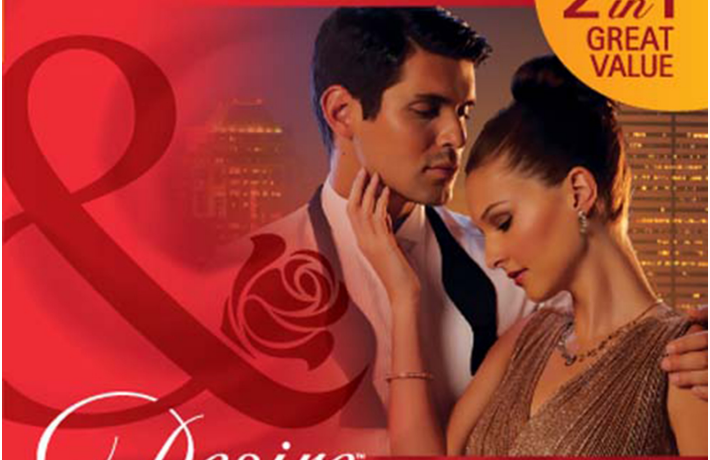
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HIS HEIR, HER HONOUR

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MEDDLING WITH A MILLIONAIRE

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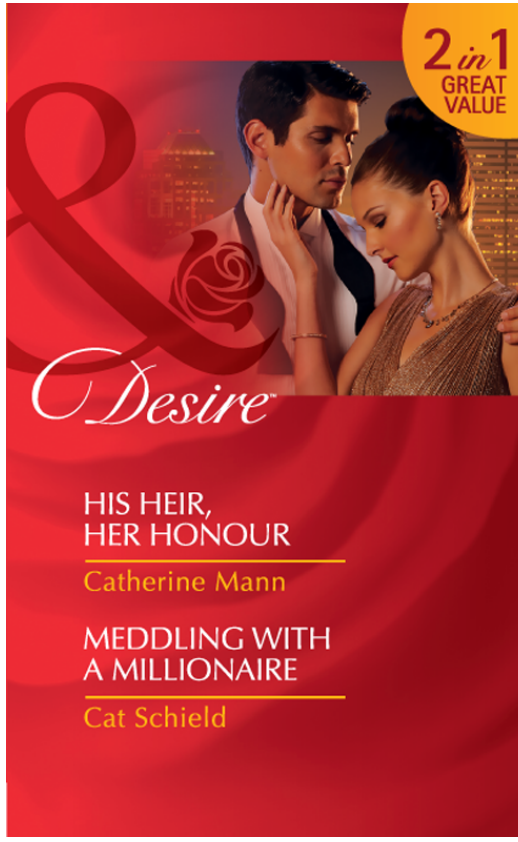
His Heir, Her Honour / Meddling With A Millionaire: His Heir, Her Honour

Аннотация

His Heir, Her Honour Royal and a doctor, Carlos Medina knew he couldn't have children.But Lilah Anderson insisted their night together had resulted in her pregnancy. The mum-to-be had never cheated on her lover; she had given him her heart, asking nothing in return. Now he wanted to marry her – for the sake of the child. Was she asking too much by insisting he give her his love with his ring? MEDDLING WITH A MILLIONAIREEmma Montgomery wouldn't be manipulated into marriage as part of a business deal – not even if Daddy cut off access to her trust fund. The talented jewellery designer would just make her own way. Too bad her intended groom – maverick businessman and former crush Nathan Case – made her stubborn stance so difficult. The heat of his touch had her nearly betraying herself at every turn!

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His Heir, Her Honour
Catherine Mann
Meddling with a Millionaire
Cat Schield

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His Heir, Her Honour

Catherine Mann

“I’m pregnant. Over two months along, and you’re the father.”

Pregnant?

Shock hit him square in the solar plexus. Followed by disbelief. Then jaded acceptance of her betrayal. Just when he’d thought he couldn’t be any more disillusioned by how easily people could deceive others. A bitter laugh rolled around in his gut and burned a bilious path up his throat.

She crossed her arms under her breasts defensively. “If this is some kind of payback for my laughter earlier, I don’t appreciate it. I don’t find this in the least amusing.”

“Believe me, neither do I.”

Her mouth went tight, her anger palpable. “This isn’t going to make much of a story to tell our child some day.”

“Our child? I think not.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the final book in my RICH, RUGGED & ROYAL series! In *The Maverick Prince,* we were introduced to Antonio, the shipping magnate and youngest of the Medina men. In *His Thirty-Day Fiancée,* we saw the second Medina son,

Duarte, meet his match. And now it's time to learn more about the oldest son, Carlos, dedicated doctor and heir to a defunct kingdom.

During the violent coup to overthrow the Medina monarchy, Carlos sustained injuries that left him with a permanent limp and no hope of ever having a family of his own. Or so he thinks! His preconceptions are blown out of the water when his long-time friend and one-time lover surprises him with the news that she is carrying his child, his heir, their future.

I hope you enjoy the last instalment to my Medina trilogy. As always, I enjoy hearing from readers and can be reached through my website, www.catherinemann.com, or at my mailing address, PO Box 6065, Navarre, FL 32566, USA.

Happy reading!

Catherine Mann

About the Author

USA TODAY bestselling author **CATHERINE MANN** is living out her own fairy-tale ending on a sunny Florida beach with her Prince Charming husband and their four children. With more than thirty-five books in print in more than twenty countries, she has also celebrated wins for both a RITA® Award and a Booksellers' Best Award. Catherine enjoys chatting with readers online—thanks to the wonders of the wireless internet that allows her to network with her laptop by the water! To learn more about her work, visit her website, www.catherinemann.com, or reach her by snail mail at PO Box 6065, Navarre, FL 32566, USA.

One

"Cover the family jewels, gentlemen," Lilah Anderson called into the men's locker room at St. Mary's Hospital. "Female coming through."

High heels clicking on tile, Lilah charged past a male nurse yanking on scrubs and an anesthesiologist wrestling with a too-small towel, barely registering the flash of male flank here, masculine chest there. Smothered coughs and chuckles echoed around her in the steamy tiled area, but she remained undeterred.

Completely focused on locating *him.*

No one dared stop her on her way past benches and lockers. As chief administrator of Tacoma's leading surgical facility, she could have any of them fired faster than someone could say "Who dropped the soap?"

Her only problem? A particularly stubborn employee who seemed determined to avoid her every attempt to speak with him over the past couple of weeks. Therefore, she'd chosen the one place she could be certain of having Dr. Carlos Medina's complete attention—a public shower.

The stall tactics would end here and now. And speaking of stalls …

Lilah stepped deeper into the swell of steam puffing around a cream-colored plastic curtain. His secretary, Wanda, had warned that he couldn't be reached since he was washing up after a

lengthy surgery. He would be exhausted and cranky.

Not deterred in the least, Lilah saw this as the perfect opportunity she'd been seeking to corner him. She'd grown up with two brothers, and she would have been left out of everything if she didn't occasionally invade their male inner sanctums. She eyed the line of showers.

Three of the five were in use. The first sported a shadowy, short and round male figure. Not Carlos.

From the second, a balding head peeked around the industrial curtain with shocked green eyes. Also not her surgeon in question.

She nodded to the head of pediatrics. "Good afternoon, Jim."

Jim ducked back into his stall, which left her to focus on the third tiled cubicle. She marched forward, heels tapping almost as fast as her heart.

Stopping, she planted her feet and checked first. Through the plastic folds, she studied the lean outline standing under the spray, scrubbing his hands over his head. Without even pulling aside the curtain, she knew that body well, intimately so.

She'd found him, Carlos Medina—doctor, lover and, as if the guy didn't already have enough going for him, also the eldest son of a former European monarch. His princely pedigree, however, didn't impress her. Long before she knew about his royal roots, she'd been drawn to his brilliance, his compassion for his patients….

And a backside that looked damn fine in scrubs. Or wearing

nothing at all. Definitely not what she needed to think about right now.

Lilah gathered her nerve as firmly as she clenched the curtain and swept it aside, metal rings *clink, clink, clinking* along the rod.

A wall of steam rolled out, momentarily clouding her vision until the mist dispersed and exposed an eyeful of mouthwateringly magnificent *man.* Water sluiced down Carlos's naked body turned sideways, revealing long lean muscles flexing and bunching. And heaven help her, she had a perfect view of the curve of his taut butt.

Beads of moisture clung to his bronzed skin, arms and legs sprinkled with dark hair. No tan lines marked him since he spent most of his time indoors either in surgery or asleep. But his natural olive coloring gave him an allover tanned look, as if he'd bared himself unabashedly to the sun.

As he turned his head toward her in a slow, deliberate move, not even a whisper of surprise showed on Carlos's face. His eyes shone nearly black … heavy lidded … darkly enigmatic. She couldn't suppress a shiver of desire as his intense gaze held hers. Her stomach knotted with a traitorous ache that could only serve to distract her from her mission today.

He raised one thick eyebrow, slashing upward into his forehead. "Yes?"

His subtle Spanish accent saturated the lone syllable like the steam in the air, so hot she felt the urge to ditch the jacket on her power suit.

In the next stall, water shut off in a hurry as the head of pediatrics made a hasty departure from the locker room. Others lingered, backs studiously turned as they retrieved clothing.

Lilah tugged her jacket more firmly in place. "I need to talk to you."

"A telephone conversation would have saved my coworkers some embarrassment." He spoke softly as always, never raising his voice as if he knew innately that people would hang on his every word.

"What I have to say isn't for an impersonal call." And wasn't that the understatement of the year? What she needed to tell him also wasn't for the curious ears behind her, but she would have Carlos alone soon.

All alone?

Static-like awareness popped along her nerves until the hair on her arms rose. Was that an answering spark lighting his dark eyes? Then he blinked away any hint of emotion.

"It does not get much more personal than this, boss lady." He turned off the shower. "Could you pass me that towel?"

She snagged the white cotton draped on a hook. The hospital name and logo were stamped along the bottom. She pitched the towel to him rather than risk an accidental touch. As he looped it around his waist, she couldn't resist staring for a stolen second.

Water soaked his hair even blacker, shiny and swept back from his face. Every hard and hunky angle of his aristocratic cheekbones and nose was revealed. Dark brows slashed over

brown eyes that rarely carried humor, but turned lava lush when he made love to her.

Pivoting, his back to her for the first time, he snagged his shampoo. Her eyes quickly left his slim hips and taut butt, drawn more to the scars along his lower back. In the four years she'd known him, he'd chalked up his permanent limp to a teenage riding accident. The one time she'd pressed him, the first time she'd seen those scars, he'd brushed aside further questions with distracting kisses along her bare skin.

While she was a lawyer and not a doctor, her tenure working at the hospital—and flat-out common sense—clued her in that he'd suffered a major physical trauma.

Toiletries bag tucked under his arm, he leaned toward her. His shoulders, then his eyes, drew her in until the rest of the space faded away. She swallowed hard.

He stared back, unblinking, unflinching. "Let's make this quick."

"Your charm never ceases to impress me."

"If you're looking for charm, you hired the wrong man four years ago." He'd been thirty-six then to her thirty-one, a lifetime ago. "I've spent most of the day repairing the spine of a seven-year-old Afghani girl injured by a roadside bomb. I'm beat."

Unwanted sympathy whispered through her. Of course he was exhausted from the drawn-out, tragic surgery. Even when he caved to his pride and used a chair during extended operations, the toll it took on him was always evident. But she couldn't afford

to weaken now.

They'd been friends for years only to have him turn into a cold jackass because of an impulsive one-night stand together after a Christmas fundraiser. It wasn't like she'd dropped a wedding planner in his lap five seconds after the third orgasm waned.

Yep, *three.* Her toes curled inside her pumps at just the memory of each shimmering release.

The sex had been amazing. Beyond amazing actually, and after that impulsive hookup, she'd envisioned them transitioning into a relationship of friends with kick-ass benefits. A nerve-tingling, *safe* option. But he'd pulled away as fast as he'd pulled on his pants the next morning. He was cold, withdrawn and *painfully* polite.

But she wasn't backing down. "I don't have the time for niceties. I'm just here to say my piece. So grab some clothes and let's talk."

He ducked his head until his voice heated her ear. "You're not the type to create a scene. Let's set up a time to talk when you're calmer. This is already awkward enough."

Her nose twitched at his fresh-washed scent. Yes, she'd chosen an unconventional route for her confrontation, but Carlos Medina's tenacious—stubborn—reputation was legendary. She felt confident the hospital board would cut her a little slack for her scene. And if they didn't? Then so be it. Sometimes a woman had to make a stand.

This was her time. She couldn't afford to wait much longer.

"I'm not setting up an appointment. I'm not delaying this conversation." She lowered her voice, although from the sound of retreating footsteps behind her there must not be many people left. "We talk. Today. The only matter up for discussion is whether we chat right here in front of everyone or if we speak in an office. And believe me, if we stay here, it's going to get a lot more awkward very quickly."

Carlos cocked an eyebrow.

From behind her, a cleared throat echoed, or a stifled laugh perhaps. She looked up at Carlos, suddenly painfully aware of just how close they stood to each other with nothing but a towel covering his oh-so-generous family jewels.

Whispering, she struggled not to back away—or move closer still. Carlos had ignored her for nearly three months, hurtful and flat-out insulting given their friendship. Or rather, their *prior* friendship.

One way or another, she would get a reaction from him. "It's not like I haven't seen you before. In fact, I recall in great—"

"Enough," he silenced her with a word.

"The almighty Medina prince has spoken," she mocked, backing a step to snag surgical scrubs from the top of a stack. "Get dressed. I'll wait."

She thrust the folded green set his way and turned away. A trio of half-dressed men faced her, their jaws slack and eyes wide. The magnitude of the scene she'd caused hit her full on for the first time. She resisted the urge to squirm.

This was too important to show any vulnerability. She just hoped she could maintain enough distance to get through the conversation during their first time alone together in so long. She pressed her fingers to her lips, still unable to forget the rush of passion from their first impetuous kiss, a clench that had led to so much more with lasting consequences.

Once Carlos put on his clothes and they moved to another room, he would learn the truth she'd only just begun to accept herself. A truth she could no longer avoid.

Dr. Carlos Medina was a little over six months away from becoming a princely papa.

Carlos Medina was about six seconds away from losing his temper, something he never, never allowed to happen.

Of course, *he* was the person who needed chewing out for foolishly allowing himself to sleep with Lilah nearly three months ago. He'd wrecked a top-notch working relationship.

Sidestepping a janitor slopping an ammonia-saturated mop over the floor, Carlos followed her down the otherwise empty hospital walkway, wearing fresh surgical scrubs, tennis shoes and ten tons of frustration. Fluorescent lights overhead lined the path down the corridor. Windows flanked either side. Murky late day sun fought to pierce the dreary drizzle outdoors. But his focus was locked in on the woman two steps ahead of him on the way to his office.

His office. Not hers. His territory.

She may have tipped the controls in her favor with the shower

confrontation, but he wasn't giving ground again. His office would also provide guaranteed privacy. Once his Medina name had been exposed, the hospital had been flooded with paparazzi. He'd feared he might have to resign his position in order to ensure the safety of his patients.

But he'd underestimated Lilah.

She'd slapped restraining orders and injunctions on the press in a flash. She'd increased security at the hospital. And she'd moved his office to the farthest corner of the building. Overzealous paparazzi would have to run a gauntlet of two layers of security and a half-dozen heavily populated nurses' stations before reaching his newly relocated inner sanctum. No one in the press had succeeded to date.

Yes, he'd underestimated her then, something he wouldn't do now. He needed every edge he could muster around this woman when all he could think about was her bold entrance into his shower, her gaze raking over his body as if she wouldn't mind a touch. A taste. Maybe even a bite. Damn, but he hadn't expected to see her again without the defense of even a pair of boxers.

The understated twitch of her hips encased in a black power suit held his gaze far longer than any simple passing interest. His eyes glided up the rigid brace of her spine to the vulnerable curve of her neck, exposed with her auburn hair swept into a tight twist. One stubborn curl escaped to caress her ear the way he burned to do even now when he was angry as hell with her.

He'd wanted her for years, but knew she was the one woman

he had to keep his hands well off. She was too insightful, too good of a friend and one who mirrored his workaholic ways. Anything more than a professional friendship would be disastrous. For a man who'd had precious few friends in his life, he'd valued the unexpected camaraderie he'd found with Lilah.

Clearing the hall and entering his reception area, he tore his eyes away from the enticing curve of her butt and nodded to his secretary, an efficient woman with photos of her twelve grandchildren neatly lined up on her desk. "Hold my calls, Wanda, unless it's about the Afghani girl in recovery."

His back twinged with a reminder of just how long he'd spent cleaning up bone fragments along the child's spine, of working to relieve pressure, doing all he could to ensure she had as much use of her arms as possible even though she would almost certainly never walk again. Entering his office, he braced a hand on the door frame, then the sofa, using walls and furniture to steady himself at the end of a long day. His uneven gait contrasted with the efficient click of Lilah's killer red heels.

Skimming her fingers along a row of leather-bound medical journals, she stopped in front of a framed oil painting by Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, a gift from his middle brother, Duarte. The canvas came from Bastida's *Sad Inheritance* preparatory pieces, a painting of crippled children bathing in healing waters.

No matter how much distance Carlos put between himself and his homeland, influences from his heritage called to him. He couldn't escape the reality of being the oldest son of deposed

King Enrique Medina from San Rinaldo, a small island country off the coast of Spain. He couldn't ignore or forget how his father had fled with his family, relocating to live anonymously off the coast of Florida for decades.

Only recently had the press picked up the Medina trail. Carlos and his two brothers, all now adults, lived in different locations across the United States. Until four months ago, they'd even managed to fly under the radar with assumed names.

For most of his adult life he'd been known as Carlos Santiago. Yet in the stroke of a media pen's exposé, it became impossible for people to think of him as anything other than Carlos Medina, heir to a defunct monarchy.

Lilah was the one person who hadn't treated him differently after the news had broken about his Medina heritage. She hadn't been impressed or even angry over his years of deception. She understood his reasons for keeping his identity hidden.

The only question she'd asked after the story broke? As the hospital's administrator, she'd requested verification that all his medical credentials were valid and in order, given his assumed name.

She was a logical woman to the end.

So what the hell made a sensible person like Lilah decide to waltz into the men's locker room and confront him in the shower? A confrontation that still had him imagining scenarios where he pulled her under the spray with him to peel off every stitch of her clothing until she was as naked and hungry as him.

He closed the door to his office, sealing them inside the sparse space. He kept his world streamlined, only bare essential leather furniture, the painting from his brother and his books.

Leaning back against the wall to take pressure off his aching spine, he faced Lilah for the first time since she'd stared him down through a thin veil of mist. Her back was still straight but her face was pale. Very pale.

Worry whispered over him as his doctor senses blared an alert. She was obviously under great stress. Only extreme measures would have driven her to act so rashly. Normally, she calmly presented her case and made her move, with a legal eagle precision that served to make her a top-notch lawyer with a fast-track start to a brilliant career. He should have realized that. He mentally kicked himself for assuming her confrontation had something to do with their encounter two and a half months ago.

Carlos studied her green eyes, noting the dark circles beneath. "Is it bad news about funding for the new rehab wing?"

"This isn't about work…." She hesitated, chewing the red lipstick from her kissably full mouth.

Concern scratched deeper. He pushed away from the door toward her, drawn by threads of their old friendship and the scent of her perfume. If he whispered in her ear again as he had earlier, he would smell a hint of her body wash along her neck. Not a heavy perfume by any means given the hospital's fairly strict rules about scented lotions, soaps and colognes. Just enough pure Lilah to send his heart pumping faster.

Her eyes tracked him and each uneven step, his limp aggravated by the hours he'd spent operating today. Long ago, he'd gotten over any self-consciousness. Life held much more important issues and concerns than whether people noticed the impairment or pitied him. He knew he was damn lucky to be walking at all.

He closed the space between them. "Then what's so important that you felt the need to cause a scene big enough to feed hospital cafeteria gossip for at least a month?"

"It's about what happened after the Christmas fundraiser."

He stopped short. With a few simple words, she filled the room with memories of the night they'd stumbled back here, into his office, then finished the night at his house because it was closer than her condo. The memories were too vivid, so close on the heels of her bold move striding into the shower. Good thing she'd passed him the towel so fast because he'd been damn close to presenting her with an unmistakable visual on how much she still moved him. Turning his back to her under the pretense of gathering his soap had offered him a few seconds to scavenge control of his careening libido.

He'd been reckless enough to cave into the temptation to sleep with her once before. Every day since then, he'd been tormented by reliving that night and knowing just how easy it would be to succumb to temptation again. Still feeling the near-tangible caress of her eyes on him from earlier, he tried to remember all the reasons he should keep his hands off her.

Somehow his finger landed on the lone curl teasing around the shell-like curve of her ear. The softness of her skin, the silky texture of her hair wrapping around his touch as if drawing him closer, each nuance of Lilah tapped aside the paper-thin remains of his restraint.

Awareness glinted in her jewel tone eyes a second before he cupped the back of her neck and stepped toward her, until God help him, every curve of her body pressed to him in a perfect fit. The give of her breasts, the cradle of her hips, the familiar feel of her broadsided his senses with memories of their night together.

"Carlos," she whispered, her palms flat against his chest, pressing, "you're so damn arrogant."

But she swayed into him anyway. His brain shut down a second before he sealed his mouth to hers.

Need knifed through him with surgical precision, sharp and inescapable. She tensed slightly before gripping the front of his scrubs, her fists tight, insistent and more than a little angry as she hauled him closer. The taste of her, the sweep of her tongue meeting his stroke for stroke reminded him of how quickly they could combust. Keeping his distance the past weeks had been necessary and futile all at once.

This was inevitable. Spearing his fingers into her hair, he loosened the tight roll until silken strands cascaded over his skin. How easy it would be to sweep aside her suit and ditch his surgical scrubs. His leather sofa beckoned from across the room.

His desk was closer.

Sweeping his hand along smooth mahogany, he cleared a penholder, calendar and notepad in one efficient swipe that sent the lot clattering to the floor. He angled her back, cupped her bottom, hitched her up onto the edge. He released the top button on her suit jacket, a satiny camisole of some sort gliding over the backs of his knuckles.

Writhing, she moaned encouragement against his mouth and he made quick work of the fastenings, one after the other until he stroked aside the suit coat to reveal her silver, body-hugging shell. He kissed and nipped along her jaw, down her neck, trekking his way to the generous swell of her breasts. His memory hadn't done her justice. As he nuzzled the scented valley, her head lolled back. He tugged her camisole from her skirt and tucked his hand into the waistband, palming the slight curve of her stomach.

Lilah froze in his arms.

The chill radiating off her brought him back to earth like a shower turned icy cold. Months of restraint had gone down the drain in one impulsive moment. He pulled himself from her and leaned against the desk beside her, dragging in air as she yanked her jacket back on with shaky hands, her hair trapped inside.

He needed to fix this mess of his own making. "Lilah, clearly I have made an error in attempting to ignore what happened between us after the Christmas fundraiser. We need to figure out a way to deal with it so we can regain a level working environment."

"Damn straight, it happened." She thrust the buttons through

openings with fierce speed, the fabric flower pin on her shoulder nearly quivering from her barely contained energy. “Believe me, I’m not likely to forget.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration as the only answer pounded through his brain. “My life is complicated in so many ways by virtue of the Medina name. I wish, for your sake, things could be simpler, but they’re not.” Committed to his new course of action, he skimmed her hair free of her jacket. “I think we should consider an intimate friendship.”

Her eyes went wide and unblinking. She sagged back against the desk again, her mouth opening and closing twice before a burst of laughter sliced the air. Wrapping an arm around her stomach, she laughed harder. Her eyes squeezed shut as she shook her head from side to side in obvious disbelief.

“Lilah?” He tucked a knuckle under her chin and turned her face toward him. “This really will be the best option for us to work through this attraction until our lives return to normal.”

Her laughter faded, eyes turning somber. “At one time, I may have agreed with you. But it’s too late for that now, Carlos.”

Disappointment surged through him with more force than he would have expected for his ill-advised plan. He should have approached her sooner. Perhaps she held a grudge that he’d stayed away from her for so long.

Well then, he would dismantle her objections one by one. “I don’t agree.”

“You don’t have all the pertinent information.” She

straightened to her full height, all of about five feet six inches, bringing her to his shoulder even in her heels. “I’m pregnant. Nearly three months along. And you’re the father.”

Pregnant?

Shock hit him square in the solar plexus. Followed by disbelief. Then jaded acceptance of her betrayal.

Just when he’d thought he couldn’t be any more disillusioned by how easily people could deceive others. A bitter laugh rolled around in his gut and burned a bilious path up his throat.

She crossed her arms under her breasts defensively. “If this is some kind of payback for my laughter earlier, I don’t appreciate it. I don’t find this in the least amusing.”

“Believe me, neither do I.” The scars on his back throbbed with a reminder of all he’d lost over twenty-five years ago during his family’s escape from San Rinaldo. He told the world the scars had come from a teenage riding accident. That lie was so much more palatable than the truth.

Her mouth went tight, her anger palpable. “This isn’t going to make much of a story to tell our child some day.”

“Our child? I think not.” If anyone had cause to be angry, it was him. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you’re just mistaken about which guy fathered your baby, because I would hate to think you would deliberately try to pass off some other man’s kid as mine.”

She slapped him, sharp, fast and stingingly hard. “You jackass.”

"Excuse me?" he asked, working his jaw from side to side to give himself a chance to weigh his words and tamp down his temper.

"You heard what I said. Believe me, that was the most benign word on my list right now. We may not be … friends … anymore, but I expected better from you than this." She waved her hand through the air as if that could somehow sum up what had transpired between them a minute earlier. "You may be cold, but I thought you were a man of honor."

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he held back the urge to call her on the accusation. She was pregnant—even if it wasn't his. God, the thought rattled him, especially with the leftover surge of hunger for her still cooling in his veins. So much for friends with benefits.

He forced himself to reign in his anger. "Lilah, I'm sorry. But it is *not* my kid."

She tugged her jacket into place again. "I won't force you to love or acknowledge your child. This baby deserves better than that. He or she deserves better than *you.* I've completed my duty in doing the right thing and letting you know. Now you can go straight to hell."

Something in her voice, the intensity of her anger set off warning bells in his brain. She truly thought the child was his when he knew that couldn't be true. If she had the due date wrong by even a couple of weeks, he could see how she might draw that conclusion. Not that he could think of any other man she'd been

seeing, but then he'd made a point of avoiding her since their night together.

"Listen closely." He gestured toward her stomach. "That is not my baby, which means you do need to speak to the real father."

A surprise bolt of jealousy shot through him as he fully grasped for the first time the fact she'd slept with someone else close to the time they'd been together. His mind scanned the hospital roster for … Damn it, no. He couldn't go down that path right now.

He forced himself to continue speaking, to make her understand. "You're right that the man deserves to know. And that man can't possibly be me." Not after what had happened to him that night on the run in San Rinaldo. Rebel bullets had killed his mother and nearly killed him while he tried to protect her. Tried. And failed.

He held up a hand to keep her from interrupting—or leaving. "The accident that caused my limp had other physical ramifications as well." Carlos forced himself to say the words he hadn't shared with anyone. "Lilah, I'm sterile."

Two

Lilah had faced her fair share of shockers in her years as a city prosecutor and then administrator at the Tacoma hospital. Certainly learning Dr. Carlos Medina had been hiding his royal lineage had stunned her silly. But his words now beat all other surprising revelations, hands down.

Gripping the edge of the mahogany desk to steady her shaky world, she searched Carlos's face for some sign of what possessed the innately honorable man to deny his own child.

Her hand still stung from her impulsive slap when he'd called her a liar. She hated the momentary loss of control then … and during his kiss earlier. No man affected her this way. She'd fought too long and hard not to be won over so easily like her mother. Yet a simple brush of Carlos's mouth against hers and she'd almost ditched her panties again with this man.

A very virile man who now seemed intent on denying the consequences of their encounter.

"You're sterile?" she repeated, wondering if perhaps she'd heard wrong. She *must* have heard wrong because she carried the living proof of his virility inside her. So either he was wrong or he was a coldhearted liar.

"That's what I said." He shifted his weight to one foot in a manner that to most would look casual. But after years of knowing him, she recognized the subtle way he favored his

aching leg and injured back, something he inevitably did when he was under stress.

Carlos Medina was one of those docs with a godlike status around the E.R., the surgeon most likely to pull off a miracle when a gurney wheeled in the impossible. She'd noticed that most people only saw that glow of success and intelligence around him—when they weren't noticing his obvious good looks. Not many people saw past that to detect the fallout of the intense pressure he put on himself. The shifting feet. The tendency to plant his spine against any vertical surface.

Except she could not think of that now. She had too much at stake to get sucked in by all the things she found compelling about this man, not the least of which were these small signs that he was human underneath all that cool professional brilliance.

"Why didn't you say something when we were together that night?" she asked skeptically.

"I didn't see the information as relevant since procreation wasn't on our agenda." His sardonic tone needled at her already tender nerves.

"But you used condoms … even if one failed in the hot tub."

Just thinking of the combustible connection, their total loss of control threatened her balance even now. They'd started in his office, then raced to his home to spend the rest of the night together, awake and making the most of every moonlit minute.

"Safe sex has to do with more than pregnancy," he pointed out practically.

Of course she knew that. She'd freaked when the condom broke, only partially calming down once he'd reassured her he was disease free. Yet in the back of her mind she'd heard the haunting sound of her mother's sobs behind a closed bedroom door. Lilah had been a preteen at the time, but old enough to understand the gist of her parents' fight.

Her father's latest reckless affair had passed along a disease to his wife.

The STD had been treatable, thank heavens, but Lilah had been stunned by how quickly her mother forgave her husband for his infidelity. Again. And again.

Rather than forcing back the memories of her mom, Lilah embraced them for motivation to stand firm now. To push for answers. And to hold Carlos accountable. "This is your child. I don't want money from you and I certainly have no interest in the whole royalty thing. I only want my baby to know his or her father."

"That isn't my baby." His voice echoed with a surety she couldn't miss.

His denial of his own child infuriated her all over again.

"All because of a riding accident when you were a teenager?" She wasn't a doctor but something sounded off in his explanation, in spite of his utter confidence. Still, she couldn't ignore the gravity in his voice, the set serious lines on his aristocratic face.

"The trauma from the accident, coupled with a postsurgical infection, left me sterile. I'm a doctor, in case you've forgotten."

He pulled a leather-bound book from the shelves and dropped it on the desk with a resounding thud. "But if you're still in doubt, there's a full chapter in here that discusses such complications. I'll be more than glad to mark the pages for you. The fact remains, though, that your child must have been fathered by someone else."

A shadow smoked briefly through his eyes, something dark and perhaps angry even, but was gone before she could confirm her impression.

If anyone deserved to be mad here, it was her. She wanted to shout her frustration. She *was* telling the father, whether he believed her or not. "Carlos, you aren't listening to me. There is no one else," she explained slowly, carefully, hoping he would hear the truth in her words even if it revealed her vulnerability in wanting only him. "There hasn't been anyone other than you in eight months."

A frown furrowed his forehead, but his silence encouraged her to continue.

"It is absolutely impossible for me to be pregnant with another man's child. And believe me, I *am* pregnant." Her voice shook for the first time. "I've seen the ultrasound. Our baby is alive and well."

The enormity of how much her life had changed so quickly threatened to overwhelm her. She'd always managed to tackle anything life threw her way, whether it be law school at Yale or standing up to a state supreme court judge.

Never had the stakes felt more important than now as she fought for the tiny defenseless life inside her.

Carlos's eyes relayed sympathy and, even worse, a hint of pity. "You really believe this."

"And you really don't."

Finally, she heard and accepted what he'd been saying since she first told him about the baby. She'd anticipated a number of reactions and prepared her rebuttals as carefully as any legal brief. However, she certainly hadn't foreseen this turn of events. Obviously his doctors had been wrong in their diagnosis of Carlos, and his refusal to even consider the possibility, his insistance on believing she'd lied, cut her to the core.

Disillusionment seeped through her veins like a chilly IV flooding through her system. Even though she'd assured herself she didn't need him, she'd hoped for … something … *anything* more than this.

Their kiss a few minutes earlier meant nothing to him. She meant nothing to him. And she needed to numb herself so *he* meant nothing to her.

Lilah pulled in a steeling breath, a trick she'd learned early on to keep her cool when her insides threatened to bubble over with too much unruly emotion. "I've done my part by informing you. A paternity test after the baby is born will confirm I'm telling you the truth. And you're going to feel like a *royal* jerk when you're faced with the proof."

Determined to leave with her pride, Lilah held her head

high as she fought back the urge to cry over how terribly the confrontation had gone. While she hadn't expected exuberant cheers by any stretch, she'd hoped for acceptance, followed by stalwart emotional support as they agreed to spell out the practical details of bringing a child into the world. Carlos was a private, reserved man, but he'd always been quietly honorable. Even after his cold shoulder recently, she'd expected better from him than this.

She closed the door with a quiet but firm click, wishing her aching heart was as easy to seal off.

The click of the closing door echoed in his ears, along with the first hints of doubt.

Carlos leaned back against his desk, staring at the space where Lilah had stood seconds before. She'd seemed so certain. In all the years they'd known each other, she'd been an honest woman —a boardroom shark in fighting for the hospital—but always frank and truthful. He admired that about her. For years, in fact, he'd used that admiration of her character to temper his more … primal response to her.

What if …

The possibility of actually being a father rocked his balance far more than the injuries that still caused him to limp to this day. He flattened his clammy palms against the legs of his green hospital scrubs.

While he'd engaged in a number of careful affairs over the years, never had he let a woman truly break through his laser

focus on his work. But Lilah was different. He was damn impressed by the way she fought for the hospital, stood up to million-dollar donors and politicians when it came to patients' rights—hell, the way she faced down even him when he dug in his heels too deeply and lost focus on the bigger picture. She had a sharp mind and she wielded it artfully in her profession.

Would she use those same skills against him even now if she thought it would benefit her child?

His father had taught all three of his sons not to trust anyone, anytime. Everybody had a price, including the cousin who had sold out their escape plan. The queen, his mother, Beatriz Medina had died as a result of the ambush that ensued on their way out of San Rinaldo. Carlos had spent his teenage years undergoing surgeries to recover from the gunshot wounds. That he could walk at all was considered a miracle. Doctors told him to be grateful for that much, even if he would never have biological children.

Could he trust Lilah?

As much as he trusted anyone, which wasn't much. God forbid the press should get a hold of this tidbit before he settled the issue. He needed to provide Lilah with concrete proof while keeping matters quiet.

First step, arrange to have the lab run a sperm count test. As much as he balked at the invasion of his privacy, the current results would end this once and for all.

The pesky "what if" smoked through his mind again, the

possibility that through some inexplicable miracle her kid turned out to be his after all. Then, he needed to keep Lilah close at hand until the baby could be tested.

Because if against all odds she carried a Medina, nothing would stop him from claiming his child.

Suddenly weary to her toes, Lilah sagged against the closed door. The reception area outside Carlos's office echoed with emptiness, thank goodness. But there was no telling how much longer before his secretary, Wanda, returned to her desk. Her computer already scrolled a screen saver photo of her dozen grinning grandchildren at the Port Defiance Zoo.

Lilah squeezed her eyes closed. The memory of her argument with Carlos rang in her ears. Her belly churned with nausea, unusual for this late in the day. She still battled morning sickness and, no question, upset emotions made it worse. She curved a hand protectively over her stomach, the baby bump barely discernable so early in the pregnancy. Carlos hadn't even noticed when he'd pulled her camisole from her waistband. But she could feel the changes in her body, the swollen tenderness of her breasts, a heightened sense of smell and an insatiable nightly craving for marinated artichokes, a food she had previously hated. While circumstances were far from perfect, she loved her baby with a fierceness that still overwhelmed her at times.

A lock of hair slithered over her cheek and she realized her French twist must be wrecked from Carlos's hands as they'd kissed in his office. Her nipples tingled in lingering awareness

of just how fast and high he could stoke desire inside her. She plucked pins from her hair and let the rest slide free around her shoulders, not as professional as she preferred at work, but no doubt better than the sexed-up mess she'd been seconds ago.

For her child's sake, she needed to think rationally rather than with her emotions—or her welling hormones. Carlos obviously believed he was sterile and had only her word that the baby was his. While she wanted to think four years of friendship would have convinced him of her trustworthiness, that clearly wasn't the case. He was a reserved and private man by nature. His aloofness—hell, his inaccessibility—the past months let her know their friendship wasn't as deep as she'd believed. That she'd been forced to chase him down in the shower to tell him …

Releasing another trapped breath, she refused to get wound up again. She needed to take a step back from him and wait. Time would prove his paternity.

Content she'd regained even ground, Lilah straightened just as the door to the hall opened. She tucked the handful of bobby pins into her jacket pocket and smoothed a hand over her hair to clear any signs of her clench from Wanda's perceptive eyes. There was a reason they called Lilah "The Iron Lady" around this place, and she intended to keep her reputation intact.

The door opened wider, revealing … not Wanda. Lilah tensed for a second, concerned about the press infiltrating the multiple layers of security she'd put in place. Then she recognized one of their newer radiologists, Nancy Wolcott. Her lab coat sported

multiple decorative buttons on the lapel. Nancy had once relayed she wore the nonregulation "flair" to put her younger patients at ease. She must be working on the surgical case Carlos was so concerned about.

"Hello, Nancy." Thank heaven her voice stayed steady. "Dr. Medina and I just finished our meeting. I'm sure he will be anxious to hear an update on his young Afghani patient from this afternoon's surgery."

"Oh, I'm not on that case." Smiling hesitantly, the willowy brunette straightened a light-up shamrock pin. "Actually, I'm here on a personal note."

Unease feathered over her. "A personal note?"

"I'm here to meet him for dinner. It's after hours, so no worries about an administrative sanction. I'm not on the hospital's clock right now." She shrugged out of her lab coat and draped it over her arm.

Oh, God, Lilah really didn't like where this conversation was headed, and the timing couldn't have been worse. She should have seen this coming. Carlos had never been lacking for dates before his Medina identity became public. He was a hunky, wealthy doctor, after all. Albeit a workaholic, temperamental doc. Women were swarming him now that he'd tacked prince onto his list of attributes.

She scrambled for something to say and a way to get out. Fast. "No one can fault your dedication. I know well how many days you've worked longer shifts when we needed you. Now if you'll

excuse me—"

The younger woman stopped her with a light touch to the arm. "I should explain. Carlos—Dr. Medina—and I have been going out for the past few weeks. We've been careful to keep it under wraps." She adjusted one of the dozen frames on Wanda's desk. "He really hates how intrusive the media can be, so we're waiting for the perfect time for a controlled press release."

No worries about steeling a breath. Nancy Wolcott had knocked Lilah into next year without even trying. Carlos, of course, hadn't said a word about it.

And they'd been dating for weeks, not days, not a onetime outing over coffee. But a relationship that needed a freaking press release.

Lilah bit back bile. "I hadn't heard."

"I wanted to keep it quiet, too. I know he has a reputation for keeping relationships light but I think this might be headed somewhere." Nancy laughed nervously, seemingly oblivious to the fact she was gushing. "Perhaps he kept his distance before, back when he had to maintain his royal background. But now that everything's out in the open about his Medina name, he's free to pursue anyone he wants."

Hearing the infatuation in Nancy's voice, Lilah wanted to hate her, to dismiss her like the royalty groupies who'd come out of the woodwork lately. She longed to find fault in someone who'd captured Carlos's interest when a night of sex with her hadn't moved him in even a passing way.

And yet she couldn't be catty. Nancy didn't know about that night with Carlos. No one did.

Furthermore, of every unattached female on staff, this one seemed least likely to be a gold digger or fame seeker. As a part of her job, Lilah knew the history of each employee. Nancy Wolcott was a nice person who very obviously had stars in her eyes over the new man in her life. Who could blame her?

Perhaps a woman who already had Carlos's child swimming around in utero.

A cold ache gelling inside her, Lilah tuned in to the rest of Nancy's lovelorn ramblings.

"I know I'm probably jumping the gun here, but he's such a gorgeous, moody man. A woman can't help but want to touch those inner depths." Nancy pressed a hand to her heart, her eyes fluttering closed as she inhaled.

Lilah wanted to give the woman a good swift kick in her unrealistic expectations about Carlos Medina. Even when he'd dated in the past, she'd seen how emotionally detached the man could be, something that hadn't changed one bit since the whole "son of a deposed monarch" revelation.

Not that she was surprised. There was no such thing as a fairy-tale ending. Libraries labeled it fiction for a reason. She'd seen firsthand with her parents how quickly love soured, how easy it was for a woman to turn into a pathetic moony-eyed doormat.

Her father had used his job as a Hollywood agent to seduce countless wannabe starlets. To this day his wife—Lilah's mother

—did her level best to ignore the indiscretions that messed with her perception of happily ever after with her hunky, rich dream man. On occasion, the bimbo of the month set her eyes on a ring or got angry when the contracts didn't flow in and would confront the Mrs., forcing her to face her husband's infidelities.

A fight would ensue. Tears would flow. He would offer up jewelry or a romantic getaway to "reconnect" and all would be forgiven until the next time when they repeated the same dysfunctional cycle all over again—leaving Lilah with two drawers jam-packed full of tourist T-shirts brought home by her lovey-dovey parents. In fact, her parents were on one of their make-up cruises now, and once they returned she would have to tell them about the baby.

About Carlos?

Listening to Nancy detail her evening with Carlos at the symphony, Lilah had to accept that the woman wasn't blowing anything out of proportion. He really had asked her out on honest-to-God dates. Not that Lilah had entertained dreams of such with him. But damn it, they had slept together. They had been friends before that. And while he wasn't the warm fuzzy kind, she deserved better from him than the way he'd treated her since their one-night stand.

She definitely deserved better than what she'd experienced in his office a few short minutes ago.

Nancy eyed his door warily. "I hope he's not in a bad mood after your confrontation."

Shock jolted her already ragged nerves. Nancy couldn't possibly know about the baby. Had someone been outside the door listening? Wanda, perhaps?

As she calmed down enough to look at Nancy's curious face, she realized the woman was just that—curious. She wasn't shocked or mad, none of the reactions that would be normal if she'd heard rumors that her new "boyfriend" had fathered a child with someone else. "I assume you're referring to the incident in the men's locker room."

"I'm sorry." Nancy pulled up straighter, fidgeting with her logo buttons until they were all cockeyed. "I shouldn't have said anything. I didn't mean to be so chatty."

Lilah eased between her and the exit. "I'm truly curious how you heard this quickly. Please, be frank."

Nancy winced. "I heard in the cafeteria. The buzz is pretty intense as people try to figure out what he did to make you that angry. Bets are being taken for possible reasons."

"And what would those guesses be?"

She nibbled her lip, hesitating for a moment before continuing warily. "Most think you're upset because he blew off that board meeting earlier this week. Others wonder if you're freaking out over him taking on too many pro bono cases. For what it's worth, my money's on the latter. He's such a bighearted man under that gruff exterior."

Lilah gripped the bobby pins in her pocket so tight they would probably leave holes in her fingers. "Hope you didn't bet the bank

on that because you'll lose your life's savings."

If the hospital rumor mill was already churning over one confrontation—granted, a pretty theatrical one—she hated to think how soon her own personal life would be fodder for cafeteria gossip. Good God, she would have to be so much more careful to protect her child's privacy. For the first time it really sunk in that she was carrying a royal child, a person who would be dogged by the press for a lifetime.

Would the news of her child fit on the same press release as Carlos's new girlfriend?

Panic roiled. So much for her decision to opt for an even-keeled "wait and see" attitude. She'd been fooling herself. Her visceral reaction to this woman made it clear too many emotions were involved already.

She needed to keep on fighting rather than letting him roll over her. She would not let her child be hurt by Carlos. She would shield this precious life as best she could from the pain of a father's neglect.

The click of a turning doorknob snapped her attention back to the reception area a second before Carlos's office door opened, the man of the hour filling the frame with his broad shoulders. A flash of surprise raced across his dark eyes.

Anger, frustration and, hell yes, hurt chased through her. Quickly, she stifled the urge to vent the steam building inside her. She'd already made a large enough scene for one day, and she didn't intend to let Carlos know just how deeply he'd wounded

her.

That didn't mean she had to balk at making him squirm.

Lilah flicked her loose hair, hair mussed by him during their out-of-control kisses, over her shoulder. "Hello again, Dr. Medina. I was just talking to your new girlfriend."

Three

The shots just kept coming today.

Carlos looked from one woman to the other. How much had Lilah said before he interrupted? Apparently not much since Nancy appeared blessedly oblivious. She was a nice person he'd gone out with a couple of times in hopes of erasing Lilah from his memory.

Nancy was everything he wanted in his personal life. She was intelligent, witty, with common interests and made no demands on his emotions. She should have been perfect for him, except she left him cold. Rather than helping him move on from that colossal mistake, the presence of his "girlfriend" reminded him of just how much every woman paled alongside Lilah.

He'd been planning to break things off with Nancy tonight, even before today's shocking revelation. Continuing to see her when he had unresolved issues with Lilah wasn't fair. Damn shame he hadn't spoken to Nancy a day earlier.

The new radiologist looked from Carlos to Lilah and back again, confusion stamped on her face. "I don't mean to interrupt if you two need to talk business. I can always come back later for our dinner date."

Carlos nodded. "That would be best."

"All righty." She arched up on her toes as if to give him a quick kiss, then paused.

Either she realized such a public display of affection would be inappropriate in the workplace—or she saw Carlos's scowl. Regardless, the woman got the message and pulled away fast.

He caught Lilah's raised eyebrow and added, "Actually, I have an appointment I need to take care of as soon as I check on my patient."

He'd contacted his doctor and the lab about checking his sperm count. He already felt certain of the outcome, but he needed to confirm for Lilah's sake.

And if by some fluke he could father children? Then he would tuck aside his reservations about the way she unsettled his world and launch an immediate campaign to win her over. No half measures, he would be all in, 24/7, until they settled things between them once and for all.

Turning away from Nancy, toward Lilah, he took in her tumbled hair, remembered how it got that way, felt the inevitable kick to his balance. "We will be talking again tomorrow."

Leaving the hospital lab, Carlos walked down the corridor back to his office in a daze. It had been a helluva day. He'd started out operating on a child who reminded him too much of himself, a child caught in the crossfire of war. Before he'd found even five minutes to regain his footing, Lilah had swept aside his shower curtain. Now, his day had ended with the surprise revelation from his own doctor. Not definitive results, by any means, but there was a very slim chance he could father children.

Even the possibility rocked him to the core. He needed time

to hole up in his office and plan his next move.

He rounded the corner. Nancy waited beside the door, shuffling from foot to foot while she texted on her cell phone. Apparently she'd been busy while he was gone. She'd changed from her work clothes into a dress—a silky sort of thing for a nice dinner out.

There was no way he could sit through dinner waiting for the right opening to break things off. He needed to make his position clear now. It was the only fair thing to do for Nancy and Lilah.

"Nancy, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"No need to apologize." She tucked her cell phone into her tiny black bag. "I was just telling my best friend about our date tonight."

He winced. "About that." He pushed open his office door. "Let's step into my office so we can talk."

"Oh, um, it's too late in the evening, isn't it?" She scrunched her nose and stayed in the hall. "You need to cancel. I understand. We can go out tomorrow instead. Or how about I cook you dinner —"

"Nancy," he cut her ramble short as gently as possible. "I'm afraid I've given you the wrong impression. This isn't something we should discuss in the hall."

She chewed her lip for a second before smiling, too brightly. She charged into the office ahead of him. He felt bad for misleading her. He'd made a mess of his personal life. He couldn't change the past, but starting now, he could make things

right.

As he followed, he decided no more hesitation. No more avoidance. Just as he needed to be clear with Nancy now, he should have settled things with Lilah before.

He wouldn't make the same mistake again. As soon as he finished this confrontation with Nancy, he would go straight to Lilah's—tonight, not tomorrow—and tell her the results of his lab test.

Standing in the open doorway to her penthouse condo, Lilah wished she'd checked the peephole first. But then why hadn't the doorman rang to let her know Carlos was on his way up? Even royalty shouldn't be given a free pass into her building.

Granted, she wouldn't have sent Carlos away, but she would have liked a second to prepare herself before facing him again.

Corridor sconces bathed him in a halogen glow as he waited. Moisture from the light rain clung to his hair and glinted on the hint of silver at his temples. Too easily, she could envision him damp from his shower earlier. Except now he wore clothes. His long trench was open, revealing his gray suit, red tie trekking down his chest the way her fingers itched to mimic.

The hall echoed with intimate silence, everyone else tucked in for the night inside their units in the restored waterfront building. Carlos had been here in the past for informal gatherings, drop-ins and dinner parties, but always with others. Never alone.

Totally alone. Like now.

She gripped the brass doorknob tighter. "I thought you said

we would be speaking tomorrow."

The scent of the salty outdoor air clung to him, teasing her nose.

"My appointment took care of itself faster than I expected." Palm flattened to the door frame, he looked past her shoulder into her condo. "We should step inside."

Even fully covered in silky sleep pants and matching green paisley top, she was too aware of the nighttime, her PJs and *him.* "It's polite to ask to be invited in rather than demand."

His jaw flexed with irritation. "Let's stop with the word games. We have important business to discuss."

Of course, he was right. She just resented that he'd caught her unawares, dictating the time and manner of their meeting. "Come inside, then. But don't get too comfortable. It's been a long—" *disappointing* "—day. I'm tired."

Careful to step well clear of him, she pressed her back against the hall rather than risk an accidental brush of her body and his. His uneven gait thudded against the freshly restored hardwood floors as he walked deeper into her condominium. She loved her two-bedroom haven full of character from the whitewashed brick walls to the soaring ceiling with exposed beams and a loft office. A wall of windows revealed the twinkling lights of the Tacoma skyline, historic Foss Waterway and a fog-ringed mountain in the distance.

Shrugging out of his trench coat, Carlos stopped just shy of her burgundy sofa, half in, half out of her place, much

like he kept himself from committing to any people, emotions, relationships. “About Nancy—”

She cut him off with the wave of her hand. “I don’t care who you date.” And maybe if she kept saying it often enough, she would believe it. “That’s your business and has nothing to do with us. We were never a couple. You and I have nothing more to say to each other outside of hospital business until after the paternity test.”

“Nancy and I are not an item, never were,” he ignored her final jab, sticking to the point he seemed determined to press. “We had a couple of casual dates, and I’d already decided to break things off before today.”

“How convenient, but still not relevant.” She padded closer to him, her bare feet whispering along the cool, bare flooring. “If that’s all you came to say, then we’re done.”

She pointed to the door.

He flung aside his trench to rest on the back of a striped chair and clasped her wrist in a big but gentle grip. Silently, slowly, *deliberately,* he folded her arm back against her chest, which brought him closer to her. His eyes turned smoky with intensity….

And focused on her mouth.

Her heart somersaulted in her chest. “Don’t even go there, Carlos,” she warned, but didn’t pull away. “Any urge to kiss you evaporated once you refused to believe me about the pregnancy.”

Teasing his thumb along her speeding pulse, he stilled her

again with his eyes. “I came here to tell you that I’m willing to entertain the possibility this could be my baby.”

The sensual tug, the raspy allure of his callused fingers on her skin sidetracked her, delaying her brain from absorbing his words for three, needy heartbeats.

Then awareness faded from her body as his words penetrated, followed by realization of the reason for his surprise visit. She leaned nearer, her breasts so close to his chest a simple deep inhale could skim her tingling nipples against him.

She kept her breathing shallow, even as she lowered her voice into a husky whisper sure to heat his exposed neck. “Got a sperm count check, did you? That was quick.”

A fleeting dry smile twitched his mouth. “It helps having connections in the medical world.”

Confirmation of her suspicion didn’t make her feel one bit better. He wasn’t here because he had a change-of-heart decision to trust her word. He’d gotten his proof. While she understood on an intellectual, practical level, she was currently feeling anything but sensible.

Let alone amenable.

“How nice for you.” She wrenched her wrist from his grip, wrapping her arms around herself and stalking to the window wall. “What a shock it must have been that you still have swimmers.”

“How nice that you find my medical history so amusing.”

“I don’t find any of this at all funny. Particularly your

insinuations about my honesty earlier." She half looked back at him over her shoulder. "Have you let your new girlfriend know?"

Ouch, she hadn't meant to bring up the whole Nancy issue again and sound—God forbid—jealous. She looked away quickly before he could see any betraying emotions on her face.

His footsteps echoed behind her, closer, the sound and feel of him too familiar. "I told you already." He stroked back her hair from her ear. "I broke things off with her."

Goose bumps rose on her skin, twinkling boat lights on the water blurring as everything faded but the sound of his breathing, the light skim of his fingers. Good God, his surgeon hands had such a capacity for minute movements, meticulous attentiveness until he turned even an inch of her shoulder into a volatile erogenous zone.

"Well, she should know you can still—"

Her words hitched up short on her next breath, heat flooding through her body and pooling low. The crisp scent of him—night air and ocean breeze—drew nearer, stronger, until she flattened her hand against the cool windowpane to steady herself.

He cupped her shoulders in broad, careful hands and turned her to face him. "She does not need to be informed."

Did that mean they weren't sleeping together or that he'd been more careful? She tried not to care about the answer, hating that he had such power over her feelings. The way her temperature spiked when she simply looked at him, the sensation of the room shrinking to just the two of them. All too easily she could lose

sight of how important it was to keep her head clear.

Shifting her focus from herself to her child, she asked, "What did the doctor have to say?"

His fingers slid down the length of her arms before he tucked his hands into his trouser pockets. "I can give you the lengthy technobabble about motility and counts if you wish. But while chances are very low I can father a child," he swallowed hard, "the chance does exist."

That simple slow swallow spoke emotional volumes from such an aloof man. Sympathy for him stirred against her will. What a shocker this day must have been for him on a number of levels, which didn't excuse the way he'd betrayed their friendship over the past few weeks with his aloof behavior. But still, the hurt and disappointment eased at having him backtrack. Now, finally, they could make plans for their baby.

She chewed her lip, tasting toothpaste from her earlier attempt to brush away the persistent memory of his kiss. "I realize this must be a big surprise for you—"

"My feelings are irrelevant," he charged over her, his face set again in a mask she'd seen him don during especially taxing surgeries. "I spoke with a GYN colleague and we can have a chorionic villus sampling done in your twelfth to fourteenth week of pregnancy to determine paternity."

An early paternity test? He *still* doubted her? So much for sympathetic leanings on her part.

Anger starched up her spine again vertebrae by vertebrae.

"Fine. You've said what you came here for—"

"Actually, I haven't finished."

"Well, good for you. However, I've had more than enough of your company for one day."

"That's my point. Today hasn't gone well for either of us. And regardless of how that test comes out, we're going to be tied to each other, whether through the pregnancy or through work. I'm assuming you have no intention of changing jobs and neither do I."

"That hasn't stopped you from being a jerk since December." She jabbed him in the chest with her pointer. "Other people—" *like Nancy* "—may be willing to put up with your moodiness because you were a hospital legend even before you turned out to be some kind of royalty, but I happen to think that excuses nothing."

"You're absolutely correct on all counts." His angular face creased with the first smile she'd seen from him in so long, longer than she could remember. The power of it was so much stronger than it should be.

Her arm fell to her side. "Pardon me?"

"You heard me." He stroked back a lock of her hair then withdrew his hand before she could object. "You're right. I've been a—what did you say earlier?—a jackass."

She sank onto her sleek red sofa, trying to process this latest surprise turn from him, tough to do when he scattered her thoughts with a simple touch or heated look. "What brought you

around to my way of thinking?"

Settling onto the gray-and-white striped chair beside her, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees—closer to her. "Actually, seeing you and Nancy in the office together. I should have given our impetuous night together some closure before moving on."

Stunned anew, she bit her tongue, afraid if she spoke, his surprising chattiness would dry up as quickly as it started.

"I still stand by what I said the morning after we were together." He stared at her intently, his linked hands so close to her legs if she even twitched, they would make contact. "I shouldn't have let things go that far between us, but I also shouldn't have assumed things could return to normal either."

She refrained from mentioning the past months had brought anything but a return to normal. He'd become even more of a workaholic than normal, leaving not even a free half hour for a simple shared coffee as they'd done in the past. Although apparently he'd found time for dates with Nancy Wolcott.

Damn, that green-eyed monster was a tenacious beast. "What is your point?"

"We have about a week's window before the paternity test to find even ground. I propose that we make the most of it."

Suspicion prickled. Could he be making a move on her because of that kiss? While she might have caved to the temptation of that passionate clench a few weeks ago, now that she knew about the baby she needed to be more cautious. "Make the most of it in what way?"

"Let's both take a week of vacation. We leave Washington and work behind to focus 24/7 on clearing the air."

Except he never took time off. Ever.

His offer to step away from the hospital rocked her, and also made her wonder if he could actually be serious. Her own calendar was packed solid. However, he had a point about the future. And she already knew how that paternity test would turn out. This truly could be her only chance to resolve her feelings for Carlos. Her only chance to protect her heart for the many times she would have to face him in the coming years.

"A week off from the hospital," she parroted, needing confirmation even if she didn't know what she would do once she got it. "Just you and me?"

"That's what I said." He nodded curtly, a lock of hair sliding across his forehead. He worked such insane hours he even missed regular haircuts.

"What about your patients? And what about the little girl you operated on this afternoon?"

"My part in her medical plan is complete. As for my other cases, everything can be handled by doctors on staff."

Heaven knows there were plenty of physicians who owed him for the times he'd stepped in for them and countless holidays spent on call so they could be with their families.

Still, she didn't quite trust he would simply drop everything in Tacoma. There must be a catch. "Where would we go?"

"How about Colorado? My family owns a house there."

Panic tickled. “Who else lives there?”

“No one. It’s a resort property. It’s empty now and completely at our disposal.”

Alone? Just the two of them? While she wasn’t ready for a meet-the-parents moment, she also wasn’t sure total isolation with her hot onetime lover was such a brilliant idea either.

Although memories of what a jerk he’d been today could provide plenty of protection. Then she thought of the tiny life growing inside her and knew she didn’t have any choice. Certainly this was a surprise baby at a time when she’d begun to wonder if perhaps motherhood wasn’t in the cards for her. But from the moment she’d seen the heart fluttering on the ultrasound, she’d known she would do anything, absolutely *anything* for her child.

Including spend seven tempting days alone with Carlos Medina.

Outside Lilah’s condo building, Carlos closed the door on his Mercedes SUV and hooked his arm over the steering wheel.

Puget Sound stretched out beyond his windshield, hazy through the misty rain. Through the tinted windows, he soaked in the sight, gaining some mystical comfort from the light roll of waves.

Water locales drew him, his brothers as well, likely because it reminded them of their island homeland of San Rinaldo. His middle brother, Duarte, had left their father’s fortress to scoop up seaside investment resorts before settling in Martha’s

Vineyard. Antonio, the youngest Medina son, had been drawn to the warmer climate of Galveston Bay, where he'd become a shipping magnate. Ironically, even their half sister, Eloisa, spent most of her life in Pensacola, Florida, before settling with her new husband in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

He could only conclude that the shores called to something centuries old in their genetics. The scientist inside him didn't make so much as a peep in protest of the illogical thought. He felt the proof surging through his veins. Only once had he felt anything as strong—the night he'd spent with Lilah. The past few months he'd been fighting the temptation to lose himself in her again. He'd tried to move on.

Today had proved his failure on that front all too well. Now, he had a full week with her. Seven days to level things with her, setting the course for the rest of his life. He would either tie her to him so they could parent their child or work her out of his system so he could walk away if she'd lied about the baby's paternity.

To accomplish his goal, he needed to get her away from here, in a setting under his control, no surprises from work or the press.

He fished his phone from the inside of his suit coat and thumbed speed dial for his brother Duarte, the next in line after him for their father's tarnished crown.

Before the second ring even finished, his brother's voice came across speakerphone, "Speak to me, brother."

Carlos didn't bother apologize for calling late, even more so for Duarte who was three hours ahead on East Coast time. He

and his siblings didn't speak every other day by any means, but when one called, they dropped everything else.

"Just calling to check up on our father." Enrique Medina had been near death for over six months from a failing liver. "How's he doing?"

"Still holding on. He's tough. I'm starting to wonder if maybe he will beat this after all."

Carlos knew the poor odds too well from a medical perspective so he opted to switch the subject instead. "I may be coming for a visit in a few days. I'm not going to say anything to him until I'm sure—" *sure if the baby is mine* "—but want to give you the heads-up."

"Just name the time and Kate and I will be there."

The sound of rustling sheets and a sleepy female mumble echoed through the phone line. Duarte was engaged to a reporter, a surprisingly illogical choice, especially given his brother's usual methodical ways. But he'd fallen and fallen hard. There'd been no doubting that when Carlos had seen him with her at Antonio's wedding a couple of months ago.

Normally, he balked at returning to the isolated compound where they'd relocated after escaping San Rinaldo, so many bad memories linked to their new "home." The island complex had been outfitted with a top-notch physical rehab center, where he'd spent most of his teenage years. His brothers had been his only friends during those days, and even so with the surgeries and recoveries, there hadn't been much time to learn about

relationships.

Although he felt anything but "brotherly" around Lilah.

His gaze shifted from the shoreline to the historic brick complex housing Lilah's restored condo. "I may be bringing someone with me."

"Care to share details?"

"Not yet."

Looking up to the tenth floor—the penthouse—he could swear he saw Lilah outlined in her window for a second before she clicked off the light. Preparing for bed? He hardened at the thought of peeling off her clothes. Lowering her onto the mattress. Imprinting himself on her. And hoping like hell that baby was his so he could take Lilah again and again, and damn the consequences to his carefully constructed world.

He hauled his attention off her condo and back to the conversation. "She and I are going to spend some time together over the next few days while I check on a couple of Father's holdings."

Enrique owned investment properties around the U.S., and even a few outside the States. Savvy financial purchases, yes, but they'd also been bought to create more confusion over where the deposed king had settled.

Enrique had already begun parceling off parts of his estates to each of his sons. While Carlos couldn't have cared less about any inheritance, he saw the wisdom in protecting the family interests if for no other reason than he could donate additional monies to

the charities of his choice. He could make it possible for more children to receive the surgeries they needed, to have a chance at enjoying their youth in a way he couldn't.

However, he refused to wallow in self-pity or bemoan all he'd lost. He preferred to charge forward and take control of the future, and normally he succeeded. Except on a day like today, the past, the injury, the acute cut of loss, were thrown in his face in an unavoidable way. Flexing his aching leg, he pushed back the temptation to imagine the face of an infant, his child.

God help Lilah if she'd lied to him.

And God help him if she hadn't. Because then he couldn't seal himself off from the past with a solitary existence any longer.

"Duarte, I'll keep in touch. Sleep well, my brother."

He disconnected the call, his eyes drawn up to the darkened penthouse where Lilah slept. Alone for tonight, but not much longer.

Tomorrow, he would begin his campaign to get back in her good graces with a trip to the family lodge in Vail, Colorado. Hopefully a few intimate nights by the fire would melt her walls and burn away the cold fist that had stayed lodged in his chest since the morning she'd left his bed.

Four

Lilah had been running full-out since the minute she'd rolled out of bed this morning. The day had been jam-packed with continuous phone calls to the hospital in attempts to clear her schedule for a week while she packed, dressed and prepped her condo for her reckless getaway with Carlos.

Now, ensconced in his limousine on the way to the airport, the enormity of what she'd done washed over her until her fingers dug deeply into the supple leather seat.

Late-day rain pattered on the limo's clear sunroof, streaks muting the already cloudy sky. Much like her nerves, it made her apprehension all the worse. She could barely believe she'd agreed to this crazy plan of his, an impulsive idea so unlike the normally methodical man. Perhaps that's why she'd agreed. He must be every bit as thrown by life as she was right now to even suggest such a plan.

Although he looked anything but rattled as he checked updates from the hospital on his phone. While he may have transferred his cases to another physician, he obviously hadn't off-loaded the concerns from his mind. Intense concentration furrowed his brow, his dark, chocolate-brown eyes taking on a distant look as he stared out the window, his mind obviously still on his young patients.

Even in casual jeans and a black cable sweater, he was one

hundred percent in charge. His dedication softened her heart, which kept her from tapping on the privacy window and asking the chauffer to take her home.

Today, Carlos was particularly involved in checking up on his very young patient from yesterday's surgery. The deep, low rumble of Carlos's bass filled the roomy limo with his exotic Spanish accent. Even with the blast of the vehicle's heater, the chill of the damp day seeped into her and made her ache to cuddle into the heat of the warm-blooded—undoubtedly hot—man beside her.

Her cashmere blend dress suddenly itchy against her oversensitive skin, she scratched the back of her neck, tucking her hand under the concealed zipper.

Carlos clipped his phone to his jeans and turned his attention toward her. "I assume everything is fine for you to travel. I didn't even think to ask last night and I should have. My apologies."

His concern touched her. "I spoke with my doctor this morning to be sure. And yes, travel is fine or I wouldn't be here. I packed my vitamins and am taking care of myself."

"Would you like something to drink? Some spring water?" He gestured to the gleaming silver minifridge. "A light snack?"

"No, thank you." Her hands were trembling so much she would likely spill it anyway. "Maybe later."

"Any morning sickness?" he asked in his oh-so-familiar physician tone.

"Some," she responded slowly, curious as to his grilling. "The

nausea's not pleasant, to say the least, but tolerable."

Suspicion niggled as she wondered if his questions had more to do with relegating her to a safe, distant role of patient rather than genuine concern for her, for their baby.

Hurt grated against her already ragged nerves. "Why the sudden interest in this pregnancy? Are you searching for clues that I'm not as far along as I say? Is that what this trip is really all about? You must realize a person can travel 'til nearly the eighth month."

He stretched his arm along the back of her seat, inches away from encircling her shoulders. The scent of him mingled with leather and new car smell. "Let's not begin a fight. This time together is about finding common ground."

While he was right on that point, resentment still simmered. "How can you simply shut down unpleasantness in a snap? I'm not accustomed to compartmentalizing my life that way."

"How then do you function during a crisis at the hospital?" he retorted without missing a beat.

"That's different." Wasn't it? "That's a unique moment in time. Life isn't one continual crisis."

He grunted noncommittally. "If you say so."

Was her pregnancy being relegated to crisis level? So, then, what was this time with her through his eyes? Damage control? "Surely you must have some way to relax, making time to lower those thick walls you put around yourself."

A one-sided grin creased his cheek but never reached his eyes.

"Letting down your guard is highly overrated, not to mention dangerous."

Dangerous? A pall settled over their conversation. "Because you're royalty?"

Which meant her child was a royal as well. She resisted the urge to lean back into the safety, the protection, of the hard-muscled beam of his arm.

He teased a lock of her loose hair. "Ah, you remember my Medina roots after all."

"That's a strange thing to say."

His head tipped to the side, his smoky eyes raking her with an appreciative gaze. "I appreciated the way you didn't treat me differently after the news story broke about my family's hidden identity."

The compliment soothed her raw nerves and also made her wonder. "Is that why things changed between us, why you made a move on me at the party?"

Hesitating, he scrubbed a hand over the five o'clock shadow already peppering his strong, square jaw. "In part. You were the one person who didn't want to talk about San Rinaldo."

Because she'd seen how people suddenly treated him differently. She'd noticed how uncomfortable the kowtowing made him. And, quite frankly, she'd found his work at the hospital to be infinitely more admirable than any royal fortune or regal bloodlines.

That he preferred anonymity to media attention impressed her

all the more. “Thank you, Carlos.”

“For what?”

“For telling me that.” For helping reassure her going with him now was the right thing to do. She needed these insights as to what made Carlos tick. She needed this trip.

She needed *him.*

Her eyes fell to his mouth, a strong masculine slash that could turn so tender on her bared body. Memories flooded her mind of the first time he’d kissed her at the hospital fundraiser, standing out on the balcony with a romantic flurry of snow casting a crystal sheen on everything around her. The second Carlos’s mouth had covered hers, she’d been warmed to her toes.

Like the heat rekindling in her veins now.

It would be so easy to lean into him, to recapture that magical connection. What a mixed blessing these feelings were. What she felt with him surpassed anything she’d experienced before, but that meant all other men paled in comparison. She ached from wanting something so wrong for her. They still had so much left unsettled. He still didn’t trust her.

But an answering blaze flared in his eyes.

The patter of the rain closed out everything but the sound of their breathing, the brush of his thigh along hers as he shifted. Carlos dipped his head silently, close but not near enough to make contact. Clearly he was letting her know he wanted to kiss her every bit as much as she wanted him, but was leaving the next move up to her. Her thudding heartbeat echoed in her ears

as the moment ticked out.

Did she dare say to hell with it all? Make the most of this time together before the baby complicated matters further? Indulge herself in the unsurpassed pleasures she'd found with Carlos?

The spacious limousine became full of possibilities. She could straddle his lap and take control with ease, thanks to the dress she wore. Or she could lean back and invite him to stretch his muscular length over her. The tingling need skipping through her veins gathered between her legs until she pressed her knees together against the sweet ache.

The limo slowed, turning off the highway and signaling the nearing end of their drive. A flush burned up her face as she realized how close she'd come to throwing herself at Carlos. She inched toward her door, tugging the hem of her sapphire cashmere dress securely over her knees until it touched the tops of her black leather boots.

Carlos angled away and back to his side, supple leather seat crackling softly under the give and shift of bodies. Just as it would have sounded had she acted on her desire to have him here and now. Every sound, each nuance, felt so intimate in light of the time they would be spending together.

The luxury vehicle rocked gently as the car slid to a stop. They'd arrived at the airport, and while they would leave the confines of the car soon, they were simply exchanging the solitude of the limo for the seclusion of a private jet.

Before she could stem her fluttering nerves, the driver opened

the passenger door, holding an umbrella over her head to protect her from the light drizzle. She swung her feet out, her eyes sweeping the small, private airport, a simple one-story red brick building with four hangars and a lone runway. A Learjet swooshed upward into the murky sky.

A pair of businessmen with matching black umbrellas rushed toward the covered walkway. A family of four huddled underneath the shelter as an SUV rumbled toward them. Lilah couldn't tear her eyes from the frazzled family tableau. While the father snagged his son from stomping galoshes through a puddle, the mother scooped up a toddler in a yellow duck raincoat that swallowed the child so fully it was impossible to determine gender.

Her hand gravitated to her stomach and she swallowed back a betraying sigh. But it was difficult to stem the flood of hopeful images, especially when Carlos had already made a first step toward opening up.

Warily hopeful, she shifted her attention to the tiny terminal where they would officially launch their journey. A woman stood by the door with a tomato-red umbrella. Actually an umbrella with a tomato stem on top, with a familiar female waiting and waving underneath the bright shelter.

Lilah stumbled on the curb.

It couldn't be….

But a closer look confirmed her suspicion. None other than Nancy Wolcott, Carlos's supposedly "ex" girlfriend, waited at the

airport entrance.

Holy hell.

Wincing, Carlos scrubbed his bristly jaw. What was Nancy Wolcott doing here at the private airport?

And clearly waving at them.

Her presence didn't make sense. He had made himself clear, in a polite fashion. They were both adults. She'd seemed to understand. Yes, she'd seemed disappointed and expressed regret, but not overly so.

He took the offered umbrella from the chauffer and slid under alongside Lilah. Her gasp let him know she'd seen the woman too and was none too happy. The timing couldn't have been worse. All the progress he'd made on the ride over was blasted to bits now. His body was still strung taut with desire and images of how easy it would have been to lean Lilah back on the leather seats….

He cut the thought short and focused on the mess at hand. Planting a hand on the small of Lilah's back, he steered her with him, toward the airport entrance. Toward the waiting train wreck.

"Yoo-hoo," Nancy called, her waving intensifying, raindrops sliding from the umbrella faster in her animation. "Over here!"

He shot a quick assessing glance at Lilah and found her lips thin and tight with irritation, her boots clicking in a snappy fast pace he recognized as angry. He'd heard the same stomping rhythm before as she left a particularly frustrating board meeting. Now was not the time to ponder the reason he knew her well

enough to read the mood of her footsteps.

Stopping beside Nancy, Carlos reined in his own frustration over the woman's surprise arrival.

Nancy's smile widened. "What perfect timing. I'm so glad I caught you before you left, Carlos."

Lilah stayed silent, but Carlos had different plans. There were important details to learn before he sent Nancy on her way. "How did you know to come here? And what time?"

"It's not a state secret, is it? I just wanted to tell you goodbye." She stared at Lilah curiously, closing her umbrella slowly and shaking it dry. "I didn't realize the two of you would be traveling together. You didn't tell me that yesterday, Carlos."

Blown away by the way she'd shown up here when he'd made it clear yesterday they both needed to go their separate ways, he wondered how he could have misread Nancy. Not that he'd really known her well when he asked her out.

What had made him gravitate to Nancy so soon after his time with Lilah? On the surface, the women were total opposites in many ways. Which made him wonder if perhaps he'd chosen Nancy for just that reason.

Had that one night he'd shared with Lilah sent him running scared? That possibility rocked his world in a way it would take some serious time to process.

Carlos stepped aside for the pair of businessmen passing. "Nancy, quite frankly, I prefer to keep details of my travels low-key and private."

"Of course." The woman nodded quickly, clutching her shiny red umbrella closer. "I only want to speak to you alone for a few minutes, you know, about what we discussed at the hospital before you left." She glanced at Lilah pointedly.

Before Carlos could insist she stay, Lilah hitched her purse higher on her shoulder and said, "I need to make some work calls. If you'll excuse me."

"No. Don't go." He clasped Lilah's arm while keeping the other, unpredictable woman clearly in his sights. Who knew what she might do next? "Nancy, I'm sorry, but let's not make this awkward for anyone. There's nothing more to say. I believe I covered everything yesterday."

He kept his voice firm and no-nonsense while working not to be outright cruel. But she needed to understand there could be nothing more.

Nancy's face froze, her grin turning brittle. "You're right. I apologize for wanting to send you off on a nicer note." Her icy smile included Lilah now. "Have a safe business trip."

Tomato umbrella swooping up and sending a fresh shower of water outward, Nancy raced out into the parking lot toward her hatchback. Regret bit at him that he hadn't handled things better with her the day before. He hadn't meant to be a coldhearted bastard, but … damn. Maybe he should have thought of that before they'd dated.

Annoyed with himself and with Nancy, Carlos watched to make sure she got into her car and left. Once her car cleared the

parking lot, he turned to Lilah again.

Frowning, she swept water from her wool coat and the hem of her cashmere dress. “Have many more groupies waiting to waylay us before we board?”

Instinctively, he reached for his phone. “I’m more concerned with how she found out we’re here and how much more she knows about our travel plans.”

A call to his family’s security team was in order. As much as he wanted to launch his quest to seduce Lilah, nothing could take precedence over her safety. Once they were secured on the plane, he would turn his attention to discovering how Nancy Wolcott unearthed his travel itinerary and just how much she knew.

Jet engines humming softly, Lilah unbuckled from her seat for a better view out the window at the night sky. Anything to distract her from what she really wanted to study. Carlos, reclined and sleeping an arm stretch away, kept stealing her attention.

Before they’d even left the ground, he’d been working his phone assigning some security team—apparently he kept one on retainer?—to figure out how Nancy had tracked them to the airport. A security team, for crying out loud. Once his “people” had been given their marching orders, Carlos had fallen asleep in a blink, a skill he’d picked up catching catnaps during long shifts at the hospital.

How could he look so familiar but seem so different out of their medical realm? She wasn’t a millionaire, but she was financially secure in her own right. She’d also grown up with

her fair share of glitz due to her father's connections to the Hollywood scene—although he'd been known to live beyond his means, which led to a feast-and-famine lifestyle for his family.

Still, even her own experience of brushing elbows with the rich and famous hadn't come close to the scope of influence she was only just beginning to see Carlos wielded. While she couldn't deny Carlos attracted her physically, she refused to be swayed by the wealth of his world of secretive itineraries, plush limousines and private jets. And a very determined female radiologist whose behavior bordered on stalking.

Lilah gripped the leather armrests tighter. Seeing Nancy Wolcott waiting and waving had provided a hefty reminder for how little she knew about Carlos. And how important it was to gauge her moves carefully.

She looked away from the starkly handsome man snoozing across from her and turned her attention to the sleeping world of tiny lights below. If only things were as straightforward as they'd once been with Carlos, just a few shorts months ago before that fateful Christmas fundraiser. Back during a time when she'd been able to rein in her wayward attraction to the brooding surgeon who haunted her dreams.

Carlos didn't believe dreams came only in black-and-white. His always felt far more vivid than that as the real world mixed with the slumber sphere. Perhaps because he'd slept lightly for as long as he could remember.

As a child, he'd been taught to stay on guard against threats

to him as heir to the throne. Then he'd been denied REM sleep by the claws of pain recovering from the shooting. And, finally, he'd needed to stay on alert for his patients.

Right now, his dream mixed with the recycled plane oxygen blending the scent of Lilah with some kind of pine air freshener … taking him back to that night at the hospital fundraiser nearly three months ago….

Lighted pine trees decorating the sprawling hospital conference room, Carlos stirred his sparkling water, refusing anything stronger until the fundraiser finished. And then, just call him Scrooge, because all bets were off.

Christmas meant celebrations and special family moments to most people. Carlos preferred a bottle of memory-numbing bourbon to get through the holidays.

But first, he had to fulfill work obligations.

He tugged at his tux tie absently. He hated the damn thing, but his presence was required at the formal event. Wealthy contributors liked to rub elbows with the doctors who used their money to save lives.

Apparently he was the celebrity of the hour since news of his Medina heritage had broken. He would give over his entire inheritance if it would get him out of this diamond-studded circus. Even his family's fortune wouldn't be enough for him to bid farewell to fundraiser dog and pony shows.

His back hurt like hell after a relentless day of surgery after surgery. Seeing Lilah offered the first distraction in an otherwise

crappy day. Her auburn hair was swept up in a bundle of loose curls rather than her regular tight twist. During office hours she wore button-up power suits, linen and layers that left him imagining peeling each piece off. Now, however, there was much more of her creamy skin on display. Not in an overt way, but enough that his fingers curled in his pockets from restraint.

The gold silk gown wrapped around her curves, giving her a Grecian goddess appeal. Beaded details glinted from the chandelier's light. The luminescent glow of her bared shoulders, however, outshone everything else.

She smiled at him, leaned toward the person she'd been speaking to—excusing herself?—and walked toward him. Silky fabric swirled around her legs with each graceful glide.

For four years he'd resisted the attraction. Persistent. Ever present. Increasingly painful appeal.

Tonight, with memories of that final, ill-fated Christmas in San Rinaldo pounding in his head like the unrelenting bullets that had killed his mother, his ears ringing, ringing, ringing, he didn't have the willpower to resist….

Five

The airplane phone rang and rang and rang, jarring Lilah from her dazed stare out the window at the distant mountain peaks below. She started to walk across to answer the phone before the jangling disturbed Carlos's catnap, but he bolted upright in the reclined lounger and snagged the receiver.

"Speak," he barked into the phone in his normal gruff fashion.

Some parts of his blunt personality were still all too familiar.

He scrubbed a hand over his eyes, his groggy look clearing in a flash as he transformed back to the alert surgeon, the intense man she knew from work. He returned his seat to the upright position. After a few clipped responses of "good," "excellent" and "keep me posted" rumbling from him, he disconnected the call.

Unbuckling, he stood with an almost disguised wince and started toward her. "Apparently Nancy figured out my plans to fly out from a note Wanda had jotted on her desk. If that's the case, then Nancy knows nothing more about our travel plans than the airport location."

Lilah thumbed the brass casing around the window, polishing a nonexistent smudge. "It's a relief to know we don't have to worry about Nancy waiting for us when we land in Vail."

"We can move on to the vacation part of our plans with a clear mind." He glanced at his watch. "Sorry to have napped so long. You must be hungry. Our steward can bring a light snack

or supper even. Whatever you wish, I'll make it happen."

"How about a double bacon cheeseburger with a mint chocolate chip milkshake?" she asked, only half joking. She was learning just how tenacious pregnancy cravings can be.

He reached for the call button. "I'll see what he can put together."

Resting her hand on his wrist, she stopped him. "I was kidding. Really, I'm not hungry yet. I just need to stretch my legs. The seats are fabulous—" as was everything on this top-of-the-line private craft "—but my back hurts if I sit too long."

His brow furrowed as he studied her. Muscular shoulders encased in warm black wool called to her fingers until everything else faded. Her mouth went dry. Carlos's gaze fell to her mouth and she couldn't stop her tongue from teasing along her lips. His nostrils flared with awareness.

She and he had a sensual connection, without question. But there was no emotional connection of any substance. Right? As long as she remembered that, she should be able to protect her heart.

His hand settled at the base of her spine, as if already testing her resolve. She started to inch away, but he pressed ever so slightly, ever so perfectly, against the spot that ached. Again, she reminded herself the physical was different from the emotions. Why should she deny herself the comfort—the undiluted pleasure—of his touch?

His fingers circled with deepening pressure and she sighed. A

hint of a moan hitched a ride on the gusty breath making its way up her throat.

While massaging in increasingly larger circles, he reached past her to slide open the shade further to improve the view of the clusters of city lights below. "How much does your back hurt?"

"Just a little … right there."

His intuitive touch gave her pause as she realized just how he knew what to do. He lived in constant pain without a complaint.

Straightening, she inched aside. "It's nothing I can't handle."

He followed, his hands never leaving her body. "There's no need for you to handle it all. I'm trying to be nice, so stop arguing. Doctor's orders."

"Okay, then." She began to offer to rub his back in return and then almost gasped.

An urge to laugh followed, chased by a bittersweet sense of how special this would have been had it happened the morning after they'd been together. Or if he'd apologized nicely yesterday for being a jerk these past months, providing a perfectly logical explanation for his behavior.

But she wasn't whimsical. She was practical. Therefore she would enjoy this blasted backrub to the fullest. It was about the physical, nothing to do with her emotions.

Talking, however, would help keep her grounded more in reality and less in the sensual play of his fingers working tension from knotted muscles. "We haven't gotten to talk since boarding. Is the plane yours?"

"My family owns controlling interest in a small charter company," he answered softly from behind her, his subtle accent curling around each word and into her. "It's an investment that also enables us to fly wherever we wish with minimal discussion of our plans."

"No one knows your itinerary."

"That's the idea. I've been able to lead a relatively normal life at the hospital since my identity became public. You run a tight ship and I appreciate that. But out in the real world, I need to be careful."

Which explained why he was especially concerned to find Nancy waiting for them. Her shoulders rose with tension. He skimmed upward to cup them, rubbing until they lowered again. Relaxation radiated through her as he became some kind of medical magician.

"That's better. Just let go," he said, his mouth closer to her ear this time.

Unable to resist, she soaked in the heat of his breath against her neck, inhaled the peppermint scent of his toothpaste. What would it be like if he were telling her to "just let go" while they were doing other, more intimately pleasurable things?

She dragged her attention off his command in her ear and scrambled for something coherent to say.

"You've got a family-owned air taxi service for the rich and famous." She traced the teakwood encircling the portal, brass edging gleaming. She'd ridden with her father in similar crafts as

a kid. Of course, thinking about her dad was worse than thinking of Nancy.

"Actually," Carlos's thumbs pressed between her shoulder blades with intuitive precision that sent waves of pleasure radiating outward, "Enrique—my father—diversified the company a few years ago so that when the planes are not in use for the needs of our family and our associates, they are used on call for search-and-rescue emergencies."

"Your father sounds like quite a philanthropist." Different from what she'd expected from a recluse monarch. "He sounds like you."

His hands stilled for the first time. "You're the first to say that."

"How would you describe your father?" She glanced back at him, catching a hint of tensed jaw before his face became a smooth, handsome mask again.

Carlos stared past her, through the portal, his massage resuming. "He's ill."

Not at all what she expected him to say. She tried to turn toward him but his touch became steely for the first time as he held her in place without hurting her, but unmistakably insistent.

Accepting his wishes to keep his face hidden from her, she gripped the window as clouds obscured the specks of light below. "I'm very sorry to hear that. What's wrong with him?"

"His liver is failing," he answered, his voice emotionless other than a thickening of his accent. "During the escape from

San Rinaldo, he spent a lot of time on the run in poor living conditions."

She'd read the basics about the coup in San Rinaldo, but there weren't many details available. Hearing the event from Carlos, envisioning the terror the Medinas—Carlos—must have experienced, made her chest go tight with pain for them.

"How awful that must have been for your family. I can't even begin to imagine."

"It was not an easy time in our lives," he understated simply. He stroked her shoulders, down her arms, never missing a beat even when his breathing became heavier against her hair. "We were not with him. My mother, my brothers and I went a different escape route once the rebels attacked. My father didn't want to risk us being captured with him so he attempted to make them follow him instead."

The picture unfolding in her mind was beyond imagining, but he seemed unwilling to take any comfort from her. Hell, he wouldn't even let her look at him.

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen," he answered starkly.

He traced up her arms again and stopped at the back of her dress. He slid a finger inside along her neck, just under the zipper, stroking one vertebra at a time. His sensuous touch was at such odds with their stark discussion, but then Carlos had always been a huge contradiction. The compassionate surgeon, gruff professional.

Tender lover, reserved friend.

And he clearly wanted to keep things on a physical level rather than emotional. How perfect since she'd thought the same thing herself not too long ago. Her head lolled forward and his hand tucked under the cashmere, fanning along either side of her spine, kneading nerve endings.

The zipper parted, only an inch, but still she gasped at the boldness of his move. Cool air brushed the tiny patch of bared flesh a second before his knuckles warmed her skin.

"Shhh," he coaxed. "I'm not doing anything other than rubbing your back to make the trip more comfortable."

She laughed softly. "Do you think I'm foolish?"

"Let me rephrase," he said against her ear. "I will not do anything more unless you ask."

Her heart stuttered at the image that conjured and the sensual power that gave her. What would it be like to claim the toe-curling bliss he could give her so easily?

So dispassionately?

She forced her thoughts to disengage from the path, dismayed to think he could pull away from her as smoothly as he could set her whole body to flame. No amount of temptation could lure her into that dangerous terrain. She wouldn't be his next Nancy Wolcott, sprinting to the shelter of her little hatchback car in the rain while Carlos watched with his cool, unmoved gaze.

"Well, take note then, Carlos, because I won't ask for more from you." She was only willing to let the physical side go so far.

For now? Until when?

"That sounds like a challenge."

She turned slightly, meeting his eyes, their mouths so close every word was almost a kiss. "Do you really promise not to do anything more?"

With the full power of his intense dark gaze staring at her with frank honesty and desire, there was no mistaking what he wanted. He wasn't thinking of any woman but her.

"You have my word. Tell me to stop and I will, without hesitation." His low, husky vow vibrated the air between them.

"Then by all means," she said, her voice breathier than she would have liked to admit, "continue what you were doing."

She could handle this.

Carefully, she turned her back to him again, her breasts prickling with awareness as she wondered how far this game between them would go. His hands spread and the zipper parted further link by link. The top of her dress stayed on even as cool recycled air swooshed over her back. He worked his way south to her waist, thumbs circling along small but persistent knots of tension and strain.

Down, down farther still, he went until massaging almost at the base of her spine, his skillful fingers teasing along the top of her bikini panties. His hands spanned all the way across her lower back, then wrapped forward to rub lightly against her hip bones.

Her dress eased precariously forward, until she crossed her arms to hold it in place. Yet she couldn't bring herself to tell him

to stop. The pressure of his hands so intimately close to where she really wanted, *needed,* him to touch her only served to stoke the ache hotter.

They played with fire here and she knew it. Yet she trusted him when he said he wouldn't take this further without her permission. So she surrendered to the sensations washing over her.

The man had the art of touch mastered. The glide of his hands on her back soothed and stirred at the same time, the healer and the infuriating prince.

Oh God, it had been so long since she'd had a man's touch on her, his touch. Her body soaked up the gentle rasp of his callused fingers, his every move so precise as he explored her, relaxed her, totally in tune as to exactly where she needed his care.

According to the pregnancy books she'd read, the backaches would only grow worse, as if in some cosmic prelude to labor. Nerves pattered in her chest as her mind fast-forwarded, anxiety intensifying at the notion of facing that day alone.

"Shhh," Carlos whispered in her ear. His hands skimmed around to her rib cage and pulled her back against him. "Whatever you're thinking about. Don't. You're tensing up again. As much as I'm enjoying having my hands on you, I hate to think my efforts here have been for nothing."

His hands rested right below her breasts, so close her nipples peaked against her bra, tight and needy. As he stepped closer, his body against her back, the rigid length of him pressed to her spine

with unmistakable arousal. She longed to writhe against him and tempt him higher, harder. How she burned to lift his palms to cover her breasts, to ease the ache with the warm pressure of him.

It was just physical, she reminded herself. Heaven knew she wasn't too happy with the man himself right now. But her willpower was beginning to wane.

She cuffed her fingers around his wrists and shifted his touch an inch lower. "I think it's time to call a halt to this."

Just that fast, his hands slid away. Not a word, not even a hint of a protest from him. However, her body shouted loud and clear over the loss of his touch. Her skin tightened, tingly and hot with awareness. Dragging in breaths that did nothing to steady her racing heart, she held her dress in place and faced him.

His features were taut, his eyes as molten as his dark cable sweater.

"We both—" Her voice shook and she steadied the betraying tremble before continuing, "We both know I'm attracted to you, and it's a safe bet to say you're attracted to me as well. I also know I can want you while not liking you very much. However, I'm not so sure that jumping each other is the wisest move—"

"Whoa, hold on there." He held up his hands while keeping them well off her. "I have no intention of seducing you."

"Oh." The guy sure knew how to take the wind out of a girl's sails. "Then what the hell was that erotic massage all about?"

He lowered his hands, still not so much as brushing her, while outlining her shape, her breasts, waist, hips, around and stopping

an inch away from curving her bottom. “To put you at ease and reassure you of my self-control. You can enjoy what I’m about to do because you don’t have to keep up your guard.”

His confidence was unmistakable, the luxury cabin echoing with the regal sense of surety in his every word. Even in casual jeans and a sweater, this man was royal born, destined to lead, and right now she very much wanted to follow wherever he led.

A simple sway would bring her flush against him. *Breathe,* she reminded herself. *Breathe.* “And what exactly are you about to do?”

He grinned ever so slightly at her words, his predatory look lifting the hairs on her arms. “I’m going to kiss you.”

Six

The luscious feel of Lilah still tattooed in his memory, burned in his brain, seared in his soul, Carlos lowered his mouth to hers. No subtle skim of lips over lips. He simply took her.

He'd warned her, giving her a chance to pull away. Still she had not uttered a syllable of protest, no request to stop. Perhaps that pushed the boundary of his promise to her, but he needed her to know how much he wanted her. It would hurt like hell to pull away, but he would honor his word.

He angled his mouth over hers more firmly, exploring, plundering, and wondered how she felt so familiar after only a few kisses. He would have recognized her taste, her scent, her fingers gliding along his jaw. Her touch was so exact, she could have been a surgeon herself, thoroughly dissecting his restraint and leaving him bare to the powerful draw of pure, undiluted Lilah.

She peeled away layers of his reserve as fully as she inched up his sweater and T-shirt to explore his chest with her cool, soft hands.

As smoothly as he'd eased the zipper down her dress earlier.

Sliding inside her open dress, he palmed her bottom. With only her silky panties between his fingers and her flesh, he fit her against him, his arousal. He'd told her they would use this time to find level ground but the floor beneath his feet felt more

unsteady than ever.

She gripped fists full of his sweater, anchoring herself to him. So fast, so perfectly, she seduced him right back with a simple stroke of her hands, her tongue, her body brushing against his.

Already rock hard from wanting her, still he throbbed harder. Nobody turned him inside out the way Lilah did, until he forgot about the ever-present pain in his back, the persistent ghosts of his past. In her arms, he could even let go of his driving need to erase loss and agony from the endless stream of children who needed him, children who he too often failed….

And for all those reasons, he needed to keep himself carefully guarded around this woman. The one woman who could make him lose sight of his only path to redemption for his own failure.

Drawing in a shuddering breath that did little to sweep away the sense of Lilah invading every niche inside him, Carlos pulled away. Full of regret, he withdrew his hands and slipped her zipper up inch by inch until he cupped the back of her neck. He took in her passion-dazed emerald eyes, her kissed moist mouth, all signs of his effect on her.

She flattened her hands to his chest, her fingers plucking at his T-shirt peeking from the V-neck of his sweater. “I thought you weren’t going to seduce me.”

“You were seduced by just a kiss?” He took small comfort in that much.

“Don’t be a jerk.” Her smile went wobbly. “You know what you did.”

"I also know what else I would like to do to you, but I promised not to take things further unless you asked." He tipped his ear toward the whine of jet engines. "Besides, I believe we are beginning our descent."

As if on cue, the intercom crackled a second ahead of the captain's voice. "This is your captain. Please return to your seats and buckle in for landing in Eagle-Vail, Colorado. On behalf of myself and my copilot, I hope you've had a pleasant flight."

They had arrived. And shortly, he would have Lilah all to himself in a house with eight empty bedrooms. He couldn't decide if he was a genius or a moron.

If there was even a remote chance that Lilah proved to be the mother of his child, they needed the chance to get to know each other better outside of the workplace. So this trip made sense. And the heat blasting over him even now from that kiss reminded him how good it could be between them.

But—baby or no baby—he needed to find a way to clear Lilah from his system before the need for her leveled all his defenses.

Permanently.

* * *

A few days alone in Vail, Colorado, with Carlos suddenly felt like an eternity.

As their SUV climbed the icy driveway winding up a hill, Lilah studied the house ahead of them and crossed her fingers for a large staff. Not because she wanted or expected to be waited on, rather she hoped for some human buffers between herself and

the increasing need to jump the man beside her. She searched the looming structure for signs of life as Carlos spoke softly beside her, detailing enticing factoids about the area.

Of course he could make a hut in the woods sound amazing with that luscious accent.

The house, she reminded herself. Check out the house.

Three stories tall at the center, the cedar home sported varying heights and levels on either side in a sort of art deco Swiss Alps style that instantly charmed her. Built with logs that could only have come from the fattest, most ancient trees, the size of the structure seemed about right for the mammoth mountain it was perched on. Generous windows shone a welcoming yellow glow into the night, a positive sign there might be people inside.

Carlos guided the four-wheel drive past towering pines, branches still wearing heavy snowcaps. She hugged her coat tighter around her, which only served to remind her how much warmer his arms had been earlier in the airplane. Since the pilot had announced their approach, Carlos had shifted from seductive lover to considerate tour guide.

Finishing his spiel about amenities in Vail, he pulled the SUV into the six-car garage that appeared to be nearly two thousand square feet on its own. She'd grown up with affluence around her, but even she was taken aback a bit by the scope of vehicles surrounding her, everything from a Lamborghini to a Mercedes sedan to top-of-the-line snowmobiles.

Carlos might live a Spartan lifestyle in Tacoma, but apparently

his family spared no expense when it came to their "toys."

Before she could unbuckle her seat belt, he'd come around to open her door, his shoulders broad in a black sweater and open ski jacket. His limp was more pronounced, reminding her what a long day this had to have been for him as well, yet he didn't complain. She'd noticed a cane in his office once, although she'd never seen him use it. He was a prideful man, no doubt. Offering him her arm would be out of the question.

What would it be like to have the freedom to slide her arm around his waist, intimately touching and helping without bruising his pride? No matter how well this time together went for them, she would never know that kind of closeness with Carlos. That stung her more than she could have foreseen a few short months ago.

Lilah followed him through the garage and into a narrow hall, pausing each time he stopped to disarm yet another security system, like peeling away layers of an onion. A very protected, paranoid onion. Hanging up her coat alongside his on a cast-iron coat tree, she eyed the massive floor-to-ceiling windows with new perception, suddenly certain the glass was bulletproof.

Trees had been thinned away from the house, giving a clear view of the empty snow-covered ground and walkways laid out with the precision of an English garden. Or a well-thought-out security plan …

Now *she* was becoming paranoid.

Focus on the perks of being here. Both indoor and outdoor

pools loomed large, each with a breathtaking view of a distant snowcapped mountain range apparent even in the dark thanks to the last bit of twilight flaring along the peaks. She still hadn't seen any staff in the quiet house, only the sound of her footsteps and Carlos's on thick Aubusson rugs cutting the silence.

Walls were dotted with oil paintings of mountains, keeping with the chalet appeal. She had to admit it. He'd picked the perfect retreat.

"The Pyrenees," he filled in simply, referring to the range between Spain and France depicted in the paintings. "My family used to ski there."

Before the coup that destroyed San Rinaldo.

Before his birthright to be king had been stolen.

Before he lost his home, his mother.

She trailed her fingers along a carved mahogany frame. How many other hints of European heritage did he incorporate into his life that she must have missed over the years? How bittersweet those reminders must be of a home that had been ripped from him just as he stood on the brink of manhood.

He swept open the next door to an enormous gourmet kitchen, top-of-the-line appliances with stone and stainless steel decor. Dark green granite glowed under the heavy black iron pendant lamps illuminating the breakfast bar. A temperature-controlled wine refrigerator took up the entire base of a massive island, the exotic labels of the expensive vintages apparent through the lit glass doors.

Carlos leaned against the breakfast bar, feet crossed at the ankles. “The staff has been sent on vacation, but they left everything we should need to eat and a cleaning service will come in when needed.”

Well, that answered the question about chaperones and buffers. She needed to put on her big girl hat and decide on her own whether or not she would sleep alone tonight. Or in his bed.

A whisper of longing huffed over her skin, and she loosened her hold on the coat she’d been clutching so tightly. Suddenly, she felt plenty warm. “I can wash my own dishes, thank you.”

He pulled open the industrial-size refrigerator, dark blue denim hugging his hips. “Then what do you say to some food before we settle in for the night?”

Fifteen minutes later, she was curled up in the corner of an overstuffed sofa with Carlos sprawled on the couch across from her in the main living room. A roaring blaze crackled in the fireplace, warming her bare toes; her boots were resting beside the sofa. The polished stone hearth stretched up to the vaulted ceiling, the same as the stone fire pit outdoors on the sprawling rustic veranda that overlooked the mountain view. The whole place smelled like pine and cedar, right down to the fragrant wood crackling in the fireplace.

Still edgy from the kiss on the plane and woefully in need of something to ease the tension crackling through her veins, she cupped her mug of warmed cider, a plate of assorted finger foods on the end table beside her. Carlos devoured a larger, more

substantial sandwich on pumpernickel. Not that he seemed to even notice how someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make even deli food look like a masterful creation, all the way down to the lettuce curling artfully around the edges.

He ate as he always did, efficiently, regarding the food as nothing more than fuel for his body. The meal was nothing more than a necessary regimen, much like how he must wash his hands before surgery. She couldn't help but admire him in this moment. He had all of this wealth and privilege at his fingertips, yet he chose to live out his life serving others. There was an unmistakable honor in that.

Although she'd also seen in her job how easy it was for the driven humanitarians to burn themselves out. Perhaps he needed this time away for reasons he hadn't even begun to recognize.

Lilah sipped her cider, the stoneware warming her hands. "This place is … beyond words."

And it was exactly what she needed after the way work had overwhelmed her these last few months. The stress of finding out about the baby and not being able to share it with Carlos had taken its toll in ways she was only starting to appreciate. Right now, she couldn't help but feel grateful for this time out from real life to sort out her future. Somehow the secluded mountain mansion felt warm and welcoming. A safe haven in a crazy time.

At least she hoped it was the house making her feel that way and not the magnetism of the man.

Wiping his mouth with a linen napkin, he finished chewing.

"Once my father accepted that his sons were not going to live their adult lives in hiding with him on his island, he tried to make sure our other properties were set up to have everything at our fingertips." Mug in hand, he gestured round the room with a semicircle sweep. "Less reason to step out into everyday society."

She shivered to think of all the worries a parent carried around in a normal world—to shoulder all the fears for his sons' safety that Enrique Medina faced seemed overwhelming.

Her hand slid protectively over her stomach. "He had reason to be fearful for your safety."

"Understood. But a life in hiding is no life at all." He polished off the last corner of his sandwich.

"Even if that life is spent in pampered luxury," she said, trying to inject a tone of levity into a suddenly too dark conversation.

"Especially so." He tossed his napkin on his empty stoneware plate and swung his legs up onto the sofa, almost managing to disguise his wince of discomfort. "All that said, however, this does make for one helluva vacation. It's even equipped with a golf room with a full swing simulator. Although we'll have to bypass the wine cellar this time since you're expecting."

This time? There would be more visits here?

Of course, once he realized this was his child there would be so many reasons for their paths to intersect. Whether or not he appreciated it yet, she knew her life was unequivocally intertwined with his forever. So many new concerns had come her way of late, it seemed impossible to absorb them all before

another came rocketing through her brain. She struggled to follow his words.

He scratched the back of his neck, stretching the sweater taut across his broad shoulders. “The personal sauna is probably a no go too. I seem to recall from med school that pregnant women should use caution when it comes to saunas and hot tubs.”

Heat flooded her face as she thought of their encounter in the hot tub at his place, the night they’d made the baby. His home had been starkly utilitarian except for the mammoth jetted bath, large enough for two. Intellectually, she knew he likely had the luxury installed for practical purposes because of his back, but they’d most certainly put the spa bathroom to totally impractical, indulgent good use that night.

The air between them snapped with awareness as she saw in his heavy-lidded eyes that he was remembering that night as well. And it affected him. Not surprising given their out-of-control kiss earlier on the plane.

But since that evening at the party when he’d really touched her for the first time, she hadn’t been able to think of much else except the feel of his hands on her skin….

From the hospital rooftop garden, Lilah stared out at the Christmas lights twinkling through Tacoma’s skyline. So intent on taking a breather from the overloud band and press of patrons at the party inside, she almost missed the sound of footsteps approaching behind her.

She stiffened in alarm, then heard the uneven gait she

recognized well after four years of working with Carlos. And quite honestly, she could use the distraction of his company tonight after the disturbing call with her mother, in tears over finding the receipt for a nightie—red and not her size. Lilah gripped the icy rail tighter.

A second later, Carlos's hand skimmed her bare arms as he eased a velvet wrap around her shoulders. "Wouldn't want you to catch a cold out here."

"Thank you." She hugged her wrap closer as snow sprinkled from the sky. "You were especially nice to the board of directors tonight. I'm not going to grouse if you want to cut out early. "

He stuffed his hands in his tuxedo pockets, dark eyes reflecting the string of tiny white lights strung around a potted evergreen. "Are you insinuating I've been less than polite in the past?"

"I know these sorts of gatherings aren't your thing." She scrunched her icy toes inside her pumps. "You usually have that vaguely tolerant look that lets us all know you've got one eye on your watch so you can get back to work."

"It's impossible to look at any watch when there's someone as beautiful as you to admire instead."

Her jaw dropped then snapped shut quickly. They'd been work friends for a long time, always careful never to cross that line. She'd accepted her attraction to him but never guessed he'd noticed her. "Uh, thank you?"

Her heart fluttered in a way that was totally out of character for her. She was usually so controlled.

"Obviously, I'm much better at hiding my emotions than you give me credit for if you've never noticed how you affect me."

A suspicion tugged at her mind. "Have you been drinking?"

"Not a drop." He crossed his heart with two fingers like the Boy Scout she couldn't picture him being.

"Me neither." Her breathy answer puffed into the cool night air.

"Actually, I've had a helluva day and something in your face tells me you have, too. The kind of day no alcohol can fix." He zeroed in with a perception that had her eyes stinging.

Thank goodness the rest of the partiers were still inside and out of sight. How he'd found her here, she didn't know. Maybe he needed the peace as much as she did.

She blinked hard and tried to tell herself it was just the biting wind making her tear up. Emotions aswirl like the spiraling snow, she boldly tugged both sides of his tuxedo tie. "You look quite stunning yourself, Dr. Medina."

His fingers banded around her wrists, hot and strong and so very enticing. Like him. "Then since we're both clearheaded, lovely Lilah," he whispered, nipping her ear once, lighting a static spark in her veins, "there's no reason not to do this."

Was that moan from her?

Deliberately, slowly, his lips grazed her cheek in a slow trek that had her gripping the rail to keep her legs from folding.

"And do this." His arms swept around her as he captured her next sigh with his mouth….

"Lilah?"

Carlos's voice startled her from her daze, back to the present in his Vail, Colorado, mountain retreat. The memory of his kiss then was as real and stirring as the one he'd given her earlier. She reached for her mug of cider, needing to ground herself in the moment. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

She eyed him over the top of her mug, inhaling steaming scents of cinnamon as a log shifted in the fireplace, launching a shower of sparks. Those pinpricks of light didn't come close to the kind of sparks Carlos could set off inside her.

He set aside his mug on the coffee table. "Why have you never married? "

His abrupt shift to the personal stunned her into silence for two pops of the logs in the fireplace. How in the world had their conversation shifted to that topic while she'd been daydreaming? Not that she intended to offer up what she'd really been thinking about.

"Why haven't you?" she retorted carefully. "You're older than I am."

"Touché." He saluted her lightly. "I apologize for the sexist sound to my question. To show my contrition, I'll answer first. I decided a long time ago to stay a bachelor."

"Because …?" she asked, suddenly curious to the roots of her hair.

"Standard eternal bachelor reasons," he answered with a wry grin. "I'm a workaholic. I didn't want to subject any woman to the Medina madness."

The last reason was far from standard. “There have been women lining up outside your office ready to volunteer for that mayhem. In fact, Nancy seems ready to hustle to the front of the queue.”

His smile flattened to a humorless scowl. “I haven’t asked for or encouraged any of them.”

“Yet still they flock to your side.” The second the words left her mouth, she winced at sounding jealous. But she was carrying the man’s child after all. Any of those women would be a part of her child’s life through him.

Great. Now she was jealous *and* concerned.

Carlos massaged his knee absently. “They’re flocking to the title and the money that comes with it. They wouldn’t care if I was a troll with an extra eye in the middle of my forehead.”

Laughter burst free and she clapped her hand over her mouth.

He cocked an eyebrow. “I wasn’t joking.”

“I know, but still, the image you painted …” She couldn’t stop laughing. She knew the giggles had more to do with releasing tension than anything else. Her body was wound so tight from the events of the past two days she needed the outlet, a release for her swelling emotions.

And her emotions weren’t the only thing that would be swelling soon. Her hand slid to her stomach.

Just the thought of that jolted a fresh burst of laughter until she clapped a hand over her mouth again. Carlos stared at her as if she was half-crazy, and maybe right now … Who knew?

She hiccupped and a tear fell free. Then another. More. Until she couldn't stop the flood of an altogether different emotion as a sob tore its way through her heart and up her throat.

Seven

Carlos had seen patients cry more times than he cared to remember. Although he didn't like to think he'd become jaded, he couldn't afford to let tears sway him or he wouldn't be able to treat his patients.

But seeing Lilah so upset sliced through what little restraint he had left.

Unable to keep his distance, he swung his feet from the sofa and knelt beside her before she finished scrubbing her wrist across her cheeks. Only once had he known Lilah to lose it, about three years after he'd begun working for the Tacoma facility. She had gone to the mat with the insurance company for a patient of his, a child whose spine had been fractured in an amusement park ride accident—at the C7 vertebrae. The parents were supposed to be grateful their child could use his thumb to work the electric wheelchair.

Lilah had crushed opponents standing in the way of getting that boy everything he needed.

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