and the wind in his hair gave him a softer, more vulnerable look.

Travis King?

Vulnerable?

"No, I'm not jealous," she said. "That would be silly, wouldn't it? It's not like we're actually—"

"Married?" His smile disappeared in a blink. "No, guess we're not. Which is why we're here. And on that subject, I'll talk to my cousin Rico tomorrow. Get the bead on who we should go to about arranging this divorce."

"Great." She walked toward the iron railing and laid one hand on the cool surface. Taking another drink of the champagne, Julie was aware that the bubbles were going directly to her head, but maybe that was a good thing.

"You're a good actress, I give you that," Travis pointed out.

"Hmm?"

"The performance you put on for the clerk downstairs almost had me convinced you were a happy newlywed."

"Yeah, well," she said, wondering why her glass was empty just before Travis reached out and refilled it. "She ticked me off."

"I guessed that much."

"And you enjoyed it," she said, taking another sip, allowing the bubbles to slide down her throat and buzz through her blood.

"I did," he said, draining his own glass of champagne in one long swallow. He refilled his glass and took another sip before speaking again. "Had to wonder, though."

"What?" God, it felt good to be out here, feeling the wind on her skin and the champagne in her blood. Looking at Travis, she felt a warmth, too. A sort of heat that was settling down low inside her. Danger, Julie. *Oh, be quiet*, she ordered that annoying

internal voice.

"Well, that acting skill of yours," he said, coming around the tiny table to stand beside her.

Julie drained her champagne and licked her lips as her body began to hum. She wasn't drunk, but she was feeling pretty good. "What about it?"

"If you're that good at acting, maybe you've been playing me all along."

She blew out a breath in frustration. If he was going to continue to believe that she was in cahoots with Jean Claude then this year was going to be misery.

"I told you Travis, I wouldn't do that." She set her glass down onto the table.

"I'd like to believe you, Julie," he was saying, reaching out with a finger to play with one of the straps of her dress. "But—"

"But?" How could he really believe that about her and still want her? More, how could she be burning up with lust for him, knowing that he thought her capable of blackmail?

Apparently, though, her mind and her body were riding two different tracks. Her skin felt as if it was on fire where he was touching her. Nerves rattled through Julie's body and she knew she was in big trouble. But she didn't care.

"I'm thinking I need some convincing," he said, his dark eyes flashing with a need that her body was clamoring to answer.

"I don't know what more I can say."

"No more talking," he said and set his glass down on the table

beside hers.

"Then what…"

He slid one of her dress straps down her shoulder and smoothed his thumb over her skin. Her gaze locked with his, Julie's breath caught and her blood began to pump thick and hot and urgent.

"I paid a hundred thousand dollars to marry you today," Travis said, dipping his head to kiss her bare shoulder.

Julie sucked in a gulp of air.

"Now," he said, straightening up as his finger slid along the line of her bodice, dipping down to caress the valley between her breasts. "How about you show me what I paid for?"

Five

Julie just stared at him for what felt like forever. Shock had her feeling a little stunned, but as she looked at him, she sensed that he was waiting for her response. To see if she'd take this or stand up and call him on it.

He didn't have to wait long.

His gaze was dark and hot and spearing into hers, daring her to look away. She didn't. Instead, she pulled in a deep breath, kept her gaze locked with his and said too sweetly, "Since you actually paid the hundred thousand dollars to Jean Claude…why don't I call him for you and *he* can show you whatever you like?"

Amusement flickered in Travis's eyes and one corner of his mouth lifted. "Good one. But I'm not interested in your Frenchman."

Frustration bubbled up inside her, frothier than the champagne she'd just drunk way too much of. "For heaven's sake, he's not *my* French—" She stopped because the amusement in his eyes was even brighter now. Frustration gave way to confusion. "You're laughing?"

"Not laughing, smiling."

"About?"

"About how we ended up here together, despite your Frenchman—"

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off quickly. "And how we've both had too much to drink," he continued. "And how you smell so good it's driving me nuts."

Her nipples peaked.

For pity's sake, he didn't even have to *try* and her body jumped and cheered.

"Plus—" he added, dipping his index finger into the valley between her breasts again "—you look beautiful. This dress… is amazing. It tempts me to peel it off you and discover all your secrets."

She trembled. He was too close. Too warm. His breath was too soft on her face and the fire in his eyes was like an incendiary, quickening a similar blaze inside her.

When he wasn't trying to seduce her, he was nearly irresistible. When he *was* trying, he was downright illegal. His finger stroked the tops of her breasts and Julie's already fuzzy brain started clouding up completely.

"Um, Travis?" Her mouth was dry and her breath was coming in tight, short gasps that were really contributing to the whole light-headed thing.

"Yeah?" He kissed her shoulder again.

Oh, he had a great mouth.

"Um…" She was really trying to think, but it was suddenly so hard. Her nerve endings were lit up like a marquee in Las Vegas and her core was damp and hot and oh, so achingly ready that her brain probably figured it wouldn't be required anymore that night, so it had shut down.

Still, Julie tried to think. She couldn't quite remember what it was that had seemed so important a moment ago. His lips and tongue moved on her bare shoulder, the edges of his teeth scraping against her skin, sending shockwaves pulsing throughout her system. Like the aftershocks of an earthquake, everything seemed just a little off-kilter.

But at last, a solitary wispy thought flashed across her mind and Julie grabbed for it. "Right. Right, Travis…"

"Mmm…" He kissed the side of her neck and Julie tipped her head to one side to make sure he covered every square inch of available skin.

"We, uh, we agreed," she said, struggling for air while trying desperately to hold onto that one tiny thought. "Agreed to a no-sex policy for this marriage. Remember?"

"Nope," he whispered, kissing the base of her neck until Julie's toes curled. "Don't remember a thing."

Was that his tongue on her neck now? Licking, tasting. Oh, my. "It was uh…in the uh…" What was that thing called again? "*Contract!* That's it. It was in the contract."

His fingertips smoothed over the tops of her breasts and her nipples popped even harder, each of them eagerly awaiting his attentions.

"We can always renegotiate a contract," he said, sliding his free hand up her bare back to the nape of her neck. His fingers rubbed and stroked, and slid into her hair. "If we want to…."

She groaned and closed her eyes, relishing the feel of him all around her. His body was pressed close and his erection straining against her hip was unmistakable. One hand on her breasts, the other stroking her neck, her back, he was overwhelming her with sensation. Short-circuiting her mind with deliciously seductive maneuvers that left her breathless.

"Oh, boy." She took a breath, forcing it into lungs straining for air, and when she blew it out again, she opened her eyes and looked at him. He lifted his head, his dark brown eyes locked on hers with a burning intensity she'd never seen before and she felt the heat as those flames reached for her, engulfed her. "Do we want to?" she asked. "Renegotiate, I mean?"

"Oh," he said, sliding his hand from the base of her neck all the way down her spine to the curve of her bottom. Rubbing, stroking, he leaned in and kissed her, then smoothed the tip of his tongue across her bottom lip before easing back to meet her gaze again. "I really think we do."

"Okay then," she whispered, moving against him, letting him feel that she was as electrified as he. That she wanted him as much as he wanted her. "Let's… negotiate."

"Right." He kissed her, slid the straps of her dress down and freed her breasts to his hungry gaze. Cold sea air touched her skin and Julie shivered, but it had nothing to do with the temperature. Every cell in her body was eagerly awaiting what came next.

When he cupped her breasts in his palms and bent to take her nipple into his mouth, he murmured, "Here's my first offer…."

Julie hissed in air through gritted teeth, and held on to Travis's shoulders as if without that stability she might just slide off the face of the earth. But she would die happy if he only kept his mouth right where it was.

As soon as that thought arrived though, he stopped, lifted his head and said, "Inside. Let's take this inside."

"What? What?"

He glanced around as if just remembering where they were. "You never know just how sneaky photographers can get and I'd rather not see us on the front page, if you know what I mean."

Her eyes went wide as she covered her bare breasts with her arms and scuttled back into the hotel suite. Back against the wall, she waited while Travis closed the French doors and then swept the sheers shut with a yank on the cord.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, gaze locked on him. "Do you really think someone was out there…watching us? Taking pictures?"

He shrugged, but his eyes were cold and dark, belying his easy dismissal of the notion. “You never know.”

“That’s just—” She blew out a breath and tried to struggle back into her dress as if covering her breasts now could somehow erase their earlier exposure.

“Pointless to worry about,” Travis told her gently. “My fault, I should have been more careful.” He stroked his hand along her shoulder, stopping her from dragging the dress straps back up. “But you tasted so good. You smell so wonderful. Look so…”

Julie’s body fired up again as if there hadn’t been an interruption. She leaned back into the wall as Travis bent his head, taking first one nipple, then the other into his mouth. Sliding his tongue across the sensitive tip, suckling, nibbling. He tormented her with tenderness. Conquered her defenses with gentle deliberation. And when she was gasping for air and wobbling in place, he stood up, took her mouth with his and sent her flying again.

His tongue tangled with hers and everything within her went hot and wild. Her core became a molten ache, desperate to have him inside. Her hips twisted against his, and his erection pressed tight and hard to her body, letting her know that he was as hungry, as frenzied as she.

How was this possible, she wondered frantically. How could she feel so much for a man she’d known her whole life? How was there this much passion in someone she’d considered a friend? How could she slip so totally into complete abandon at his touch?

Then she stopped thinking. Stopped wondering. Instead, she surrendered to the magic rising up between them.

He wrapped a hand around the base of her neck and tipped her head to one side. He nibbled his way down the length of her throat, and then slid back up, leaving a trail of damp heat behind him as he kissed and licked her skin. She was struggling for air, but not really concerned. Who needed to breathe when there was all of *this* to feel?

But she wanted more. Needed more. Needed to feel his skin beneath her hands. Needed to touch as she was touched. Feel as she was felt.

Sliding her hands up his chest, she tore at the buttons on his dress shirt until she'd freed them all, sending several of them pinging to the floor. Then she was touching his hard, muscled skin, feeling the soft curl of dark brown hair beneath her fingers and dragging her nails across his flat nipples.

He growled in her ear and took her mouth harder, deeper. Their breaths mingled, their tongues played out a dance their bodies hungered for.

"I want you. Now." His voice was harsh, strained as if it were all he could do to squeeze out those few words. Then Travis reached down, lifted the skirt of her dress and ripped her tiny lace panties from her body.

Julie inhaled sharply and then groaned as he cupped her aching core. Sliding first one, then two fingers into her depths, he pushed her so high, so fast, her head spun. As his fingers delved

inside her, his tongue continued to twist with hers in a frantic dance of need and passion.

Her body coiled tight as he rubbed one sensitive spot over and over and Julie's legs trembled violently as she tried desperately to keep her balance while giving herself over to the incredible sensations shooting through her. Again and again, he stroked her, pushing her as if he couldn't wait to feel her climax.

But she fought the feeling, wanting to draw this out as long as she could. Incredible, the way he made her feel. Overwhelming, the way she wanted him, needed him. She'd never known anything even remotely like this before and she wanted more of it. Her hands dropped to his waist and her fingers fumbled with his belt, then the snap and zipper of his slacks.

He broke their kiss as she wrapped her hand around him. His eyes briefly slid shut and he ground out one word. Her name. "Julie…"

"I want you to feel what I feel," she whispered, opening her eyes and looking into his. Raw passion and desire shone out at her and she knew he must be seeing the same things reflected back at him. She was on fire for him, her body burning inside and out. As if a fever were raging through her system.

She stroked him, her fingertips sliding up and down his length, stroking the sensitive tip of him, marveling at the soft strength of him. Travis went completely still for one long, shattering minute when their ragged breaths were the only sound in the room other than the quiet hiss and snap of the fire.

Then he looked down at her, shifted his hands to her waist and said, “Lift your legs.”

She didn’t ask why. Didn’t think. Just went with what she was feeling, needing. Lifting her legs, she wrapped them around his hips and he leaned into her, bracing her back against the wall, cupping his hands on her bottom.

And in the next moment, he was sliding inside her, pushing himself into her body.

“Oh, Travis…” Julie sighed, twisted her hips, writhed on him as she took every amazing inch of him. An invasion of the most amazing kind, she thought, relishing the feel of his body filling hers.

He groaned tightly and began to move, slowly at first, then with a soul-splintering speed that had his hips pistoning against hers. Their bodies met and separated over and over as tension coiled and need escalated.

She felt it building, knew her release was so close she could almost touch it. The tingling sensations soared and a delicious ache rose inside until it was nearly unbearable. His strength surrounded her, his body filled her and he didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. She moved with him, her body welcoming his, holding him tightly, creating a fabulous friction that accelerated the desire clawing at them both.

And when the first tiny explosions shattered within her, Julie’s eyes flew open so that she could look at Travis as her body exploded in a shower of light and color and sensation like she’d

never known before. His gaze was dark, hot, steady.

"Let go," he whispered.

And she did.

"Travis!" She held on to him, arms locked around his neck, legs crossed at his spine. She pulled him in tighter, closer, holding him to her as an enormous wave of pleasure crested inside her.

Her climax pushed him over that teetering edge of control and before the last of the sweeping tide of ripples had died away, Travis called her name on a hoarse shout of victory and emptied himself into her.

When the storm was over, Travis's blood was still pumping like fury through his veins. He'd thought having her would clear his head, make the wanting less, the attraction he'd felt for her less powerful.

Big mistake.

Julie nestled against him, laying her head on his shoulder and he wanted her all over again. Her heat, her touch, her explosive reaction to his lovemaking all combined to only feed the fires already quickening inside him. He hadn't eased the desire he felt for her, he'd only fed the flames.

He turned his face toward her, kissed her forehead and murmured, "I'm not done."

She lifted her head, kissed him lightly, briefly and whispered, "Me, neither."

In an instant, his body thickened inside hers, tightening, hardening. She shifted in his arms, wiggling her hips and

everything in him fisted hard and tight. He wanted her. More than he had before.

Turning, he held her close, their bodies still joined,

he took the few steps to the nearest couch and laid her down. Beside them, the fire burned, and light and shadow played across her features in a never-ending shift of patterns that only served to make her more beautiful, more dreamlike.

Travis wanted nothing between them this time. He slid free of her body long enough to tear his clothes off, then he bent down over her and helped her shimmy out of her dress. Then she was naked, lying on the soft, pale fabric of the couch and lifting her arms to him.

"Do it again, Travis," she whispered as he came into her embrace. "Take me there again and let me take you."

He didn't need to be asked twice.

Covering her with his body, he braced his weight on his hands at either side of her head. Her eyes were wide and shining in the firelight, the deep green sparkling with a golden glow that intrigued and captivated him. Her mouth was swollen from his kisses and when she touched the tip of her tongue to her lips, he bent his head to capture it.

Their mouths fused as he entered her on a slow slide of languorous satisfaction. He pushed himself into her heat with a calm deliberation he wasn't really feeling. Every instinct had him clamoring to take her, to drive himself into her body, but his will kept him moving slowly, drawing out the pleasure, making each

inch of her he claimed a small victory.

"Travis—" She tore her mouth from his and sucked in air desperately. Lifting her hips under him, she sought to take him in more fully, to draw him deep, high inside. "I need…I need…"

"Me, too." His words were strained, hollow, echoing with the desperation suddenly tearing at him. With each of her movements, she tore at the foundations of his self-control, his will.

He hadn't expected this lightninglike connection between them. Now, he couldn't imagine doing without it.

Travis felt her body tighten around his, felt the first velvety grip of her inner muscles and watched as her eyes flashed with wonder. Then he let himself go, falling into the green of her eyes and the warmth of her body.

The next morning, Julie was feeling completely sated and impossibly lazy. Her body ached in a very good way and just for a second or two, she stretched on the bed and let herself remember the night before.

Lying in Travis's arms. Feeling the magic that sprung up between them when they touched. Experiencing the incredible sensations caused when their bodies joined. And just for that second or two, she allowed herself to pretend that this marriage was real. That they'd really found something amazing together.

But in the next moment, that illusion was shattered.

"I don't *believe* this!" Travis's outraged shout carried from the next room.

She bolted up in the oversized bed in his room and scrambled off the mattress. Naked, she stood there for a second, wishing she had her robe. Then she shrugged and dragged a sheet they'd yanked loose during the night around her body. Tripping on the edges of it as she went, Julie stumbled into the main room.

Travis was still as a statue, standing in a wide splash of sunlight pouring through the open French doors. A room service cart loaded down with coffee, fresh fruits and an assortment of breakfast pastries stood unnoticed beside him. He held a newspaper and his features were filled with fury as he stared at the front page.

"Travis?"

His gaze snapped to hers and she watched as the anger in his eyes shifted to a different, much harder to read emotion. "We've got a situation."

"Yeah, I heard," she said, tugging the sheet out of her way as she walked toward him. "What's wrong?"

"What isn't?" When she was close enough, he turned the paper toward her.

"Oh, my G—" With her free hand, she snatched at the newspaper and tilted it so that the black-and-white picture taking up most of the front page was in the sunlight. But she hadn't really needed clarification.

The headline was large and black. *King and His New Queen*. She winced at that and wondered idly if that would be her new nickname in the press. But when she glanced farther down and

took in the picture below the headline, the title *Queen* was the least of her worries.

The photograph was crystal clear and so detailed, the photographer might as well have been in the room with them. Or rather, on the terrace.

There she and Travis were, captured in the moment when desire had leaped up between them. Her head was thrown back in ecstasy as his hands cupped her breasts and his mouth was at her throat.

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