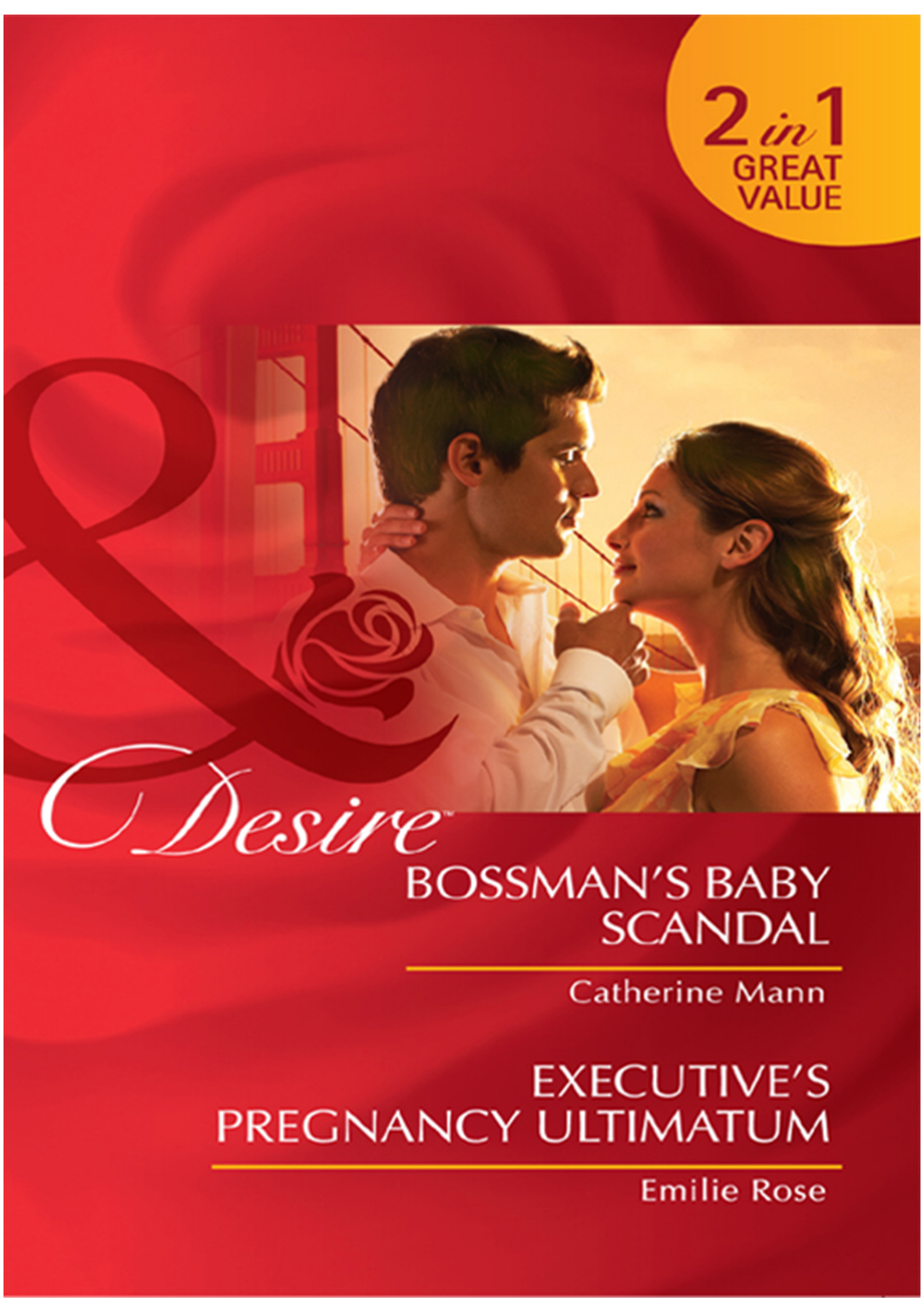


2 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE



Desire™

BOSSMAN'S BABY
SCANDAL

Catherine Mann

EXECUTIVE'S
PREGNANCY ULTIMATUM

Emilie Rose

Catherine Mann

**Bossman's Baby Scandal /
Executive's Pregnancy Ultimatum:
Bossman's Baby Scandal /
Executive's Pregnancy Ultimatum**

«HarperCollins»

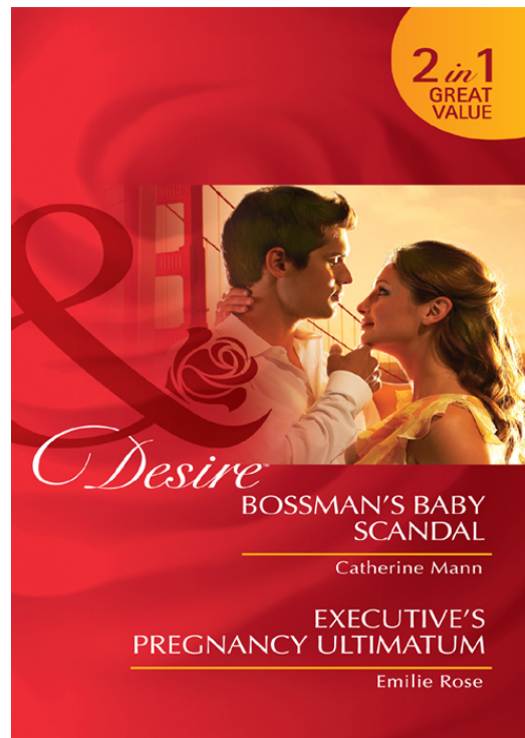
Mann C.

Bossman's Baby Scandal / Executive's Pregnancy Ultimatum: Bossman's
Baby Scandal / Executive's Pregnancy Ultimatum / C. Mann —
«HarperCollins»,

Bossman's Baby Scandal Jason Reagert had made millions and he was determined to become an even bigger success. Then he discovered he had made heiress Lauren Presley pregnant. He couldn't afford even a whiff of scandal, so he proposed to his lover of one night. Surely she'd agree to a lifetime of convenience, if only for the baby's sake. Executive's Pregnancy Ultimatum Flynn Maddox thought he was over his ex-wife, Renee. But when he learned that they were still married – and that she was trying to have his baby – he realised he had never stopped wanting her. He would give her the baby she so desperately wanted...but not without getting her to sign off on some terms of his own. **KINGS OF THE BOARDROOM** They need the right women to melt their steel-hard hearts!

Содержание

Cast of Characters	7
About the Author	8
Prologue	9
One	11
Two	16
Three	22
Four	28
Five	34
Six	40
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42



Advertising Media Volume 183

FEATURESPOTLIGHT

This Week in Advertising ...

The Ad Man: Jason Reagert His New Campaign: Wedding bands—for the man who needs to get the ring on her finger... fast!

Maddox Communications has recently hired New York's golden boy, Jason Reagert. Rumours are flying that Maddox Communications may be going head-to-head with their chief rival, Golden Gate Promotions. The last thing Maddox needs is a scandal plaguing the pursuit, but it seems self-made, suave Jason Reagert is in quite the situation. Surely by now everyone has seen the notorious photo of one *Miss* Lauren Presley sporting quite the prominent baby bump. Seeing as how the mommy-to-be has just accepted the marriage proposal of Mr Reagert ... one can only assume she's marrying her baby's daddy.

Dear Reader,

Receiving an invitation to participate in a continuity series is such a thrill and honor for me! I especially enjoy the opportunity to work with other authors to build an exciting new story world—in this case, the world for *KINGS OF THE BOARDROOM*. In *Bossman's Baby Scandal*, it's my pleasure to introduce you to the driven men and women at Maddox Communications, an ad agency in scenic San Francisco.

Ambitious ad exec Jason Reagert expects a fresh start on the West Coast, a chance to make his mark outside his wealthy family's influence. But all too soon his ties back east tighten when he learns his ex-lover, Lauren Presley, is carrying his baby!

I hope you enjoy the glitz, glamour and high-powered dealings in *KINGS OF THE BOARDROOM*. I love to hear feedback from readers, so please feel free to contact me via my website, www.catherinemann.com, or write to me at PO Box 6065, Navarre, FL 32566, USA.

Happy reading!

Catherine

Advertising Media Volume 184

FEATURESPOTLIGHT

This Week in Advertising ...

The VP: Flynn Maddox His New Campaign: Cribs & Cradles—for the man who has it all ... except the baby!

Scandal is threatening Maddox Communications yet again and this time Vice President Flynn Maddox is the target. According to sources, Mr Maddox is now living with his ex-wife—who apparently was never his “ex” at all. Rumor has it that Mrs Renee Maddox relocated from Los Angeles to the house she and Mr Maddox shared seven years ago. But what’s even more interesting is that she recently tried to gain access to her husband’s sample at a sperm bank. So ... what exactly is going on between husband and “ex-wife”?

Dear Reader,

Who hasn’t spent time rehashing a conversation or event after the fact and come up with a much wittier response or better ending? Wouldn’t it be great if life had a “do over” button?

I recently heard country song lyrics that talked about how a rock and a hard place can make a diamond. I am a firm believer that everything in life—even the bad stuff—happens for a reason, and we have lessons to learn from the events. Once we’ve learned those lessons we are often stronger and better equipped to deal with the next stumbling block in our path.

Executive’s Pregnancy Ultimatum gave me the opportunity to grant Flynn and Renee Maddox a second chance at love when Renee’s longing for a baby brings her “ex” husband back into the picture. This story also afforded me the opportunity to revisit San Francisco, one of the most romantic cities in the US.

I hope you enjoy the trip as much as I did.

Happy reading,

Emilie Rose

BOSSMAN’S BABY

SCANDAL

BY

CATHERINE MANN

AND

EXECUTIVE’S

PREGNANCY

ULTIMATUM

BY

EMILIE ROSE



www.millsandboon.co.uk

BOSSMAN’S BABY

SCANDAL

BY

CATHERINE MANN

Cast of Characters

I'm truly blessed to work with an AMAZING group of writing industry professionals! Hugs and thanks to the fabulously talented Emilie Rose, Maya Banks, Michelle Celmer, Jennifer Lewis and Leanne Banks. Ladies, it's been a delight and an honor to collaborate with you on this project. Abundant appreciation to my brilliant editor, Diana Ventimiglia, and my savvy agent, Barbara Collins Rosenberg. And my unending gratitude to the whole publishing team for bringing my books to life!

About the Author

RITA[®] Award winner **CATHERINE MANN** resides on a sunny Florida beach with her military flyboy husband and their four children. Although after nine moves in twenty years, she hasn't given away her winter gear! With over a million books in print in fifteen countries, she has also celebrated five RITA[®] Award finals, three Maggie Award of Excellence finals and a Booksellers' Best win. A former theater school director and university teacher, she graduated with a master's degree in theater from UNC-Greensboro and a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the College of Charleston. Catherine enjoys hearing from readers and chatting on her message board—thanks to the wonders of the wireless internet that allow her to cyber-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.

Prologue

New York City, four months ago

Lauren Presley wondered how a man could be so deeply inside her and yet totally distant at the same time. But no doubt about it, the sated, half-dressed man tangled up with her on her sofa at work had emotionally left the building.

She would boot the rest of him out of her deserted office as soon as she could breathe again.

The butter-soft leather of her turquoise couch stuck to the backs of her legs through her thigh-high stockings, sweat still slicking her body from their frenetically passionate—and surprise—hookup. At least her fledgling graphic-arts business was closed for the day, the workplace empty.

Everything seemed out of sorts, disconnected like a Salvador Dali painting. She couldn't blame Jason for regretting their impulsive act, since she was pretty much freaking out, too, over how fast her panties had landed on the floor, her dress up around her waist while she'd torn at his belt buckle and zipper. Jason Reagert was a business colleague, one half of a working alliance they may very well have wrecked. She needed to get through this awkward post-sex moment ASAP with her pride intact.

A low drone filled the quiet of the empty office. Lauren tensed. "Your pants are vibrating."

Jason arched back and raised a dark eyebrow, his close-cropped hair mussed on top from her fingers. "Pardon?"

She clapped her hand on his warm hip—beside his BlackBerry. "Seriously. It's buzzing."

"Damn." He disentangled himself, cool air brushing her bared legs. Jason swung his feet to the floor, his Testoni loafers thunking against the scarred wood as he sat and unclipped the handheld. "Helluva bad timing."

Avoiding his eyes, she slid upright and adjusted her silky black wrap dress, putting it in place again. Her panties would have to wait. She kicked the scrap of ebony satin under the sofa. "Your pillow talk leaves something to be desired."

"Sorry." His zipper closing rasped, overloud in the late-night silence. "It's my reminder alarm."

"Alarm for what?" She stared nervously at the white brick walls, the easel in the corner, the artwork on lit screens.

"My flight to California."

Right.

He was leaving.

Lauren stood, smoothing her dress and looking for her favorite Manolo leopard pumps that she wouldn't be able to wear again without thinking of this stupid, impetuous night.

She and Jason had been wrapping up final details on a graphic-art design project she'd freelanced for his last ad campaign at the New York firm—he was leaving his NYC job and heading to greener career pastures in California. The job at Maddox Communications in San Francisco was a great opportunity for him. She'd known about this for a couple of weeks. And as she'd hugged him goodbye tonight, she'd been knocked off balance by how upset she was over his impending move.

One second she'd been looking up at his leanly handsome face while blinking back tears, and the next second they'd been kissing ... and more. Pleasure prickled down her spine, settling low, as she remembered the bold sweep of his tongue and his hands, his strength as he'd cupped her bottom and lifted her against him. Already her body ached to reach for him again, grab hold of that tie she'd never quite managed to undo and tug him toward her. The impulse was too much, too strong.

Too overwhelming.

Gathering her shredded self-control, she looked away from his strong cheekbones and tempting mouth. She didn't know where all these frenetic feelings had come from and wasn't sure how to undo them now that he was leaving.

She spied her leopard-print shoes under the desk and welcomed the chance to put some space between herself and Jason and a sofa that smelled of good sex. She knelt, pulling one pump free, but the other stayed annoyingly out of reach.

“Lauren—” his loafer-clad feet stopped beside her, making her all the more aware of her ungainly butt-up position “—I don’t make a habit of—”

“Stop.” She sat back on her feet, willing away one of those awful blushes that came with her auburn-head complexion. “You don’t need to say anything.” Echoes of her mother’s humiliating pleas for her husband to stay bounced around in Lauren’s head.

“I’ll call—”

“No!” Standing, she gave up on her shoes, her toes curling against the cool wood floor. “Don’t make promises you aren’t certain you’ll keep.”

He scooped his suit jacket from the back of a contoured metal chair. “*You* could call *me*.”

“What would that accomplish?” She faced him full on for the first time, taking in his prep-school good looks, hardened with an edge from his years in the Navy. He came from old money and had made his fair share of new, as well. “You’re moving to California, and New York City is my home. It’s not like we have any kind of real connection beyond being work acquaintances who happened to get caught up in a fluky hormonal maelstrom. Nothing to disrupt our entire lives over.”

Shaking her long, loose hair back, she opened the door to the larger studio outside, empty but for vacant rolling chairs pushed haphazardly up to tables.

He braced a hand on the door frame, his arrogant brown eyes revealing a hint of surprise. “You’re giving me the brush-off?”

Apparently Jason Reagert wasn’t told no often. Of course she’d been mighty quick to say yes, something she intended to change starting now.

“I’m simply being realistic, Jason.” She stared him down, her spine straight in spite of the fact he stood at least a head taller.

Later, away from him, she would hole up in her cute little one-bedroom apartment in the Upper East Side. Or better yet, hide out in the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the entire day, crawling into the world of each painting. Her art was everything. She couldn’t forget that. This business—bought with a surprise inheritance from her dear elderly aunt Eliza—was her big chance to make her dreams come true. To prove to her mother she was worth something more than a debutante slot and lucrative marriage.

She refused to let any man derail her.

Finally Jason nodded. “Okay, that’s the way you want it, that’s the way things will be.” He skimmed back her hair with his knuckles, his callused thumb stroking her cheekbone. “Goodbye, Lauren.”

She settled her features into a portrait worthy of any Dutch master—solemn and unrelenting. Jason turned away, his jacket hooked on one finger over his shoulder, and she fought back the urge to call out to him.

Hearing he was leaving New York had brought a surprise pinch of regret. But nothing compared to the twist in her gut as she watched him walk out the door.

One

San Francisco, Present Day

Working Lauren Presley out of his system had turned out to be tougher than Jason Reagert thought when he'd left New York. But up until sixty seconds ago, he'd been giving it a damn good try.

Clinking glasses, frenetic conversation and blaring eighties music in the high-end bar swelled more tightly around him. He looked up from the photo on his BlackBerry to the woman he'd been flirting with for the past half hour, then back down at the just-in image of Lauren Presley celebrating New Year's Day.

An unmistakably *pregnant* Lauren Presley.

He wasn't often at a loss for words—he was considered a major player in the advertising business, after all. But right now? His mind blanked. Maybe because his brain was suddenly filled with visions of that impulsive encounter in her office. Had that surprise—mindblowing—night produced a baby? He hadn't spoken to Lauren since then, but she hadn't called, either. Certainly not with any pregnancy news. He blinked twice fast, the bar coming into focus again.

Pink mirrored walls cast a rosy glow as he studied the shocker image just sent by an NYC pal. He schooled his face to remain neutral while he figured out the best way to make contact with Lauren. She'd sure shown him the door fast enough the last time they'd seen each other.

Some guy gyrating to overloud music jostled him from behind and Jason angled to shield the BlackBerry screen from the packed clientele at the local martini bar on Stockton Street. Rosa Lounge was small and quaint and very expensive, pretty dim on the inside but still classy, with green glass tables and black-lacquered chairs.

A white marble bar took up the majority of one wall with bottles suspended overhead, while tall tables lined the other wall, dark wood floors stretching between. Since Rosa Lounge was just a block away from Maddox Communications, right on the park, MC employees tended to gather here when they closed a big deal or finished a major presentation.

His grip tightened on the BlackBerry. This gathering had been called in honor of him. What rotten timing to be the center of attention.

"Hello?" Celia Taylor snapped her manicured fingers in front of his face twice, her Key Lime Martini sparkling through the crystal glass in her other hand. "Hello? Earth to Jason."

He forced his thoughts and focus to Celia, another ad agent at Maddox Communications. Thank God he hadn't even started drinking his Sapporo. He didn't need the top-shelf brew messing with his head. "Right. I'm here. Sorry to zone out on you like that." He tucked the BlackBerry into his suit jacket. The stored photo damn near seared through his Armani jacket and shirt. "Can I get you a refill?"

He'd been about to offer her more—a date—but then the photo had buzzed through. Technology sure did have an ironic sense of timing.

"I'm good." Celia tapped her painted nail against her martini glass. "That must be one hefty work e-mail. I could get insulted by the fact I'm not warranting your full attention, except I'm just jealous my cell phone isn't buzzing."

Celia flicked her bright red hair over her shoulder and perched a hand on her slender hip.

Red hair.

Green eyes.

Like Lauren. Damn. Realization kicked him in the conscience.

He'd deluded himself into thinking he was putting Lauren behind him this evening, only to try to pick up the lone redhead in the room. Of course, Lauren had darker, auburn hair and softer curves that had driven him crazy exploring....

Jason set his bottle on the bar and eyed the door, mind made up. Delaying wasn't an option. He had to know. But he also didn't want to alienate Celia.

She was a genuinely nice woman who tried to put on a tough facade in order to be taken seriously in the workplace. She deserved better than to be seen as a substitute for another woman. "Sorry to cut out, but I really need to return a call."

Celia cocked her head to the side, her nose scrunched in confusion before she shrugged. "Sure, whatever. Catch you later." She fanned a wave and pivoted on her spiky heel toward fellow ad exec Gavin.

Jason shouldered sideways through the crush of people in power suits, looking for the best way to duck out so he could place a few phone calls. And find answers.

A hand slid from the press of bodies and clapped him on the shoulder. He turned to find both Maddox brothers, the heads of Maddox Communications—CEO Brock and VP Flynn.

Flynn waved other MC employees nearby to join in and then lifted his drink in toast. "To the man of the hour, Jason Reagert! Congratulations on landing the Prentice account. You've done Madd Comm proud."

"To the wonderboy," CFO Asher Williams called.

"Reagert rules," Gavin cheered.

"Unstoppable," Brock declared, his executive assistant echoing the toast.

Jason pulled a smile for appearances. Bringing in the Prentice Group was undoubtedly a coup, although timing had certainly come into play in winning over the country's largest clothing manufacturing company. Landing Prentice was the next best thing to nabbing Procter & Gamble. Jason had only just moved to California in the fall when Walter Prentice dumped his other PR firm for moral-clause violations.

The ultraconservative Prentice had a rep for ditching firms for anything from hearing that the account exec had visited a local nude beach to realizing an exec was dating two women at once. Jason's eyes flicked to Celia.

Brock dipped a wedge of pork quesadilla in mango sauce. The workaholic had most likely missed lunch. "Spoke with Prentice today and he made a point of singing your praises. Good move sharing those war stories with him."

Jason's feet itched to get to the door. And damn it, he hadn't shared the war stories as a schmooze move. He'd simply discovered a connection there since Prentice's nephew had done a tour about the same time as he had. "Only making polite conversation with the client."

Flynn lifted his glass again. "You're a hero, man. The way you and that SEAL team took out those pirates back in the day ... epic."

He'd served his six years in the Navy after college graduation. He'd been a dive officer with a specialty in explosive ordinance disposal, attached to a SEAL team. Sure, he'd helped take out some pirates, saved a few lives, but so had the others around him. "I was only doing my job, same as anyone else."

Brock finished off his dinner with a final bite. "You're definitely on Prentice's radar. Keep your nose clean and you'll go far with his influence. Landing Prentice's clothing line couldn't be better timed, especially with Golden Gate Promotions breathing down our necks."

Golden Gate was their main rival, another family-owned advertising agency with quite a pedigree and still helmed by its original founder, Athos Koteas. Jason understood well the specter that rival cast. This job at Maddox—this chance in California—was everything to him. He wouldn't let anything screw it up.

His BlackBerry buzzed again from inside his jacket. More pictures? Was the guy sending him an ultrasound photo, for crying out loud? His gut pitched. He liked kids, sure, wanted some of his own.

Someday.

Flynn ducked in closer. “We consider it quite a coup, you charging in with a winning pitch after that lame ass was fired.”

Brock smiled sardonically. “Lame ass? Sunburned ass maybe, after hanging out on that beach au naturel.”

Low laughter rumbled up from the clustered bunch of MC employees. Jason slid his finger along the neck of his shirt. What a time to remember that Walter Prentice had reportedly disowned his own granddaughter for refusing to marry the father of her kid. Prentice lived by his motto Family Is Everything.

Performance on the job should be all that mattered, damn it. He’d already been dubbed the golden boy at Maddox Communications, a title he’d worked hard to achieve and would do anything to keep. The key word? *Worked*. He’d earned his way to the top, determined to shed the trust-fund label that had dogged him growing up. He wouldn’t allow an impulsive move from four months ago to wreck his chances for the success he’d damn well paid for.

He’d walked away from the carrot of joining his old man’s advertising company and took a Navy ROTC scholarship to college instead. After serving his six years, he’d launched out on his own in the ad world. While he’d tackled the New York City job, he could still feel his father’s influence breathing down his neck. The offer from San Francisco-based MC had put a whole country between him and the old man’s far-reaching shadow.

And just that fast, inspiration hit.

As soon as he finished up here at Rosa Lounge, Jason would be on the red-eye to New York. By morning, he would be on Lauren Presley’s doorstep for a face-to-face with her. If that baby was his, she would simply have to come to California.

Any possible rumors would be taken care of when he introduced her as his fiancée.

The icy January wind kept most people indoors. Normally Lauren would have been in her apartment in warm wooly socks, tending her plants. But the cold helped calm her nausea. So she worked on the roof, checking the winterizing on the community garden she’d started a couple of years ago.

Kneeling, she tucked the plastic tighter along the edges of the rooftop planter while roaring engines and horns announced that the Big Apple was waking up. The city in winter wore the neutral palette of an Andrew Wyeth painting, a world reduced to blacks and whites, grays and browns. Icy-cold concrete stung through her jeans as she knelt, a bitter breeze whipping off the East River. She huddled deeper into her wool coat. She flexed her numbed fingers inside her gardening gloves.

Her stomach fluttered from more than the baby.

She’d gotten a panicked call from her friend Stephanie informing her that her husband had let Jason know about the pregnancy via a photo taken at last week’s New Year’s party.

And now Jason was on his way to NYC.

No amount of cold air or gardening would stem the tide of nausea this time. Her world was totally falling apart. Jason was on his way to confront her about the baby she hadn’t gotten around to informing him was due in five months, and oh, by the way, her business was all but in ruins.

Lauren sagged back against the concrete fountain, water frozen in the base, icicles dripping from the stone lion’s mane. A week ago she’d learned her bookkeeper, Dave, had used her sick leave as an opportunity to embezzle half a million dollars from her fledgling graphic-design business. She’d only found out when she hired a temp bookkeeper to take over while Dave went “on vacation.” Now they all knew he wouldn’t be returning from whatever island haven he’d taken up residence at using her money. Authorities didn’t hold out much hope of finding him—or her funds.

She rubbed a hand over the growing curve of her belly. A child completely dependent on her and she’d royally screwed up her life. What kind of mother would she make? A total coward, up here hiding.

Things had changed so much in a few months. She missed the color palette of spring and summer, but her artistic eye still appreciated the monochromatic stark-ness of a winter landscape.

The rooftop door creaked a second before a long shadow stretched over her. She knew before she looked. Jason had found her anyway. There was no more delaying this confrontation.

Lauren glanced over her shoulder and ... She felt a shiver of awareness.

Jason's lean, looming presence added the final touch to the stark skyline, his swimmer's build, dark hair cut short, thicker along the top and just lifting in the harsh wind. He stood tall, immovable, uncompromising—physically and emotionally.

She turned away and tucked her gardening tools back in her bag. "Hello, Jason."

His footsteps grew louder, closer, and still he didn't speak.

"I guess the doorman told you I was up here," she babbled, her hands frantically busy.

He knelt beside her. "You should be more careful."

She inched away. "You shouldn't sneak up on people."

"What if it hadn't been me coming up here? That door creaks mighty damn loud and you were in another world."

"Okay, you're right. I was, uh, distracted." By his impending arrival, the baby on the way, and oh, yeah, she had an embezzler on her payroll. So much for her insistence she was ready to take on the world.

She could almost hear her parents' disapproval about everything in her life. Except for Jason. He was exactly the sort of man her socialite mother would pick for her, with his blue-blood lineage, fat bank account and good looks.

Hell, most any mom would be happy to have Jason Reagert as a son-in-law. But he was also stubborn and controlling and she'd fought too hard for her independence to risk it in a relationship with this man. No doubt that was why she'd succeeded in ignoring the attraction for the past months.

She clutched her bag to her chest. "What are you doing here? You could have just called."

"And *you* could have called." He looked at her stomach and back up again. "When I spoke with a friend of mine back here last night, he told me you've been working from home because you're not feeling well. Are you all right? Is the baby all right?"

And there it was. Her pregnancy news out there with a simple statement. No huge confrontation or shouting match like her parents would have had before—and after—their divorce. All the same, her fingers shook, so she hitched her bag over her shoulder and stood.

"Only morning sickness." She stuffed her hands in her pockets. "The doctor says I'm fine. I'm just more productive if I work from home. The worst is past."

"I'm glad to hear that."

The nausea had been debilitating for a couple of months. Entrusting so much of the office routine to others had been nerve-racking, but there hadn't been any other choice. Too bad it had cost her so much. "I made it back up to half days in the office last week."

"Are you sure you're ready? You look like you've lost weight." A protective gleam lit his eyes. He grabbed an iron chair and hauled it over to her.

Lauren glanced at him warily before sitting. "How much do you know about the pregnancy?"

"Does it matter?" He shrugged out of his trench coat and draped it over her shoulders.

The familiar scent of his aftershave mingled with his body warmth clinging to the fabric. Too tempting. She passed his coat back because she couldn't handle even one more obstacle in her life. Not now. "I guess not, as long as you do know."

He stepped closer, his dark eyes intense in a way that sent shivers up her spine and had even led her to ditch her panties four months ago.

She forced herself to look away, reminded too thoroughly of the feelings that had propelled her into his arms the first time. "Thank you for believing me."

"I would say thanks for telling me, but you didn't." The first hint of anger tinted his tones.

"I would have, eventually." Before the kid graduated from college, at this rate. "The baby isn't due for five more months."

"I want to be a part of my child's life, every moment. Starting now, we'll work together."

"You're moving back to New York?"

"No." He flipped the collar on his trench coat up over his ears, his suntanned face declaring how much he'd already acclimated to the more temperate California weather. "Let's take this conversation to your apartment where there's heat."

Then a sneaking suspicion seeped in deeper than the damp cold. "You're not moving back to New York, but you want us to work together bringing up the baby. You can't actually expect me to move to San Francisco, can you?"

His silence confirmed her suspicion.

Her anger rose. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Not to my apartment and not to California. You really expect me to uproot my life? To abandon the company I've put my heart and soul into?" If there was even a company left to look after.

"Fine—" the word burst from his mouth in a gust of cloudy cold white "—yes, I want you to come to San Francisco. I want us to be together for our baby. What's more important—your company or your child?"

She wanted to shout that she had put her child's welfare first at the cost of her business. And she knew she would do the same all over again. She only wished she'd shelled out extra dollars for someone more reliable to watch over the shop, instead of worrying about her tight budget and blindly trusting the people she'd hired to do their damn jobs.

"Jason, why are you being so pushy so fast?" Some—okay, a lot—of her anger and fear from work directed itself at Jason. "There's time for us to talk through this, months, in fact. What's really going on here?"

His face closed up, all frustration hidden until he looked as cold as the frozen lion fountain. "I don't know what you mean."

"There must be a reason for the sudden hard sell to put me in the same state as you." Wind whistled louder, almost drowning out the sounds of street traffic below. "Was your mother abandoned by some scum bucket of a man? Did a woman do you wrong in the past?"

His laughter burst out in a fresh gust of puffy clouds until he shook his head. "You have an active imagination. I can assure you that I have none of those tortured scenarios in my past."

His laughter was infectious—and distracting. "That's not a complete answer."

"I'm not here to fight with you." He stepped closer, the ocean-fresh scent of him teasing her pregnancy-heightened senses.

Warmth radiated off him in a welcome wave and contrast to the bitter cold. She ached to burrow against his chest and feel the lean coil of his muscles rippling against her. Tension gathered low and hot and fast as it always had around him, but even more so now that she knew how explosive they could be together.

She raised her hands between them, stopping just shy of actually touching his chest. Wary of even touching him to nudge him away. "You're moving too fast for me. I need time to think."

"Well, while you're thinking, keep this in mind." He slid a hand into his pocket and pulled out a black velvet ring box. He creaked open the lid to reveal ...

A platinum-set solitaire diamond engagement ring.

Two

Jason held the velvet box in his hand and waited for Lauren's answer. Getting a jeweler to open up after hours had been a challenge, but he'd managed in time to catch the red-eye flight.

The shock on Lauren's face wasn't a great sign, but he was used to overcoming difficult odds. Wind stirred dry leaves around their feet, so frigidly different from the summer evening they'd spent working after hours in her office.

He extended his hand with the engagement ring, knowing he was being impatient, but time was short. "So? What's the verdict?"

"Whoa, hold on." She gathered her long straight hair back from her face and exhaled—hard. "I'm still stuck back on your idea that I would uproot myself to come to California and now you're tossing an engagement into the mix?"

"Does this look like I'm joking?" He lifted the diamond. The morning sun refracted off all three carats.

The gardening bag slid from her shoulder and thudded to the ground. "You really expect us to get married just because I'm pregnant? That's archaic."

He hadn't meant marriage. He'd been thinking more along the lines of an engagement to shut up any gossips, something she might appreciate, too. But telling her as much probably wouldn't go over well. "If agreeing to marriage moves too fast for you, I'll settle for a trial engagement."

"Trial engagement? You're out of your freaking mind and I'm freezing." She turned toward the door. "You're right about one thing. We should move this conversation to my apartment."

He picked up the canvas bag she'd left on the ground—the only sign she might be nervous—and followed her down two flights of stairs to the third floor. Her place was safe by New York standards, but somehow that didn't seem like enough now. And where would an active toddler play?

He'd had a lot of time to think on that flight, and one thing he'd settled on for certain—he didn't want to be a bicoastal dad. He wanted to be a larger part of his child's life. Sure, he worked hard, but he wasn't going to be like his father, who'd expected Jason to be a carbon copy of him, while never spending any time with his son to actually get to know him.

He needed to lure Lauren to California for more reasons than the Prentice account. He tucked the ring back in his pocket—for now. His goal set, he waited while she unlocked the double bolts and swept the door wide.

Her one-bedroom apartment reflected her personality. Vibrant. Alive. Packed with flowers, plants and colorful framed fabrics, an oasis in the middle of winter. Each area was painted a different color—the living room yellow, the kitchen green.

A hint of pink showed past her partly open bedroom door. He'd joined others from work for drinks at her apartment before, out here in the living area, but he'd never seen the bedroom up close. Something he intended to change down the road.

He set her bag on the hall table and followed her inside, wiping his feet on a rag rug. "We were friends for months, and we're obviously attracted to each other." He gestured toward her stomach. "Can you honestly say you never considered a future between us?"

"Never." She hung her coat on one of the vintage doorknobs mounted on a strip of wood, glancing back over her shoulder at him. "Now could you wrap this up, please? We can talk later about logistics for after the baby is born, but right now, I need to get ready for work."

"Wow, no worries of a guy getting an inflated ego around you." This didn't seem to be a wise time to bring up how fast she'd kicked him out of her office four months ago. Besides, she looked tired. Fine lines of exhaustion furrowed her forehead. His instincts went on alert. "Are you sure you're all right?"

She hesitated a second too long before walking away toward the green galley kitchen. "I'm fine."

He tracked her movements as she poured a glass of milk, her silky red hair swinging along her back and inviting his hands to test the texture, to discover if it was as soft as he remembered. "There's something you're not telling me."

"I promise the baby and I are both totally healthy." She lifted her glass in toast, her back still toward him.

She was dodging something, he was sure, but he could also sense she wouldn't share more now. He would be best served by a temporary retreat before advancing his cause again in a few hours.

He was an ad guy, after all. He knew how to make a pitch, and for now, he needed to back off. The right opportunity would present itself.

Jason pulled the box out of his pocket and set it on the small butcher-block counter. "Just hang on to this for now. We don't have to decide anything today."

She eyed the box as if it contained a snake. "I already know there's no way in hell we're getting engaged, much less married."

"Fair enough." He nudged the box forward until it rested beside an apple-shaped ceramic cookie jar. "Save the ring for our kid."

Turning toward him, she sagged back against the counter, her T-shirt with paint splatters hugging her pregnant belly—and her fuller breasts. "You seem sure it's a girl."

His eyes dropped back to her stomach, his own gut clenching tight as an image of a little girl with red curls filled his head. This baby was real and growing inside Lauren just an arm's reach away. He'd barely had time to process the idea of being a father, much less see the proof so visibly. His hands itched to touch Lauren, to explore the differences in her.

To feel the baby kick?

His throat went tight. "It could be a boy, who'll one day need an engagement ring to give some girl."

She tipped her head to the side, her silky hair gliding over the rounded curves of her breasts. "Do you want a boy? Seems that most men prefer to have a son first."

"Is that how things were with your dad?" His own father sure as hell had wanted a mini-version of himself, someone to mirror his every move, decision, thought.

Her face closed up. "This isn't about my father."

"Okay, then." He gave in to temptation and stroked back a lock of her hair, sliding his hand away before she could protest. "You look beautiful but tired, and I seem to recall you saying something about needing to go to work." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, resisting the urge to linger and, instead, making a beeline for the door. "Goodbye, Lauren. We'll talk later."

He stepped into the hall, her confused face stamped on his memory, fueling him in his decision to retreat for the moment, keep her off balance. She had doubts and he could play on those.

She may have said no this morning, but he wasn't down for the count. Without question, by the time he took the last flight out on Sunday night, Lauren would be coming to California with his child.

Lauren pushed through the glass door leading into the fourth-floor offices that housed her graphic-design business. Not much space, actually, just a common room with tables, a receptionist desk by the door and her own office in back. Where she and Jason had made this baby.

At the moment she couldn't blame the pregnancy for her churning stomach. Her insides swirled around like a Jackson Pollock color extravaganza.

The small velvet ring box seemed to weigh ten tons in her purse—a sack of a bag made from an old sweater she'd found at a consignment store. She'd packed up the jewelry so she could call Jason, schedule a lunch and return the ring. An engagement was a ludicrous idea.

She had enough on her plate, anyhow, finding a way to save her business from bankruptcy.

Franco, her secretary, passed her a stack of memo sheets. "Ms. Presley, your messages."

"Thanks, Franco." She forced herself to smile.

Lauren shuffled through the inch-thick pile; calls from prospective clients were mixed in with phone numbers from creditors.

Franco stood, smoothing down his NY Giants tie. "Before you go into your office—"

"Yes," she answered, opening her door at the same time. The floral scent wafted out.

Franco shrugged and leaned back. "They were delivered just before you arrived. And, uh ..."

His voice dwindled off in her mind as she turned to find her office packed with at least five vases of white rosebuds with pink and blue ribbons. On the corner of her desk, she saw a carafe of juice and basket of muffins. She spun back to hear what else Franco was saying.

Movement drew her attention to the far recesses of the reception area, where Jason lounged, assessing her with sexy, hooded eyes. How had she missed him when she came in? And why hadn't Franco told ...? Okay, so Franco had tried.

Lauren nodded Jason into her office. "Come on. You might as well eat with me."

He shoved away from the wall, slowly, lean and lanky, like a predator cougar as he strode toward her. Franco, the new accountant and the two interns from NYU looked from Jason to her with undisguised curiosity.

Jason slid his arm around her waist. "I wanted to make sure the mother of my child is well fed and happy."

She stiffened under his touch. Damn his presumptuous ass. Just that fast he'd announced their relationship to the world. Well, not the world, but to her employees and three waiting clients.

"The baby and I are fine, thank you." She planted a hand in the middle of his back and pushed. "Can I speak with you in my office, please?"

"Of course, dear," he said with smooth affection and a charming smile that had the two interns giggling and blushing.

She closed her office door, sealing her in the room with Jason. Alone. With the turquoise sofa. With a host of memories.

Lauren opened the white metal blinds and let the sun blast through. Not that it did much to defuse her anger. "What the hell was that all about?"

"Only letting people know I care about you and our child." He picked up a fat blueberry muffin. "Breakfast?"

"I've already eaten. Don't you think you should have checked to see if I'd told the folks at work about the baby?"

He paused. "You've told them. You've been on sick leave."

"Fine, you're right. But the clients in the waiting area didn't know, and this is my announcement to make to the world when I'm darn well ready."

"You're right, and I'm sorry." He waved the muffin closer, near enough for her to catch a whiff. "Now would you like something to eat? The bakery made them fresh this morning. I saw them come out of the oven."

She wanted to tell the pushy man what he could do with his muffins. But damned if she wasn't starving all over again as she looked at those plump blueberries straining at the sides, the sweet crumble topping making her lick her lips in anticipation. While she loved her baby, sometimes she really resented these hormones that seemed to have such Herculean control over her body.

That same hormonal storm was making her go all teary-eyed over the flowers and food because, God, this was what first-time parents did for each other. The past few months had been so damn hard without the support of a partner. She didn't even want to think about how difficult the coming months—years—might be.

For now she just wanted to enjoy her muffin.

Her feet carried her closer, until she stood toe to toe with Jason. Sniffing back her tears, she could smell him and the flowers and the muffin, and, gracious, but all of it smelled mouthwateringly

good. Jason pinched off a piece and brought it to her lips. She parted for him before she could think, pretty damn much the way she'd done on that sofa four months ago.

What was it about this man that made her act so out of character? She wasn't wildly impulsive like her erratic mother. She had control over her emotions. Except for a most memorable lapse around Jason.

She took the bready bite and her senses exploded with pleasure over the sweet fruit melting on her tongue. Jason's thumb traced along her bottom lip, stroking, stirring a whirlpool of want inside her until her breasts tightened in response beneath her brown wool sweater-dress. She arched up on her toes inside her burnt-orange pumps, a whisper away from his mouth—

A knock rattled her office door.

"What?" Her voice came out breathy and impatient. She didn't move. Neither did Jason, the heat of his brown eyes sizzling through her.

The knocking continued, more insistent now. Lauren cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes?" she said, stepping back, not a hundred percent sure who that "yes" was for. "What do you need?"

Jason smiled, wicked and sexy as if to say exactly what he needed. Here. Now.

Lauren clasped the doorknob, willing her professional composure back into place. "What can I help you with?"

She found the grandmotherly accountant she'd hired to sort through the financial mess. The brisk woman waited, hand raised for another knock. Talk about a splash of ice-water reality to douse her passion! She needed to tend to this now, but didn't need Jason to hear.

Lauren said, her voice low, "I'll be with you in five minutes."

The accountant tucked the files against her chest. Her keen eyes proclaimed loud and clear that no one would steal cookies from the jar on her watch. "Good, good. We can go over the preliminary financial statement, with a list of the most pressing creditors."

"Of course." She glanced at Jason, nerves gnawing. She needed him gone. "Jason, we'll have to talk later. Tonight, after work."

He frowned. "Creditors?"

"It's not your problem," she said, dodging his question.

His chest expanded in a manner she'd come to recognize as territorial. "You're the mother of my child. If something pertains to you, it's my problem too."

She angled toward the accountant. "I'll meet you in your office in five minutes."

Lauren closed the door and leaned back against it, facing Jason. The genuine concern in his eyes caught her off guard. She was so on the defensive these days, she'd all but forgotten what a champion he could be. In their year as friends, more than once she'd seen him go to the mat for someone else—a guy fired unjustly, a woman with a stalker boyfriend, even taking on the account of a company pro bono when he'd learned the owner's kid had inordinately high medical bills.

Jason Reagert was pushy, but a goodhearted kind of pushy. It wasn't surprising he'd found his way to military service for so many years.

She could cut him some slack while still keeping her boundaries in place. "It will be public knowledge soon enough when charges are filed, so you might as well know. My accountant, the one before this new lady, embezzled half a million dollars from my company."

His eyebrows shot up toward his dark hairline. "When did this happen?"

"While I was working from home." She pushed away from the door and sagged to sit on the sofa, suddenly weary all over again. If she couldn't tell the guy who'd knocked her up, who could she tell? "I had some suspicions about Dave just before I got sick and planned on firing him. Then I spent a week in the hospital for dehydration. I was relieved when he turned in his resignation. I gave him two weeks' paid vacation and had him escorted out of the office. Three days later I hired a new accountant, the one I should have hired in the first place, but I was trying to save money." She shrugged. "I guess it's true that you get what you pay for."

He sat beside her, not touching, not crowding her for once since he'd shown up on her roof. "I'm so damn sorry."

"Me, too."

"No wonder you were upset this morning." He clasped his hands loosely between his knees, his Rolex glinting in the light shining through the open blinds. "You don't need this kind of worry, especially when you're pregnant. Let me help."

So much for not crowding her. "Whoa, back up. I may be in trouble, but I'll handle it."

"There's nothing wrong with accepting help." He stretched his arm along the sofa back, wrapping her in his scent if not his arms. "In fact, that's why I'm here. I need *your* help."

"With what?" she asked warily, wondering if she was talking with the altruistic Jason, who went to the mat for people.

Or the shark of an ad man who won accounts through his unerring ability to make people believe anything he said.

"I'm new at Maddox Communications and times are tight. No job is secure." His chocolate-brown eyes seemed sincere, intense.

"I can understand that."

"I'm not sure how much you know about MC...."

"It's a family-owned business." She hadn't worked with Maddox before, but the grapevine said they'd hooked some hefty clients. "Run by two brothers, right?"

"Right, Brock Maddox is the CEO and Flynn is the vice president. The one thing standing in the way of the company's domination out West is Golden Gate Promotions."

"That's a family-owned advertising business, too, isn't it?" She relaxed into the sofa, more comfortable in their familiar ground of talking shop. "Athos Koteas still runs the show. I haven't worked with him, but I've heard he's quite a force to be reckoned with. Absolutely ruthless."

"But successful." His arm on the back of the sofa radiated a warmth that made the roots of her hair tingle. "He's a Greek immigrant who made quite a splash, which brought in many European connections to give his company a leg up in these tough last few years. Now he's trying to encroach on Maddox's clients." His face went tight with irritation. "He's put some rumors out there to make Maddox Communications seem untrustworthy and now they're losing business. It's causing Brock even more headaches."

"Are you regretting the move to California?"

"Not at all. Things are going better at work. I've brought in some new clients, one big fish in particular. But that client is extremely conservative. You may have heard of him—Walter Prentice."

Holy crap. "Congratulations, Jason. That's amazing. Landing Prentice isn't just reeling in a big fish. The Prentice account is a freaking whale."

"A whale with the motto Family Is Everything. Prentice fired his last ad guy for going to a nude beach." Shaking his head, Jason pulled his arm back. "He disowned his only granddaughter for not marrying the father of her baby."

Wait, he couldn't really be suggesting ... "You can't expect me to believe they'll fire you because you have a pregnant ex-girlfriend." Okay, so she'd never been his girlfriend. But still. She flopped back on the sofa. "Give me a break."

He held up both hands. "I'm serious as a heart attack. The guy's offering up a seven-figure ad campaign in tough economic times. He gets to call the shots and choose whoever he wants."

She eyed her bag with the ring inside—a ring that hadn't been romantic at all. It hadn't even been offered out of old-fashioned chivalry. He wanted to keep his job.

A cold core grew heavy in the middle of her chest. "You're that ambitious."

"Aren't you?" He leaned closer, eyes intent. "You and I are like-minded. We both want to prove to our families we can make it without their help. So let's work together for the good of our kid."

“Leave my parents out of this!” she snapped before she could think, but her heart hurt when it totally shouldn’t have. She knew better than to expect anything from Jason. There had never been talk of feelings between them.

In fact, she preferred her life be less emotional. Less like her mother.

“Fine,” he conceded, “it’s not about our parents. We’ll make this about securing our baby’s future by securing our own. I need you to agree to a temporary engagement, just until I’ve finished with the Prentice account. I’ll give you the money you need to tide over your business until you regain your footing.”

He was starting to make sense and that scared her. She shoved to her feet, pacing, restless. “I don’t need your money. I just need time.”

“You can call it a loan if it makes you feel better. A half million, right?”

She toyed with the strap on her purse, all too aware of the ring inside. His offer of money made it all sound so awful. “Do you know what would really make me feel better?”

“Name it.” He walked up behind her, quietly, looming without touching. “It’s yours.”

She spun to face him. “If you took your almighty money and—”

“Okay, okay, I get the picture. You’re not interested in saving your company.”

She jammed her arm elbow-deep in her purse and fished out the ring. “I’m not interested in handouts.”

He clasped his hands behind his back. “I’m offering you a trade.”

She thrust the ring toward him. “How can you be so certain this big-account client will even know the baby is yours? We can just stay silent.”

His chest expanded. “There’s no way in hell I’m denying my own kid for even a day. I may be ambitious, but there are lines. That one’s not negotiable.”

She pressed the back of her wrist to her forehead, ring box still in her grip. “This is all too much to absorb at once. I just don’t know ...”

He clasped her shoulders lightly. “Fine, we’ll let that ride for now.” He massaged gently, his touch both soothing and stirring. “We have more pressing concerns, anyway, making plans for the baby. I’ll pick you up after work.”

She struggled not to loll into his caress, his comfort. His help. She’d been so tense and scared her whole body ached from knotted muscles. “Do you think for once you could ask rather than command?”

He smoothed his hands down her arms, plucked the ring box from her and set it on her desk. Then he linked their fingers, the first real connection they’d shared since they’d made love in this office four months ago. “Would you like to go out to dinner after work?”

“To discuss plans for the baby.”

He nodded, still holding but not moving closer, not crowding, only tempting.

She should know better. But they did have to talk. She couldn’t avoid him forever. “Pick me up at my place at seven.”

As she watched him leave her office, she couldn’t help but wonder if she’d made a mistake bigger than the rock resting in that ring box.

Three

Phone tucked under her chin, Lauren hopped on one foot, tugging on her purple boot. “Hi, Mom.” She dropped onto the edge of her bed. “What can I do for you?”

“Lauren, dear, I’ve been calling and calling and you never pick up at work, or home, or on your cell,” her mother said, rambling a thousand miles an hour at the other end of the line. Her flat New England accent was more pronounced, a sure sign she was worked up. “I’m beginning to think you’re dodging me.”

“Would I do that?” She’d spoken with her mom just a couple of days ago. Jacqueline Presley had logged in about thirty-seven messages since then. Lauren had enough trouble dealing with her mother in a manic cycle during a regular day.

These days were far from regular.

“I don’t know what you’ll do, Lauren, I don’t know anything about you lately.” Her mother paused. For air? To gather her thoughts? “Have you spoken with your father?”

Ah, hell. She needed to steer clear of that ticking bomb. “No, Mother, I haven’t given Dad a single minute more of my time than you’ve gotten.”

“There’s no need to be snippy. I don’t know why you get so uptight. Sometimes you’re just like your father’s sister, and she ended up alone. And fat.”

Great. Just what she needed to hear, her mother’s obsession with her daughter’s curves. Lauren had probably been the only ten-year-old on the planet who’d known what the term *Rubenesque* meant.

“Didn’t mean to offend you, Mom.” Perched on the edge of the mattress, Lauren zipped one boot, then the other, glancing at the clock. Jason would be ringing the doorbell any minute now. She’d barely had time to yank on the black stretch pants and long sweater after her workday had run late. She’d tossed her purse onto her bed and the ring box had tumbled out. “Things are just hectic at work.”

“You don’t have to grind yourself into the ground trying to prove yourself to me.” A chain jingled on the other end of the line as Jacqueline Presley undoubtedly fidgeted with her jewel-studded glasses chain. “I can tell your father to release a portion of your inheritance now. Or you could have simply invested that money from Aunt Eliza and had a nice little nest egg while you pursued real art.”

Lauren’s chest went tight. A typical stress reaction around her mom, especially when Jacqueline went down this path ...

“You could be as good an artist as I was, Lauren, if you just applied yourself.”

Lauren twisted her fists into her satiny damask bedspread. The debacle with the accountant would only fuel her mother’s arguments. She felt ill. “Mom—”

“I’m going to be in the city next week.” Jacqueline plowed ahead. “We can lunch.”

Good God, once her mother was on a roll with her list of all the ways Lauren wasn’t living her life right, it usually ended with a list of eligible young men she’d met. Men Lauren would just *love*. Men like Jason.

Her mother was going to have a cow when she learned about this pregnancy.

“Mom, it’s been great talking to you—” she stood, tugging her sweater over her hips “—but I really have to go.”

“You have plans?”

And if she didn’t? Her mother would keep talking. Might as well be honest. “I do have a dinner date with a work associate. Not a *date* kind of date.” Babbling only made things worse, and worst of all made her fear becoming like her mother.

“Please, dear, do go and pretty yourself up. And remember, pink is not your color. Ta-ta.” Her mother hung up.

“Argh!” Lauren thumbed the off button so hard her nail polish chipped. She tossed the phone on the bed, pacing and shaking her hands as if she could somehow flick away the irritation.

The hurt.

After all these years, she should have gotten used to her mother, and actually, this conversation hadn't even really been that bad in the big scheme of things. But she could hear the mania building, knew how close her mother was to the edge. One small nudge would send her flying into a full bipolar swing. Since her mother refused medication and therapy lately, the highs and lows grew more extreme.

Finding out about the baby would be more than a small nudge for Jacqueline Presley. Add the embezzlement, and who knew how her mom would react? One thing was certain, her mother wouldn't handle any of the news calmly.

Passing a potted fern under the window, Lauren snapped off a dry frond. What would it be like to have a mother she could turn to right now? Her hand slid to her stomach. She would do whatever it took to be that kind of support for her child.

Lauren turned the fern stand so the other side of the plant received equal time in the sun. If only she could have a few weeks to regain her footing outside the high drama. If she just had some space to gather her thoughts, plan, put her life on track again ...

The ring box in the middle of the mattress drew her eyes like a magnet. Her feet followed, leading her toward the bed.

Jason's offer of a temporary engagement spiraled through her mind. Tempting. Dangerous. Could she risk that much time in California in close quarters with him?

Then again, with her life in New York ready to implode and her own health a bit touchy, could she afford not to?

Jason guided the rental car along the two-lane road leading into a quaint small town about forty minutes out of the city. Lauren sat beside him, her head resting back, that crazy sweater purse of hers cradled in her lap against the gentle curve of her stomach.

Of their baby.

He finally had Lauren alone for a few hours and he needed to make the most of them. He'd dug deep for everything he knew about her, had approached the evening as an account he needed to win.

Yeah, thinking of this analytically was a helluva lot easier for him than contemplating how important it had become to win this point. The more he thought about the crook who'd stolen from her business, the more pissed off he got. She was so damn talented. He'd recognized her extraordinary artistic gifts from their very first meeting.

His fist tightened on the luxury sedan's gearshift. The urge to do more than protect—to take action—fired through him, stronger than anything he could remember since he'd been on assignment in the Navy.

Of course, persuading Lauren would be easier if she was awake. She'd been out like a light before they hit the city limits. If she didn't wake up by the time he reached their destination, he would simply circle the block until she woke up or he needed to refuel the car. As much stress as she'd been under, she undoubtedly needed the sleep. And he could press his point better with a well-rested Lauren.

Vintage streetlamps dotted the roadside, casting dim orbs for a shadowy view of the small stores and shops. Snowflakes skittered in front of the sweeping beams of the headlights, the occasional car swishing past in the other lane.

Ring, ring. Her cell phone cut through the silent car with soft wind-chime tones, buried deep in her funky sweater purse. Too deep for him to fish out. Would she simply sleep through it?

She stirred, then jolted awake, her long eyelashes sweeping wide and blinking fast. Lauren grabbed her purse and stuffed her hand inside. She pulled out the cell just as the ringing stopped. She frowned.

He turned down the radio, jazz music fading. “Do you need to take that call?”

She shook her head and stuffed her phone back in her bag. “No, it’s fine. I can call back later.”

“I understand if you have work commitments.”

“It’s not work.” She fidgeted with the handle on her purse, the strap looking as if it was made from the arms of a sweater. “My mother. She calls. A lot.”

From her tone it didn’t sound as if she looked forward to those calls, but still, they talked. He hadn’t spoken with his parents since his dad disowned him, vowing he’d broken his mother’s heart by turning his back on everything they’d done for him. Hell, he didn’t want to go there in his mind. Better to focus on Lauren. “What did your family have to say about the baby?”

She pitched her purse on the floor. “I haven’t told them yet.”

Strange. “She calls but she doesn’t visit?”

“We haven’t seen each other in a month. I only started showing a couple of weeks ago.”

“They’re going to hear soon. Hell, I heard clear across country. I’ll go with you when you tell them.”

A laugh burst free. “Who said you’re invited, ego man? Besides, they’re divorced.”

He eased up on the accelerator as they approached a curve, careful to keep the car well below the speed limit. He had precious cargo on board. “I thought we were going to try and get along for the baby’s sake.”

“Sorry.” She folded her arms under her chest and stared out the window, trees stretching ahead in the historic suburb, full of whitewashed fences and brick colonials. “I’m upset about work and taking it out on you.”

He wanted to remind her he could fix that work problem in a flash, but decided not to push his luck. Better to go at this from a different angle. “You can’t genuinely expect to keep it a secret that I’m the baby’s father, can you? Your parents will find out eventually. If they’re going to get upset, maybe it would be best to run a preemptive strike. We tell them as a unified front, catch them off guard, then head out before they have a chance to ask questions.”

“That sounds good in theory, but the odds of getting both my parents in the same room together are slim to none. And the second one of them finds out, that person will be on the phone blaming the other.” She shook her head, her booted feet crossing and uncrossing restlessly, her purple footwear drawing his eyes, not to mention his interest. “I just don’t want to put myself through that if I can possibly avoid it.”

He couldn’t recall her mentioning much about her parents before. They’d mostly talked about work and nightlife in New York. He’d always been attracted to Lauren, but the timing never seemed right to pursue it. First she was seeing someone else, then he was. Although he couldn’t even remember who that other woman was now. “Sounds like your parents have really hurt you since they split up.”

“Maybe in the past.” Her chin tipped, her green eyes glinting from the dashboard glow. “But I don’t let them have that kind of power over me anymore.”

“Are you sure?” He glanced at her purse with the cell phone. “Just because they had a contentious relationship doesn’t mean we’ll play out the same problems.”

The glimmer in her eyes turned cooler than the snowflakes picking up pace outside. “And just because you’ve been inside my body doesn’t give you the right to crawl inside my head.”

“Fair enough.” He liked her spunk most of all. When he thought about it, he liked a lot of things about her. Her smarts, her ambition, even her obsession with packing every square inch of her apartment with plants. Then there was the way her cool exterior lit on fire when he’d least expected it.

“That’s it? You’re backing off?” She looked over at him, her full lips parting in a pretty O of surprise that invited him to lean across ...

He held strong. Better not push his luck. Especially when he had thoughts filling his mind of her wearing nothing but her hair.

“You asked me to back off. I’m listening to you.” Very closely. Details were important with so much at stake.

He slowed on the tree-lined road, nearing his destination.

She watched him through narrowed eyes. "I've seen you at work. You never give up, you merely change tack. Remember when you went crazy for the sailboat ink drawing I did and vowed to work it into the cologne campaign even though the client was dead set on a cowboy graphic?"

Okay, so that sailboat was now stamped on male cologne bottles around the world—the original drawing framed in his computer room at home. But all that was beside the point. He focused on the goal.

"This is more important than work. I want you calm and happy." Honest enough, and while he was going for truthfulness ... "Hell, and it just so happens that I also want you. You were beautiful before, but now you're absolutely stunning."

"Back down, Romeo," she said, but still smiling, as he guided the car up to a small cabin restaurant. "You've already worked your way into my bed."

"It's been a while." Four months that felt like longer and still he hadn't been able to forget her. Irritation nipped. Damn it, he'd had to force himself to offer to buy another woman a drink. A drink, for Pete's sake. He hadn't even asked her for a date.

Lauren pulled out her cell phone and thumbed the keypad.

Jason reigned in his irritation and focused on Lauren. "Your mother again?"

"No, I'm checking the call history." She pursed her lips. "Hmm ... four months and not a single call from you. Doesn't seem like you've been pining for me."

Had she been mad that he hadn't called? He'd considered it, but she'd been fast to show him the door after they had sex. Maybe he'd misread her. As much as he prided himself on gauging people, this time, he wouldn't mind being wrong one damn bit.

Maybe she did want a repeat. God knows, he'd wanted more of her then, wanted more now. Her flowery scent drifted across the car, her soft curves warm, inviting him to pull off somewhere more secluded and tangle up with her. The pregnancy complicated matters, sure. But maybe sex could simplify them again.

Pure want pounded through his veins. "You made it clear our plans for the future didn't jibe."

"That hasn't changed."

"Everything has changed." He shifted in his seat, the leather creaking as he leaned closer to her.

Her pupils dilated. She swayed nearer. Still he waited, taking his time to breathe in the fresh scent of her, the flowers and greenery she worked with.

He slid an arm along the back of her seat, just cupping her shoulder, absorbing the feel of her, remembering. Her curves fit into the curve of his arm, softer, fuller with the swell of pregnancy between them.

He forced himself to move away. "This baby puts a whole new spin on priorities, and the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can move on to the good stuff."

She flopped back with a frustrated sigh. "You have a one-track mind."

He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. If there was a chance she wanted to resume the sexual relationship, he wouldn't mess it up again by pushing too fast or walking away too soon. Time to start romancing the mother of his child.

Jason flipped his coat collar up and unlocked the car doors. "Let's put this conversation on hold until after supper. I have a surprise for you."

He was certain the specially chosen restaurant would charm her. He just had to hope his best powers of persuasion would be enough to sway this coolly inscrutable woman.

The stakes were too high to consider a loss.

Where had she lost her self-control?

Lauren gripped the banister of the front steps leading up to her apartment building, a restored brownstone. The dinner with Jason had been amazing. His choice of a family-owned Italian restaurant

full of plants charmed her. The rustic old homestead was like a warm vineyard inside. Having him notice her love of greenery touched her. He was trying.

She climbed the steps, aware of him at her back. Of course he was trying. He wanted to get his way. Jason Reagert was a driven, ambitious man. Everyone in the ad business knew nothing could stop him when he set his mind to do something. She'd found it admirable when they were work friends.

But as the target of his campaign? She wasn't so sure anymore. What would have been an enjoyable, intimate evening bothered her somehow, made her want the real thing.

No. She wasn't ready to go that far. The ring would stay in her purse a while longer.

She glanced over her shoulder as a car slushed past. "Thank you for the thoughtful dinner. You actually managed to take my mind off the mess at work for a couple of hours."

He turned up his coat collar, his dark hair shiny in the glow of the outdoor lights. "You need to eat. Glad I could be of service."

Lauren twisted her key in the lock. "You're not going to use my comment as an excuse to press your plan for a fake engagement?"

"You know where I stand. What more is there to say?" He followed her into the building's hallway, apparently in no hurry to call it a night. "And before you ditch me on the stoop, I am going to see you safely to your apartment door."

"For safety's sake?" She gestured around the entry-way, soaring ceiling echoing the low voices of a couple down the corridor and the older lady in 2A calling to her poodle for a walk. Nobody would get mugged here. Too many witnesses.

"Somebody's gotta protect you from that vicious pup." He smiled, his five-o'clock shadow adding a badboy air to go along with the glint in his eye.

She rolled her eyes and started up the stairs, trying not to think about how long those three flights would feel once she was in her third trimester. "Come on, then."

He followed, a wooden stair creaking under his foot. "I'm not asking for coffee or anything. Although if you invite me, I'll pick you up and carry you inside for a night you won't forget."

"I had forgotten how persuasive you can be."

"I didn't forget how good you smell." He eye-stroked her. "Have I told you how much I like the scent of flowers on you?" He dipped his head. "Taking you to that restaurant was as much for me as it was for you."

"Dinner was nice and I appreciate that you picked a spot to win me over, but I don't like being manipulated. Your honesty calls out to me more than anything."

A grin creased the corners of his eyes as they reached the third floor. "I forget sometimes that you and I are in the same business."

"Just be straight with me."

"I can do that."

Could she believe him? Leaning back against her door, she searched his eyes for some sign of his deeper thoughts and feelings. She looked and found ... passion.

Not a surprise, but unsettling all the same, with her own emotions in such a whirl that she felt the least upset could send her spinning. Before she could think, she reached to dust melting snowflakes off the lapel of his jacket. Hard, male muscles twitched under her touch. Her pulse raced, stirring that pottery wheel inside her faster.

"Whoa!" She jolted back, pressing a hand to her belly.

Frowning, Jason braced a palm against her back. "Are you all right? Give me the key. You need to lie down."

"I'm fine, totally fine." She stepped away before she succumbed to the temptation to lean against him. The baby's swift kick brought her back to reality. "Our kiddo is just exercising off that fabulous chicken marsala."

His gaze dropped to her stomach. His fingers flexed. The way he didn't ask for what he so obviously wanted nudged her to offer. "Do you want to feel?"

He nodded curtly.

She took his hand and flattened it to the spot where ... "I'm not sure if you'll be able to feel—it's still kinda early." And no way was she inviting him to touch her bare stomach. Would he be at her doctor appointments down the road? Too much to think about. She needed to stay in the moment, one thing at a time. "Wait, just a little to the left." She guided him. "Right there."

His eyes widened. He looked up at her quickly, then back to her stomach. "I think I ... Yeah. Wow."

"Sometimes I just lie in bed and feel the baby move until all of the sudden I see an hour has passed. Wild, isn't it?"

"I had no idea what that felt like. I've never ..." He looked up at her again, holding her gaze, no shutters in place for the first time. "Thank you."

All noise around her faded, the other couple, the barking poodle, became a dull din drowned out by the drum of her pulse in her ears. She linked her fingers with his, wondering what it would be like to follow this attraction.

The heels on her boots brought her closer to his face. He only needed to duck a little, or she could arch up. Only a kiss. Nothing more. A simple ... brush of his mouth against hers. She could feel his breath already touching her in a phantom caress and, God, how she wanted this, just this much. Why even bother worrying about whether they would take it further?

She nipped his bottom lip. He growled low, then took her mouth with his, fully, no way to tell who'd opened for whom first because the hunger just took over. They'd kissed in her office before landing on the sofa. It hadn't been a totally impersonal hookup, but they certainly had made out. Not like this, standing in the hall outside her door, necking with the man who'd taken her to dinner. There was something wonderfully romantic about it. Something that made her want to sink in for a while and just enjoy the moment.

Her fingers tested the texture of his short hair still damp from snowflakes. He smelled of the cool crisp winter air and a hint of oregano from the restaurant, and her ravenous senses lapped up every bit.

"Lauren," he whispered, scattering kisses up her cheekbone, over her ear, "this is getting more than a little out of control for a public hallway. Do you want to move inside?"

Did she? She inched back to stare up into his face.

Her apartment door swept open, startling her back a step and into the present. Jason stepped in front of her protectively, his back tense under her fingers. When had she touched him again? Her fingers curled deeper into the fabric of his jacket, taut muscles flexing under her grip.

She peered over his shoulder and winced. "Mom?"

Four

Lauren stared at her mother, framed in the open doorway, and tried not to panic. How long would it take those keen maternal eyes to notice the baby bulge under the baggy sweater? She really should have taken care of informing her parents before now.

Second-guessing herself served no good. She needed to focus on how to best handle the moment, which began with gauging her mother's current mood by how she dressed.

Jacqueline Presley had always been a strange mix of junior league meets avant garde. She wore her standard Chanel suit—plum purple today—but with chunky jewelry in an animal theme. A family of ruby lizards climbed up one side of her jacket. Her emerald cape with silver fringe was draped haphazardly over her arm. She must have just arrived.

How she'd talked her way past the super to get inside, Lauren didn't even want to know.

She had more pressing concerns, anyway. Her mother's clothes said she was in an up mood, but her tousled hair, chipped nails and shaking hands testified to a frenetic edge. Sure, they were minor signs, but Lauren had learned long ago to catalog every detail, read the nuances, prepare herself for anything.

As she struggled for what to say, Jason stepped forward and thrust out his hand. "Hello, Mrs. Presley. I'm Jason Reagert."

"Reagert?" She shook his hand, then tapped the air with a rhinestone-studded fingernail, chewed down on one corner. "Are you related to J. D. Reagert of Reagert Comm?"

His smile tightened but didn't disappear. "My father, ma'am."

"Oh, no need to call me *ma'am*. I'm Jacqueline." She took his arm and hauled him into the apartment, not even looking back at Lauren.

What the hell?

She'd been so freaked out worrying that her mother would learn about the baby—only to be ignored completely. But then, Jason represented everything her mother wanted in a son-in-law. Lauren followed them inside, closing the door behind her.

Jacqueline's laugh bounced around in the vaulted ceiling. Her mom had many wonderful qualities, and she could certainly be charming when she wanted. And the times she'd taken meds, life had been level, happy. Lauren couldn't quite say "normal," because her mother was always quirky and artsy, but when she took care of her health, those eccentricities were actually fun.

God, she hoped this was one of those times.

Lauren inched her purse around over her stomach and followed Jason and her mother deeper into the apartment, the pair still with their backs to her. Jason pulled out a chair for her mother at the dining table. Odd choice, but Lauren wasn't going to argue, since sitting at the wooden ice-cream-parlor-style table would conveniently hide her pregnancy.

Had Jason known that? A sharp and watchful edge in his eyes indicated he was very aware of everything going on around him. Realization washed over her. Jason was shielding her from her mother. He'd maneuvered everyone so Lauren's stomach was never visible, while keeping her mother distracted—offering to take her wrap, pulling out her chair, asking about her trip down.

Could they actually pull this off without her mom finding out about the baby in such an explosive way tonight? It looked increasingly possible as Jacqueline seemed enraptured with quizzing Jason about his new job in California. Neither of them spared so much as a glance across the table at Lauren. Jacqueline was too busy soaking up the attention to even fidget with her glasses chain dangling from her neck.

How strange, not to mention different, to have someone run interference with her mom. She'd never had that before—her father had been more concerned with hiding out than containing the situation. Okay by her. She was an adult now.

Still, it felt good to breathe. Of course, Jason offered only a temporary reprieve. The news would come out soon enough, but in a more controlled setting.

Fifteen or so minutes of small talk later, Jason clasped Jacqueline's hand. "Jacqueline, it's been a delight meeting you. I hope you don't find me pushy here, but I've just gotten in from California to visit Lauren and have to leave soon ..."

Her mother scooped up her cape and passed it to Jason to hold open for her. "Oh, don't let me keep you two lovebirds. I'll just head back to my suite at the Waldorf." Stepping into her cape and shaking out the fringe, she turned to Lauren. "Lunch, dear, you and I, as soon your guy here returns to California."

"Sure, Mom. We really do need to talk."

"I know a great place with all organic foods. It'll help you with that water retention. Your face is a little puffy." Jacqueline leaned close to press her cheek to Lauren's. "He's a keeper. Don't mess it up this time, dear."

Lauren secured her purse over her stomach. "Of course, Mom."

She so didn't want to have a conversation with her mom about finding an "acceptable catch," especially in front of Jason. She could even let the "puffy face" comment pass if it meant getting through this visit without a confrontation. Come to think of it, her mother would probably see this baby as an opportunity to reel in that "catch."

Lauren shivered in disgust at the thought of her child being used that way.

Jacqueline breezed toward the door with a wave over her shoulder but not even a backward glance at Lauren as Jason escorted her out to the hall.

Lauren sagged in the chair, her purse sliding to the hardwood floor with a hefty thump. She smoothed her hand over the slight bulge of her stomach, the baby rolling under her hand. No child of hers was going to be seen as merely an opportunity to climb up some social ladder.

A tear dripped off her chin.

Damn. She scrubbed the back of her wrist along her face. She hadn't even known she was crying. She heard the creak as Jason closed the door, and she swiped her fingers under her eyes again, praying she'd cleared away any mascara tracks.

As he stepped into the apartment again, she scavenged up a smile. "I can't even begin to thank you."

"For what?" He pulled a chair closer to her and sat.

"For running interference with Mom, for not saying anything about the baby or my slimy accountant."

"I'm all about making things easier for you and our baby."

Our baby.

His words sent a shiver through her. Of excitement or fear?

She thought of their kiss in the corridor and how quickly she could land right back in his arms again, in his bed. Jason had a way of making her lose control, and that scared her most of all.

Lauren clenched her hands together to keep from clasping his hand on the table. "You've been great. Really. Coming here the minute you found out, dinner, handling Mom." In so many other ways, but still she couldn't forget the past months of no communication, not even so much as an e-mail. They needed to talk about that night sometime. Discussing it seemed less daunting now in light of the land mine she'd just dodged with her mother. "You haven't asked how I ended up pregnant."

He scratched his jaw, leaning back. "I figured the condom must have failed."

Memories of their frantic coupling churned through her mind, her body still humming from their make-out session in the hallway. Four months ago they'd torn at each other's clothes. And yes, they'd kissed then, too, deeply, frantically, desperate to connect. Then the mad fumbling through his wallet to sheath him before ... "We were pretty preoccupied at the time." Lauren shifted in her chair, suddenly unable to get comfortable. "I appreciate you not questioning me about it."

Her eyes lingered on his strong neck as she remembered the strength of it under her lips, savoring the bristly texture of his late-day shadow.

“We’ve known each other for a year and worked together most of the time the last month before I left. And I realize you weren’t seeing anyone else around the time we, uh, landed on your office couch.”

“I wasn’t seeing you, either.” Yet they’d ended up having impulsive sex, something she’d never done before. She’d only ever been with two men before, both long-term relationships, both men she’d considered marrying.

He angled closer, skimming his knuckles up and down her arm. “We may not have been dating, but I sure as hell always noticed you.”

His stroking hand moved slower, shifting from soothing to sensual, the heat of his skin searing through her sweater. She wanted him so damn much.

Too much.

She inched out of reach before she did something impulsive like draw him down to the floor with her. God, why hadn’t someone warned her about how out of control her hormones would be during pregnancy? Crying one minute and ready to jump Jason’s bones the next.

He rested his hand back on the table, giving her the space she needed. Okay, she would need a couple of states between them to disperse the tangy scent of his aftershave.

Lauren cleared her throat, settling on a subject sure to douse any passion. “How did you manage that whole scene with my mother so perfectly?”

His eyes smoked over her, assessing for three very loud beats of her heart before he relaxed in his chair again.

“A while back,” he said, apparently willing to concede her abrupt change of subject, “I landed an ad account for a new makeup line. The spokesmodel got pregnant. They still wanted her face on their product but not her stomach. We did some very inventive posing on that photo shoot.”

“Well, I appreciate your help all the same.” She toyed with a peppermill in the middle of the table. Maybe if she ground some flakes she could explain away the tears stinging behind her eyes. “I know I’m just delaying the inevitable.”

He tugged a linen napkin out of the basket and passed it to her. “Telling your mother about her first grandchild should be a happy event—at a time and place of your choosing.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Taking the napkin from him, she dabbed at her eyes, cursing the hormonal flood yet again. The weight of everything going on overwhelmed her—from saving her company to being pregnant on her own. It all felt like too much and Jason had offered her help. What did she have to lose by going to California with him, just for a couple of weeks to get her world in order and work out logistics for their life as parents? “Okay, Jason.”

“Okay what?”

She drew in a deep breath and crossed her fingers as the words bubbled out. “I’ll go to California with you for two weeks and pretend to be your fiancée.”

His eyes flashed with surprise briefly, then his face smoothed into his best calm-executive expression, which she’d seen him plaster in place often in the past. “Two weeks?”

So he’d caught that part. “I can’t leave my business indefinitely.” And she couldn’t let herself get caught up in playing house with Jason. “Look what happened when I was out of the office for a few weeks because of the morning sickness. My slimy accountant ran off with half a million dollars.”

“Valid point.” His features hardened, more angular with his negotiating face. “And you’re willing to accept my offer to infuse some cash into your business?”

“A loan. With interest and a payment plan.” Her pride would only let her go so far with this crazy idea. “I wouldn’t feel right otherwise, especially since I’m not agreeing to move to California permanently.”

“We could consider the money an investment for our child.”

“Jason, don’t push your luck. Even if half a million dollars isn’t much to you, it’s the principle here.”

“Fine,” he conceded. “I hear you.”

“I’ll accept a low interest rate.” She wouldn’t allow her pride to push her to the point of bankruptcy again.

“Good business decision. I’m obviously not going to argue, since I would have given you the money.”

“I’m going to be more careful this time in choosing who will watch over the business while I’m away. I considered hiring an office manager when the morning sickness first set in, but opted to cut corners to save money. That’s a mistake I won’t be repeating.”

She’d gotten a second chance, one she couldn’t afford to lose. Her baby deserved a strong, capable mother.

Lauren jabbed Jason in the chest with a finger. “But I really mean it when I say two weeks. I’m nervous enough being away from the office for that long.”

“You come back to New York in two weeks, but we leave the engagement on the books to quiet your mom and my client.” He clasped her finger and folded it against his chest, enfolding her in the warmth of his touch and chocolate-brown eyes.

“After a while, we can say time apart took its toll.”

“Hey, we just became engaged.” His thumb rasped along the inside of her wrist, her pulse leaping in response. “Do we have to plan the breakup already?”

“Quit trying to make me laugh.” *And quit trying to turn me on.*

He linked their fingers, holding her as firmly with his molten brown gaze. “But you have the most beautiful smile. Call me a selfish bastard, but I like to see it.”

The heat of his hand and his eyes stoked the barely banked fire inside her. She needed to hold strong.

Lauren eased her hand away. “I have one final condition.”

“Name it. I’ll make it happen.”

Lauren clasped the arms of her chair to keep her hands off him and her resolve in place. “Under no circumstances will we be sleeping together again.”

She’d agreed to go to California to give herself breathing room to regroup, to save her company and, yes, to help him secure his job. But she refused to let him blindside her a second time. She couldn’t risk the way sex with Jason stole her ability to think straight.

As she stared at his broad shoulders and steamy brown eyes, she wondered if she’d cut off her nose to spite her face.

Jason had known he would win in the end. Still, he was damn glad to be pulling up to his home in San Francisco’s Mission District with Lauren firmly planted in the seat next to him. Sure, she’d tossed that “no sex” clause into the agreement, a frustrating turn. Not unexpected, though. And not insurmountable. He’d seen the arousal in her eyes, the tightening of her nipples under her sweater.

He had hope.

Their day traveling together had gone well in a chartered flight with a catered supper on Sunday night. He’d bided his time and kept things low-key. He had two weeks to win her over, and he wasn’t going to blow it on the first day by pushing too fast. Right now, he needed to focus on getting her settled into his restored Victorian house for the night as smoothly as possible.

The streetlamps brightened the inside of the sedan. Lauren pressed her hand to the window of his Saab, her eyes widening. “You have a house.”

“I don’t live in my car.”

She laughed lightly, then looked back at the house as he drove around to the garage. “I just expected you to live in some cool condo in a singles’ complex.” She looked closer and gasped. “And

look at that window box next door. They already have some flowers in January. This is all so ... domestic.”

He hadn't thought of it that way and wasn't sure he was comfortable with the label. He turned off the ignition and closed the garage door. “When I was in the Navy, I spent so much time on a cramped ship and on the road. I'm ready for a space of my own.”

“Babies are noisy and take up lots of room.”

“Unless you're pregnant with a dozen sailors, I don't think we're going to have a problem with space.” Winking, he stepped out of the car and opened the door for her, leading her out to the covered walkway connecting the new garage to the historic, million-dollar home.

He'd bought the property for its location. As he walked up the steps to the side entrance, he saw the details anew through Lauren's artistic eyes—an old remodeled Victorian home, gray with white trim. Hardwood floors stretched throughout, the newly refinished sheen gleaming as he flicked on the lights. Crown molding and multipaned stained-glass windows had made it too good an investment to pass up.

“This is absolutely gorgeous.” She spun on her heel, her loose dress swirling around her calves. Her pinup-girl curves and beauty sucker punched him.

Jason loosened his tie. “I like being at the center of things.”

“Does that mean you're not a workaholic anymore?” She skimmed her fingers along the marble fireplace mantel, her gaze skipping around the room with obvious appreciation.

He'd known the vintage home would appeal to her. He hadn't been shopping for the two of them when he'd bought the house, but appreciated the dumb luck of owning a home she liked. Or would that qualify as having something in common?

“My time for recreation is very limited. Having restaurants and nightlife more accessible makes sense.”

She traced the chair rail down the hall. “What a find.”

He set her luggage at the foot of the stairs. “The couple who lived here before remodeled the whole place, wiring and all. They even gutted and updated the kitchen and baths.”

“So how did you luck into it?” Her auburn hair swished along her back as she looked over her shoulder at him.

“Apparently the renovations put a strain on their marriage and they ended up in divorce court. It looked like they broke up in the middle of a project. The upstairs guest bath still had the materials for wallpaper stripping set up in the tub.” He'd been working so hard landing the Prentice account, he'd only gotten around to clearing out that guest bathroom the week before. “Neither of them could afford to keep the house on their own, so they sold it.”

“How sad.” She wrapped her arms around her waist, accentuating her lush curves. “Don't you worry about stepping into all that bad karma?”

“I would worry more about paying the extra cash to get the same house down the road.”

“I guess so,” she said, her soft voice bouncing around the nearly empty space. “What about furniture?”

He glanced at the bare walls and mostly vacant rooms. A few moving boxes were stacked in a corner in each room. He just pulled out what he needed as he needed it. “I haven't had time to pick anything out and my old place came furnished. So once I got here, I bought the bare basics and went to work. I figured I might as well wait to do it right rather than buy a bunch of crap I regret later on.” He gestured for her to follow him. “Come on back to the kitchen. I have seats and food.”

“You could hire a decorator.” Her footsteps echoed down the hall on her way into the kitchen. Her gasp of pleasure at the spacious layout made him smile.

“I can wait. I have everything I need.” He steered her toward one of the two bar stools at the mammoth island between the kitchen and eating area. “A recliner, a big TV. There's a bed upstairs with a top-of-the-line mattress.”

Her lips went tight as she sat, resting her elbows on the Brazilian-granite countertop. “Where will I be sleeping?”

“In my bed of course.” His temperature spiked at just the words. He opened the refrigerator. “Bottled water? Fruit?”

“Yes, please.” She stood and took the drink and grapes from him. “Then I hope for your sake that your guest room has a comfy bed or sofa.”

God, he loved the way she didn’t take his bull, just quietly lobbing the serve back to him. “No furniture there, either. I’ll sleep in the recliner for now and have another mattress delivered.”

“That really sucks for you tonight, because I am not going to feel sorry for you and invite you to share the bed.” She tipped back her water.

“You’re heartless.” He slid a hand behind her waist and brought a grape to her lips.

“I’m fairly certain I made myself clear about the sleeping arrangements before we left New York.” She plucked the grape from his hands and popped it into her mouth.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” His thumb stroked along her spine as he watched her eyes for any signs of arousal—like the widening of her pupils, the pulse along her neck quickening.

“Jason, we can’t just sleep together for a couple of weeks and then have a civil relationship. It’s not logical. We have a child to think about. We can’t afford to take risks.”

Since she hadn’t shoved him away, he urged her a little closer until she stood between his knees. “Don’t you think our kid would like to see us together?”

“Are you suddenly magically ready for a long-term relationship? Because you damn well weren’t prepared for that four months ago.”

His eye twitched. “Sure, why not?”

“How charming.” Her lip curled. She shoved his arms away and charged toward the stairs.

“Hey, I’m trying here.” He spread his arms wide, following. “This is uncharted territory for me, too.”

She gripped her roll bag. “I’m going to bed. Alone. Enjoy your recliner.”

Not a problem, since he doubted he would sleep, anyway.

“I will. Thanks. I’m a deep sleeper.” He slid the suitcase from her hand. “And I’m also a guy who can’t watch a woman—especially a pregnant woman—lug a suitcase up the stairs.”

Without another word, he loped ahead of her. He had her in his house and he had two weeks to work his way into her bed. And once he got there? He intended to make sure she wasn’t so quick to boot him out again.

Five

Loneliness echoed around her in the empty bedroom.

Lauren slumped against the closed door, Jason's footsteps growing softer as he made his way to his recliner. Sure, she jammed too much furniture and plant life into her apartment back in Manhattan, but this space? It was beyond sparse.

A mattress on a frame.

One brass side table for a lamp and alarm clock.

And a closet full of clothes hanging from the racks and neatly folded on the shelves.

She pitched her purse on the bed, the bag bouncing to rest on the brown-and-blue comforter. Again the ring rolled out like a bad penny that kept turning up. Lauren placed it on the brass table. The generic piece of furniture.

Damn it, she didn't want to feel sorry for him. Jason was known as a shark in the business world, and stakes were too high for her to be caught unawares. But something about this place made her sad, made her want to bring flowers and color and noise to his world.

His whole house looked forlorn, for that matter, all the sadder given the home absolutely shouted out for love and attention, parties and family. Although he did have two bar stools in the kitchen. Had they come with the place or had he bought them with the notion of entertaining someone?

Kneeling, she unzipped her suitcase and pulled out the silky nightshirt that still fit. But for how much longer? She smoothed a hand over the growing curve of her stomach. Certainly not femme fatale material.

Her eyes scanned the empty walls, the barren bay window that cried out for a pair of comfy chairs, perfect for a couple watching a sunrise together. But other than those bar stools, it didn't appear he'd brought anyone here.

Anyone except her.

He knew she hadn't been dating anybody for the last six months he'd lived in New York—but *he* had been. Well, up until a couple of months before he'd left, that was. She wouldn't have slept with a guy who was seeing someone else, no matter how swept up into the attraction she may have felt.

Lauren peeled off her travel-weary clothes and slid the nightshirt over her head. The silky fabric teased her breasts to pebbly peaks, leaving her achy. Wanting. God, it would be so easy to walk down those stairs and satisfy the ache between her legs.

She eyed the door and actually considered taking what she wanted. She even stepped forward. Her toe hooked on the strap to her computer bag.

Her computer. Her work. She needed to remember her reason for coming here in the first place—to give herself time to plan, to save her business, to save her pride.

Too bad a laptop and pride made for very chilly bedfellows.

Jason stepped over the serpentine computer cord, Lauren's laptop closed and resting on the bedside table by his alarm clock. The ring box sat by the clock, closed. Her ring finger was still bare. She'd agreed to be his fiancée, even flown to California, but she hadn't committed one hundred percent to the plan.

He set the breakfast tray on the corner of the mattress and took his time studying the sleeping woman in his bed. Her auburn hair was spread over the brown cotton pillowcase, the sheets tangled around her legs. Her lemon-yellow nightshirt rucked up to the top of her thighs. He remembered well how soft those legs were to the touch, how strong when wrapped around his waist, insistently urging him along. Keeping his hands to himself with her in his space all the time was going to be tougher than he'd expected, but the game went to those who were patient.

Jason sat on the edge and indulged himself by stroking her hair away from her face. He hated to disturb her, but also didn't want to leave her alone in a strange place without checking on her. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

She rolled to her back and stretched, the nightshirt pulling taut over the growing curve of her stomach. Feeling the baby move the other day had been ... amazing. And unsettling.

Persuading Lauren to stay became all the more important.

Her eyes flickered open, vague and unfocused. She smiled, reaching up to him, and just that damn fast he forgot about careful plans and brushed a kiss over each beautiful eye. Her soft skin enticed him to hang around a while longer, kiss the tip of her nose, her chin. He would have liked to work his way lower, but she wasn't fully awake yet, and he wanted her aware and consenting the next time they had sex.

She wriggled slowly, sensuously, beneath him, waking him up hard and fast, harder still as she sighed sweetly. He rested his forehead against hers.

And then she froze, her eyes snapping open wide. "Jason—" she shoved at his chest and slid to the side "—I thought I told you to stay out of my bed."

He eased back, frustration pulsing through his veins. *Patience*. "You're in *my* bed, remember?"

"A technicality." She tugged her nightshirt down to her knees with one hand and pulled the sheet up higher with her other.

"I remember you being more of a morning person." He lifted the black lacquer tray from the corner of the bed.

"That was back when my stomach didn't live in my throat." She eyed the breakfast tray packed with juice, milk, toast and eggs. "Thanks, though. This is nice of you."

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well."

"I'm better now. At least I can keep food down." She plucked up a piece of toast and nibbled at the corner.

Content she was going to eat, he stood, for the first time in ... well, ever wanting to delay leaving for the office. "I'll be back at lunchtime."

"You don't need to. I can entertain myself." She sipped her milk. "I have work on the computer and calls to make."

"All right, then. We'll meet up for supper. Tomorrow I need to introduce you to my boss, and there's a big shindig in the evening later this week."

"Ah, so I'll get to meet the people who don't like the fact that you have a pregnant girlfriend." She scrunched her slim nose. "Great. I can't wait."

"Actually it's the client who has the problem, not my coworkers." He tugged a tie out of the closet, slid it under his collar and began knotting it.

"Oh, that's right. The old-fashioned guy."

He flipped his collar back in place and reached for his suit jacket, the intimacy of the morning stealing over him and she'd only been in his house one night. "It's his money to spend how he chooses. If we want his account—and we do—then we have to play by his rules, especially with Golden Gate Promotions nipping at our heels. Surely the businesswoman inside you understands that."

"I hear what you're saying."

"It would really help convince people to buy into our engagement if you would wear this." He scooped the ring box off the table and placed it on her breakfast tray. Winning a point was all about the presentation. If he offered her the diamond nestled in his palm, it seemed too much like a real proposal. Hopefully, by casually dropping it on the tray, she would feel less crowded.

Lauren nudged the box with the tip of her index finger. "You can't really expect to marry someone just to please a business associate."

Her question churning in his brain, he decided honesty would work best. She was smart and insightful, two things he enjoyed most about her.

“Honestly, Lauren, I’m not sure how far I would go with this. I’m still taking things a day at a time, working to make the best decision possible to secure the baby’s future, which means smoothing out your world and mine. Making the engagement as official as possible—including flashing this ring around—will go a long way toward taking care of those concerns. It could keep your mother off your back for a while, too.”

Lauren lightly punched his arm. “Now you’re playing dirty pool.”

“I’m a man on a mission.” He tapped the little velvet box.

She hugged her knees and stared at the ring as if it was a bomb, not a three-carat, flawless rock. Nice. He restrained the urge to laugh. Especially since it really wasn’t all that funny.

Lauren tore her eyes from the ring. “What will I say if someone asks when we’re getting married?”

He cricked his neck from side to side, working out the stress already knotting its way up and it wasn’t even seven o’clock yet. “Tell them your mother is planning the wedding. Tell them we’re looking for a date that fits in with our work schedules. Tell them we’re thinking about bolting to Vegas and will keep them posted.”

She scooped up the box and held the ring so it reflected the morning light streaming through the stained-glass window. “You’re really, really good at lying.”

Lying? He prided himself on being a man who stuck to the truth, even if he did his best to make that truth something others would buy into. “I’m just an ad man spinning the product.”

She stayed silent, but her eyes said loud and clear she thought he was lying to himself.

Steam from the shower still coating the air, Lauren tucked the towel more snugly around her body and raced to the telephone. God, she felt like a teenager rushing to catch a call from a guy.

Gasping, she snatched up her cell phone from the bedside table, her wet hair a dripping rope over her shoulder. “Hello?”

Her mother’s voice popped through the airwaves, loud, high-pitched and frantic. “Lauren, I got a call from the lawyer for Aunt Eliza’s estate today.”

Lauren dropped to the edge of the bed, her stomach knotting as she mentally kicked herself for not checking caller ID. “Why is he speaking with you, instead of phoning me directly?”

Could something actually be wrong? The money from Aunt Eliza’s estate had already been transferred to her—and stolen by the crooked accountant.

“He said he’s looking for you and can’t find you. Where are you?”

“I’m on a business trip, but I have my cell phone and am checking e-mail. I’ll give him a call. Thank you for the heads-up,” she said quickly, hoping to end the conversation.

“Dear, he says you’re having financial troubles.”

Lauren measured her words carefully. Her parents had plenty of money and didn’t hesitate to share it with her, which was generous. Except that money came with big strings attached. And quite frankly, she didn’t want to be a trust-fund kid, living her entire life off Mom and Dad’s hard work, never accomplishing anything on her own. “Things are tight at work, but I’m settling that out.”

“Tight? Most businesses fail in their first year, you know, dear.” Her mom’s jeweled glasses chain clicked in the background as she fidgeted.

“Yes, Mother. I know the statistics.” And she prayed her business wouldn’t add to the failed numbers on that list. “Thank you for passing along the message.”

Jacqueline pressed ahead. “You know, I’m going to call my accountant to talk to you. Make sure to keep your cell phone with you.”

“Thank you, Mom, but I can handle it.” And she would. She hugged her towel closer, shivering.

“You’ve never been good with money, dear.”

Staying silent, she bit her lip. Hard. The barb dug deeper than her teeth.

Her mother continued. “Remember when you blew your entire savings on that watch?”

“Mom—” the words bubbled up in spite of the fact she knew better than to argue with her mom on a rant “—I was in the third grade. My savings fit in a piggy bank.”

Her mother’s voice cracked on the start of a sob. “Of course. What do I know? I only care about you.” Jacqueline gasped again and again between words, her voice bobbling. “There’s no need to attack me. You’re just like your father, always picking, picking, picking at everything I do.”

“Mom, I’m sorry—”

“Yes, well, at least I have somewhere to go to relieve the stress. Did I tell you about my new vacation home?”

Lauren closed her eyes. Already weary and it wasn’t even lunchtime. Her mother’s mood swings were nothing new, but exhausting all the same. She just listened and hummed when her mother shared the details of the latest perfect place to get away to.

Which actually meant a new place to start over, since she’d alienated the people in her old vacation community. Lauren had seen it play out time and time again. While she half listened to her mother, she stared at the little velvet box.

Jason had been so calmly helpful in dealing with her mother. He’d helped her with her business troubles and her mother. He was certainly trying to understand what *she* needed, as well, even down to small details like the flowers in her office and the toast for the morning.

His reasons for becoming engaged might feel calculated, but what did she really have to lose by simply wearing his ring? Just by sliding that diamond on her finger, she could help him secure his job, which made for a more secure future for their baby. He was already doing everything he could to help stabilize her business, too.

She slipped the velvet box from the side table. The ring winked suggestively from the bed of velvet.

It was just a formality, really. She was here, in his house, pregnant with his child. What did it matter if she wore the ring?

Phone tucked under her chin, Lauren slid the ring in place and closed her fist. She knew this was the right thing to do, but the thought of sitting around here all day staring at that ring and second-guessing herself made her nerves churn so fast she feared losing her toast.

Jason wanted his office to know about their engagement. He’d given her time to gain her footing even though the delay could cost him. So why bother waiting? She could meet the people he worked with and even surprise Jason with a casual meal out where they could start on their path of a smoother relationship for the baby’s sake.

Decision made, she stood. “Mom, it’s been great talking to you, but I have a lunch date I just can’t miss.”

Staring out the taxi window, Lauren took in the towering white buildings of Union Square’s posh shopping district. Somewhere in that concrete jungle with palm trees waited Maddox Communications. She’d done more research on the Internet about MC before leaving Jason’s house. She was a businesswoman in her own right and knew to arm herself as well as possible before entering any new camp.

The Maddox patriarch, James, had founded Maddox Communications more than fifty years ago. He’d married Carol Flynn and they’d had two sons: Brock and Flynn, who each went into the family business. When James died eight years ago, Brock took over the helm, with his brother acting as vice president.

Lauren leaned forward, reading signs, watching for Powell Street, and, more important, the building referred to as The Maddox. Finally the cab cruised to a stop in front of the seven-story, Beaux Arts–style building constructed in 1910. The article she’d found said the building had been set for demolition when James Maddox saved it from the wrecking ball and had it lovingly restored in the late seventies.

Now the building was reputed to be worth ten times his purchase price.

She tipped the cabbie and stepped out of the taxi. Automatic doors whooshed wide. The first floor was home to the trendy New American cuisine restaurant Iron Grille and several retail stores. At the elevator, she consulted the building legend and found the second and third floors were rented out to other businesses.

Floors five and six were the corporate offices. Directions indicated that clients and visitors to Maddox Communications should enter the offices on the sixth floor.

Elevator Muzak piped jazz horns, floors chiming smoothly and quickly. The elevator opened directly to a reception desk and total opulence and edginess, from the black-stained oak floors to the stark white walls with original art. Two seventy-inch plasma screens sat on either side of the large reception desk, showing videos/commercials with a small scroll of words along the bottom proclaiming they'd been produced by Maddox Communications.

Jason had landed well in his new job. A sense of pride in his accomplishment beyond his parents' wealth stirred. She sure understood how tough it could be to step out of the shadow of influential parents to make your own mark in the world.

Lauren's low heels clicked along the high-sheened floors.

The receptionist smiled. "Welcome to Maddox Communications." Her short brown hair swished with every perky twitch of her head. "How can I help you?"

Lauren glanced down at the woman's name plate—Shelby—and smiled. "Hello, Shelby, I'm here to see Jason Reagert. My name's Lauren Presley."

"Yes, ma'am, if you'll wait over there?" She gestured to the large white leather sofas.

Lauren flickered her thumb over the engagement ring nervously as butterflies stirred. Shelby eyed her with undisguised curiosity. Lauren's stomach flipped again.

Suddenly Lauren wasn't so sure this had been a good idea, after all. What kind of game had she been expecting to play? She'd wanted to show Jason she was in charge and had only succeeded in looking erratic.

She cringed inside. Maybe she should just leave. She inched her purse around to cover her stomach, starting to stand.

A shadow stretched from the hall and she hesitated. Was it Jason already?

A lean man, around forty with black hair, came into sight, stern and very obviously not Jason. The man stopped at the desk, passing a note, his voice low. Lauren decided to make her big escape—

Shelby whispered back and pointed to Lauren. He straightened and walked toward her. Damn.

He extended his hand. "Hello, I'm Brock Maddox." The CEO. The big boss and obviously one confident son of a gun. "I understand you're here to see our wonderboy."

Busted. She shook his hand. "Lauren Presley. I'm a friend of Jason's. I'm also a graphic designer. We worked together on a couple of projects back in New York."

He eyed her stomach briefly. Sheesh. Was it that obvious? Apparently so. "Are you in San Francisco on work or vacation?"

"Both," she answered noncommittally. "Shelby was just about to let Jason know I'm here."

"Follow me. You can surprise him." Brock gestured over his shoulder and began plowing deeper into the Maddox offices, making low small talk she barely registered.

She was committed now to seeing this through. She quelled her nerves as he stopped in front of a door with a brass plate: Jason Reagert.

Inhaling a bracing breath, she pushed open the door and stopped short. Jason stood with his back to her—with a woman. *A smiling, stunningly beautiful red-haired woman who had her hand placed intimately on his arm.*

Fluttering nerves morphed into stone-still anger and a possessiveness that unnerved her to the tips of her toes.

He couldn't actually be seeing someone else? For a guy who cared about causing a scandal at work, he sure was playing with fire on a lot of levels.

Lauren stiffened her spine, feeling as frozen as the chill seeping into her heart. As she took in the couple standing together in his sleek office full of nautical prints, she couldn't believe she'd actually allowed herself to be hopeful simply because he'd brought her some toast and milk.

God, she was too easy. She'd had it with passively letting people walk all over her—her mother, her accountant, now Jason. She twirled the ring on her finger. At least she'd gotten a wake-up call when it came to the father of her baby.

He'd brought her here, damn it. And she wasn't going to scamper off like some scared rabbit. He wanted a fiancée? He was about to get one. Big-time.

"Hey there, lover." Lauren rested her hands on her stomach. "I'm absolutely starving. Are you ready for lunch?"

Six

Damn it all.

Jason stepped back from Celia so her hand fell from his arm—something he'd been a second away from doing, anyway, right before Lauren walked into his office. What was she even doing here? And to make matters worse, Brock stood just behind her, scowling.

What rotten timing all the way around. Celia had stopped by his office to ask if he was going out for drinks after work, and he'd been preparing the words to clear the air between them when the door had opened.

He needed to do some damage control ASAP.

Lauren stepped farther into the office, her green eyes flashing like kryptonite, ready to take down Clark Kent. Her loose-fitting teal-colored dress swirled around her legs, brushing against her curves. The woman was total sensual confidence. She thrust out her hand—her left one—engagement ring glinting. "I'm Lauren Presley, Jason's fiancée just in from New York. We're getting married tonight."

"Married?" Celia squeaked.

"Tonight?" Jason needed air because keeping up with the surprises Lauren dished his way was an Olympic sport.

Brock cocked an eyebrow and leaned deeper into the doorway for a front-row seat.

Lauren breezed up to Jason's desk and hooked her arm in his. "I know an elopement is supposed to be a secret. Sorry for spilling the beans, honey, but I'm just so darn excited. We're catching a hop to Vegas. Hokey, I know, but, well—" she caressed her stomach "—it's obvious we don't have a whole lot of time to plan unless I want to get married wearing a tent."

Brock stuffed his hands into his pockets, his face inscrutable. "We all had no idea. Congratulations."

Jason adjusted his tie. "Thank you."

Lauren smiled apologetically. "Blame me for that secrecy part, Mr. Maddox. I tend to be very private about my social life. I'm working on being more open." She smiled up at Jason, her fingernails digging trenches into his arm, the only indication her joy was anything other than authentic. "Did you tell them you'll be late for work tomorrow?"

He patted her hand, easing her nails away. "Uh, not yet."

Brock straightened. "Sounds like you two have some plans to make. We all look forward to celebrating with you when you get back. Congratulations again." He held the door open for wide-eyed Celia to follow.

Man, Jason owed her an apology. But he also owed Lauren his loyalty. Had she been serious about eloping? If so, why the sudden change of heart?

Once the door clicked shut, Jason turned to Lauren, eyeing her warily. Her hand rested mighty darn close to the pewter antique compass he used as a paperweight. Was she the kind of person who threw things? She was usually so calm he wouldn't expect behavior like that from her. Although he also wouldn't have expected her to announce to the world they were jetting off to Vegas in a few hours.

He closed the gap between them, watching her stoic face for the least sign of her mood. "Were you serious about eloping tonight?"

"Serious as a heart attack." She set the pewter paperweight down with an extra-hefty thud.

"That's great, really great." He wasn't sure what had caused her change of heart. Hell, he wasn't sure what had propelled her to come to the office in the first place, but he didn't intend to argue. He brushed her hair back over her shoulder, lightly, intimately. "You have nothing to be jealous about with Celia."

"Who said I'm jealous?" she snapped.

"You're obviously upset." He cupped the back of her neck, massaging, hopefully soothing. She shrugged free of his hand. "I don't like being made a fool of."

"There's nothing going on between Celia and me." And there wasn't.

"Does she know that?" Lauren jabbed a finger toward the door.

"I was making sure when you walked in."

Her eyes narrowed. "So there *is* something between the two of you."

"Whoa, hold on. Let's back this up." His feet damn near paced the shine off the black floors. "You're confusing the hell out of me. I try my ass off to charm you, and you all but toss my ring in the Bay. But when you think I'm flirting with another woman—which I was not—you're ready to elope?"

"As soon as you can pack your bags and book the flight." She closed the gap between them, blocking his pacing. Her jaw jutted aggressively. Which also happened to thrust out her full, kissable bottom lip.

She was hot when she was mad. Her eyes glimmered and her hair all but crackled from the heat radiating off her.

He was trying to do the straight-up best thing for their baby, and she was jerking him around nonstop. "If you're so pissed at me, why did you announce to the world we're headed to a Vegas wedding chapel?"

"Before—" she inched closer, tipping her head back until there was only a whisper of static-charged air between them "—I was worried about our feelings getting tangled up. But believe me, you've laid to rest all my fears about broken hearts and muddying the waters with an emotional train-wreck marriage like my parents went through. Now I know without question, there's not a chance in hell that I could fall in love with you. So let's go to Vegas."

Lauren held it together all the way through the introductions to Maddox Communications employees as Jason escorted her to his car. At least Jason had seemed to get the message she didn't want to give anything other than simple yes and no answers as he chartered a flight to Vegas.

She even managed to stay dry-eyed during the flight and through the sham of a wedding ceremony, difficult as hell to do since Jason had somehow managed to find a garden chapel service.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride." The wedding chapel official closed his book of vows, running his hand over the floral cover. His Hawaiian shirt was a little over-the-top, but there were flowers and plants everywhere, just as she would have wanted, which made her all the more emotional.

Jason brushed her lips with a kiss, nothing overly dramatic and yet still perfect. Although the feel of his mouth against hers, even closed and only lightly touching, sent heat sparkling through her veins.

And made tears prick her eyes.

He palmed her waist gently, his thumb stroking so lightly but enough to send her spine arching toward him. Her stupid, stupid traitorous body.

She broke away, looking down quickly, needing space. "Excuse me."

Lauren raced to the washroom, desperate to leave before she embarrassed herself by falling completely apart in front of Jason. The whole day had been like a ride on a high-speed roller coaster, with more than a few loops tipping her life upside down. And somehow she'd zipped right along with it, never once calling for a halt, or even a slow down.

What in the world had she just done?

Lauren rushed into the restroom, potted palms and hanging ferns packing the space. She sank onto the rattan sofa and yanked tissues from the box on the end table. Finally she let the tears flow, tears she'd bottled up since the minute she'd found out she would be having a baby alone. Tears collected from worry about how all of this would affect her mother. Tears over the possibility of losing her business.

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