

Falling for King's Fortune
Maureen Child
Seduction, Westmoreland Style
Brenda Jackson



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Maureen Child

**Falling for King's Fortune /
Seduction, Westmoreland Style:
Falling for King's Fortune**

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Child M.

Falling for King's Fortune / Seduction, Westmoreland Style: Falling for King's Fortune / M. Child — «HarperCollins»,

Falling for King's Fortune Maureen Child According to airline tycoon Jackson King, business always triumphed over romance, and babies were best appreciated from afar. That was, until the beautiful stranger with whom he'd shared a mind-blowing liaison revealed he had a baby daughter! Jackson was determined to have his child under his roof...Seduction, Westmoreland Style Brenda Jackson Montana horse breeder McKinnon Quinn savoured his "no women on my ranch" rule. So when Casey Westmoreland asked for a job, he turned her down flat. Despite her innocent looks, she tempted him beyond reason. Casey vowed to get McKinnon to hire her and make him her first – her only – lover.

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Falling for King's Fortune by Maureen Child



Casey had a way of getting to him like no other woman ever had.

Not something Jackson wanted to admit even to himself, let alone her. But it was there. A niggling tug of desire that was damned hard to ignore. He stopped alongside her table, opened his mouth to speak and then slammed it shut again.

Beside her on the red vinyl booth was a child's booster seat. And in that seat was a baby girl. Jackson scowled as the infant – surely not even a year old yet – turned her face up to his and grinned, displaying two tiny white teeth.

And *his* eyes.

Tearing his gaze from the child, Jackson glared at Casey and ground out, “Just what the *hell* is going on?”

Seduction Westmoreland Style by Brenda Jackson



Casey Westmoreland was a woman who, without very much effort, could bring out strong desires in any man.

And to make matters worse, she was Corey's daughter and Durango's cousin. That meant she was doubly off limits.

“Regardless of what she thinks, I did the right thing,” McKinnon muttered, trying to place his concentration back on grooming his horse, and not how Casey had looked when she walked out of the barn. All he wanted from a woman was a short, hot, satisfying affair with no ties. Casey Westmoreland had the words *home*, *hearth* and *motherhood* all but stamped on her forehead. And that was the type of woman he avoided at all costs.

He refused to let any female become an emotional threat to his well-being ever again.

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. The 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,

Do you ever wonder if a decision you make will come back to haunt you? Sure you do. We all do.

In *Falling for King's Fortune*, two people find out just what can happen when Fate steps into their lives.

Casey Davis, alone in the world and craving family, visits a sperm bank, eventually gives birth to her daughter and thinks her world couldn't be better. Then an anonymous source tells her who her child's father is and before she knows it, Casey's life is spinning out of control.

Jackson King is the youngest of the King brothers and the most adventurous. He goes where he wants when he wants and likes his life just as it is. But when everything changes on him, Jackson has to decide if love isn't the *real* adventure.

I hope you enjoyed the KINGS OF CALIFORNIA trilogy as much as I enjoyed writing them. I'm planning on revisiting the Kings, since as it turns out, there are a lot of King cousins yet to be heard from!

Please stop by my website at www.maureenchild.com and drop me an e-mail! Or write to me at PO Box 1883, Westminster, CA 92684-1883, USA.

Happy reading!

Maureen

Falling for King's Fortune

MAUREEN CHILD

Seduction, Westmoreland Style

BRENDA JACKSON



FALLING FOR KING'S FORTUNE

by

Maureen Child

To Sarah...for too many reasons to list here

I love you

One

"I've been stood up." Jackson King closed his cell phone with a snap. Setting his empty glass down on the lustrously polished bar top, he signaled the bartender, Eddie, an older man with knowing eyes, to fill it again.

"Well," Eddie said, "I think this is a first for you, isn't it? You losing your touch?"

Jackson snorted a laugh and leaned deeper into the cushioned back of the dark red bar stool. Swiveling it a half turn, he glanced over the dimly lit room behind him. The Hotel Franklin, the only five-star hotel between the tiny town of Birkfield and Sacramento, boasted one of the best bars in the state.

It was also conveniently close to the King family airfield where Jackson spent most of his time. He kept a suite in the hotel for those nights when he was too tired to drive home and thought of the elegant bar almost as his office.

"Oh hell no. That's never going to happen. Wasn't a woman who blew me off, Eddie," Jackson said with a grin. "My cousin Nathan canceled on me. His assistant was driving his car to his mountain place and had problems. Nathan to the rescue."

"Ah." The bartender nodded. "Good to know you're not slipping. Thought maybe it was a sign of the apocalypse or something."

He did have good luck with women, Jackson mused. Or at least, he always had. Soon enough, all of that would be over. He frowned a little at the thought.

"Something wrong?" The bartender asked.

Jackson shot him a look. "Nothing I want to talk about."

"Right. Another drink. Coming right up."

While he waited, Jackson let his gaze slide around the elegantly appointed bar. The room gleamed with a warm glow as discreet lighting reflected off the wood walls and marble floors. The mahogany bar itself curved around the room in a sinuous bend that was nearly artistic. Tall, high-backed red leather stools were pulled up to the bar inviting patrons to sit and stay awhile. Small round tables spotted the floor, each of them boasting flickering candlelight. And the soft, lazy strains of jazz piped in through overhead speakers.

In this bar a man could relax and a lone woman could enjoy a quiet drink without being hassled. At the moment, the place was practically empty. There were two couples at the tables and at the far end of the bar, a woman sat alone, like Jackson. Instinctively, Jackson's gaze fixed on the blond woman and he smiled. She gave him a long, sly look that fired his blood before returning her attention to her martini.

"She's a looker all right," Eddie muttered as he refilled Jackson's glass with his favorite, Irish whiskey.

"What?"

"The blonde." The bartender risked a quick look himself. "Saw you spot her. She's been sitting over there for an hour, nursing that one drink and acting like she's waiting for someone."

"Yeah?" Jackson took a longer look. Even from a distance there was something about the woman that made his blood start to hum. He began to think that maybe Nathan not showing up was a very good thing.

"Can't imagine anyone standing *her* up," Eddie said as he moved off to fill another order.

Jackson couldn't either. This was a woman who demanded a man's attention. He watched her long fingers move up and down the stem of her martini glass in slow strokes and his body jerked to attention as strongly as if her hand was moving across his skin.

She looked up and her gaze slammed into his. He couldn't see her eyes from here, but he had a feeling there was a knowing gleam in them. She knew he was watching her. Had probably done the whole stroke-the-crystal thing on purpose to get his attention. Well congratulations, babe, it worked.

Picking up his drink, Jackson casually walked the length of the bar, slipping from lamplight to shadow, his gaze continually fixed on the blonde who watched his approach. As he got closer, he could appreciate the view even more.

She smiled, and a blast of something hot and driving roared up inside him. He hadn't felt anything like that in...well, ever. Instantaneous heat. Even from a distance, she was affecting him in ways he never would have expected. Possibilities opened up in front of him as he closed the distance between them.

She swiveled on the bar stool as he approached and Jackson took that moment to size her up completely. She wasn't very tall, maybe five foot five, but she was wearing sky-high, black-heeled sandals that would give her an extra few inches. Her blond hair was short, cut close to her head, and small gold hoops in her ears twinkled in the light as she tipped her head to look at him. Her sapphire-blue dress had long sleeves, a full, short skirt and a V neck that dipped low enough to showcase breasts that were just the right size.

Her big eyes were blue and focused on him and one corner of her mouth was tipped up in an inviting smile as he stopped beside her.

"This seat taken?"

"It is now," she said and her voice was a whisper that sounded like long nights and lazy mornings.

He shot his cuffs, straightened his dark red tie, slid onto the stool beside hers and said, "I'm Jackson and you're beautiful."

She laughed and shook her head. "Does that line always work?"

He nodded to her in acknowledgement. "More often than not. How's it doing tonight?"

"I'll let you know after you buy me another drink."

Oh yeah. He'd have to remember to thank Nathan for blowing him off tonight. Turning, he signaled Eddie for a refill, then looked back at her. Close up, her eyes were as blue as the deep sapphire of her dress. Her mouth was tinted a deep pink and her lips were lush and full, tempting him to lean in and take what he wanted.

But he could wait. Waiting was half the fun.

"So, do I get to know your name?"

"Casey. You can call me Casey."

"Pretty name."

"Not really," she said, shrugging one shoulder. "My full name is Cassiopeia."

Jackson grinned. "Well, that's prettier."

She returned the smile and Jackson could have sworn he actually *felt* his blood start to simmer. The woman packed a hell of a punch with that smile.

"No, it's really not. Not when you're ten years old and your friends have names like Tiffany or Brittney or Amber..."

"So, you went with the short version."

She glanced up at Eddie with a murmured "thank you," as the bartender delivered her bright green Appletini. "I did," she said. "And have my father to thank for it. My mother loved Greek myths, hence my name. My father loved baseball. Hence the nickname."

Jackson blinked, then laughed, getting the connection instantly. "Casey Stengel?"

Surprise flickered briefly in her eyes. "I'm impressed that you know the name. Most in our generation don't."

Jackson eased into the conversation, realizing he was having a good time. It was more than just her sex appeal, he was enjoying talking to her, too. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened. "Please. You're talking to a man who still has truckloads of his old baseball cards carefully tucked away in storage."

She lifted her drink, put her lips around the straw and sucked. Jackson went hard as stone in an instant. His mouth was dry and his heartbeat thundered in his ears. He wasn't sure if she was deliberately trying to set him on fire, but whether she was or not, the result was the same.

While he watched, she crossed her legs in a slow slide of skin against skin and one sandaled foot began to swing. One of her hands cupped the bowl of her drink glass while the other stroked the stem, as she'd done before.

Now he was sure she was doing it deliberately. Because her dark blue eyes were fixed on his as if she were measuring his reaction. Well, he'd been playing this kind of game for years. She'd see what he wanted her to see and nothing else.

When she set her drink down, she swept her tongue across her top lip as if searching for any errant drops of liquor. Jackson's gaze followed the motion and his insides fisted even tighter. Damn, she was good.

"So, Casey," he asked idly, "what are your plans for the evening?"

"I don't have any," she admitted. "You?"

His gaze dropped from her face to her breasts and back up again. "Nothing special until a few minutes ago. Now, I can think of a few ideas off the top of my head."

She chewed at her bottom lip as if she were suddenly nervous, but he wasn't buying it. Her moves were all too smooth. She was far too sure of herself. She'd set out to seduce him and she was doing a hell of a job of it.

Ordinarily, Jackson preferred to be the one making the moves. But tonight, he was willing to make an exception. Mainly because the deed was done and he wanted her more than he wanted to take another breath. "Why don't you let me buy you dinner at the hotel restaurant? We could get to know each other a little better."

She smiled, but her heart wasn't in it. Glancing around, as if to assure herself the two of them were secluded at the shadowy, far end of the bar, she looked back at him and said, "I'm not really in the mood for dinner, thanks."

"Really?" Intrigued again, he asked, "Then what?"

"Actually, I've wanted to kiss you since the moment I first saw you."

Good. She was going to be as upfront about this as he planned to be. "I'm a big believer in going after what you want."

"I'll bet you are," she murmured.

Her voice sounded breathless and he could feel her tension in the air. A tension he shared. All Jackson could think about was kissing her. Forget dinner. The only taste he wanted in his mouth was her.

Oh, he *definitely* owed Nathan.

"The question," Jackson said quietly, his gaze linking with hers, daring her to look away, "is whether or not *you* believe in doing exactly what you want."

"Why don't we find out?" She leaned forward and he met her halfway, more than eager to get a taste of this woman. In mere minutes, she'd driven him to the edge of a raw desire the likes of which he'd never known before.

Their lips met and in that instant, electricity hummed between them. There was no other way to describe it. Jackson felt the burn, the rush, and gave himself up to it. There in the shadows, his mouth moved over hers, his blood practically steaming in his veins.

Her scent—lavender—filled him and clouded his mind. All he could concentrate on was the incredible feel of her mouth on his, even as he told himself to pull back. To not push this too far

too fast. This was something he wanted to enjoy. To revel in. And to do that, they'd need somewhere more private than the darkened end of a luxurious bar.

But as he shifted to break the kiss, she reached up, threaded her fingers through his hair and held him in place. Her mouth opened to him, inviting a deeper kiss, even as her fingers pulled hard enough at his hair to pull out several strands.

He jerked back, laughed shortly and said, "Ow."

She blushed, bit down on her bottom lip and let her hand slide from the back of his head. "Sorry," she said, her voice a whisper of sound that tugged at his insides. "Guess you bring out the wild in me."

She was doing the same damn thing to him. Forget dinner. Forget getting to know each other. All he wanted at the moment was her under him. Over him. He'd never desired any woman so desperately as he did this one. And Jackson wasn't a man to deny himself.

"I like wild," he said and laid one hand on her knee, his fingertips sliding discreetly beneath the hem of that spectacular dress to touch her bare skin. "How wild are we talking?"

She took a breath, grabbed her clutch purse off the bar and dipped her hand inside as if she were looking for something. Then she snapped the bag closed again, lifted her gaze to his and said, "Um, I think maybe this was a mistake."

"I think you're wrong," he said and smiled to himself as she jumped a little at the touch of his fingertips moving across her thigh. "I think you *are* feeling a little wild tonight. And I know I am."

"Jackson..."

"Kiss me again."

"There are people here," she reminded him.

"Didn't bother you a second ago."

"Does now," she said.

"Ignore them," he coaxed. Not usually a man who liked an audience, he couldn't care less about the sprinkling of people in the bar. He didn't want to chance her cooling off, coming to her senses. He needed to kiss her again. To remind her what was sizzling between them. Besides, the lighting was so dim, and he and Casey were so far from anyone else, they might as well have been alone anyway. And right now, that was good enough.

Her gaze lifted to his and when he looked into her eyes, he saw her wavering. Good enough. Leaning in close to her again, he kept one hand on her leg, letting his fingers slide higher onto her thigh even as his mouth took hers again.

She inhaled sharply, deeply at the touch of his lips and an instant later, her inhibitions went out the window, just as he'd hoped they would. Her tongue tangled with his and when he leaned in closer, sliding his hand higher, she sighed into his mouth and shivered beneath his touch.

"Let's get out of here," he whispered, when he'd managed to take his mouth from hers.

"I can't."

"Yes we can," he said, fingers moving higher, higher up her thigh. She shifted instinctively, and he knew she was feeling the same burn he was. "I have a room upstairs."

"Oh..." She took a breath, blew it out and shook her head. "That's probably not a good idea."

"Trust me, it's the best idea I've had all day." Abruptly, Jackson reached for his wallet, threw a hundred-dollar bill onto the bar, then tucked the wallet away again and took one of her hands in his. "Come with me."

She looked up at him and even in the dim light, Jackson saw the sheen of something hot and needy in her eyes. She wasn't going to refuse him. A moment later, she proved him right.

Standing up, she grabbed her clutch bag off the bar, and let him lead her from the room. He walked quickly, wanting to reach the elevator before she changed her mind. She kept up with him, the sound of her heels tapping out a quick rhythm on the floor that sounded like a frantic heartbeat.

Jackson wasted no time. The elevator doors dinged and swished open and he pulled his mystery woman inside. Before the doors were shut again, he turned her back to the wall and kissed her. His tongue swept inside, tangled with hers and he felt her surrender even as she lifted both arms to hook them around his neck. She held him close and arched her body into his as he pressed tighter and tighter to her.

Again and again, he ravaged her mouth and as he did, he shifted one hand, sliding up from her waist to cover one of her breasts. Even through the silky slide of the sapphire-blue fabric, he felt her erect nipple. Flicking its tender surface with his thumb, he listened to her moan and let that soft sound feed his own passions.

The doors opened again on the top floor and Jackson stepped back from her reluctantly. Her hair was a wild tumble, her eyes were glassy and her delicious mouth was puffy and swollen from his kisses. He wanted her desperately.

Heading down the hall, he opened the door to the suite that he kept, pulled her inside then slammed and locked the door again. In an instant, she was back in his arms.

No hesitation, no awkwardness, they came together as if they'd been touching each other for eternity. There were no games, only need. No shyness, only desire. No second thoughts, only a wild, frenzied passion blistering the air.

Jackson yanked the zipper of her dress and slid the shoulders and sleeves down her arms. He thanked whatever gods were listening that she wasn't wearing a bra. Her breasts were beautiful, just the right size and looked so tempting, he didn't wait another moment.

Covering them with his hands, he pulled and tweaked with her hardened nipples and listened to Casey's soft moans and whispers as if they were the sweetest music ever composed. He bent his head to taste first one erect bud and then the other and knew he had to have more of her.

Her hands at his shoulders tightened, holding him to her, even as she swayed from the impact of his actions.

"More," he murmured, his tongue circling her nipple. "All."

And he pushed her dress the rest of the way to the floor. It fell in a sapphire puddle at her feet and he helped her step out of it. Her fingers were at his suit coat now, shoving it off, then loosening his tie and tearing at the buttons of his shirt. His hands roamed over her amazing body, sliding over cool, lavender-scented skin again and again, as if he were trying to memorize every line, every curve.

Then her palms were on his naked chest and he felt the zing of heat slice into him. Quickly, he tore off the rest of his clothes, picked Casey up in his arms and carried her to the nearest flat surface. He wasn't going to wait another moment. He had to have her. Be in her. Had to know what it was like to be surrounded by her heat.

"Now," she whispered as he laid her down on the extra wide couch in the living room of the suite. She opened her legs for him, reached up her arms and in the pale wash of golden lamplight, her eyes burned an arctic blue. "Now, Jackson. I need..."

"Me too," he admitted, willing to let her know just how affected he was by her. No games. No secrets. For this woman, this moment, he wanted her to know that from the first moment she'd smiled at him from across the room, he'd been aching for this.

Then the talking was over and all that was left to be said was said by their bodies. He entered her with one hard thrust and she gasped, arching into him, silently demanding he go deeper, harder, faster. He did.

Every move she made only fed his need. Every response quickened the fires inside. Every touch, every slide of skin to skin, every gasp and moan and sigh worked together to push him higher than he'd ever been before. And Jackson wanted more.

He looked into her eyes when he felt her climax nearing. He watched as pleasure flashed across her face. He heard her gasp, felt her body's tremors. Then she locked her legs around his hips to hold him tightly even as she rocked her hips and cried out his name.

Something inside Jackson burst wide open and seconds later, his body erupted, throwing him after her into the wild, surging storm.

Casey woke up in the middle of the night. Her body felt sore and stiff and, she silently admitted, fabulous. It had been a *long* time since she'd had sex. She'd almost forgotten how good it could make you feel.

Until the guilt started seeping in.

She wasn't the one-night-stand kind of girl. She'd never done anything like this in her life and she was still trying to come to grips with the fact that she'd done it *now*.

Moonlight spilled into the hotel bedroom through the glass French doors leading to what she assumed was a balcony. She hadn't really had a chance to explore the suite, after all. She'd gone from the couch to the bed and that was about the sum total of her "tour."

God, Casey, what did you do?

Turning her head on the pillow, she looked at the sleeping man lying next to her. He was on his stomach, the silk duvet pulled up just over his hips. He had one arm stretched out toward her and Casey had to curl her fingers into her palms to keep from reaching out and smoothing his dark hair back from his forehead. In sleep, Jackson looked less dangerous, but hardly vulnerable.

There was still a hardness, a strength about him that seemed to resonate around him, even when sleeping. The man was a force of nature. She was lying there, naked and well used in his bed as a testament to that fact.

She hadn't planned to have sex with him.

Although, what they'd shared couldn't be called simply *sex*. Sex was just a biological function. At least, it always had been before that night. But what she'd shared with Jackson had gone way beyond anything she'd ever experienced before. Even now, hours after his last touch, her body was still humming. And that wasn't a good thing.

Because she wasn't looking for a relationship. Heck, she'd gotten what she'd come there for while they were still in the bar. How she'd allowed herself to end up in his bed was something she still wasn't sure about.

The only thing she was certain of, was that it was beyond time for her to leave. Best she do that before he woke up and tried to stop her. Quietly, stealthily, she slipped from the massive bed and the air in the room felt cool against her bare skin.

Moonlight lay across the silk duvet-covered mattress, spotlighting Jackson's broad, tanned, naked back in a silvery glow. He shifted in his sleep, and the duvet slid down his skin, revealing a paler swatch of flesh just below his waist. Casey took a breath and forced herself to look away. She didn't need to be tempted to stay. This was not part of her plan. She'd already gone too far. Allowed her hormones and her need to sweep away rational thought.

Tiptoeing across the moonlit bedroom like a naked burglar, she hurried into the living room of the luxurious suite and in the dim light, wasted several minutes trying to spot her clothes. But she didn't dare turn on a light. She didn't want to chance waking him up. Didn't want to risk him tempting her back into his arms. Into his bed.

"You are *such* an idiot," she whispered, hardly able to believe she'd let herself get into such a situation. She was usually so much more careful. Restrained, even.

When she spotted her discarded dress, Casey grabbed it up, hitched herself into it and clumsily worked the back zipper. Shouldn't these things be on the side? Finally, she was at least dressed—minus the panties that seemed to have disappeared. She picked up her heels and searched for her clutch bag. Finding it on the floor, half under the couch where she and Jackson had first come together. Swallowing hard, she avoided looking at the couch, snatched her purse and then headed for the front door.

She turned the knob carefully, opened the door and let the hallway light fall into the room in a narrow, golden slice. Before she stepped through the doorway though, Casey turned for one last look.

She'd never been in a hotel room this elegant. She'd never been with a man like Jackson. In fact, this room, this man, were so far removed from her real life, that she felt like Cinderella at the end of the ball. The magic was over. The spell was ended.

She stepped into the hall, closed the door behind her and nearly ran to the elevator.

Time to get back to the real world.

Two

"Her name is Casey. She's about five foot five, has blond hair and blue eyes."

"Well," his assistant Anna Coric mused, "at least that narrows it down. Blue eyes, you say?"

"Funny." But Jackson wasn't laughing. He'd awakened to find himself alone and if the scent of lavender hadn't still been clinging to his skin, if he hadn't found a pair of white lace panties on the living room floor, he might have convinced himself that the hours with his mystery woman had never happened.

Why the hell would she leave without a word?

Anna, a middle-aged mother of four, worked for Jackson at the King family airfield. She kept ahead of the paperwork and made sure Jackson and the pilots who worked for him were always on top of their schedules. If the military had any sense at all, Jackson had often thought, they'd have hired mothers to be generals. Anna kept his work life running like a fine-tuned engine.

Too bad she couldn't do the same for his personal life.

He thought of something, snapped his fingers and said, "Wait. She said her full name was Cassiopeia. That should help you find her."

Anna glanced at him from the cabinet where she was deftly filing last month's flight plans, gas usage records and pilot hours. She paused in her work, turned amused brown eyes on him and said, "As much as it pleases me to know you think I'm a miracle worker, I'll need more than her first name and the color of her eyes to find her."

"Right."

"Besides," she said thoughtfully, "don't you have enough women in your life already?"

He chose to misunderstand her meaning and flashed her a smile. "You're right, Anna my love. You're more than enough woman for me."

She laughed, as he'd known she would. "Oh, you're smooth, Jackson. I give you that."

Smooth enough to have managed to change the subject before Anna could start reminding him of things he'd rather not think about at the moment.

Jackson left Anna to her work and walked into his private office. Here on the airstrip, there was a tower, of course, and a main building with a room for their wealthy passengers to wait for their planes in comfort. The boarding room was lavishly appointed with overstuffed sofas and chairs, reading material, plasma TV, plus a fully staffed bar and snack area. Above that main room, were the offices. One for Jackson, one for Anna and one room that was mainly storage.

Jackson's office, like Anna's, overlooked the airfield. The walls were a tinted glass that let in light but kept the glare down to a minimum. Also, Jackson had never liked being cooped up, and having walls of glass made him feel less like he was spending time in a box when he absolutely *had* to be in the office.

Normally, he preferred spending his time on the luxury jet fleet he owned and operated. Sure, he had a staff of pilots working for him, but he enjoyed the footloose lifestyle that running his own business provided. And the chance to fly superseded everything else in his mind. Practically took an act of Congress to get him to do paperwork, but he could fly rings around most other pilots and was happiest in the air.

Today though, he walked to his desk, sat down and deliberately ignored the view. "Casey. Casey *what*? And why the hell didn't you get her last name?"

Disgusted, he sat back in his leather desk chair and stared at the phone. This shouldn't be bothering him. Not like he wasn't used to one-night stands. But damn it, in the usual scheme of things

he was the one who did the slipping away. He wasn't used to having a woman slink off in the middle of the night. He wasn't used to being the one left wondering what the hell had happened.

He had to say, he didn't care for it.

When the phone rang, he grabbed it, more to silence the damn noise than because he was in the mood for talking. "What is it?"

"You're damn cheerful this morning."

Jackson frowned at his brother's voice. "Travis. What's going on?"

"Just checking to make sure we're still on for dinner this weekend. Julie's got her mom lined up as a babysitter."

Despite his foul mood, Jackson smiled. In the last couple of years, he'd become an uncle. Twice over. First his oldest brother Adam and his wife Gina had become the parents of Emma, now a nearly unstoppable force of nature at a year and a half old. Then it was Travis and his wife Julie's turn. Their daughter Katie was just a few months old and already had taken over their household.

And though Jackson loved his nieces, after a visit with either of his brothers, he walked into his own quiet, peaceful house with a renewed sense of gratitude. Nothing like being around proud parents and babies to make a man appreciate being single.

"Yeah," he said, sitting up to lean one arm on his desktop. What with his mystery woman, an upcoming flight to Maine and a plane in for a refit, Jackson had almost forgotten about his dinner date with the family. "We're still on. We've got reservations at Serenity. Eight o'clock. Figured we could meet in the bar for drinks around seven. That work for you?"

"It's fine. Will Marian be joining us?"

Jackson frowned. "Don't see why she should. She's not part of the family."

"She will be."

"I haven't proposed to her yet, Travis."

"But you're still going to."

"Yeah." He'd made the decision more than a month ago. Marian Cornice, only daughter of Victor Cornice, a man who owned many of the country's largest private airfields.

Joining their families was a business decision, pure and simple. Once he was married to Marian, King Jets would grow even larger. With unlimited access to so many new airports, he'd be able to expand faster than his original business plan had allowed. The Cornice family was wealthy, but compared to the King family fortune, they were upstarts. In the marriage, Marian got the King name and fortune, plus she pleased her father, who admittedly was the spearhead of this match, and Jackson got the airfields. A win-win situation for everyone. Besides, both of his brothers had entered into marriages of convenience and they'd made them work. Why should he be any different?

If an image of his mystery woman floated into his mind, Jackson told himself it was fine because he wasn't officially engaged yet. Wasn't as if he were cheating on Marian.

"If you're seriously going to do this, marry her I mean, it would be a chance for Marian to get used to the family," Travis pointed out. "But if you'd rather not, fine. I'll tell Adam about dinner. I'm driving Julie to the ranch so she and Gina and the kids can spend the day together."

"Man." Jackson shook his head and laughed a little. "Did you ever picture yourself a father, Travis? Because I've got to say, it's weird for me to think of you and Adam as being *dads*."

"It's weird to be one too," Travis admitted, but Jackson could hear the smile in his voice, even over the phone. "A good kind of weird, though. You should try it."

He snorted. "Never gonna happen, big brother."

"Marian might change your mind."

"Not likely." Jackson leaned back into his chair again. "She's not exactly the maternal type. Fine by me anyway. I can be the world's greatest uncle, spoil your kids rotten, then send them home."

"Mistakes happen," Travis said. "Everybody gets surprised once in awhile."

Okay, Travis and Julie hadn't been trying to have a baby, but Jackson wouldn't make the same mistakes. "When it comes to that sort of thing, I'm Mister Careful. I'm so careful I'm practically covered head to toe in plastic wrap. I'm—" A hideous thought flashed through his mind, jolting him from his chair to his feet.

"You're mistake-proof, I get it..." Travis prodded, waited for a response and when he didn't get one said, "Jackson? You okay?"

"Fine," he muttered, already hanging up when he added, "Gotta go. Bye."

Careful?

He hadn't been careful the night before. Hell, he hadn't even thought of careful until just this minute. Last night, he'd been too caught up in the woman with blue eyes and a luscious mouth. Last night, he'd let himself get lost in the urgency of the moment.

For the first time in years, he hadn't used a condom.

Jackson muttered a curse, kicked the bottom drawer of his desk and ignored the slam of pain that rocketed from his foot up his leg. Served him right if he'd broken something. How could he have been so stupid? Not only hadn't he been careful, but he'd been with a stranger. A woman he knew nothing about. A woman who, for all he knew, had deliberately set up the situation to try to get pregnant by one of the wealthy King family.

He shoved one hand through his dark brown hair, then stuffed that hand into the pocket of his black jeans. Every muscle was tensed. His back teeth ground together and he told himself that no matter how difficult this turned out to be, he had to find that woman.

Casey.

Had to find her, discover who the hell she was and what she'd been up to the night before.

Still furious with himself, he stared out the window at the view stretching in front of him. A few of the King Jets were lined up on the tarmac, their deep blue paint shining, their tail fins proudly displaying the stylized gold crown that was the King family logo. Usually, his sense of pride swelled when he looked down on those jets. On the empire he'd taken over at twenty-five and built into one of the most enviable in the world.

Now, as he stared, unseeing, one of those jets roared down the runway, tore into the sky and lifted off to sail into the clouds.

While Jackson stood, earthbound, feeling like he was sinking deeper and deeper into a mire.

He had to find her. Especially now. He couldn't risk losing this merger with the Cornice family.

And he sure as hell wasn't ready to become a father.

* * *

A week later, Casey held the phone in a grip so tight her knuckles were white. "You're sure? There's no mistake?"

"Honey, I checked and rechecked." Casey's best friend Dani Sullivan's voice came through loud and clear with just a touch of sympathy. "There's no mistake."

"I knew it." Casey sighed, leaned back against the kitchen wall and stared up at the rooster clock hanging on the wall opposite her. The hands went to five o'clock and the rooster crowed. Why had she ever bought such a ridiculous clock? Who needed a rooster crowing every hour on the hour?

And who cared about the stupid rooster?

"Thanks for putting a rush on this, Dani." Dani worked full-time at a private lab and she'd done the testing herself, just so Casey could not only get the results faster, but be absolutely sure about those results. "I appreciate it."

"No problem sweetie," she said. "But what are you going to do now?"

"Only one thing I can do," Casey said, straightening up and walking across the room to grab her iced tea off the kitchen counter. The old fashioned wall phone's cord was stretched to its limits and slowly reeled Casey back in. "I've got to go see him."

"Hmm," Dani said thoughtfully, "considering what happened the last time you went to see him face-to-face, maybe you should consider a phone call instead."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?" The whole point of a best friend was having someone you could tell your deepest, darkest secrets to. So naturally, she'd spilled her guts to Dani. The downside was, Dani wasn't shy about offering her opinion.

"The point is, you haven't forgotten it, have you?"

"No," Casey said. She hadn't forgotten. Worse, she'd dreamed of Jackson almost every night. She kept waking up hot and flushed, with the memory of his hands on her skin. And that memory, rather than fading, was only getting stronger. With only a small effort, she could almost taste his kiss again.

And she didn't want to admit just how often she expended that effort.

"But," she said, lifting her chin before taking a sip of her tea, hoping the icy drink would cool her off a little, "that doesn't mean I'd make the same mistake again. Once bitten and all that."

"Uh-huh."

"You know, a little support wouldn't be out of line," Casey said, frowning.

"Oh, I'm supportive," Dani argued, her voice low enough that no one else who worked with her could overhear, "but I still don't think it's a good idea for you to meet him face-to-face, so to speak, again. With the kind of news you're going to deliver, I really think you'd be better off making a phone call from a safe distance."

Probably. But she couldn't do that. She really resented being put in this position, but there was nothing she could do about it now. By all rights, Casey never should have had to make this decision. Things had changed though and she'd been backed into a corner. So there was really only one thing to do. The right thing.

"Nope," she said. "I have to tell him. And I have to do it while I'm looking at him."

"Never could change your mind once it was made up," Dani muttered.

"True."

"Just be careful, okay?" her friend said. "He's one of the Kings, you know. They practically own half of California. If he decides to, he could make your life really difficult."

Fear curled in the pit of Casey's stomach. She'd considered that already. But she'd done her homework. She'd done research on Jackson. She knew he was the playboy type. The footloose and fancy-free kind of man. The kind who didn't want entanglements.

So she was pretty sure that despite the news she had to deliver, he wasn't going to make trouble for her. He'd probably thank her for the information, offer to write her a check—as if she'd take money for this—and then quietly go back to his lifestyle of easy women and mega money.

"He won't," Casey said firmly, wondering if she were trying to convince herself or Dani.

"I hope you're right," her friend said. "Because you're certainly betting a lot on the outcome of this."

Oh, Casey was well aware of that.

Three

Jackson looked across the table at the woman he was planning to marry and felt the slightest buzz of interest for her. But compared to what he had felt for his mystery woman, it was the voltage of a double A battery alongside the frenzied energy of a nuclear power plant.

He'd assumed that whatever attraction there was between them would grow with time. Hadn't happened yet though and he was forced again to remember the instant chemical reaction between he and Casey Whoever during their one night together. And what kind of statement was it that he'd had a better time with a perfect stranger than he was having with the woman he was expected to propose to? Images of Casey smiling, Casey naked, reaching for him, filled his mind and despite everything, Jackson felt his body burn and his chest tighten.

His mystery woman.

What had she been after?

She'd deliberately seduced him. Gone out of her way to entice him, then disappeared without a backward look. Who did that? And why?

If he didn't get answers soon, he was going to go nuts.

"My father says you're interested in the airstrip in upstate New York," Marian said, snapping Jackson's focus back to her.

As it should be. Didn't he have the damned engagement ring in his pocket? Wasn't he planning on proposing tonight? He had plans for his life and they didn't include mystery women, so best for him to get on with this.

"Yes, it's big enough for several flights a day and I've already worked out a new schedule with my pilots," he said, lifting his coffee cup for a sip. Dinner was over and there was only dessert left on the table. Naturally, Marian would no more eat the chocolate mousse she'd ordered than she would dance naked on the tabletop.

If there was one thing Jackson had learned about the woman over the last couple of months, it was that she was far more interested in how things looked than how things really were. She was painfully thin and ate almost nothing whenever they went out. And yet, she always ordered heartily, then spent her time pushing the food around on her plate with her fork.

His mystery woman, he recalled, had had curves. A body designed to allow a man to sink into her softness, cradle himself in her warmth.

Damn it.

Marian was watching him through calm brown eyes. Her dark brown hair was tucked into a knot on the back of her neck and her long-sleeved, high-necked black dress made her look even thinner and less approachable than usual. Why was he suddenly looking at Marian with different eyes?

And why couldn't he stop?

The small velvet box in the pocket of his suit coat felt as if it were on fire. Its presence was a constant reminder of what he was there to do and yet, he hadn't quite been able to bring himself to ask the question Marian was no doubt waiting to hear.

When he felt the vibration of his cell phone, Jackson reached for it gratefully. "Sorry," he said. "Business."

She nodded and Jackson glanced at the screen. He didn't recognize the number, but flipped the phone open anyway and said, "Jackson King."

"This is Casey."

His heart jumped in his chest. Even if she hadn't identified herself, he would have recognized that voice. He'd been hearing it in his sleep for days. But how the hell had she gotten this number? A question for another time. He shot a quick look at Marian, watching him, then keeping his own voice low and level, he said, "I've been wanting to talk to you."

"Now's your chance," she said and he heard the hesitation in her tone. "I'm at Drake's coffee shop on Pacific Coast Highway."

"I know the place."

"We need to talk. How soon can you get here?"

Jackson looked at Marian again and felt a small stab of relief at being able to escape this dinner and avoid asking the question he'd come there to ask. "Give me a half hour."

"Fine." She hung up instantly.

Jackson closed his phone, tucked it into his pocket and looked at the woman opposite him.

"Trouble?" she asked.

"A bit," he said, grateful she wasn't going to demand explanations. No doubt she was used to her father bolting out of dinners to take care of business. Reaching into his wallet, he pulled out the money required for the bill and a hefty tip. Then he stood up and asked, "I'll take you home first."

"Not necessary," she said, lifting her coffee cup for a sip. "I'll finish my coffee and get myself home."

That didn't set well. Bad enough he was leaving her to go meet another woman. The least he could do was see her home. But Marian had a mind of her own.

"Don't be foolish, Jackson. I'm perfectly capable of calling a cab. Go. Take care of business."

He shouldn't have felt relief, but he did. Another small tidal wave of it splashing through him. "All right then. I'll call you tomorrow."

She nodded, but he'd already turned to weave his way through the diners seated at linen-draped tables. He hardly noticed his surroundings. His mind was already fixed on the coming meeting. He would finally see his mystery woman again. Finally discover just what she'd been up to when she'd come onto him. He'd find out if she'd been protected during their night together.

And if she played her cards right, maybe the two of them could share another night of amazing sex.

Forty-five minutes later, he was parked outside Drake's. The place was practically an institution in this part of California. Around for more than fifty years, Drake's was cheap, the food was good and they never closed.

A far cry from the quiet dignity of the restaurant he'd just left, when Jackson pulled the door to Drake's open, he was met by a cacophony of sound. Conversations, laughter, a baby's cry. Silverware being jangled into trays and the crash of dirty plates swept into buckets by harried busboys. The overhead lighting was bright to the point of glaring and the hostess, inspecting her nail polish, looked just as bright when she spotted Jackson.

He hardly noticed though. Instead, his gaze swept over the booths and tables until he found the person he was looking for. Blond hair, pale cheeks, and blue eyes focused on him.

"Thanks," he said, walking past the hostess, "I found my table."

Walking down the crowded, narrow aisle between booths, he kept his gaze locked with Casey's and tried to read the emotions flashing one after the other across her features. But there were too many and they changed too quickly.

His gut fisted. Something was definitely up.

Tonight, she wasn't dressed to seduce. Tonight, she wore a pale green, long-sleeved T-shirt and her short hair was mussed, as if she'd been running her fingers through it. She wore small silver stars in her ears and was chewing at her bottom lip.

Nerves?

She should be nervous, he told himself. He had a few things to say to her and he doubted she was going to like many of them. But damn, just looking at her made him hot and hard again. She had a way of getting to him like no other woman ever had. Not something he wanted to admit even to himself, let alone her. But it was there. A niggling tug of desire that was damned hard to ignore. He stopped alongside her table, opened his mouth to speak and then slammed it shut again.

Beside her in the red vinyl booth, was a child's booster seat. And in that seat was a baby girl. Jackson scowled as the infant—surely not even a year old yet—turned her face up to his and grinned, displaying two tiny white teeth.

And *his* eyes.

Tearing his gaze from the child, Jackson glared at Casey and ground out, "Just what the *hell* is going on?"

For just a moment, Casey wondered if Dani hadn't been right. Maybe she should have just told him her news over the phone. At least then, she wouldn't be faced with a tall, gorgeous furious male looking at her as if she'd dropped down from the moon.

Casey had watched him arrive. Watched him approach, in his thousand-dollar suit, looking as out of place at Drake's as a picnic basket at a five-star restaurant. He'd obviously been out when she called. And she couldn't help wondering who he'd been with.

Now, she stared up into his eyes—the same eyes she saw every morning when her daughter woke up to smile at her—and fought down the nerve-induced churning in the pit of her stomach. She'd known he'd be angry and she was prepared for that. Didn't mean she had to like it.

Yes, she was doing the right thing. The only thing she could do, being the kind of person she was. But that didn't mean she wanted to. Or that she was feeling at all easy about this confrontation.

She watched as he shifted his gaze from her to the baby and back again and felt his tension mount. She didn't need to see it in the hard set of his broad shoulders or the tight clenching of his jaw. She could *feel* it, radiating out around him, like flames looking for fresh tinder.

And things were only going to get worse in the next few minutes.

"Why don't you sit down, Jackson?" she finally said, waving one hand at the bench seat opposite her. *Keep calm*, she told herself. *You're two mature adults. This can be settled quickly and calmly.*

As if he'd just remembered that they were in public, he grudgingly slid into the booth, braced his forearms on the table and glared at her.

Maybe not calmly. But at least he wasn't willing to shout and argue in public. Precisely why she'd chosen Drake's to let him in on her little secret. "Thanks for coming."

"Oh, are we being polite now?" He shook his head and let his gaze slide to the baby, now happily gumming the corner of a teething biscuit.

Casey knew what he was seeing. A beautiful little girl with a thatch of dark brown curls and big brown eyes. Her cheeks were rosy from the nap she'd taken on the drive to the diner and her smile was wide and delighted with the world.

But Jackson didn't look so delighted. He looked more like he'd been hit over the head with a two-by-four. Casey could hardly blame him for being shocked. Her daughter was the best thing that had ever happened to Casey. But Jackson was being slapped with a reality that she had been living with for nearly two years.

It was a lot to take in.

Especially for someone like him.

According to her very detailed research into his background, he was a womanizer. Hence her seduction routine at the bar a week ago. She'd known that he'd respond to her if she showed the slightest interest. It was what he did. He was a man who couldn't make a commitment that lasted more than a few weeks. He was dedicated to his own pleasure and living his life unencumbered.

Not exactly prime father material.

When his gaze shifted back to hers, Casey stiffened. Accusation and reproach shone in his eyes and were very hard to miss.

"Since we're being so very civil, you want to explain to me just what exactly is going on here?"

"That's why I called you. To explain."

"Start with how you got my cell number," he said and nodded when a waitress approached with a pot of coffee. She deftly turned the cup over on its saucer, poured the coffee, then drifted away again at his dismissive glance.

"I called your office at the King airfield," she said once they were alone again. "The recording on the answering machine listed your cell number for emergencies. I thought this qualified."

He blew out a breath, took a sip of his coffee, then set the cup down gingerly, as if he didn't trust himself not to throw it against a wall. "All right. Now, how about you explain the rest. Starting with your full name."

"Casey Davis."

"Where you from?"

"I live just outside Sacramento. A little town called Darby."

He nodded. "Okay. Now, about..." He glanced at the baby again.

Casey inhaled deeply, hoping to settle the jangle of nerves rattling around inside her. She'd known this was going to be hard. She just hadn't expected to feel almost mute when the time came for her to speak.

Clearing her throat, she told herself to just say it. So she reached over and smoothed her palm over the back of her daughter's head. "This is Mia. She's almost nine months old—" she paused to look deeply into his eyes "—and she's your daughter."

"I don't have children." His eyes narrowed until they were nothing more than slits with dark brown daggers shining through. After several long seconds ticked past, he finally said, "I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but it won't work. I've never seen you before a week ago."

"I know—"

He laughed shortly but there was no humor in the sound. The harsh overhead lights spilled down over him and weirdly cast his features more into shadow than illuminating them. "I came here wanting to find out who you were, why you slipped out on me and to find out if you were trying to set me up by getting pregnant deliberately... turns out you were way ahead of me."

Casey straightened up, insulted to the bone. She was trying to do the right thing and he thought she'd— "I was doing no such thing."

"You purposely set out to seduce me that night."

"It wasn't difficult," she said reminding him easily that she hadn't exactly kidnapped him, tied him to the bed and had her wicked way with him. But at the first memory of that night, her body stirred despite her best efforts.

"Not the point." He waved one hand as if dismissing that argument. "You had an agenda and saw it through. What I want to know, is *why*?"

Picking up a napkin, she leaned over, wiped Mia's mouth despite her daughter's efforts to pull free. Then Casey looked at Jackson again. "I went there to get a sample of your DNA."

He laughed again. Louder. Harsher. "You went a hell of a long way to collect it!"

She flushed and she knew it. She could feel heat staining her cheeks and hated the fact that she'd never been able to keep from doing that when she was embarrassed. Glancing around the diner, she made sure the other customers weren't paying them the slightest bit of attention before she said in a vicious whisper, "I took strands of your *hair*. Remember when you kissed me—"

"You kissed *me* as I remember it," he interrupted.

That's right. She had. All part of the plan that had taken a seriously wrong turn almost instantly after her mouth had touched his. And there was the uncomfortable twist and burn inside her. "Fine. I kissed you. Remember I pulled on your hair?"

"Ah yes," he said, leaning back into the seat and folding his arms over his chest. "You were feeling *wild*, you said."

"Yes, well." She shifted in her seat and wished she could get up and move around. She'd always thought better when she was walking. But she couldn't very well spring out of the booth while Mia was there, strapped into a booster seat. "I needed a follicle of your hair so I could have it tested."

"Why not simply ask?"

Now she laughed. "Sure. I'm going to go up to a strange man and ask for a sample of his DNA."

"Instead, you went up to a strange man and kissed him?"

Frowning, she admitted, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"And what about the rest of it?" he asked. "Was that part of your plan, too? Spend the night with me to what? Trap me into something somehow? Get me so wound up that neither one of us was considering any kind of protection?"

She cringed a little. She hadn't even thought of protection that night. The way she remembered it, she'd been so hot, so needy, so completely over the edge with a kind of desire she'd never known before, the thought of condoms hadn't even entered her head. And just how stupid was *that*?

"I didn't plan any of that," she said firmly. "The rest of that night just...happened." Her gaze snapped to his. "And while we're on the subject, I'd like to assure you that I'm perfectly healthy. I hope *you* can say the same."

"Yes. I am."

One worry taken care of, she told herself.

"That's good."

"And what about the other concern?" He asked the question slowly, as if judging her reaction.

"You mean pregnancy?"

He tipped his head toward Mia. "You seem to be fertile enough, it's a reasonable question."

"You don't have to worry," she told him. "The doctors say I would have a difficult time conceiving in the usual way."

One dark eyebrow lifted and she squirmed a little. Her personal history was just that. Personal. It wasn't something she discussed with just anyone.

"And yet..."

Again, he nodded toward Mia, gurgling and now slapping that teething biscuit against the tabletop.

"Look," he said, capturing her attention again, "let's leave everything else for the moment and go back to the real matter at hand." He glanced at Mia and Casey wanted to hide her daughter from his appraising gaze. "You needed my DNA. Why? We'd never met. How could you think I'm the father of your child?"

More personal history that she would prefer not to discuss. Yet, she'd come here tonight because she'd felt she didn't have a choice.

"Nearly two years ago," she said, her voice low enough that no one could possibly overhear her, "I went to the Mandeville clinic..."

She saw understanding dawn on his features. His eyes opened, his firm mouth relaxed a little and his gaze, when it shifted to Mia, was this time, more stunned than angry or suspicious.

"The sperm bank," he muttered.

"Yes." Casey shifted in her seat a little, uncomfortable discussing this with anyone, let alone the "donor" who'd made her daughter's birth possible.

He shook his head, scrubbed one hand across his face and said, "That's just not possible."

"Clearly," she said, "it is."

"No, you don't understand." His gaze locked on hers again, silently demanding an explanation for how this could have happened. "Yes, in college, I admit, I went to the clinic with a friend of mine. We'd lost a bet and—"

"A bet?"

He frowned at her. "Anyway, I went, made the donation and didn't think about it again until about five years ago. I realized that I didn't want a child of mine, unknown to me, growing up out there somewhere. I told them I wanted that sample destroyed."

A chill swept through her at those words. She glanced at her daughter and as a wave of love rushed through her, she tried to imagine a life without Mia in it. And couldn't. Somehow, through some bureaucratic mishap, Jackson's order had gotten lost in the shuffle, overlooked and ignored. She could only be grateful. Knowing how close she'd come to never having Mia only made her treasure her daughter even more.

She smiled. "Well, I'm glad to say they didn't do as you requested."

"Obviously."

It wasn't hard to judge his current feelings. He was now avoiding looking at Mia at all. And that was fine with Casey. She didn't want him interested in her daughter. Mia was *hers*. Her family. Casey was only here because she'd felt that Jackson had a right to know he had a child.

"I thought sperm banks were anonymous," he said a moment later.

"They're supposed to be." When she'd gone to the Mandeville clinic, she'd specifically made sure that she would never know the identity of her child's father. She wasn't looking for a relationship, after all. She didn't need a partner to help her raise a child. All she'd wanted was a baby to love. A family of her own.

When she was assured that their donors' identities were very strictly protected, Casey'd been relieved. And that relief had stayed with her until about a month ago.

"I got an e-mail almost four weeks ago," she said softly. "From the Mandeville clinic. It listed my name, the donor number I'd selected and identified you as the man who'd made the original deposit."

He winced a little at that.

"Naturally, I was furious. This whole thing was supposed to be anonymous, remember. I called the clinic to complain," she told him and with the memories flooding her mind, she felt again that helpless sense of betrayal she'd experienced when she first read that e-mail. "They were in a panic. It seems someone hacked into their computers and sent out dozens of e-mails to women identifying the fathers of their children. It wasn't supposed to happen, of course, but it was too late to change anything."

"I see."

Two words, said so tightly it was a wonder he'd been able to squeeze them out of his throat. Well, fine. Casey understood that this was a surprise. But he had to understand that she wasn't happy about this, either.

"I didn't want to know the name of my daughter's father," she said firmly. "I wasn't interested in the man then and I'm not interested now. I didn't go to a sperm bank looking for a lasting connection, after all. All I wanted was a baby."

A muscle in his jaw twitched and an emotional shutter was down over his eyes, preventing her from getting the slightest impression of what he was thinking. "And you found this out a month ago."

"Yes."

He tapped his fingertips against the table. "Why'd you wait so long to tell me?"

Though his tone was even, his voice quiet, Casey had no problem identifying the anger behind that statement.

She took a gulp of her now cold coffee and grimaced as it slid down her throat. "Frankly, I'd considered not telling you at all at first."

His eyebrows arched.

"But soon enough, I realized you had the right to know if you actually *were* Mia's father."

"You doubted it?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she countered. "Just because some hacker got into the clinic's computer system doesn't mean he did a good job of it." Then she looked him straight in the eye. "Besides, you are definitely not the kind of father I wanted for my baby. When I went to Mandeville, I specifically requested the sperm of a *scientist*."

For a second, insult flashed across his face, then he snorted a laugh again and shook his head as if he couldn't believe they were even having this conversation. "A scientist?"

"I wanted my child to be smart."

He glared at her. "I graduated magna cum laude."

"With a degree in partying? Or women?"

"I happen to have an MBA, not that it's any of your business."

She had already known that, thanks to her research, but the point was, she knew very well what Jackson King considered most important in his life. And it wasn't intellectual pursuits.

"It doesn't really matter anymore," Casey said with a sigh. "I love my daughter and I don't care who her father is."

"Yet, as soon as you found out her father was Jackson King," he countered, "you came to me. So what's this little meeting really about?"

"I beg your pardon?" She sounded as stuffy as her late aunt Grace.

"You heard me, Casey Davis. You came here to present me with my daughter—"

"My daughter," she corrected, wondering why this conversation was suddenly feeling like more than a verbal battle.

"So it makes a man wonder, just what it is you really want from me? Money?" He reached into the breast pocket of his suit and pulled out a black leather wallet. "How much are you after? Looking for some child support? Is that what this is about?"

"That is just typical," she said, feeling a slow burn of anger start to build within. "Of course you think this is about money. That's how you see the world, isn't it? Well, I already told you, I don't want anything from you."

"I don't believe you."

She hissed in a breath and devoutly wished she'd never told him about Mia. "You can think whatever you like. I can't stop you. But I can leave. This little conversation is over."

Turning in her seat, she unstrapped her baby from the booster chair, lifted Mia into her arms and cuddled her close as she scooted out of the booth. Feeling Mia's warmth against her was a soothing balm to the anger churning inside her. It didn't matter what Jackson King thought or did. She'd done the right thing, now she could put him behind her. She could concentrate on her daughter.

When she was standing, her purse hanging from her shoulder to slap against her jean-clad thigh, Casey looked down at Jackson. And this time there was pity in her eyes. Because he couldn't grasp just how much he was missing, not knowing the child he'd helped create.

"I thought you had a right to know that you'd helped make this beautiful little girl possible, whether or not it was done willingly," she said, disgust pumping into her words. "But I can see now that was a mistake. Don't worry though, Jackson. Mia will never know that her father thought so little of her."

"Is that right?" He smiled up at her, clearly believing her outrage just another part of the act. "What will you tell her about me?"

"I'll tell her you're dead," Casey said quietly. "Because as far as I'm concerned, you are."

Four

She moved fast, he'd give her that.

But then, shock had slowed him down a little, too.

Jackson was only a step or two behind her, raw emotion pumping through his system. He couldn't even believe what was happening. At thirty-one years old, he was a father. To a little girl who'd been alive for nearly a year and he hadn't known it. What the hell was a man supposed to do with information like that?

His gaze fixed on Casey as she hurried across the parking lot and even as furious as he was, he couldn't stop himself from admiring the rear view of her. Her jeans clung to her behind and her legs like a second skin and instantly, lust roared up inside and kept time with the anger frothing in his gut.

Casey was already at her car, putting the baby into a car seat when he caught up with her. A cold ocean wind slapped at him as he approached, almost as if someone, somewhere was trying to keep him at a distance.

Well the hell with that.

"You can't just drop this bomb on me, then walk away."

She flipped her head around, froze him with a hard look and muttered, "Watch me."

He glanced at the baby, who was watching them both through wide brown eyes. After being around his nieces for several months, Jackson recognized the expression on the baby's face. The tiny girl looked confused and on the verge of tears. Not what he wanted. So he lowered his voice, tried to force a smile into place and said, "Look, you surprised me. Sandbagged me. And I think you know it."

Casey paid no attention to him, instead, she struggled with the straps on the car seat. "This stupid thing always gives me fits."

He didn't want to talk about the car seat. Getting more impatient by the minute, he finally took hold of Casey's arm, ignored the instant sizzle that touching her caused, pulled her back and said "Let me do it."

She laughed. "How do *you* know anything about infant car seats?"

"I have two nieces," he muttered, not bothering to glance at her.

He'd had plenty of practice over the last year, dealing with all of the accoutrements that seemed to come along with a baby. Emma had more luggage than her parents and in a few short months, Katie's toys and necessities had completely taken over the vineyard.

In seconds, he had the buckles snapped securely. He looked at *his daughter* and tried to wrap his brain around that simple fact. Didn't work. Still, he traced one finger down the baby's cheek and got a giggle for his trouble. His heart ached with a completely unfamiliar feeling as he looked into eyes so like his own.

When he backed out of the car, he was still smiling until he caught the fiery look in Casey's eyes.

"Thanks," she said quickly, then pushed past him to close the car door and walk around to the driver's seat.

Jackson stayed right at her heels. Before she could open her car door and escape him, he grabbed hold of her arm again. "Just wait a damn minute, all right?"

She pulled free of his grasp and he let her go. Shoving one hand through his hair, he took a breath, glanced around at the full parking lot and then looked back at her. "I don't know what you want from me."

"Nothing," she said and now she sounded almost tired. "I've already said that. Now I have to go."

He slapped one hand against the car door and held it shut. Bending down, he looked directly into her blue eyes and said, "You've known about the baby—"

"Mia—"

"—Mia," he corrected, "for nearly two years. I've known for—" he checked his watch. "Ten minutes. Maybe you could cut me a break here, huh? It's not every day a man finds out he's a father while sitting in a twenty-four-hour diner that smells of corned beef hash."

An all-too-brief smile curved her mouth then disappeared again in a heartbeat.

Jackson's mind was racing. He'd just received the biggest news of his life. How the hell was he supposed to react?

"Fine," she said and he could see that the effort to be reasonable was costing her. "You need time. Take all the time you want. Take *eternity* if you need to." Her gaze bored into his. "While you get used to the idea, Mia and I will go back to our lives."

"Just like that?"

She jerked him a nod and the silver stars in her ears winked at him, reflecting off the parking lot lights. "Just like that. You needed to know, now you do. That's all."

He looked through the car windows at the back of the car seat. He couldn't see Mia's face, but he didn't have to. The image was burned into his memory. He doubted he would ever forget his first look at her.

Something momentous had just happened to him and damned if he could make sense of it standing in a crowded parking lot. So he'd let Casey go. Let her take his daughter away.

For now.

She'd find out soon enough that he wasn't a man to be dismissed whenever she felt it was time.

"All right. Take Mia home." Easing off the car, Jackson stepped aside and allowed her to open the door. He noticed the wary suspicion in her eyes, but didn't care to say anything that might ease it. Let her worry a bit. She'd put him through the wringer in a matter of a few minutes. Worrying about it now was the least she could do.

She tossed her purse onto the front passenger seat, curled her fingers over the top of the car door and looked at him. In the dim light, her deep blue eyes were shadowed. A trick of the night? Or something else?

"I guess this is goodbye," she said and mustered up a smile that only managed to tip one corner of her mouth. "I don't suppose we'll be seeing each other again, so have a nice life, Jackson."

He watched her leave, memorized her license plate number and was already making plans as he headed to his car.

"It went great," Casey lied as she moved around her kitchen, entangling herself in the phone cord as she went. She really had to get a cordless for this room. Opening the refrigerator door, she pulled out a bottle of chardonnay then went for a wineglass. "He saw Mia, we talked, then we came home and he went... wherever men like him go."

Mia was sound asleep in her room, the house was quiet and Casey was still a bundle of nerves. Seeing Jackson again had been way too hard. She hadn't expected the sexual tug to be as strong as before. And then, watching his face as he looked at Mia and realized the truth had really sucker punched her. He'd looked stunned, of course. But there was an undercurrent, too. A look of a man glimpsing something he'd never expected to find. Like he'd stumbled across a treasure—just before his eyes went cold and calculating again.

And that worried her a little.

After all, as Dani had pointed out, the King family was a powerful force in California. What if he decided to take Mia from Casey? Then what? No, she told herself instantly. He'd signed a form when he donated his sperm, giving up all rights to a baby. Though with his family's power, he could probably negate that form. He wasn't interested in having a child.

Instead, he'd actually thought Casey had come to him for money!

Was that really how he looked at the world around him? Everything solved by a checkbook or a thick wallet? Did he really believe that she would use her *daughter* to make money? What kind of horrible people did he know, anyway?

"Uh-huh," Dani said. "Your voice sounds filled with all kinds of good feelings and happy butterflies."

"Okay," she admitted, "no happy butterflies. Should have known I couldn't put one past you." Casey poured the sunlight-colored wine into a glass, recorked the bottle and only then noticed the label. *Kings Vineyard*. Perfect. Even when he wasn't here, she was reminded of Jackson. Not that she needed reminding.

She could almost feel him right now, as she stood, safe in her tiny kitchen. The man's inherent strength and *presence* was something that lingered. At least, it did in her case.

"It wasn't great and it wasn't easy. He was stunned and not in a happy way." Casey nodded firmly, forced herself to put a good spin on the night by adding, "But it ended well. I came home with Mia and Jackson went away."

"Permanently?" Dani asked.

"I hope so," Casey admitted. "He said he needed time to adjust. I told him we don't want anything from him, but I'm not sure he heard me. Either way though, the point is, mission accomplished. I told him, it's over now, and I can go back to my life. Put this all behind me."

"And you really think it's going to be that easy?" Dani paused, half covered the phone receiver and said, "Mikey, don't run the choo-choo train on your sister's head. That's a good boy."

Casey grinned. Trust Dani and her wild bunch to keep things in perspective. "Having trouble?"

"Nice subject change," Dani told her with a laugh. "And the answer is yes. I love my husband, don't get me wrong, but when Mike's in charge, the kids pretty much rule the house. When it's my turn, I spend most of my time in damage control."

Dani's husband Mike, a Darby police officer, worked nights and Dani worked days. That way, there was always a parent around for the kids. A tired parent, but at least the children were cared

for by family. Of course, Dani insisted it had been so long since she'd had sex, she only had a vague recollection of it.

Casey's memories on the other hand, were clear and vivid. Which was just part of the problem.

"I don't know how you take care of Mia all alone," Dani said, switching the subject back to Casey. "I mean, Mike and I have separate shifts, but we always know there's somebody to back us up. To turn to. To *whine* to."

Casey smiled a little wistfully. She'd known going in, that she and her child would be alone. And that was okay with her most of the time. If she sometimes envied Dani's relationship with her husband, she figured that was only normal.

"I've never known it any other way," she admitted, putting the wine bottle back in the fridge and picking up her glass for a sip. "When I decided to get pregnant, I knew I'd be doing it alone. Sure, there's nobody to help out, but I don't have to share her with anyone either."

"You don't just share the bad stuff, Casey," Dani said. "It's nice to have someone to turn to and say, 'Hey, did you just see that? Isn't our kid brilliant?'"

Casey lifted her chin. "I have you to call and brag to. Besides, Mia and I get along great."

"I love you and Mia like crazy, you know that. And nobody's saying you're not doing great on your own."

"But? I hear a but in there somewhere."

"Okay, *but*," Dani said. "I think you're being unrealistic to believe that Jackson King is going to disappear just because you want him to."

Casey's stomach did a quick flip and she took another sip of wine. She didn't want to believe her friend, but hadn't she been thinking the same thing earlier, while she'd bathed Mia and put her to bed?

Jackson came from a wealthy, powerful family. If he wanted to make trouble for her, he could. Right thing to do or not, she was beginning to wish she'd never contacted Jackson.

Casey dropped into one of the two wooden chairs pulled up to a tiny table in one corner of her kitchen. She stared out at the night beyond the windowpanes, where her postage-stamp-sized backyard lay and tried to keep panic at bay.

Shaking her head, she said, more to convince herself than Dani, "Why would he come back? He doesn't want a baby. His whole lifestyle is built around hedonism. He does what he wants when he wants. He's got a home he rarely stays in, his business has him flying all over the world and he's not exactly a candidate for Mr. Commitment."

"That's the thing though, honey," Dani said softly. "He's never had a reason to commit to anything before, has he?"

"No. No, he hasn't." Casey set her wineglass down on the table and carefully unwrapped the curled phone cord from around her shoulders. "And by telling him the truth, I've just given him one, haven't I?"

The next morning, Jackson was at the King family ranch, having called an emergency family meeting. He faced both of his brothers and was grateful that neither one of them had brought their wives into this.

"Did you actually see the DNA report?" Adam asked.

Jackson stopped pacing the confines of the elegantly appointed room and shot his oldest brother a look. "No, I didn't."

"Well, why the hell not?" Travis demanded from his seat in a dark brown leather chair.

Shifting him a glare, Jackson snapped, "I was a little shocked, okay? Having a child you never knew existed thrown at you all of a sudden is more surprising than you might think. Besides, I don't need to see the report. You'll know what I mean when you see Mia. She looks just like Emma and Katie." He paused for effect, then added, "Prettier, of course, but then I'm the father."

Adam chuckled and shook his head. "You're sure taking this better than I thought you would."

"You should have seen me last night." Jackson had spent the entire night prowling through the home he rarely stayed in. The rooms were empty, the caretakers who lived there permanently were in their quarters and he'd listened for hours to the echoes of his own footsteps.

He'd tried to imagine the sound of a child's laughter ringing through the big house, but hadn't quite been able to do it. Hadn't really known if he'd *wanted* to do it. But even as he told himself that, he'd realized a part of him was already making room for his child in his life.

Travis shook his head and scowled into his coffee. Adam on the other hand, sat behind his desk, his feet, crossed at the ankle, perched on one corner of it. "What does she want?" he asked quietly.

"She says, nothing."

"Right." Travis blew out a breath.

Jackson walked back across the floor to face both of his brothers. "Look, she just found out I'm the father. I told you she went to that sperm bank and—"

"I can't believe you did that," Adam interrupted.

"Not the point," Jackson told him, refusing to go back over past mistakes. "Barn door open, horse gone."

"He's right," Travis said, standing up to refill his coffee cup from the thermal pot on Adam's desk. "How it happened doesn't matter. What matters is what comes next."

"What do you *want* to happen next?" Adam asked.

Hell if he knew.

He threw his hands in the air and let them fall to his sides again. This was something he was so not prepared to deal with. Something that had never once come up on his radar screen, so to speak. Now that it was there though, he had to step up and make the decision about how to go forward.

Images of Casey and Mia filled his mind. He was a *father*.

What the hell was he supposed to do with that?

"Jackson?"

Coming up out of his thoughts like a drowning man breaching the surface of a deep lake, Jackson looked at Adam and said quietly, "She's my daughter. I won't be kept away from her. Casey's just going to have to deal with that reality. Mia is a *King*. She's going to grow up knowing what that means."

Adam and Travis exchanged glances and nodding, turned back to him.

"Of course she is," Adam said.

"She's family," Travis put in.

"Her mother's not going to like it," Jackson told them.

"You'll have to find a way to work around that."

"I can do that," he said, though inwardly, he admitted that a woman as stubborn as Casey wasn't going to be easy to outmaneuver.

"There's something else to remember here too," Travis put in a moment later. He waited until both of his brothers were looking at him before saying, "You've got Marian to consider, in all this."

"Marian." Jackson whispered her name and shaking his head, realized he hadn't given her a single thought since the night before. But it didn't matter, he decided. He and Marian had a business arrangement. It wasn't as if this were a great love match, after all. He'd tell her what had happened and let her know the engagement would have to be postponed. "She'll understand."

"What makes you think so?" Adam prompted.

"Because she wants this merger. And her father wants this marriage too," Jackson told him. "Having King Jets linked to the Cornice family airfields will be good advertising for them and they know it. Our presence will bring in even more business for them."

"Still not going to make her happy to hear about the baby," Travis said.

"She'll have to deal with it," Jackson declared, unwilling to accept any other outcome. "I'll simply explain that I just found out I have a daughter."

Silence greeted him. Then he repeated the most earth-shattering part of that last sentence. "I have a *daughter*."

Travis laughed. "I know just how you feel. Strange, isn't it?"

Strange, yes, Jackson thought as he mentally repeated the word *daughter*. A part of him thrilled to it.

Which shook him some. He hadn't planned on this happening. If someone had asked him flat out if he'd wanted to be a father, he would have said no instantly. But now, faced with the reality of Mia, he found himself wanting to know her. Wanting her to know him.

There was a kernel of something inside him that was already taking root, blossoming despite the strange situation he found himself in. There was a little girl alive right now because of him. Didn't that mean that they already had a connection, however slight?

His brothers each looked at him with understanding and he appreciated knowing that he wasn't alone in this. After all, they'd already proven they could survive fatherhood.

"Seems like the King brothers are going to produce all girls in this generation," Travis mused.

"Give me a houseful just like Emma and I'll be happy," Adam said, then frowned. "Until boys start coming around."

"We don't have to worry about that just yet," Travis said.

Jackson though, paled a little. He'd just discovered his daughter, now he had to worry about her growing up? Dating? Meeting guys like *him*?

Being a father just got a lot more complicated.

The following morning, Casey had Mia happily spending time in her walker, bumping around the floor, the plastic wheels making a whirring noise, alerting Casey to her daughter's whereabouts at all times. Mia's throaty laughter spilled into the sunshine-filled room and Casey was smiling as she bent over the graphics program on her computer.

Her home business, *Papyrus*, had really taken off lately. She designed and made exclusive brochures, gift cards, high-end stationery and invitations for every occasion from weddings to birthday parties. She had a small, but select clientele and that list was steadily growing, thanks to word of mouth.

She made her own hours, worked out of her home and had plenty of time to devote to her daughter. The best of all possible worlds. If there was a niggling seed of worry called Jackson King at the back of her mind on this beautiful morning, she made a concerted effort to ignore it.

Talking to Dani the night before had actually reinforced Casey's belief that she wouldn't have to be concerned about Jackson. Yes, Dani thought he'd be back, but Casey was sure her friend was wrong about this. Jackson was simply not the kind of man to be interested in a daughter he'd had no choice in creating. Mia did not fit into his lifestyle, for which Casey was grateful.

No doubt, Jackson was already in one of his luxury jets, flying off to Paris, or London....

"What would that be like?" she whispered, leaning back in her desk chair and staring across the room at Mia, busily chewing the ear of her beloved teddy bear. "Imagine that, sweetie, jumping into your own jet and taking off whenever you felt like it. Where would we go?"

Mia babbled, waved her arms and accidentally tossed Teddy to the ground. Before her little mouth had completely turned down to initiate crying, Casey was up and out of her chair. Picking up the lop-eared toy, she knelt down in front of Mia, handed Teddy back to her and leaned in to plant a kiss on her forehead.

"What do you think, sweetie? London? No," she said as Mia shook her head, laughing. "You're right. London in springtime, way too rainy. Okay, Paris then! We'll go to the Louvre and I'll show you all the beautiful paintings. Would you like that?"

Naturally, Mia didn't understand the question, but she loved having her mom's full attention, so she jumped up and down in her seat and babbled excitedly.

“Good! We’ll go on one of those dinner cruises, too, what do you think? We’ll see all the pretty lights of the city and get you some yummy French baby food?”

Mia giggled again and Casey paused just to listen. Was there any more wonderful sound than that deep-from-the-belly laugh her daughter had? Mia’s big brown eyes sparkled, her wisps of dark brown hair flew about her head in a soft halo and her chubby cheeks were rosy.

“What did I ever do without you?” Casey asked, suddenly filled with so much love, she could hardly stand it. Scooping the baby out of her chair, she cuddled her close, burying her face in the curve of Mia’s neck to inhale that soft scent that was so completely Mia.

Pulling back, Casey looked at her little girl and said wistfully, “I should have thanked your daddy. Whether or not he knows it, he gave me the most amazing gift ever.”

The doorbell rang and Casey, carrying Mia, walked out of her cramped, makeshift office, down the short hall and through the small, cluttered living room. Evidence of Mia’s presence in the house was everywhere. From the playpen tucked beneath the front window to the toys on the floor and the neatly folded clean clothes in the laundry basket perched on the love seat.

Casey shifted Mia higher on her hip and automatically leaned in to look through the peephole in the front door.

Jackson.

He looked different than he had the night before. He was wearing blue jeans today and a black T-shirt that molded itself to his broad chest. On the left breast pocket of the shirt, there was a stylized gold crown with the words *King Jets* beneath it. He looked more approachable today and therefore... more dangerous.

Instantly, Casey’s heartbeat raced and her mouth went dry. What was he doing here? How did he find her?

“How?” she whispered, answering her own foolish question. “You told him your name and where you lived. Of course he found you. Idiot.”

The doorbell rang again and Mia squealed.

“Shh...” Casey winced, and jiggled her daughter, hoping to keep her quiet.

“I can hear the baby,” Jackson called through the door.

The timbre of his voice resonated throughout Casey’s body. She tried to tell herself that the shivers it created was nothing more than nerves. But even she wasn’t buying it. Her body, despite what her mind would have preferred, was reacting to the man exactly as it had the first night they met.

Like a lit match set to dynamite.

“Open the door, Casey,” he said, voice just loud enough to carry.

“Why?” she called back, when she knew it was useless to pretend she wasn’t home. Her car was in the driveway and Mia was burbling loud enough to alert him.

“I want to talk to you.”

“We said everything we had to say last night.”

“You might have,” he acknowledged, “but I haven’t even started yet.”

She chanced another look through the peephole and this time, met his stare directly. He’d bent down and was staring right back at her as if he could see her, as well.

Those dark brown eyes were filled with a quiet determination and Casey knew he wouldn’t be leaving until she’d heard him out. Her shoulders slumped in defeat before straightening again with a touch of defiance. He wanted to talk? Fine. She’d let him say his piece, then they could go their separate ways.

“Your daddy’s awful pushy,” she whispered as she flipped the dead bolt lock and slowly opened the door.

“I heard that, too.” One of Jackson’s dark eyebrows arched as he gave her a cool look just before he stepped past her into the house.

Casey closed the door and locked it, then turned around to look at him. Jackson King standing in the middle of her living room somehow dwarfed her whole house.

True, the older bungalow was tiny anyway, but it had always seemed more than sufficient for her and Mia. Now though, with the strength of Jackson's presence, the house seemed to shrink substantially in size.

His gaze was on hers and she felt the heat of that stare burn right into her. His dark hair was windblown, his jaw was clenched tight and as he folded his arms across his chest and braced his feet wide apart in what looked like a battle stance, she felt a zip of something hot and undeniable.

How could she possibly keep reacting sexually to a man she should be avoiding? And how could she keep him from noticing?

"I didn't expect to see you again," she said, walking past him, and silently cursing the fact that since she had to move sideways to do it, her breasts brushed against his chest. Did he just move in even closer?

"Then that just proves you don't know me as well as you think." His voice was whiskey rough and pitched low enough to send ripples of awareness skittering along Casey's spine.

Darn it.

Determined to at least behave as if she wasn't thrown for a loop by his unannounced visit, Casey headed for an overstuffed chair near Mia's playpen. Once she was seated, she turned Mia around to sit on her lap and looked up at Jackson. He seemed to tower over her. She didn't really remember him being this tall. This intimidating.

Glancing around the room, he spotted a low hassock, gave it a shove with the toe of a scuffed-up cowboy boot and when it was positioned in front of her, he sat down on it. Elbows braced on his knees, he turned the full force of his dark gaze on her and Casey held her breath for a slow count of ten before asking, "Why are you here, Jackson?"

"To talk."

"About?"

"Mia."

She stiffened.

His gaze locked on hers, he said, "I know that neither one of us was expecting this."

She nodded, since her throat was suddenly so tight, she didn't think she'd be able to squeeze out a single word. Did he have to sit so closely? Did he have to smell so good? Did he have to have a voice that sounded like hot nights and silk sheets?

"So," he said, his tone pleasant, though his eyes were dark and unreadable. "Since we find ourselves in a unique position, I've got a unique solution to the situation."

She found her voice. It was scratchy and she was forced to clear her throat, but she managed. "I didn't realize we required a 'solution'."

"Then you were wrong again," he said and gave her a brief half smile.

"Jackson..."

"You've lived here three years, right?"

The statement was so far out of the blue, she only blinked at him for a second or two. "How do you know that?"

"You rent it."

She shifted, lifted her chin and said, "Did you investigate me or something?"

"Why wouldn't I? You show up claiming I'm the father of your child, it only makes sense to check you out."

"I can't believe this." Nerves jumped inside her and Casey suddenly felt as though she couldn't draw enough air into her lungs. She felt trapped in the little house she'd always loved so much.

"Since you rent, it'll make things easier all the way around." He nodded thoughtfully, glanced at the cramped quarters and she could guess exactly what he was thinking. He came from big, towering

piles of money. He owned a mansion he rarely used and kept hotel suites ready “just in case.” He had no idea what life for real people was like and she was sure he was mentally dismissing the home she’d made for Mia and herself.

But Casey had nothing to be ashamed of. The house was small, but it was clean and cute and just enough for her and her daughter. And if he had investigated her background, then he knew she was honest, paid her bills on time and that she was completely capable of caring for *her* child.

He could think whatever he liked. It really didn’t matter to her one way or the other.

“That will make this easier,” he said at last.

“Make *what* easier?”

“I want you and Mia to move in with me.”

Five

“You’re crazy!”

“Possibly. You know, it’s the oddest thing,” Jackson mused as he watched her features register complete and total shock. “Your eyes change color according to your moods.”

She shook her head as if she couldn’t believe she’d heard him correctly. “What?”

He’d done that on purpose. Put her off guard. Off balance. Never sure what he’d do next. Besides, her eyes did intrigue him. But then, *she* intrigued him. More than he was comfortable admitting.

“Your eyes,” he said. “They seem a very pale blue usually. But when you’re mad—like now—or when I’m inside you...” he paused and watched his words hit home, “that soft blue becomes as dark and deep as the ocean.”

She squirmed uneasily in her chair. Good. She should be uneasy. He was. Damn it, she’d thrown him for a hard loop since the moment he’d first spotted her at the hotel bar. Seemed only fair he return the favor.

Since meeting with his brothers the day before, Jackson had been in high gear. One thing you could say for the Kings, they knew how to get things done fast.

He’d placed a single phone call to the King family attorneys and within a few hours, he’d not only gained several new employees at his home and every stick of furniture an infant required, but he’d known everything about Casey Davis that there was to know. He wasn’t sure how the law firm had managed it, but he assumed they had people on the payroll who could pull off minor miracles when necessary.

Even knowing that he’d come here to draw a line in the sand, all Jackson could think now was, he wanted to touch Casey again. Feel her eager response, the sigh of her breath on his neck. Drown in the heat of her body.

He shook his head, dislodging the erotic images that flooded his mind, so that he could concentrate on the problem at hand.

“You can’t be serious about us moving in with you.” Her arms tightened around Mia until the baby squirmed uncomfortably in her mother’s grasp.

He’d expected just such a reaction. And if he were to be honest with himself, it was a crazy idea. He was supposed to be on the verge of getting engaged. Marrying a woman who was completely unaware of Mia and Casey’s existence. And truth be told, he hadn’t come here with the idea of moving the two of them into his house. He’d come to demand time with his daughter. But one look at the tiny rental on the ragged edge of town where his daughter lived had convinced him that she deserved better.

And she’d get it.

As for Marian, he’d talk to her. Explain that he needed more time. He couldn’t go into a marriage—not even one that was a strictly business proposition—until he had the rest of his life straightened out.

And who would have thought it would need straightening? He'd always lived his life as he chose. Making his own decisions. Never factoring in anyone else's opinion.

Seemed those days were over.

"There's plenty of room. I've got a nursery completely outfitted already and plenty of help in the house for you if you need it."

"I don't."

"So you've said. Repeatedly." He shifted on the footstool and the old leather creaked with the movement. "But I've been doing a lot of thinking about this."

"And *this* is your plan?"

"That's right." He got up from the too-low footstool, not because his long legs were cramped but because he was too close to Casey. Her scent reached for him. The curve of her breasts tempted him and her mouth all but begged to be kissed.

And that wasn't why he was here. This wasn't about him and Casey. This was about his daughter.

He walked two short paces—all he could take without actually leaving the room—stopped beside the playpen and idly rested one hand on the rim. "Look, I might never have planned on being a father, but I am one now and that changes things."

Her chin lifted, her eyes narrowed and her grip on Mia tightened as if she were half afraid he was going to grab the baby and make a run for it. "I don't see how."

He laughed shortly. "Of course you don't."

She took a breath, blew it out and said, "I know what you're doing..."

"Is that right?" He let go of the playpen, folded his arms over his chest and looked down at her.

"Men like you—"

"Like me?"

"The take-charge type," she explained.

"Ah."

"Men like you see a situation and immediately jump in and start shifting things around. For some reason, you've decided that Mia and I are *your* business. We're not."

"We disagree," he said, his gaze slipping from her now dark blue eyes to the baby on her lap and back again.

She blew out a frustrated breath. "I don't know how to say this so you'll understand me. You don't owe us anything. I don't want your money and I don't need your help."

Well, that stung. True or not. And it was clearly, he thought with another rueful glance around her tiny, cluttered home, not true.

"Let's cut to the bottom line here, shall we?" he asked tightly.

Casey stood up and he silently admired the move. She wasn't content to sit there having to look up at him. Instead, she'd taken action to put them on more equal footing. Or so she thought. Her yellow T-shirt was hiked up beneath Mia's chubby leg, but her eyes were steady and her features were schooled into a carefully stoic mask. "Let's."

"I don't want my daughter living here."

She sucked in a breath as if he'd slapped her. "There's nothing wrong with our house."

"Not the best neighborhood," he said.

"We're perfectly safe."

"My daughter deserves better."

"My daughter is happy here."

Jackson knew this little verbal battle could go on for hours, so he decided to end it. Moving in close to her, he looked down into her eyes, inhaled the scent of lavender that clung to her and said, "We can do this one of two ways. A, you and Mia move in with me for say, six months. I get to know my daughter and at the end of that time, I'll buy you a house anywhere you want."

"I don't—"

"Or B," he said loudly, to drown out her voice and force her to listen to his counterproposal. "You insist on staying here and I make a phone call to the family lawyers. Within a couple of hours, you'll be notified that I'm suing for joint custody. And if you think I can't...remember, you contacted me. You broke the anonymity clause."

Her eyes went wild and wide. Like a trapped animal looking desperately for a way out of a dangerous situation. But there was no way out and Jackson knew it. He had her boxed in neatly.

"You...why would..."

"I'm not the bad guy here," he said.

"Could have fooled me," she muttered.

"Let's remember here that I only just found out about Mia's existence. I want to know my child. Is that really so unreasonable to you?"

"No, but expecting us to change everything about our lives, is."

"You have a choice."

"Some choice." Shaking her head, she stared up at him and the sheen of tears in her eyes threw him for a second. He hoped to hell she didn't cry. He hated it when women cried. He always felt helpless—not a feeling he was comfortable with.

"You're a bully," she whispered, willing the tears back.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You're a bully. You're rich and powerful and think you can just sweep in and get anything you want."

He thought about that for a long minute, letting his gaze sweep up and down her curvy body. Finally, he said, "When I want something bad enough, yes."

She pulled in a deep breath and held the baby even closer than before. Then lifting her chin, Casey said, "Fine then. You win this one. We'll move into your house for six months. You'll get to know your daughter and then we'll leave."

"Wise choice."

"But just so you know," she said, "your tactics won't work on everything. You can't have *me*. What happened between us that first night? It's not going to be happening again. Do you understand?"

Jackson's body was hard and ready and he wanted her even more now than he had when he'd first walked through her front door. He shouldn't though and he'd do his damndest to ignore the rush of desire that jumped through him whenever he laid eyes on her. Because he had plans for his life. And they didn't include Casey Davis, no matter how alluring she might be.

So he smiled and met her gaze as he said, "None of this is about you, Casey. This is about my daughter."

Movers arrived the following Saturday. Casey sat in a lawn chair on the front yard beside Dani, the two of them watching the kids roll around on a quilt spread beneath the jacaranda tree. A three-year-old boy and two baby girls were surprisingly loud.

"I know you don't want to hear this," Dani said as they watched two movers carry boxes out of the house, "but Mike's glad you're moving."

"What?" Casey looked at her, then reached down and pulled a stick from Mia's grip. "I thought your husband liked me."

"He does, you nut," Dani said. "But he's also a cop. And he says this neighborhood isn't a good one for a single woman and a baby."

Casey frowned. Okay, it wasn't a ritzy area, but the houses were mostly tidy and the teenagers weren't too annoying and she'd only had graffiti spray-painted on her garage the one time.

"He never said anything..."

"He didn't want you to be scared or anything," Dani said, instantly defending the husband she was so crazy about. "But he always cruises your neighborhood at night, keeping an eye on things."

Casey sighed. That sounded like Mike. Such a nice man. Unlike some others she could name. Mike didn't push his views on her, try to run her life. He just quietly did what he could to keep her safe.

Why couldn't Jackson be more like that?

"So I'm not surprised your Jackson wanted you to move."

"He's not *my* Jackson, for heaven's sake," Casey said quickly and scowled as her insides did a quick ripple of expectation at the sound of his name. "And he's not interested in my safety, believe me. He just wants Mia."

"She is his daughter."

Casey shot her a dark look. "Traitor."

Dani laughed and scooped her baby girl up into her lap to pull a leaf out of her mouth. "I'm just saying there are worse things in life than to be scooped up by a gorgeous millionaire and whisked off to his hilltop mansion."

Sure, when you said it like that, Casey thought, it was like something out of a romantic movie. Almost Cinderella-like. Poor but honest girl meets rich handsome prince and finds love and happily ever after. But Casey knew the truth. The only thing between her and Jackson—except for some incredible heat—was Mia.

He wasn't a prince. At the moment, she thought of him more like a cartoon villain, evilly twirling his moustache.

"He threatened to take Mia."

Dani sighed. "If he'd actually meant to do that, he could have. He's probably got a fleet of lawyers on standby. Instead, he just wants to get to know his kid. You really can't blame him for that."

"Why not?" When Dani only looked at her, Casey laughed. "Okay, I know. I'm overreacting."

"Just a bit," Dani agreed. "I mean, I get why, but you'd probably have been furious if Mia's father had turned out to be some miserable creep who wanted nothing to do with her, too."

"Maybe..." The truth was, she could understand Jackson's interest in his daughter. That didn't mean she had to like it, though.

"Casey, try not to treat this move as if it's a jail sentence. Look at it like a minivacation."

"A vacation?"

"Sure. He's got a huge place. Plenty of room for you to work and Mia to play. There'll be someone else for you to lean on once in awhile. You won't have to do it all yourself...."

She liked doing everything herself. She was used to it. She'd made her way, built a business, was raising a beautiful child. Why should she look for help she didn't need?

Besides, "Can you really see Jackson King changing diapers?"

Dani shrugged. "Guess you'll find out. But the point is, stop sabotaging this before it starts."

Was she? Or was Dani seeing only a silver lining and disregarding the huge, massive black cloud currently sitting over Casey's head? Case in point...the movers. They were carrying Mia's crib now and the rocking chair that Casey had painted herself.

"Um, didn't you say Jackson told you he outfitted a nursery?"

"Yes," Casey said tightly. Only the best for the daughter of a King. "He arranged to put my stuff in storage for six months." Without bothering to ask her. He'd just called her with the information and when she'd tried to argue that she wanted to take her stuff with her to his house, he'd simply steamrolled right over her.

"Ah..."

A cool wind kicked up, scattering twigs and lacy leaves across the lawn. Casey shivered a little. Was she making a huge mistake? Should she have stood up to Jackson? Gone to court rather than caving to his demands? She looked down at Mia and a small thread of fear wrapped itself around her heart.

"I can do this, right?"

"Of course you can."

"It'll be good for Mia."

"Positively."

Oh, God. "Is it too late to run away?" Casey wondered aloud.

"It is if that's Prince Charming in your carriage," Dani told her, pointing to a big black SUV pulling up in front of the house.

Casey didn't have to see the driver to know it was Jackson. She could tell because her body had started humming and her stomach was doing somersaults. Six months of living in his house? Being around him night and day? How was she going to manage this?

Before she could come up with an answer to that question, Jackson opened the door and stepped out of the car. Beside her, Dani sighed heavily. Not hard to understand. Jackson was wearing black slacks, a long-sleeved white shirt with the sleeves rolled back on his tanned, muscled forearms and sunglasses that he slipped off as he walked toward them. Prince Charming? Maybe. Dangerous? Absolutely.

"Remember," her friend said, "you're going to make this work."

Casey's mouth was dry, just watching him walk across the lawn, so she nodded.

"Casey," he said, smiling. His gaze dropped briefly to Mia and even Casey saw his dark eyes warm.

"Hello, Jackson," she said when she found her voice again. "You didn't have to come by, I was going to drive to your place later."

"Not necessary," he said, turning a smile on Dani. Casey didn't even have to see her friend's face to know she was being sucked into Jackson's orbit. The man was definitely high on the charisma chart when he wanted to be.

"Jackson King," he said, holding out one hand.

"Dani Sullivan." She shook his hand, turned to Casey and lifted both eyebrows.

Casey ignored her and did her best to rise above the charm level Jackson was using. "I can't go with you and leave my car here."

"Don't worry about it. One of my guys will drive it over to the house later."

"Your guys?"

"Employees," Jackson corrected for her benefit. "Besides, your little compact's not the safest car in the world to haul a baby around in."

Casey was stunned. "Of course it's safe. I take it in for checkups regularly."

"Not what I mean," he said, waving one hand at the pale-blue compact parked on one side of her driveway. "Look at it. In an accident, you might as well be riding a skateboard."

Dani winced and Casey stared at him. "I don't get in accidents."

"Not purposely," he conceded. "But then that's why they're called 'accidents'."

"He's got you there," Dani muttered.

Casey scowled at her friend, then shifted that same expression to Jackson. "My car is perfectly serviceable."

"Uh-huh, maybe it used to be." He turned, pointed to the black monster parked at the curb, then looked back at Casey. "*That's* your car, now."

"I—my—what?"

"I bought you a car," he said, in the same tone he might have used when saying, *I made you a sandwich*. "Had the dealer install a top-of-the-line car seat for Mia, so you're all set there, too. Much safer for you and the baby."

Casey wasn't an idiot. She could see that he was most likely right about that monstrous car/bus being safer to ride in. After all, it looked the size of a small tank. But she couldn't keep allowing him to ride roughshod on her life anymore. A line had to be drawn. Might as well be done now.

"Jackson, you can't go around doing things like that," she said, staring at the car now and trying to imagine herself behind the wheel. It was so huge it would be like driving an eighteen-wheeler.

And the thought of how much it would cost simply to fill the gas tank gave her a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

“Why not? You needed a safer car, I got it for you.”

He really didn't get it. Didn't seem to understand that she wasn't the kind of woman to be taken over by some big strong male who thought he knew what was best for her. For heaven's sake, she was an adult. She'd been making her own way and her own decisions for most of her life.

Now, all because she'd felt it was his right to know about Mia's existence, her life was wildly spinning out of control. That old saying about *good deeds never going unpunished*, was certainly true enough.

But that ship had sailed and there was no going back. Dani was right, she'd have been furious if Mia's father hadn't wanted to know her, too. So there really had been no win to this situation and the fact that Jackson was clearly determined to be a part of his daughter's life said *something* about his character.

And even if she didn't like it, having a father would be good for Mia. That's what she had to keep in mind, here. What was best for Mia.

Still, she had to make him see that while he might be related to Mia, he had no control over Casey. So she tried again, speaking slowly and plainly. “I don't need a new—”

“It's in your name. Temporary registration and insurance information are in the glove compartment. Why don't you drive it on our trip back to my place, get used to the feel of it?” He smiled and started for the house. “I'll just check with the movers, make sure they know where to take your stuff.”

“I already told them—” Her voice trailed off as Jackson walked away, clearly not trusting her to have been able to instruct movers. “Did you see that?”

“Deep breath,” Dani said, putting one hand on Casey's forearm. “Okay, I see what you mean. He is a little—”

“Overbearing? Bossy?”

“Yeah.” Dani gave her a pat of reassurance. “He is. But it seems like he means well.”

“He's impossible.”

“Honey, it's only six months.”

“Six months,” she repeated and thought that very shortly, she would be using those two words as a mantra.

Casey turned to look at the little house that had been hers. Where she and Mia had built so many memories. She knew she was looking at her past, because no matter what happened over the next six months, she and her daughter wouldn't return to this place. And nothing would be the same, ever again.

Jackson stepped out of the house, walked to the edge of the porch and looked at her. Across the yard, despite the presence of the movers, Dani, and the kids, Casey felt the power of his steady gaze reach out to her. Even from this distance, even surrounded by people, she felt heat building inside her. Just a look from him gave her shivers. Her body didn't seem to care that he was the human embodiment of a bulldozer. Didn't care that he was taking over her life.

All her body wanted, was *his* body.

Six

Through the baby monitor, Casey heard Mia whimpering in her sleep. Slipping out of her wide, sumptuous bed, Casey grabbed up her terry-cloth robe and headed for the door of her room.

It wasn't surprising that Mia was awake and fretful. Their day had been filled with strange people, strange places. Even Casey was finding it hard to sleep in a new place. No wonder then that the baby was feeling just as unsettled.

Skylights dotted the roof over the long hallway, letting in moonlight that guided her way along the corridor to the room beside hers. While she hurried to Mia, Casey's mind raced.

Jackson had naturally stepped in and taken over moving day. When they arrived at his sprawling hilltop home, Casey had been amazed to see just how much the man had accomplished in one week. Not only was her bedroom the most elegant, luxurious room she'd ever set foot in, but Mia's nursery was the sort she was used to seeing in celebrity magazine articles.

There was a mural of forest animals on the walls, a closet stuffed with clothing, shelves filled with toys and a crib fit for a princess. The lower half of the windows in the second story nursery were barred for safety's sake and looked out over the sweeping landscape that rushed downhill toward the ocean.

Casey, on her own, never could have provided her daughter with anything like the well-appointed room. And though she appreciated all Jackson had done to make their daughter a space in his life, she couldn't help feeling the sharp sting of envy.

He was using his money to point out the differences in their lives and he was doing a good job of it.

She reached Mia's room and the door was partially open, as she'd insisted it remain earlier. The baby's cries had stopped on Casey's short walk down the hall, but she had kept going, wanting to reassure herself that Mia was safely back to sleep. Now, Casey heard whispers just carrying over the baby's sniffling breaths.

Curious, Casey pushed the door open silently, and paused on the threshold. Moonlight flooded this room as well, and the night-light that had been left burning was a magical thing that threw patches of stars onto the ceiling.

But she hardly noticed any of it. Instead, her gaze focused on the man standing beside the crib, holding Mia against his chest.

"No more tears, Mia," he murmured and his already deep voice was a rumble of hushed sound. "You're safe here. This is your new home...."

Casey's heart twisted as she watched him soothing their daughter. Clearly, he'd left his own bed to come to this room. He wore silk pajama bottoms that hung low on his narrow hips and the chest he held his daughter against was bare and gleamed like carved bronze in the moonlight. His dark head was bent toward Mia's and Casey heard his soft whispers as he soothed the tiny girl he held so carefully.

"Go back to sleep, baby girl," he said on a soft sigh. "Dream of rainbows and puppies and long summer days. Your daddy's here now and nothing will ever hurt you...."

She couldn't tear her gaze from them. There was something so sweet, so...right about the picture they made. Calling himself Mia's daddy, promising that sweet little girl that she'd never be hurt, all of it made Casey want to both smile and cry.

Jackson swayed gently, continuing the quiet rush of whispers and Mia's tiny sigh sounded gently in the room. And Casey's tears won the battle, stinging her eyes, blurring her vision until she had to fight to hold them back.

As if sensing her presence, he turned, still cradling Mia, and smiled at her. "I've got a monitor in my room, too."

Casey walked close to them and reached out one hand to smooth her sleeping baby's hair. "Of course you do."

His eyes narrowed a bit. "I am her father."

"You're right," she said, meeting his dark gaze. "I'm just used to being the only one getting up in the middle of the night."

The look in his eyes gentled some at that admission. His hand moved up and down Mia's back, soothing, stroking. "I can understand that," he whispered. "But you're not alone anymore, Casey. I'm here. And I'm going to be a part of Mia's life. I've already missed too much."

She took a deep breath and nodded. This was only their first night together. She was going to have to find a way to deal with Jackson's rights as a father.

Forcing a smile, she said, "You seem handier with babies than I expected."

Apparently realizing that she was willing to if not end their little war, then to at least declare a temporary cease-fire, Jackson smiled. "I've got two nieces, remember? Emma and Katie. Emma's a little more than a year old and Katie's about three months. I've put in my babysitting time."

Her surprise must have been stamped on her features because his smile widened into a grin that made her catch her breath.

"Didn't know that, did you?" he asked.

"No. I mean," she said, "I knew about your brothers' children, I just never thought you would—"

"What?" he challenged. "Love my family?"

Well, that made her feel small and petty. She should have known better. Should have guessed. In the research she'd done on Jackson before meeting him in person, she'd learned just how tight the King family really was. She just hadn't even thought that a man more interested in jetting off to exotic places would be so attentive to his infant nieces.

"Of course not," she said softly as Jackson turned and expertly laid a sleeping Mia back in her crib, "I just didn't think a man like you would want anything to do with babies."

"A man like me?"

She moved past him, bent over the top rail of the beautiful white crib and ran the flat of her hand down Mia's back. Listening to her child's quiet snuffles and sighs, she smiled. "You know," she said as she turned back to him. "The playboy type."

He laughed quietly. "You think I'm a playboy?"

She turned her head to look at him and almost wished she hadn't. While he'd been holding Mia, he was gorgeous, but somehow safe. Now that he wasn't...he looked much too tempting. All that bare, tanned, muscled flesh. The sleep-ruffled hair. The shadow of whiskers on his jaw. The heavy-lidded sexiness of his eyes.

Oh, God.

"I only know what I read about you," she said and moved for the door. Best to get back to her own room fast, before she did something really stupid like reaching out one hand to trace the planes of those muscles of his.

He was just a step behind her and when they moved into the hall, he caught her arm. Heat shot from his touch to rocket through her body like an explosion battering off a series of walls. She was forced to lock her knees to keep from swaying into him. His eyes were dark, fathomless and when he spoke, she had to fight for focus.

"And just what have you read?"

"I think you know the answer to that," she said, trying to tug her arm free of his grasp. "You're practically the poster boy for fast jets and faster women. So you can understand how seeing you, being so gentle, so tender, with Mia like that, could throw me a little."

He snorted. "You've got a narrow view on the world, don't you?"

"No, I don't." She tried again to get free, but Jackson wasn't ready to let her go just yet. He parted her robe and ran one hand up her arm. Even though the terry robe she wore wasn't exactly sexy, seeing the curve of her breasts beneath the soft fabric was enough to make him hard and ready and way too eager. Despite the fact that she had the ability to seriously annoy him.

"Sure you do," he said with a sneer. "You read some one-sided articles about me and decide that I'm what? Some rampaging guy, only interested in what he can take out of life?"

She stilled and chewed on her bottom lip. He'd like to help with that, but he resisted.

"Do you think the tabloids would be interested in doing a story on me babysitting my nieces? No," he answered for her. "They want sensationalism because that's what people like you want to read."

Her eyes, a dark, passion-filled blue, widened. "People like me?"

“Not fun being judged, is it?” he countered. “Yes, people like you. People who see a headline about me on a grocery store paper and assume you know me.” He bent down, until their gazes were on the same level and his mouth was just a breath away from hers. “I’m not that guy, Casey. There’s more to me than that, just as I assume there’s more to you than the woman who seduced me just to get a DNA sample.”

She tried to pull away again, but wasn’t successful. Jackson stared down into her eyes and felt the tug of the attraction between them arc like a downed power line, sparks flying, hissing, through the air.

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