

The Corporate Raider's Revenge

Charlene Sands

Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta

Yvonne Lindsay



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The Corporate Raider's Revenge / Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta /
Y. Lindsay — «HarperCollins»,

The Corporate Raider's Revenge Charlene Sands Millionaire hotel magnate Evan Tyler will stop at nothing to get revenge. So when the perfect opportunity arises – a chance to have Elena Royal – the daughter of his biggest competitor – he doesn't think twice. Evan plans not only to seduce family secrets from the sexy hotel heiress, he also plans to enjoy every second of it! Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta Yvonne Lindsay For take-no-prisoners tycoon Hunter Dolan, ten years after his passionate nights with Lily Fontaine – and the Fontaines' fatal betrayal of Hunter's family – bitterness still fuelled his success. Now he was this close to luring Lily back to his bed and having the socialite bear him the child he'd long been denied!

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The Corporate Raider's Revenge by Charlene Sands



Damn, she was a beauty .

Then Evan realised who she was. Elena Royal.

His rival in the hotel business, Nolan Royal, had only the one child, and she usually kept a low profile. Evan almost could give Nolan Royal credit for keeping the media out of his daughter's life.

Almost.

But because Nolan Royal had been a *royal* pain lately, cheating Evan out of a hotel buyout that he'd been working on for two years, he couldn't even give the man his due for protecting his daughter. Evan still burned from Royal's deliberate and dishonourable tactics.

He meant to make Royal pay.

Evan turned to Elena, "Want to get un-bored?"

She raised her eyebrows and he could tell she was intrigued. "What do you have in mind?"

Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta by Yvonne Lindsay



Seducing Lily would certainly be no hardship.

Convincing her, now that would be the challenge, and there was nothing in life that Hunter loved more than a challenge.

Was that fear he had detected in her voice? Hunter knew he should feel some sense of compassion for her, but it was a commodity he was very short on when it came to the Fontaines. Yes, he knew her secrets, knew all about her fall from grace. It couldn't have worked better if he'd planned it himself.

The Corporate Raider's Revenge

CHARLENE SANDS

Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta

YVONNE LINDSAY



THE CORPORATE RAIDER'S REVENGE

by
Charlene Sands

Dear Reader,

I love visiting Hawaii and I love chance encounters. The idea of a corporate raider accidentally meeting up with his rival's beautiful daughter and hatching a scheme to take revenge on his competitor was a story I *had* to write. Put them all together, an exotic location, red-hot chemistry from the get-go, a hunky millionaire and a hotel heiress, add a little deception and intrigue along the way, and you have *The Corporate Raider's Revenge*.

But sexy Tempest Hotel owner Evan Tyler doesn't know what he's got himself into when Elena Royal turns the tables on him. Elena isn't a pushover, and I enjoyed every moment writing the battle of wills between the two.

I hope you enjoyed meeting the Tylers. There'll be more stories coming soon with Evan's brothers – those hard-driving, heart-stopping Tyler heroes.

Happy reading!

Charlene Sands

REAL MEN STILL EXIST...on the pages of a Charlene Sands romance. Visit www.charlenesands.com.

CHARLENE SANDS

resides in Southern California with her husband, her school sweetheart and best friend, Don. Proudly, they boast that their children, Jason and Nikki, have earned their college degrees. The empty nesters now have two cats that have taken over the house. Charlene's love of the American West, both present and past, stems from storytelling days with her imaginative father, sparking a passion for a good story and her desire to write romance. When not writing, she enjoys sunny California days, Pacific beaches, and sitting down with a good book.

Charlene invites you to visit her website at www.charlenesands.com to enter her contests, stop by for a chat, read her blog and see what's new! "Friend" her at www.myspace.com/charlene_sands or e-mail her at charlenesands@hotmail.com.

This one is for Mom and Dad.

You are always with me.

One

Elena Royal sipped on her second glass of Sex on the Beach and the irony struck her anew.

Sex on the beach?

That's exactly what she should be having right now, while on her honeymoon. Instead, she sat outside alone on a bar stool of the Wind Breeze Resort. As overhead palm frond fans lapped around stealing traces of tropical Hawaiian heat, she cast off admiring looks from men at the patio bar and proceeded to drink away her sorrows.

She would have been married by now.

To Justin Overton, the scoundrel who had her convinced he loved her and not the Royal bankroll. Finding out on her wedding day that her would-be bridegroom hadn't an honest bone in his body, sent her packing, abandoning her wedding and the guests that would have arrived within the hour.

Yes, she'd left Justin at the altar, but she'd left her heart there, as well. No longer the trusting twenty-six-year-old girl who believed in happily ever after, Elena's tender ego had taken a nosedive.

She'd been shattered and still felt slivers of regret and heartache deep inside. She'd come to this secluded out-of-the-way Maui resort hoping she wouldn't be recognized as the daughter of West Coast hotel magnate, Nolan Royal. She needed the escape. She needed peace and quiet. She needed

time to reevaluate her life. She'd spent the past three weeks on the beach, swimming, reading and relaxing.

It was driving her crazy.

The midnight moon glistened on the oversize pool and beyond that, Hawaiian waters caressed the sand, the gentle waves echoing into a soft roar. From under the thatched roof of the bar's hut, she finished her drink, debating on having another before returning to the solitude of her lonely cottage. The sultry June night surrounded her in stillness, the Wind Breeze Resort falling short of its namesake. If it weren't for the lapping fans, the heavy air would smother her.

"Want another drink?" the bartender asked, then darted a hard quick stare, keeping the last of the men at the bar from approaching her.

She smiled. Joe, the bartender, had taken it upon himself to protect her solitude once he realized she wasn't like other single women who were eager and willing to leave the bar with a stranger. "I'd better not. I haven't finished this one yet."

A splash from the pool had her lifting her eyes from her cocktail glass.

The late-night swimmer dipped down deep in a perfect dive then, shadowed by moonlight, he rose up until his head popped out of the water. Water flowed off longish black silken hair and his shoulders rivaled the breadth of an Olympic athlete.

She caught herself staring and when he spotted her, he stared back, his eyes dark and piercing. Her heart beat faster. Chills of awareness romped up and down her body, the sensation like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

She lifted her lips in a smile.

He didn't smile back, but the slightest arch of one brow answered her.

She grew warm all over, her lower body stirring with unexpected heat as she watched the stunning man come out of the water with a grace that belied his rugged physical stature.

Holding her breath, she watched as he mopped up beads of water off his shoulder, shaking out his hair and wrapping a towel around his waist. He glanced at her again, his eyes filled with promise. Her heart raced as she hoped for his approach, which surprised her since she'd sworn off men at least for the next ten years.

She'd had it with liars, deceivers, men who'd speak vows of love and forever after, only to want a piece of the Royal pie. Justin had been most clever. She'd been fooled quite easily with his charm and vows of undying love. Until her father had him investigated.

She'd found out just in the nick of time that Justin Overton wasn't the high-powered financial consultant he'd claimed to be when she'd met him in Europe six months ago, but a college dropout on the verge of bankruptcy.

Elena had run for all she was worth to hide away in this tropical resort and heal her broken heart.

She glanced once more toward the pool. Her mystery man was gone. Just like that, he'd disappeared. Elena sighed and shook her head. It was probably for the best. At least her instant attraction meant she wasn't completely destroyed inside, burned somewhat but not yet a dry pile of ashes.

"Anything wrong, miss?" Joe asked, wiping a shot glass clean and keeping his eyes trained on her.

"Nothing at all, Joe," she said, with a quick rueful smile, realizing the only *sex on the beach* she would have tonight remained sitting at the bottom of her sparkling cocktail glass on the bamboo-framed bar.

The combination of peach schnapps, vodka and fruit juices she'd had in those two drinks last night, wreaked havoc on her head this morning. She'd never been a heavy drinker, preferring a glass of vintage wine or fine champagne. Now, she paid the price with a hangover that pounded like a sledgehammer.

She sat on a private stretch of beach on a striped sand chair, sipping straight black coffee, watching the ocean through her gold-framed sunglasses. Even Yves Saint Laurent couldn't block the bright sunshine well enough to keep her eyes from squinting and her head from aching.

She closed her eyes and hoped the fresh sea breezes would clear out the fuzziness.

"Mind if I take up this piece of real estate?" A deep male voice surprised her eyes open and another chair slid into the sand next to her.

She looked up and found her mystery man smiling at her, his eyes hidden behind a dark pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses. He wore an unbuttoned tropical shirt in blacks and forest greens and dark shorts. The shirt flapped in the breeze, opening enough for her to see that same muscled physique that had inspired her interest last night. "This beach is one big open house," she said, sipping her coffee.

He sat and stretched out his tanned legs. "There's definitely something to be said for the view."

She nodded, looking out at the horizon, until she realized he might have been offering a compliment. She turned to him, but he masked his expression well. She felt his eyes on her through the gunmetal shade of his sunglasses.

"Thanks for loaning me a piece of your private strip of beach. I'm Ty," he said.

"El—uh...Laney," she offered, glad not to be sharing last names and making an attempt not to give her true first name, either. Only her father and best friend called her by her childhood nickname, Laney. She sipped her coffee again.

"Too much Sex on the Beach last night, Laney?"

Her body flashed hot from the way he said *sex*. He was about as appealing as one man could get and his rich confident voice didn't hurt his image, either.

"Uh, yes to drinking too much and none of your business, if that question went somewhere else."

"It didn't," he said quickly. "I saw you last night at the bar."

"I'm not really much of a drinker."

He smiled and his mysterious persona vanished for a second. "Are you bored?"

"Last night I was," she answered honestly. "I mean, I came here to relax, do some reading, do nothing at all." *Recover from a broken engagement.*

"But doing nothing isn't your style?"

She shook her head. "Apparently not."

He sank back into his chair and watched the waves hit the shore. "It's not my style, either. I guess we have that in common."

"Are you on vacation?" she asked, wondering if he was alone on the island. Not that it should matter one way or the other. She told herself she was simply making idle conversation.

"Something like that," he said with a shrug. "With a little business mixed in. I always stay at the Wind Breeze when I'm here."

* * *

When she leaned back in her chair, Evan Tyler looked his fill. Damn, she was a beauty. Just thinking about the way her smoky blue eyes had nearly devoured him last night made his blood heat. He'd come out of the pool to find this gorgeous blonde studying him from her bar stool with a look of pure lust in her eyes. What turned him on even more was that she was probably clueless as to how she appeared—her body language enough to bring a man to his knees.

Then Evan realized who she was.

Elena Royal.

He'd recognized her from a few photos he'd seen. And though the rich heiress hadn't been notorious, she'd had a broken engagement that made the rounds with every sleazy tabloid in the country.

His rival in the hotel business, Nolan Royal, had only the one child and she usually kept a low profile. He guessed she'd come here to recover from the scandal of leaving her fiancé at the altar.

Hollywood had been buzzing with news of the Royal breakup, but Nolan killed the media attention instantly with hefty bribes to unprincipled journalists to let that story die a quick death.

Money talked and people listened. And Evan almost could give Nolan Royal credit for keeping the media out of his daughter's life.

Almost.

But because Nolan Royal had been a *royal* pain in his ass lately, cheating him out of a hotel buyout that he'd been working on for two years, he couldn't even give the man his due for protecting his daughter. Evan still burned from Royal's deliberate and dishonorable tactics. He'd lost two years of his life and a sizable chunk of future income to Nolan Royal. Yet, the older man had covered his tracks well and Evan couldn't provide any tangible proof that Royal had resorted to shady, if not illegal means to take over the southern-based hotel chain, The Swan's Inns.

Now, Evan was out for blood.

He meant to make Royal pay.

Evan turned to her, noting her bright red two-piece swimsuit that couldn't begin to hide her full breasts and luscious curves. "Want to get *unbored*?"

She raised her eyebrows and he could tell she was intrigued. "What do you have in mind?"

He rose and stripped to his swim trunks then grabbed her hand. "Let's go for a swim."

Laney enjoyed the swim with Ty so much that when he asked her to join him for lunch she couldn't find a reason to veto the invitation. They dined at Moose McGillicuddy's, a local Maui establishment on Front Street in Lahaina. They were known for their Ono Pupus, nose-clearing, mouth-searing hot chicken wings.

The place was jam-packed but somehow Ty orchestrated a corner table on the lanai that overlooked the historic town below hopping with tourists. Normally, Laney abhorred crowds and avoided places that crammed folks in worse than a Stones concert, but Ty promised *nothing boring*. And nothing boring, was exactly what she'd gotten. Studying photojournalism abroad, Laney loved people-watching. They made the best subjects for the camera and she'd been taking pictures of people and events ever since her father presented her with her first Canon on her twelfth birthday, fourteen years ago.

When she wanted to order a simple chicken salad, Ty intervened and made her try something a bit more daring on the menu. She ordered the Kahuna, a burger loaded with teriyaki sauce and grilled pineapple and told him after sharing those hot wings appetizers to be satisfied, because that was as bold as she was willing to go, right now. As she nibbled on her burger, she watched him eat Kalua Pig, a shredded pork sandwich piled high with cabbage and sautéed onions, another of the local main fares.

They walked along Front Street after lunch and spoke of nothing important. She liked that they'd seemed to have a silent agreement, no last names and no personal histories to mar the time they spent together.

She found him exciting and fun and full of surprises. When he took her back to the Wind Breeze, he walked her into the lobby and spoke in a sexy low voice near her ear. "I'd like to explore your 'bold as you're willing to go' comment a little more. Have dinner with me tonight."

She wasn't here for romance. She'd come to this secluded resort to get away from the press and memories that would have surely haunted her much more had she stayed in Los Angeles after the wedding fiasco. Normally, she wasn't one to sit still, but a broken heart had a way of sucking the joy out of everything. She was here to recover from her emotional injuries, she reminded herself, yet she could use a diversion.

A handsome, attentive diversion.

"Will I be expected to have more Ono Pupus?" she asked with a little smile. "Because my mouth is still burning up from lunch."

His attention riveted to her lips. "I can promise you no more hot wings, Laney." Then he added in a thrilling whisper, "But I'm afraid I can't make any promises regarding your mouth."

A shot of heat rivaling the Ono Pupus coursed through her body and she decided that Ty was good for her torn-up ego. Why shouldn't she have dinner with a fascinating man? Why not have *more* than dinner with him? She'd played by the rules all of her life and look what that got her?

She'd been persuaded by her well-meaning father to enter into The Royal hotel business after college, when all she really wanted in life was to become a photojournalist. And when her father had given her a three-month reprieve to study and tour Europe with her camera, hoping she'd get the camera bug out of her system, she'd met a vacationing Justin Overton in a little French café.

Justin had been smooth and charismatic and she'd been so naive. She'd found that he'd deliberately sought her out, following her from her native California home, playing on her love of photo galleries and the stunning French countryside. They had so much in common, it seemed, and before long, she fell in love and they'd gotten engaged quickly.

Laney thought she knew Justin well, until her father went against her wishes and had him investigated. And just before they were to speak their vows, her fiancé had been exposed as a fraud and a con man, only interested in Royal money.

He'd duped her, broken her heart and made her look like a fool. That wouldn't happen again with any man, much less an appealing stranger she met today on the beach. Thanks to Justin, she had trust issues now. She would guard her heart well.

So why not have a little fun? Let go and enjoy the rest of her time here, instead of trying to wrap herself around a *New York Times* bestseller thriller. Or pretend to enjoy the sand and surf, when her disillusionment weighed her down like an iron anchor.

"If you're married or engaged, I'll personally hunt you down and have your head on a platter," she said, only half-jokingly.

Ty's laughter filled the lobby and an appreciative gleam entered his eyes. "That's not in the cards for me. I'm single. I can make you that promise."

"Okay then," she said, "I'll have dinner with you."

He glanced at his watch, then cast her a steamy look filled with other promises. "I'll pick you up at eight. Be ready to have some fun and be *bold*."

He left her standing there, untouched. By the hungry look in his eyes, though, Laney knew that might all change tonight and she debated—for about two seconds—whether or not she should have dinner with him after all.

"Find out everything you can about Elena Royal, Brock. I need this info yesterday." Evan spoke to his brother on his cell phone as he drove along the Maui coastline toward the run-down but potentially profitable Hotel Paradise on the western tip of the island.

"Elena Royal?" Brock questioned quickly. "From what I understand, she's made herself as invisible as a person who bears the Royal name could. Except for her recent marriage collision, she's kept herself out of the limelight. What could you possibly want to dish up about her?"

"She's here on the island. We've met and she doesn't know who I am."

"So?"

"So? She's Nolan Royal's only child, only daughter. She's worked for him on and off the past few years."

"She's quite a looker, Ev. I've seen her picture somewhere. Where are you going with this?"

"She's bound to have knowledge of the old man's business. If that hotel chain is truly in trouble, I need to know. I'll make it my mission to find out while I'm here."

"I'll find out what I can right away. How is it, I'm up to my ears in paperwork and you're sunning yourself at an island resort with a gorgeous woman?"

Evan pulled the rented Porsche into the drive leading to the ramshackle hotel and parked the car. He made an instant assessment. Good location. Great view. In need of major renovations. He'd

have to do a thorough appraisal before deciding to add this hotel to the Tempest chain, the Tylers' hard-won hotel corporation.

"Someone's got to do it, Brock," he said, amused at the image of his youngest brother sitting behind a desk, knee-deep in work. Brock wasn't one to sit still very long. "I'm one who doesn't mind mixing business and pleasure. They're one and the same for me."

"You know, rumors about the Royals have been floating around for months."

"Precisely. I plan to find out if there's any truth to them. Call me when you have details."

Evan clicked off the phone and got out of the convertible, leaving the car right in front of the porte co-chere. No valet. He made a mental note before entering the establishment to tour the hotel with the owner.

By seven forty-five that evening, Evan had showered in his cottage suite at the Wind Breeze, dressed in a black suit and had gotten all the details he needed about Elena Royal. He had to admit, the woman hadn't been dealt a fair hand. She'd been courted by a con man and he'd almost succeeded in landing a place in the Royal family. Nolan had been cagey and going against his daughter's wishes and risking their relationship, he'd had the guy investigated completely, almost too late.

That only showed the hotel baron was getting soft in his old age.

Evan straightened his gray silk tie, combed his hair and grabbed several condoms from an unopened box in the dresser, sliding them into his pocket with ease. He hadn't met a woman who'd intrigued him more than Elena Royal in months and he didn't plan on letting her get away. There was keen intelligence in her eyes. She had a quick wit and an uncanny sense of humor. He'd make sure the lady didn't know another moment of boredom.

At precisely eight o'clock, Evan knocked on her cottage suite and was nearly *knocked* to his knees when she opened the door.

She went for bold.

"Wow." His low appreciative whistle made her smile almost shyly.

"Thank you," she said, bowing gracefully, her long wavy blond hair falling over her shoulders. Sleek black lacy material dipped low and Evan eyed her awe-inspiring cleavage and the way the dress hugged her body at the waist, curving around perfect hips to rest just above the knees. She appeared taller, almost eye level with him now, thanks to shiny rhinestone-embellished sandals that lifted her up about four inches.

"Come in for a second. I need to get my purse." When she turned around, soft folds of that lacy material plunged down to the very last vestiges of what would be considered decent, exposing her full back, teasing at her shapely bottom and making him itch to uncover more.

He stepped inside the suite's living room and kept his eyes trained on her. "Nice."

"It's almost like home," she said, picking up a small black evening bag from the sofa and turning. "I've been here almost a month."

"In that dress, you have to know I wasn't speaking about the room."

"Oh." She appeared flustered. "Thanks again."

Evan would love to keep her that way all night, with a rosy hue on her cheeks and a glint of anticipation in her eyes. He approached her slowly. "Let's just get this over with."

"Get what over with?"

She seemed genuinely surprised, but Evan couldn't stop himself. "This," he said, wrapping his arms around her, dipping his head and taking her in a hungry kiss. Her lips tasted fruity sweet like tropical nectar from the island and her body felt damn good pressed to his. Her little breathless moan of surprise triggered his desire even more. He deepened the kiss, slanting his head and brushing his lips over hers again with more demand this time. And she responded by putting her arms around his neck and pressing her mouth harder to his.

He parted her lips and stroked her tongue once, twice and she met his strokes with tentative ones of her own. His manhood rose to the occasion and he couldn't figure out if she were an expert

tease or more timid than she let on. But he couldn't deny that she felt perfect in his arms. Evan pulled back slightly and looked into her killer blue eyes. "If I didn't promise you dinner, we wouldn't be leaving this room, Laney."

She shook loose her blond waves and spoke in a breathless whisper, "Well, then I guess it's a good thing you did promise dinner. I like a man who keeps his promises."

"I also promised that you wouldn't be bored."

She released her breath slowly and unwound her arms from his neck. "So far, I'd say you've succeeded. You continue to surprise me, Ty."

Ty? For a minute, Evan almost forgot the real reason he pursued the wealthy heartbroken heiress. Without revealing his identity, he planned on getting some firsthand knowledge about The Royal hotels and any trouble they'd been having lately.

He brushed his mouth to hers again, then grabbed her hand and led her out of the suite, before they wound up horizontal on the bed.

Laney surprised him, too, and that was a tall order. Evan never liked surprises of any kind. He always needed to be in control. His immediate intense reaction to Laney Royal wasn't just sexual and that bothered him. But he wouldn't let that get in the way of what he really needed from her.

Information.

Two

Laney's lips burned now, not from Ono Pupus but from the man named Ty, whose spontaneous kisses had put a whole new meaning to the word *bold*.

Warm Hawaiian breezes blew her hair into a wild new style as they drove in Ty's sports car along the coastline. Laney thought of the lesson her father had always drilled into her head.

Be careful what you wish for.

She'd been lonely and glum without really knowing it, trying to convince herself she was doing fine after Justin's betrayal, but she'd been praying for something or someone to bring her out of her doldrums.

And out of the blue, this striking mystery man had entered her life and suddenly, Elena's heart raced again. Her body throbbed with excitement. Her nerves tingled and she felt truly alive. She'd gotten what she wished for and now she wouldn't tempt fate by questioning it. She'd decided the moment Ty's lips had touched hers, that she wouldn't deny herself this opportunity to forget the past.

She'd be leaving the island in two days to go home and spend some time with her father. Being the sole heir to the Royal empire, her father wanted her not only to learn the business, he wanted her to *love* the business as much as he did. But Laney never had and she'd always felt like a disappointment in that. She'd tried, but she couldn't become even remotely passionate about his business. Not when her camera was close at hand and there were countless images just waiting to be photographed.

She put all that aside for now. She'd live in the moment with a man who seemed to know exactly where those moments would take them.

Ty took her to an intimate restaurant overlooking the Pacific. They dined on the rooftop where tiki torches and a sliver of moonlight were the only source of illumination. The night was sultry and warm and the sound of waves crashing against the shore rivaled her pounding heart. She had Ty's undivided attention while they feasted on platters of seafood and drank champagne.

After dinner, the select few private rooftop guests were treated to a luau performance with beating drums and Hawaiian dancers whose exotic moves and undulations put Laney in a daring mood. She sipped her drink and each time she glanced at Ty, she found him watching her with a raw gleam in his eyes.

When the show ended, a three-piece band took over and played mellow tunes. Ty stood and took her hand. "Dance with me."

Laney rose and followed him onto the dance floor. She loved the strength of his grasp, the way she didn't have to think about a thing when she was with him. And when he took her into his arms,

meshing their bodies almost too close for her equilibrium, Laney allowed it. She fell into him, resting her head on his shoulder, her body pulsing inside and fully aware of his own growing need.

"I couldn't wait to hold you in my arms again," he whispered into her ear.

"I couldn't wait, either," she whispered back.

He brushed a soft kiss to her throat, then another and worked his way up to her chin, while his hands wreaked havoc on her back, his fingers splaying along the top of her derriere.

They rocked back and forth, more in rhythm to their own bodies than to the music playing.

"How long are you on the island?" he asked quietly, his lips almost brushing her mouth.

"Only two more days," she answered.

"And then where do you go?" he asked.

"Home, to spend time with my father. How long for you?"

"I think I just extended my stay two more days," he said before brushing his lips over hers.

A thrill shot straight through her. He'd planned on staying. For her. "And then?"

"I have a busy calendar. I'm not sure where my office will send me."

Part of Laney wanted to know everything there was to know about this man she simply knew as Ty, but the other part, the more cautious, no-more-men-in-my-life-thank-you-very-much part of her, was glad she knew next to nothing about him. She'd take away whatever memories they'd make on this island before she headed back to reality and her father's world.

He'd been calling daily, worried sick over her, hoping to coax her home. She'd finally agreed. It was time to stop licking her wounds and face the music and her friends and family. She'd been secreted away far too long, her father pointed out. This was one of the few times, she'd agreed with him.

Laney turned her full attention back to Ty. She knew he had to be quite successful in whatever business he was in. The Wind Breeze Resort only catered to the elite class. Any man who could turn a simple date into a private rooftop dining experience with top-notch entertainment had to have connections, money and power.

But she didn't want to know. She didn't want to get caught up in anything remotely reminiscent of her experience with Justin Overton.

She was happy just to be in Ty's arms, dancing hip to hip with him, feeling his body rub against hers. She'd instituted a Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy with him and she found she liked it very much.

After several more dances, which had them both incredibly breathless, they left the Top Reef restaurant and when she thought they'd go directly back to the resort, Ty surprised her by driving farther up the coast to a smoky jazz club called Good Sax. Ty had promised to keep her entertained and he was delivering. They sipped cappuccinos and listened to the sensual sounds of a bass saxophone player, Ty sitting next to her, his arm draped around her chair. Every so often he'd nibble on her throat, or stroke the underside of her hair, or take her hand to rub tiny circles over her thumb. The subtle gestures seemed incredibly natural and felt so right but that didn't stop every cell in her body from reacting with raw need. His gentle touches heightened her senses to the point that she didn't think she could take much more without pouncing on him.

She wanted him.

She turned to him and smiled, blinking her eyes, but the words wouldn't come. She wasn't that bold. Not yet.

"Ready to leave?" He didn't wait for her answer. He laid down several bills on the table, rose and took her hand with a look in his eyes that said he knew exactly what she wanted.

And once again, he would deliver.

They almost made love on the hood of his Porsche in the Good Sax parking lot. Ty had whirled around suddenly when they reached the car, taking her into his arms and kissing her senseless. He touched every part of her body that he could possibly get to without being arrested. And Laney had touched him back, returning his kisses with hot, wet kisses of her own. She ran her hands through his hair, cupped the back of his neck and pressed her body to his.

They came to their senses minutes later when a security guard approached. Laney giggled and straightened her dress while Ty tried to regain his composure below the waist. They drove home in complete silence, Ty knowing better than to touch her as they would surely wind up in a fatal accident. Already Laney was on the path of a major collision, but she didn't care. Living in the moment had its perks, she decided.

Now she stood outside her cottage suite facing Ty, her legs trembling and her heart rate rapidly picking up speed. She'd never wanted a man with such sheer abandon and desire. She wasn't a "party girl" and the tabloids had pretty much left her alone until the wedding fiasco that had splashed negative attention and scandal upon the Royal name. She'd come to the secluded island resort to heal, revamp, unwind and take charge of her life again. Yet, she couldn't imagine saying good-night to Ty right now. "I don't *ever* do this sort of—"

He bent and kissed the words from her mouth. "Then tell me to leave, Laney," he said quietly, brushing his lips into her hair. "I'll still be here tomorrow, no matter what you decide."

She liked that he gave her the choice, though there really wasn't any other choice she could make. She shoved open the door with her behind, grabbed at his silk tie and tugged him into the room. He breathed a sigh of relief and from that point on, things got a little crazy.

Ty pressed her up against the door and kissed her into oblivion, their tongues mating with openmouthed frenzy. She pulled at his Armani jacket and he struggled out of it while keeping their mouths locked. She undid his tie and he slid her dress down. Before she knew it, she was undressed but for her black thong.

Bare chested and bronzed, Ty bent his head and kissed her breast, then the other, his mouth covering her pebbled tip and sucking her in. A shot of burning heat raced through her.

"You're so beautiful."

Laney thought the same of him. She'd never met a man who'd been so beautiful in body and mind. He seemed to connect with her, even though they knew very little about one another. "Ty," she breathed out. "I want you."

Ty sank down onto his knees. "You'll have me, babe. In a minute. I promise."

Slowly, he lowered her thong down along her thighs, lifting her sandaled feet up one at a time, helping her out of the last piece of her clothing. He planted quick darting kisses up her leg to the juncture of the core, then he touched her there, splaying the folds of sensitive skin, until she let go tiny moans of pleasure, her head thrashing back against the door.

His hands moved up to her torso then, holding her in place at the waist as his mouth covered her, his tongue probing and stroking her inner warmth. She grabbed his thick hair in her hands as he continued to prime her body. The stubble on his face scraped her inner thighs, heightening her awareness even more. When she was ready to combust without him, he stopped, his timing right on.

He rose and lifted her into his arms, kissing her with lips that had just been on her. She felt heady and dizzy and more turned-on than she'd ever been in her life. He strode past the living room, down the hallway to the bedroom and set her onto the bed, quickly removing his pants and briefs. She glimpsed his massive erection right before he sheathed it with a condom. Then he was on the bed, on his back, pulling her on top of him.

She'd never been so daring or felt so exposed.

But Ty's appreciative gaze spurred her courage. "Bold, Laney," he whispered.

She straddled his thighs, fully naked in body and spirit and when he lifted her onto his erection, she sank onto him and he groaned with deep, unabashed pleasure. The sound spurred something wild in her and she moved on him, up and down, riding the tide of his passion. He reached up and touched her arms, her shoulders, guiding her until she found her pace. He cupped her breasts, weighing them with his hands, stroking her nipples with his thumbs.

She rode him hard then, wanting more, wanting all of him. He shoved inside her harder, feeling her need. And she rode to the brink of her passion climbing to an orgasm that shook her entire body.

Ty watched her release, his eyes grazing hers with intensity and amazingly she didn't feel anything remotely resembling her natural timid nature. With him, she felt open and free.

And then he rolled her over, their bodies and legs entwined and he pushed deeper inside her, his arms braced upon the bed as he reached his climax and thrust into her. Locks of his hair fell forward, perspiration coated his skin and his taut gorgeous body stiffened as he thrust into her one last glorious time, while his gaze pierced deep into her eyes.

Ty bent to kiss her lips before rolling off of her onto his back. "You okay?"

If she were a feline, she'd be purring loudly. "I'm definitely *not* bored."

He caught his breath before rolling to his side, his head braced on his hand. "As promised."

She rolled on her side to face him. "Ty, we don't even know each other's full names."

With his finger, he outlined her lips, swollen now from his passionate kisses. "I figured you wanted it that way."

She debated about a second then nodded. "I do. But how could you know that?"

He shrugged. "Usually a woman asks more questions than a game show host when she meets a man. You didn't ask, because you didn't want any questions in return. I figured you wanted your privacy."

Don't ask, don't tell.

"You're very perceptive." Yet Laney figured she owed him some sort of explanation. After all, they'd just had mind-boggling sex and he'd given her the best lovemaking experience of her life. She wouldn't dwell on the reason for that right now. "I'm not married or...engaged. I mean, I was engaged and it...it didn't work out. I came to the island to forget all about him."

Ty leaned back against the bed and chuckled. "If I helped in any way, I'm glad to be of service."

It wasn't like that. Or was it? Either way, Ty didn't seem the least bit upset about it. "You did. I haven't been thinking much of him lately." Just his betrayal. "But I'm glad I met you." *Whoever you are.*

Laney would never have imagined she'd give herself so fully and completely to a stranger—a hunky mystery man whom she'd never see again after she left the island.

Ty kissed her again and fondled her breasts. "Babe, that goes double for me."

And he gave her an encore performance, *doubling* her pleasure into the night until they exhausted themselves.

Evan finished his shower, taking a thick towel from the shelf in Laney's bathroom and wrapping it around his waist. Finger combing his hair back, he winced in the mirror at his two-day beard. He wasn't exactly on the clock this week, doing some business with pleasure on the island, but the "pirate" look was wearing thin on him.

He needed a shave.

But he needed something else more.

He exited the humid room and walked into the fresh air of the master bedroom where he'd left Laney sleeping. She wasn't in bed any longer.

He found her out on the private lanai overlooking the blue Pacific, on her cell phone. She wore his shirt from last night, the hem barely covering her shapely bottom. He followed the line of her long tanned legs to her bare feet and her white-tipped toenails. Classy.

Something raw tugged at him seeing her wearing his clothes like that.

Ty put on his briefs and trousers, then stepped out onto the balcony watching her body move as she spoke into the cell. He leaned against the French door and listened.

"Yes, I'm feeling a little better now." Laney bobbed her head. "Yes, I know I've been gone almost a month. I miss you, too."

"No, I wasn't aware the problems were escalating, Daddy. I'm sorry I'm not there for you right now."

Laney let go a little sigh. “Of course I’ll come home soon. I—I think I’m ready. I love you, too. Very much.”

Evan heard the whole conversation including another sigh once she clicked the phone closed. He walked behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tight against him. “Problems?”

She nodded, her blond waves tickling his chin. “It’s my father. He runs a big company and things are in chaos.”

This was exactly what Evan wanted to hear. He pushed her hair aside and kissed the back of her neck. “What kind of chaos?”

“Oh, that feels good.” She relaxed against his shoulder, fitting into him perfectly before she explained. “He’s losing money. It’s one mishap after another—fires, mechanical breakdowns, thefts and all kind of things. Now, his blood pressure is up. He wants people around him that he trusts. That means me,” she said quietly.

“Go on,” he said, “get it all out, babe.” Evan continued to nibble on her neck, kissing the soft skin just above her shoulders.

“I think he really needs me. He’s getting older and the stress is taking a toll on him. He hasn’t been the same since my mother died five years ago. It’s been hard on all of us.”

“That’s understandable,” he said, thinking about his own mother and the devastating way his father had died. The memory of that day haunted him still, yet Rebecca Tyler forged on, raising three sons single-handedly. They never had much money growing up, but now she had a good life, living in Florida and enjoying her retirement. Brock, Trent and Evan had developed a successful hotel chain and Tempest had made them multimillionaires within the first four years in operation. Although Rebecca Tyler never asked for anything, her sons made sure she wanted for nothing.

Yet, even knowing that, he couldn’t be too unhappy that Nolan Royal’s hotels were having trouble.

“How can you help him?”

She shrugged and her beautiful bottom wiggled against him. He was beginning to wish Laney Royal were any other woman. A woman he could pursue once they got back to the mainland.

“I’m not sure I can really. Lately, I’ve only contributed to his worries instead of helping him. But what he really wants is for me to play a more active role in the business and relieve him of some of the burden.”

“And you didn’t plan on that?”

Laney shook her head. “No, but I can’t afford to break his heart. He doesn’t want the company to fail or be sold. He’s worked hard all of his life. And now, he wants me by his side, so when the time comes for him to retire, he’ll have peace of mind that his legacy will continue.”

“And what do you want?”

She beamed with the same kind of passion he’d seen when she got all hot and sexy. “All I want to do is take pictures. I’m a photojournalist at heart. I’ve sold some of my work to magazines and I want to continue with it. But Dad thinks of it as a hobby. Anything I do outside the business isn’t important to him. He doesn’t take my work seriously.” She made a little hopeless shrug. “I’m all he’s got.”

She turned around, winding her arms about his neck and resting her pretty eyes on him. “Ty, thanks for listening, but I don’t really want to think about my father right now.”

Hell, how could he resist that kind of temptation? Evan braced her waist and brought her closer, breathing the sunshine in her hair, whispering into her ear, “I can think of a few ways to distract you.”

She ran her fingers along his unshaven beard. “Distract away.”

Evan cupped her sweet bottom bringing her up against him and took her in a long lazy slow kiss.

He’d found out what he needed to know for now. There was truth to the rumor that Nolan Royal’s hotels were in deep trouble. And that also meant he’d be less of an obstacle when Evan made

his move to buy him out. Satisfied with the information he'd garnered, he spent the next part of the morning distracting Laney Royal and enjoying every minute of it.

Later that morning, they took a lazy stroll along the beach, flirting with the waves and each other, playing in the water and sunning themselves until their stomachs grumbled in hunger. Then Ty took Laney to his cottage suite at the opposite end of the Wind Breeze. It was clearly the largest the hotel had to offer. They had a catered lunch on the sundeck and then soaked in the private Jacuzzi.

Laney baked in the sun in the afternoon, Ty being diligent in lathering her with sunscreen, his hands roaming over her body in places the sun would never touch. But after two hours, she needed to rinse off and Ty offered her his shower.

Laney entered the suite's enormous, marble-from-wall-to-floor bathroom, the shower area alone taking up half the room. Jets from all sides and top streamed down and, before she knew it, Ty entered the shower with only one thing on his mind.

"What do you think about the plumbing in here?" he asked, wearing an innocent expression as he approached in the nude. One thing Laney had learned, there was nothing innocent about Ty, the mystery man. He knew all the right moves and Laney was only too glad to be on the receiving end of his vast knowledge.

She gripped him below the waist, filling her hand with his firm length and returned his innocent look as seven jets rained upon both of them. "I think I've turned everything on properly in here, don't you?"

She slid her hand up and down and Ty growled, the sound echoing against the Italian marble. "Babe, uh, yeah. You've pressed all the right buttons."

Laney loved Ty's sense of humor. It reminded her that she had one of her own. But when he backed her up against the cool marble wall of the shower, all thoughts of humor vanished. Ty had that look in his eyes and Laney knew she was going to be made love to all over again.

In the most delicious way.

They spent the rest of the afternoon in Ty's suite, napping in his bed, eating room-service pizza and drinking beer. Laney beat Ty five games to three in gin rummy and much to her delight, she found out that Ty didn't like to lose, which made teasing him all the more fun.

In the evening they took a moonlit stroll along the beach and then a quick swim in the pool. Laney opened up a little bit more to Ty about her dilemma with her father. Though she made sure not to reveal too much about her identity, she found talking to him was easy. He listened well and didn't ask too many questions or give his opinion. Who'd have thought the gorgeous stranger wouldn't mind hearing about her love of photojournalism and her lackluster interest in her father's business?

They retired to bed together in Ty's suite and made slow thrilling love to each other. Her body sated, her mind clear, Laney felt hopeful that she could move on from past hurts now. She'd never had a fling before and probably wouldn't have another, but Ty had been exactly what she needed, when she needed it. Besides, how could any fling compare to this one? She'd met the perfect man to help her forget her heartache.

Only a tiny part of her wished for something more with Ty. Or maybe she just wished she'd have more time with him, before having to say goodbye. But, her flight left the island tomorrow evening.

In the morning, Ty woke her early and kissing her quickly, he said, "Get dressed. And bring some layers of clothing with you. Don't forget your camera."

Disheveled and sleep hazy, she asked, "Why, where are we going?"

"To the house of the sun." He patted her butt and tugged at her hair playfully. "Come on, babe. Rise and shine."

By 9:00 a.m., Laney found herself sixty-five feet above sea level at the top of Haleakala Crater, in complete awe of the vista before her. She snapped picture after picture of the two-million-year-old moonlike crater and the surroundings from the staging area, before the downhill bike ride Ty insisted she shouldn't miss before leaving the island.

He'd been right. Wearing helmets and outer gear to protect against the frigid weather, they sailed down the volcanic crater area on sturdy bikes, dropping to the three-thousand-foot level in less than ten miles, only stopping their exhilarating ride at key lookout points to take amazing pictures. At one point, all five of the islands were visible from where they stood. "This is awesome, Ty. I've never come up here before."

"I thought you'd like it. The landscape's amazing." Then he kissed the tip of her nose. "And the view from where I'm standing isn't half-bad, either."

Laney snapped a candid picture of him then, holding his helmet in hand, wearing a crazy orange jumpsuit, but it was the appreciative look in his eyes that she wanted to capture in time. "I'd have to agree," she said, before putting her helmet back on.

As they biked down closer to sea level, the outer gear came off, Ty giving them up to the driver of the chartered van following them. And once they reached up-country, more level land known for ranches and Hawaiian cowboys, Laney shot more pictures, grateful to Ty for understanding her love of photography and glad to have had this chance.

After leaving Justin at the altar, she'd only snapped pictures of things that required no effort and no research on her part, her heart too shattered and her confidence too wobbly to make the effort.

But this...this discovery had fulfilled all of her dreams. She knew she'd gotten some great shots today and she had Ty to thank for that.

When they arrived back at the Wind Breeze, Laney realized this would be her last few hours with Ty. She didn't want to waste any time making small talk. She'd seen the hot gleam in his eyes and knew he was thinking the same thing.

They fell onto her bed with great urgency. Hungry mouths, steaming bodies and wild caresses had them panting hard. Ty stroked her to a full climax instantly, knowing her body so well and then she returned the gesture, taking him in her mouth and bringing him to the brink. Ty took control then, positioning her onto her back, lifting her legs to his shoulders and bringing them both to fast and fiery fulfillment in a matter of seconds.

The next time they made love, it was slow, deliberate, a final farewell. Ty took care with her and allowed her the time she needed to come to grips with the end of their weekend together. His kisses were long and lazy and he caressed her body with the tenderness one would lavish on a precious treasure.

Laney was certain she'd never find a better lover. Ty thrilled her, excited her and made her laugh. But he wouldn't make her cry, she told herself. She'd known going into this brief affair, there could be no future for them. She hadn't room in her heart to even try again.

Thanks to Justin Overton, she couldn't put faith in any relationship any time soon. Maybe forever.

So when Ty sat up, glancing at the clock, realizing the time and offering her a ride to the airport, Laney declined.

They'd say their farewells here and now.

Ty kissed her soundly on the lips and gazing at her with regret in his eyes, he said something quite mysterious, like the mystery man that he was. "You were quite a surprise to me, babe."

He left her sitting on the bed, holding a satin sheet to her chest, her hair tousled and wild about her face, wondering exactly what he meant by that.

Three

One month later, Laney bent down on her knees to set a dozen white carnations on her father's grave. He'd always liked the simple traditional flower, sturdy and hearty, a bloom that would thrive a long time. Nolan Royal believed in longevity and in keeping his time-honored namesake hotels first-rate despite the newer, up-and-coming chains. He'd built a prestigious empire on that premise.

Now, the man was gone, but the empire was still alive.

Tears dripped from Laney's eyes as she touched the fresh grass that had been planted over his resting place, as if the caress could possibly bring her closer to him, somehow. "Oh, Daddy," she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

She'd never get over the guilt she felt these past few weeks at not having been stronger for him, not having been the person he needed, not having helped him more when he seemed to need it most.

When she'd come home from the island after her extended stay, he'd been relieved to see her. He'd been dealing with the tension and pressure of the business failings without her, relying on his right-hand man, the only other person he trusted with inside information, Preston Malloy.

She'd promised her father right before his fatal heart attack that she would work her hardest to help get things back on track. The hotels had been plagued with a run of back luck or worse yet, they'd been deliberately sabotaged.

Her father had been perplexed, angry and frustrated at how so many things could go wrong in such a short span of time. Within months, many of The Royals across the continent had failed in one way or another.

Don't worry, Daddy. I won't disappoint you again. Laney made the vow in her heart and her mind. She was sole beneficiary to The Royal holdings and now everything fell in her lap. She'd assured her father she would keep the hotels thriving and she would do it.

"I'll take care of things now," she promised, staring at her father's bronzed plaque. It rested beside her mother's in a private section of the cemetery.

"I thought I'd find you here." Preston Malloy came up behind her.

She rose from her knees to face him. "What is it?" she asked. "Is there another problem at Royal?"

Preston wrapped an arm around her shoulder and hugged her close. "Not today, Elena."

As close as they'd been through the years, she'd never allowed Preston or anyone besides her mother, father and best friend, to call her Laney. Yet, she'd given her nickname to one other person, on a sandy beach, on an island, at a time in her life when she really needed a friend. Now, those special moments seemed as if they occurred eons ago.

"I just came by to make sure you're okay."

"I'll be fine."

"You've been here every day since the funeral, five days ago."

"I know. I need to feel connected. I want Dad to know I'm here."

"He knows. He wouldn't want you blaming yourself for not being with him when he died. We've already had that talk."

Preston smiled. He was ten years older than her, but he'd become her rock lately, holding up the business end while coordinating all the funeral arrangements. Small wonder that her father valued Preston's abilities and friendship. She was grateful that her father had Preston as his executive assistant. Now, Preston took on another heavy load, dealing with a grieving daughter.

Laney had always suspected her father would have liked to see something happen romantically between the two of them. But though she'd been on several dinner dates with him, nothing had developed in that regard.

"I wish I'd been there to hold his hand during his last moments." Laney shook her head, grief eating at her thinking about her father dying alone.

He'd had an awful day she'd been told, his calendar full of meetings that afternoon. Many believed something or someone had upset him enough to cause his heart to fail. He'd never even made it to the hospital.

Sorrow and wrenching pain filled her with despair. She hadn't gone to work that day, or the days before. Since coming home from Maui, she'd worked diligently beside her father and for the very first time, she'd really gotten a deep sense of the difficulties facing the corporation. Her father hadn't taken the problems well, suspecting there was more than met the eye to these sudden, unexpected setbacks.

Seeing the undue stress on her father's face made her dig her heels in, promising him that they'd get to the bottom of the costly hotel mishaps that also had hurt the outstanding Royal reputation.

Laney worked day and night for three solid weeks and had begun to really get into a good stride—until she fainted at work from fatigue. She'd refused medical attention, thinking the long hours and her lack of appetite had contributed to her fainting spell. She'd gone home to rest that day. She thought she would feel better with some rest, but the weakness and fatigue continued. Her father insisted she not come into work until she felt stronger. Three days later, Nolan Royal had gone into cardiac arrest while sitting at his desk and died instantly.

Preston squeezed her shoulders gently. "He always knew you loved him, Elena. Never fear that. He was very proud of you."

"Was he?" Laney wasn't always so sure. She glanced at his grave and dried her tears with a tissue. "I hope so."

"You know what he'd want right now?"

She shook her head, sadness usurping her thoughts too much to make sense of anything.

"He'd want you to fight for the company. He'd want you to bring The Royals back."

Laney sighed with deep regret. She owed her father that much. She'd put aside her own needs to honor the vow she'd made to him. "I want that now, too, Preston. But I don't know if I can manage it all by myself."

He smiled and kissed her cheek. "You won't have to. You have me."

Laney put down the phone slowly, her head aching, her body stiff with tension. She stared at the paperwork on her late father's desk—which had become her desk now—in the corporate headquarters building adjacent to The Royal Beverly Hills. Sitting in his oversize tufted leather swivel chair, she felt small, diminutive. Her father had been a large man, six feet tall and built like a linebacker. Space was something he valued. His chair, his desk, his office, his dreams were all on a grand scale.

She massaged her forehead and stretched her neck, making head circles to work out the kinks. "A computer glitch in San Diego," she muttered, closing her eyes. The entire reservation system had bleeped off for half a day, causing The Royals undue losses in potential revenue at the height of the summer season. "What next?" she whispered, tossing her head back against the comfort of the cushioned chair.

When Preston walked into her office, she felt a little better. His dedication had been a godsend these past few weeks. And true to his word at her father's graveside, he'd been right by her side, assisting her in every way he possibly could.

"Is it quitting time?" she asked.

Preston smiled, glancing at his watch, playing along. The day had just barely started. Sunshine streamed into the penthouse office suite bringing morning warmth that hinted at a very hot, humid July day to come. "It could be—you're the boss."

She allowed herself one last moment of relaxation, then leaned forward in the chair, bracing her arms on the desk. "If only," she said, not exactly in jest. She'd been stressed lately and extremely tired, but it was all part of the grieving process, she'd been told. "I've got meetings throughout the day, I could use your input."

Dressed in a light suit coat that fit his form perfectly and made his blue eyes stand out, Preston was the epitome of competence and efficiency. "I heard about the computer glitch in San Diego. I think I need to check it out personally today. I'd planned on being back tomorrow evening."

Inwardly, Laney cringed. Whenever Preston was out of the office, she constantly second-guessed herself. Having him here to bounce ideas and solutions off, gave her the confidence she needed. Though she worked for Royal before, during and after college, she'd never really taken on a significant role. Suddenly, she was thrust into the driver's seat. "If you think it's necessary."

"I do. We need to find out what caused the problem and make sure it doesn't happen again. It's just two days, but if you'd rather I didn't go—"

"No, no. You should go. I'll hold down the fort."

Preston nodded. "Okay, but have dinner with me tomorrow night. You look like you could use a break."

Dinner? She hesitated. He'd been rather obvious about his desire to date her a few years ago and she didn't want to encourage anything again. The last thing she needed now was to complicate her life at the moment. "I'm not eating much these days, Preston."

He cast her a warm, encouraging smile. "Your father wouldn't want you to be alone so much. Besides, I should *make* you eat something. You gave us all a scare when you fainted that day."

"I won't faint again."

"Darn right. Because we're going to have a nice peaceful meal tomorrow night and I'll fill you in on my findings from my trip."

"Okay," she agreed, finally. She was being foolish. Preston was only looking out for her welfare and they did have to spend time together after hours some of the time until Laney felt more confident about her position here. "Call me when you get back tomorrow."

"I will," he said, satisfied. "I'm off now. You know how to reach me if you need anything."

Laney watched him leave, closing the door behind him. When her cell phone rang, she glanced at the number and immediately answered. "Julia, thank God. Your timing is perfect. I need my best friend right now."

"Oh, Laney, I think I sensed it. We haven't spoken much this week. How're you doing? Still not eating?"

"I can't. My stomach's not right. It's from all the stress I'm sure. And believe me, you can cut the tension with a knife around here. The employees aren't thrilled at having me take up where my father left off. Most of them think they know more than me. And guess what, they just might."

Julia chuckled, the same girlish laugh she remembered when they went to private school together. "No, they don't. They're just used to taking orders from your father. Don't let them push you around."

"Many of them were working here when I'd come around selling candy bars for school fundraisers. It's hard to gain their respect. But I am my father's daughter. I'll prove to them I know what I'm doing. It's just going to take a little while." Laney hoped so, anyway. She'd gotten a degree in business and had a good background, but she'd been thrust at the helm so suddenly, while still reeling from a broken engagement and her father's death. Yet, she was the go-to person. The buck stopped with her. "I'm managing, Julia."

"I know you are. Your father would be proud."

Laney sighed with relief. "Thanks, hon. You always know how to cheer me up."

"I've got another cheer or two in me. Our days at SC weren't that long ago." Laney flashed an image of the two of them at USC, cheering for the Trojans. Both had crushes on the quarterback. "So let me take you to lunch today."

Laney groaned. The mention of food brought queasiness to her stomach. "Why does everyone try to feed me?"

"Because we're worried about you. I've been over at your place enough lately to see what you're eating, which is next to nothing. Are you sure you're fine?"

"I'm...doing...okay."

"I know that tone, best girlfriend. You are not *okay*."

"It's just all this turmoil in my life. Really, I appreciate the offer, but I'm not taking lunches these days." Laney wouldn't admit to Julia that maybe something more was wrong with her. She didn't want to worry her best friend. Her suspicions were unfounded at the moment. She'd been through a world of grief and upheaval in her life lately. That had to be the reason she didn't feel quite like herself.

"Okay, then, but I'm holding you to lunch this weekend. You need to get away from the office, get your mind off business. We'll go down to the beach and have a peaceful meal, clear your head."

"Sounds great," she answered truthfully. Julia was the one person who really understood her. Spending time with her always helped her forget her problems. "I'm looking forward to it." She hung up the phone feeling much better.

* * *

An hour later, Laney looked up from the pile of reports on her desk when someone knocked briskly on the office door. Before she could acknowledge the knock, the door pushed open and a man strode into the room.

Laney rose immediately, startled.

"Hello, Laney."

Ty? Her mystery man was here, standing in her office? Laney swallowed and stared in disbelief. That deep, sensual voice reminded her of romantic nights and sizzling sex. Her first thought was: he looked gorgeous. Her second: she was overjoyed seeing him. She hadn't forgotten the glorious days they'd spent together last month. Alone in her Brentwood home at night, thoughts of him would filter in and she'd smile at the memory of her steamy, hot, short-lived fling. She'd never done anything quite so spontaneous or been so uninhibited as she'd been with him. He had helped her through a very bleak time in her life.

"Ty." She drank in the sight of him, dressed in a black suit, with the collar opened at the throat. She remembered nibbling on that throat and gaining his undivided attention. She couldn't keep a wide smile from emerging. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

"But how did you know where to find me?"

He smiled slowly as he approached. She stepped away from the desk to stand a few feet from him, her heart racing. She stared into his eyes. And he stared back. That familiar gleam was there, the one that told her he appreciated what was before his eyes. "I'll explain that later. How are you?"

"I'm...I'm...stunned, actually. I never thought I'd see you again."

Ty nodded and closed the gap between them. He took her hand. His touch sent tingles from her palm clear up her arm. He closed his fingers around hers, drew her close and brushed a soft, exquisite kiss on her lips.

Laney responded instantly, savoring his warm lips on her, the familiar scent that could heat her instantly. She kissed him back with full abandon and was left breathless when their mouths broke apart. But when he looked into her eyes, regret marred his expression. "I didn't really plan on it happening this way. I heard about your father."

Laney's eyebrows shot straight up. "You know my father? How?"

"I'm sorry, Elena." Her secretary barged in. "I stepped away from my desk for a moment."

"No, no. It's okay, Ally." She took her eyes off Ty to give a direct order to her secretary. "Hold my calls. And please tell my ten o'clock appointment I'm running a little late."

"But, he is your ten o'clock appointment." Ally glanced at Ty, puzzled.

"Don't be silly," she said. "He doesn't have a..." Then she walked over to the appointment book sitting on her desk, just to double-check. She'd known about her ten o'clock, dreading the meeting. She'd seen his name on the schedule this morning and immediately her stomach had clenched. "Just tell Evan Tyler to wait."

She'd like to keep that man waiting until hell froze over. He'd been a thorn in the Royals' side and had added to her father's stress level over the months, advocating a buyout of the chain. When she found out he'd been the last appointment on the books before her father's fatal heart attack, Laney knew she'd have to face him one day.

Today, was the day.

And she'd wished that she'd asked Preston to stay for that appointment. Laney had suspected the man capable of aggravating her father enough to send him into cardiac arrest. But thankfully, she'd gotten a short reprieve when Ty entered the room.

“Uh, Elena?”

“Ally, what is it?”

“I’ll straighten this out.” Ty turned to face her secretary. “You can go back to your desk now, Ally. Miss Royal doesn’t need you at the moment.”

Ally peered over Ty’s shoulder, her eyes wide with desperate concern.

“It’s...fine,” Laney said, trying to ease Ally’s alarm, but Ty had already ushered her secretary out of the room. Laney had never heard that tone in Ty’s voice before, or seen this commanding side of him.

“Ty?”

Then it struck her. Like a giant oak toppling onto her head. Or should she say, a tall palm tree, from the island. Ty...Tyler? Ty, her mystery man, was of course, Evan Tyler. They were one and the same! Laney closed her eyes as impending dread crept in. “Oh, no! Tell me it’s not true.”

She opened her eyes. Ty stared at her. “I’m your ten o’clock appointment, babe.”

Laney backed up, shaking her head, her body trembling. “Babe,” she repeated, quietly stunned. “Babe? Are you kidding me? You’re Evan Tyler! You’re...you’re... Oh, God!”

He just stood there, watching her meltdown. She shook so violently now, she had to brace herself against her desk. Then she gave up trying to stand on legs that would surely buckle under her. She plopped into her chair, the desk protecting her from Evan Tyler, the man responsible for her father’s heart attack. She was certain of it now.

“You coldhearted bastard.”

“Laney, listen—”

“You took advantage of me. Of my situation. And I played right into your hands, didn’t I?”

As the shock wore off, fury filled her. Fueled with anger she rose from the chair, refusing to submit to the scoundrel another second. She faced him head-on. “You used me in the worst possible way! You did, didn’t you? Tell me the truth, if you have it in you. You knew who I was the whole time at the Wind Breeze, didn’t you?”

Evan Tyler’s lips hardened into thin lines. “I knew.”

Laney wanted to throw the Waterford vase on the desk at him. She wanted to knock him out and drag him from her office from the pain he caused her. Everything inside burned with humiliation. She’d been duped, fooled by an unfeeling, hard-nosed deceiver. And what really ticked her off, aside from having slept with the enemy, was that he’d destroyed the only true good memory she’d had to hold on to during her time of mourning. “Damn you. I’d heard of your ruthless reputation, but this has to be one that would make it into the Guinness book.”

Evan Tyler didn’t argue the point. He didn’t apologize for anything, either.

“I came here to offer my condolences.”

Laney jammed her arms across her middle, holding her temper hostage for a moment. “You do know that you were the last person to see my father alive.”

“That’s debatable, Laney.”

“You caused his heart attack!”

“Like hell I did. When I walked out of his office, he was smiling. He’d blown me off in a matter of ten minutes and he was glad to do it.”

“You’re lying. Don’t try to deny it. You told him about sleeping with me, didn’t you? That was part of the plan, wasn’t it? You wanted to buy him out and you’d stoop to hitting below the belt to do it. You’d use any means to get what you wanted.”

“Your father wasn’t a saint, Laney. He cheated me out of a deal I’d worked on for two years. I wasn’t feeling overly generous toward any Royal when I saw you at the Wind Breeze bar, drinking away your sorrows. When you didn’t recognize me, I figured, what the hell. You were beautiful and lonely and looking at me like I was the last man on earth.”

"You're modest, too, I see." Laney blinked away that vivid memory. It was true. She must have looked like a little lost lamb, just waiting to be slaughtered by the big bad wolf, and Evan Tyler charged in for the kill, right on schedule. Oh, she'd been such a fool.

He ignored her gibe. "My original plan was to rub Nolan's nose in the fact we'd been together on the island. But, no, he never knew. I didn't tell him."

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

"It's the truth." He stood firm.

"You wanted to rattle his cage. Weaken the enemy. Right? So, if I'm to believe you, which I don't, what would have changed your mind?"

Evan looked into her eyes. Then he glanced at her mouth. At one time, his direct appreciation, the hot look in his eyes, would've heated her body to smoldering. But now all she felt was disdain.

"You. You changed my mind."

She shook her head. "I'll never believe that."

He didn't try to convince her. "I'm in the hotel business. I knew about the problems at Royal. Anyone doing an ounce of research would know that the hotels were having problems."

"But that didn't stop you from questioning me."

"You volunteered the information."

"You seduced it out of me!"

Evan's dark eyes took on a hard gleam. "I never heard you complain."

Laney closed her eyes briefly, fighting for control of her fury. "You had an agenda. You used me to get information. I was your ace in the hole, the weapon you planned to use against my father."

"Listen, you only confirmed my suspicions about Royal. I'll admit that. But you can't deny we had a good time on the island."

Laney didn't want to think about being with him on the island. She was certain every word that came out of his mouth was an out-and-out lie. "I can't recall. I've blocked out those memories."

Ty scoffed at that, his mouth twisting into a crooked smile. "Now who's lying?"

Laney calmed herself. She took in oxygen and sat at her desk, keeping her chin held high, refusing to give him any more satisfaction than she already had. When her head continued to throb, she sighed with impatience. "What do you want?"

Evan took a seat across the desk from hers. "I want what I've always wanted. To buy out The Royals."

"No. Meeting over. You may show yourself out."

"You're not cut out to run this company."

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do, Mr. Tyler."

"Damn it, Laney. I've seen you naked half a dozen times. Call me Evan."

Laney inhaled sharply and frowned. "So kind of you to remind me. But it doesn't change anything. I'll never sell the company."

"It's in trouble, Laney. You know it and I know it. Your father couldn't fix it and I doubt you'd get even close. It's not a reflection on you personally. It's just plain fact." He stood then, his shoulders broad, his eyes focused on hers and she met his stare with a hard one of her own. She disregarded his handsome face and the truth to his claims. "Don't be a fool, Laney. The hotels are losing money. They'll go under if you don't do something soon. I'm offering you a way to save them."

"My answer is no."

Evan shook his head as if she were a schoolgirl misunderstanding an easy mathematical problem. "I'm leaving my offer on the table. I'll be back." He strode to the door, then turned to meet her stare, an unexpected earnest look in his eyes. "And just for the record, I remember *everything* about the island."

Four

Laney watched Julia scoop up a pile of fries and wolf them down one by one without blinking. They sat at a seaside café on Saturday afternoon. Her stomach squeezing tight, Laney looked at her veggie sandwich and wondered if she could manage it.

"You haven't taken a bite yet, Laney." Julia picked up her patty melt oozing with Cheddar cheese and finished it off. "And I'm all done. You'd think I was eating for two." She laughed. "Me and you."

Laney closed her eyes briefly and put a hand to her stomach. "No, you're not eating for two. I am." She glanced at her friend and tried to smile.

Julia's face paled. She put the down the Diet Coke she was about to sip. "W-What?"

Laney pushed her plate aside. "I think I'm pregnant, Jules."

Shock registered on Julia's face, which she tried very sweetly to hide. She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "You *think* you're pregnant, but you're not sure?"

"I have all the symptoms. I've never felt like this before. Not even when I ran away from the wedding and Justin. The queasiness, the lack of appetite, and there's the fact that I missed my period. I made an appointment with my doctor for next week."

"Oh, I thought you and Justin had decided to, uh, refrain, before the wedding. Are you going to tell him?"

Laney shook her head. She abhorred thinking about Justin. She hadn't had sex with him in the weeks prior to the wedding. She'd been so busy with the final arrangements, the wedding planner and spending time with her bridesmaids, that she and Justin had decided to spend their last few weeks apart before the ceremony.

Now, Laney could add Evan Tyler to her list of men she'd rather forget. Both men had deceived her. She popped a Tums in her mouth. It helped with her shaky stomach and other rocky emotions. "I would, if it were his baby."

This time, poor Julia couldn't hide her shock. Her sculpted auburn brows rose, making four crinkle lines appear in her forehead. Lines, she'd normally go to great lengths to avoid creating. Julia opened her mouth, but no words came forth.

"It's pretty bad, I'm afraid." Then Laney unloaded the entire story to her friend about her time at the Wind Breeze Resort and the mystery man who'd turned out to be a scoundrel and her father's competitor. She left nothing out. A lifelong friendship meant spilling it all, even the smallest of details.

"Oh, wow." Julia gazed out to the Pacific Ocean trying to come up with something positive to say, Laney presumed. But they both knew this was as hopeless, as hopeless could get.

"I know. Believe me, I'm just as shocked. We used protection."

"So, what happened? I mean, *how* did it happen?"

"Well, there was this one time, in the shower...and, damn it, we really were careful all the other times."

Julia sank deeper into the tall wicker throne seat, her arms braced on the rests. This had always been their favorite beachside café. As young girls, they'd lean back and pretend they were island queens—eating lavish foods, sipping exotic drinks, with the world at their feet—and share their innermost secrets. Now, Laney was grateful she had Julia to confide in and that part in her life hadn't changed.

"Why didn't you tell me all this the minute you got back from Maui?"

"I don't know." She ducked her head slightly. "I'm sorry. It's just with everything happening at once at Royal and then my father dying, I just couldn't bring myself to share this. It seemed...trivial and self-indulgent." Her time with "Ty" the mystery man, had been anything but trivial. It had been glorious. But it hadn't been real—none of it.

"No one would ever describe you as self-indulgent, Laney. You wanted to hold on to those few good memories, and after what you'd been through with Justin, I can understand that. So, what are you planning to do now?"

“Nothing. I’m not going to do a thing.”

Julia blinked. “Oh-kay.”

“I can’t deal with this right now. I have a company to run. I have to keep focused. I can’t let—”

“You might have a baby to think about, honey. That’s important, too.”

“I know. I’ll take care of the baby.” Laney patted her stomach with a protective hand. If she were pregnant, she couldn’t fault the new life growing inside her. The child was innocent and would receive all the love she had to give. “I’m coming to terms with that. I’ll love this child. Believe me. I’ve always wanted children.”

“Oh, I know you will. There was never any doubt about that, but what about the father?”

“I really can’t stand thinking about him. He most likely caused my father’s heart attack. He’s about as heartless as they come. I’ll deal with him later when the situation forces me to come to a decision.”

Julia nodded in agreement. Thankfully, she had her best friend’s support in that.

“Right now, no one knows but you and me. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Julia’s lips lifted as she reached for her hand. “Laney, that’s what we always do. Keep each other’s secrets. But when the time comes, I get to throw you the biggest baby shower. Promise?”

“Promise.” Laney leaned back in her Queen of the Island chair, closing her eyes and thanking heaven for best friends.

Later that week, Laney rubbed her tension-filled forehead just as Preston Malloy walked into her office. “Preston, please close the door.”

She waited until he sat before sharing the news. “I just received word that there’s been a flood at The Royal Phoenix.”

“How bad is it?” he asked with a calm that Laney wished she could absorb into her own chaotic life. Preston had a good head for business and had become her life preserver in the face of very choppy waters. Over their business dinner the other night, he reassured her that the San Diego computer glitch wouldn’t happen again. He’d taken additional, but costly measures to see that they had a backup reservation system for all the hotels. Laney had approved the requisition immediately.

“It’s bad. The entire first floor just had renovations. All the new carpeting and furniture was involved. I need you to check to see if we’re covered by insurance. You might have a fight on your hands. The insurance company hasn’t been too happy with all the claims we’ve filed this year. The Phoenix manager says a faulty pipe burst during the night. That’s all I know right now.”

“Okay, I’ll check into it.”

“We’ll have to scramble now to get the lobby and reservation desk operating again somehow. You know how proud my father was of that main lobby. He’d commissioned sculptures and artwork personally to suit that location. I’m praying none of that art was destroyed.”

Preston rose instantly. “Don’t worry, Elena. I’ll take care of it. Will you be around this afternoon?”

Laney sighed. “No, I have an appointment with…well, it’s something I can’t neglect. Trust me, I wouldn’t leave you with this mess if it wasn’t very important.”

Preston smiled. “I’ll handle it. You can count on me.”

“I do,” she said in earnest. “But call me if you find out anything more about Phoenix, okay? You can reach me at home tonight.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” he said as he turned to leave. Then he swung back around to add, “I had a nice time at dinner the other night, Elena.”

“Me, too.”

“And just for the record, you’re doing an excellent job here at Royal.”

“Thank you,” Laney said, grateful for Preston’s constant support. She wished she could feel the same way, but in fact, Laney felt as though the entire hotel chain were crumbling around her feet.

Three hours later, Laney's mood had gone from bad to worse. She'd visited her ob-gyn and he had confirmed her suspicions: the recent pregnancy tests she'd taken at home weren't false positives. She was six weeks pregnant. That meant Evan Tyler was the father of her baby.

She drove down the 405 Interstate in a state of shock. She thought she had a handle on this and fully expected that her suspicions had been correct, but when the doctor announced, "You're pregnant," the full impact of her situation struck her with stunning force. The baby was due next spring. *Her* baby. The reality that in less than eight months, she'd be holding her own little helpless child in her arms, struck her anew.

She was really pregnant.

A life for a life, her father would say.

It was strange how true that was in her case. Just weeks before her father died, Laney had conceived a child. And even stranger yet was that Nolan Royal would never know his grandchild because Evan Tyler, the baby's father, might very well also be responsible for his death.

Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them quickly to clear her vision, but she couldn't wipe away the searing pain of losing her father. "I miss you, Daddy," she whispered quietly, her hands rigid on the steering wheel. He may not have been a perfect father. He'd expected so much from her, but he'd also loved her very much. It was as if when her mother died, he'd thrust all of the love he'd had for her mother onto Laney. And he'd looked to Laney for that same kind of devotion.

Both her mother and father were gone now and the dawning knowledge that she was alone in the world but for some distant relatives, brought agonizing sadness.

When her queasy stomach grumbled with hunger she was reminded that she wasn't really alone. A baby grew inside her. She smiled at the thought. Regardless of all else, she would love this child. The two of them would be a family.

Laney got off the freeway at Sunset Blvd. and drove home, ready to soak in a hot tub and then try to eat something. The doctor had warned her about staying healthy in body and mind. She needed nourishment. He'd offered her a prescription for her nausea, but Laney hated taking medication so she hadn't swallowed one pill yet. She wanted to try to conquer the queasiness on her own.

She hit the remote to her garage and pulled her car inside, just as another car pulled up in her driveway. She got out of her car, closing the door, curious about the shining silver sports car that had appeared out of nowhere.

She walked to the edge of the garage, squinting in the afternoon sun as a man stepped out of the car wearing faded jeans and a white cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

For a second her heart raced—memories of casual walks on a Hawaiian beach with a handsome stranger kicked in. Laney glanced at his pant legs when he strode up the driveway. Staring curiously, her throat tight and dry, she barely managed, "Boots?"

"Born in Texas."

Laney nodded, as if that made all the sense in the world, but it had shown her just how little she'd really known about the man she'd once called Ty.

"Did you follow me?" she asked, puzzled. She'd put nothing past him.

"No. Just good timing."

"That's debatable. We have nothing to say to each other, Mr. Tyler." She wouldn't ask how he'd found out her private home address. A man like Evan Tyler had ways to get the information he needed. Hadn't she learned that brutal lesson, firsthand?

He twisted his mouth. "Mr. Tyler again?"

She'd ticked him off and took childish satisfaction in that. "I'm not going to allow you to buy Royal out, so please, get off my property."

"You need to listen to reason, Laney. Take a drive with me. We'll go somewhere peaceful and talk."

Laney wanted to put a protective hand to her trembling stomach, but she didn't dare. And she couldn't quite block out the doctor's routine inquiries today about the baby's father—health history questions she couldn't answer. Laney would have to get those answers soon.

Once again, she fought off tears. "Evan, please leave me alone."

"You're emotional right now, but—"

"Damn right, I'm emotional. My father just died! And you were the last person to see him alive. If you don't think that makes me emotional and sorry I ever laid on eyes on you—"

"Hey! Calm down."

Evan closed the gap between them. He kept his hands to himself, thankfully. If he touched her, she feared she'd melt into a puddle of tears. Her emotions were that close to the edge.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I just told you."

"No, it's something else. You're pale as a ghost."

"You have that effect on me."

Evan lips pursed tight. "Laney, come on. Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous. I want to know exactly what you said to my father that day."

"And I want to speak with you about The Royals. Seems we both want something. Since now isn't a good time for you, have dinner with me tomorrow night and I'll answer all of your questions."

Laney hesitated. Her stomach clenched. She was finally hungry, which didn't happen often these days. She needed a peaceful meal and a nice warm bath. Then she planned on crawling into bed. What she didn't want to do was have an emotional breakdown in front of Evan Tyler. She couldn't let him see her that way. She wasn't ready to tell him about the baby, but she desperately did need to find out if he had anything to do with her father's heart attack. "Okay, fine. I'll meet you for a quick business dinner."

He shook his head. "I'll pick you up at eight, tomorrow night right here. And I won't be wearing my boots."

Laney watched him drive off as myriad emotions swam around in her head. Flashes of the man she'd known at the Wind Breeze wouldn't stop infiltrating her thoughts. She'd caught rare glimpses of that man when he glanced at her. She'd only wished he were half the man she'd known on that island. But at best, he was a coldhearted driven businessman out to raid her father's hard-earned company.

"Well, baby," she whispered, as her stomach growled with hunger again. "That was your daddy."

Evan drove into the underground garage at the L.A. Tempest and parked the car in his personal space, his mind focused solely on Laney Royal. When he should be thinking about ways to get her to sign on the dotted line, all he really could focus on was how he could get her back in his bed.

There was just something surprising about the beautiful Miss Royal. Maybe it was the challenge she represented to him. He wanted her company, but after spending time with her, he found he wouldn't mind any fringe benefits that came along with the deal. She'd managed to cure his own boredom at the Wind Breeze, breaking up his business routine and allowing him to enjoy moments of sheer relaxation. And when they weren't relaxing they were hot for each other, tangling in and out of the sheets. He squeezed the vision of her smooth, supple body under his out of his head before his pulse escalated and his temperature rose. Every time he thought of her that way, his body surged like a damn power strip in a blackout.

Hell, she clearly couldn't stand the sight of him. She believed that he had something to do with the death of her father.

Evan clicked off the ignition, grabbed his briefcase and slid out of the car, slamming the door. He rode the private elevator up to his penthouse apartment, angry that she'd believe him of aggravating her father into cardiac arrest.

He was still in a mood when he unlocked his door and was greeted by his mother and two brothers.

They stood in the afternoon shade on his courtyard balcony, with champagne glasses in hand. His mother smiled warmly, her brown eyes twinkling, while his two brothers barely held back smirks.

He glared at his brothers then ran a hand down his face. “Amazing who the doorman lets in these days.” Then Evan walked over to his mother. “I didn’t mean you,” he said with a wink. He bent to give her a kiss. “It’s always good to see you, Mom.”

“Your brothers flew me in from St. Petersburg to surprise you. Did you forget your own birthday, Evan?” she asked, her expression bordering on grim.

“I’ve been busy, Mom. I thought we agreed to celebrate next month in Florida when you hit the big—”

“Don’t say it,” Trent warned.

Brock walked over to hand him a glass of champagne. “You’re taking your life in your hands.”

Rebecca Tyler waved off her boys. “Oh, pooh! I’m not ashamed to admit I’ll be sixty years old next month and you boys know that. But your birthday is today, Evan. I hear you’re working very hard.”

“I’m putting together a deal that’ll put Tempest in a whole different league.”

Rebecca blinked and nodded, then she took a seat on a chaise lounge, looking a bit weary. The three of them took their cue from her and sat, circling her seat. “You’ve already made me so proud. All three of you boys. You’ve got a thriving business with Tempest. I was just hoping...”

She let the sentence drop, but they all knew what she was thinking. Evan glanced at Brock, who glanced at Trent, and neither one of them wanted to look their mother directly in the eyes.

Trent spoke up first. “How old are you today, Ev, thirty-three?”

Evan twisted his mouth. “If you say so.”

“Trent, you know your brother is thirty-*two*. All of my sons are two years apart.”

“Yeah, but Ev’s the oldest,” Brock said and it was beginning to sound the way it had when they’d been kids, pointing fingers and laying blame.

His mother raised her glass. “To Evan. My oldest son. Happy Birthday, dear.”

Brock and Trent chorused the birthday sentiment and they each raised their glass and sipped champagne.

“I remember the day you were born. It didn’t seem so long ago,” she said, her eyes taking on a distant gleam. Often she appeared that way when she thought of times when their father had been alive. “You gave me the most trouble before you were born. I was nauseous every morning for months, barely had any appetite at all. The doctors worried about me losing weight. They didn’t have those nausea pills like they have now. But you were my easiest delivery.” His mother sighed. “And now you’re the head of a big company.” She sipped her drink then smiled wistfully. “Did I tell you Larissa Brown’s daughter is having another baby and her son is getting married this fall?”

“I don’t think we knew that,” Brock said, “did we, Ev?”

Evan shook his head and kept his mouth shut. “Nope.” He knew better than to engage in a conversation with his mother about marriage and babies. She’d been hinting for years. He couldn’t say he blamed her. She had three sons, all of age and not a one of them was remotely interested in settling down.

“Hey, Mom, I hear you’re finally going on a cruise,” Trent said, changing the subject.

“Yes, Larissa convinced me to go with her. She says I don’t know what I’m missing—all those activities and tours. We’re leaving in two weeks. I’m getting things packed and ready.”

Trent continued asking about his mother’s vacation, giving Evan the best birthday gift of all: a reprieve from his mother’s subtle hints. He’d never minded being the oldest, bearing the burden of helping her raise Trent and Brock, but now Rebecca Tyler wanted more in life. And she looked to Evan to get the ball rolling.

Later that evening they dined at The Palm, a well-established Los Angeles restaurant known for their specialty of the house—jumbo Nova Scotia lobsters—to celebrate Evan’s birthday. It was his

mother's favorite place to eat when in L.A. Caricatures of famous celebrities who'd frequented the restaurant were painted on the walls and every time Rebecca came in, his mother would find several new cartoons drawn onto the "living murals."

It was just the four of them and Evan liked it that way. He wasn't one for big parties and displays. That was more Brock's style. He and Trent ran the Tempest Hotels in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona while Evan kept control of all their California hotels from San Diego to Hollywood to San Francisco. He was also in charge of acquisitions, being the better negotiator of the three. Soon, they'd add the Maui Paradise hotel to their chain.

But Evan wanted more. He wanted The Royals. If he could acquire them in a deal with Laney Royal, not only would Tempest stand to gain more widespread national appeal, but they would have knocked out their biggest competitor. He'd just have to make sure Laney saw things his way tomorrow night.

Actually, he couldn't wait for the challenge.

Five

Laney pulled her hair back and secured it with a barrette at the nape of her neck. She put on a black suit, a fitted blazer and skirt that screamed all business, no pleasure. She wore little jewelry, but for the diamond stud earrings that had been her mother's. She'd treat this dinner with Evan as business as usual and nothing more.

That was the plan until she answered the knock on her front door precisely at eight o'clock to find Evan standing there, looking like every woman's fantasy. Dressed in slate gray, wearing an Italian cut suit, his dark hair groomed and combed back with just a hint of stubble on his face, and no cowboy boots to be found, he earned an admiring stare from Laney.

"It's good to see you, Laney." He said it as if he meant it. A shiver of sexual awareness shimmied through her body. She peered over his shoulder to the jet-black limousine waiting. She realized she'd grossly underdressed for whatever Evan had in mind, and normally the fashion faux pas would have plagued her all evening. But tonight she decided to turn the tables on him.

"I think I would have preferred cowboy boots, Evan."

He took no offense, but only laughed. "Then let's just make a quick stop to my penthouse and —"

"No, thank you," she said quickly. "I want to remind you, this is a business dinner."

Evan studied her hair and the blond waves she'd tucked safely into a sterling silver prison. His gaze traveled to her face, meeting her eyes with a slow searing look before lowering to her lips. Laney's heart beat harder. Her head swam as he scrutinized her mouth. And when he dipped his gaze lower yet to scan her buttoned lace blouse and the hint of cleavage Laney couldn't hide, she had to warn herself to be careful. He wasn't to be trusted.

"You look beautiful."

"I wasn't going for *beautiful*."

"I know. You can't help it."

His compliment shot straight to her head, like a brain freeze after sipping an ice-cold chocolate malt too quickly. But Laney rebelled against it. She retreated back in her doorway. "This isn't a good idea."

Evan reached for her hand, wrapping his fingers over hers. "It's a very good idea." He softened his tone. "You're working too hard. Take a break. Let's have a quiet meal and talk."

She hated that his touch, the soothing way his hand covered hers, didn't repel her. Or that the sound of his voice only brought familiar, fond memories. She wouldn't be fooled again, but she did need answers from him.

Her stomach was back on the blink. She'd barely eaten a bite today, the thought of food making her sick. She only hoped she could make it through dinner tonight with him.

“Okay, fine.” She released herself from his grasp and locked up her house. “Let’s get this over with.”

Evan set a hand to her back guiding her to the limousine, waving off his chauffeur and opening the door for her himself. She settled into the backseat as he closed the door.

Before she knew it, they’d traveled to the beach and headed north up the coastline.

“You ready for some wine? Champagne?”

She looked at the fully stocked bar again, then up at him. “No, thank you. I’m not celebrating anything.”

He leaned back against the cushiony leather seat. “At one time, you didn’t need a reason to have a drink with me.”

“That *wasn’t* you, Evan.”

“No? How can you be so sure?”

“I’m sure,” she said rather smugly, proud that she’d managed to put a frown on his face.

“You know, you don’t need to cover yourself up in a prim business suit. I know what’s underneath. And I’m not just speaking about your sexy body.”

“Sure, say that now while the car is traveling at sixty miles an hour and I can’t jump out.”

Evan let go a deep chuckle. “Smart-ass.”

All in all, Laney was pretty darn proud of herself for holding her own with the likes of ruthless, driven, gorgeous, Evan Tyler.

In her estimation, he was no better than Justin Overton. Both men had hurt her, but Evan had the distinction of possibly being responsible for her father’s heart attack. And while he was her baby’s father, he was also her enemy, a man she would never trust.

Originally, Evan wanted to hate Laney Royal. She was the spoiled, wealthy, indulged daughter of Nolan Royal. How could she be anything else? But he’d found her remarkably unlike her father, which had been a genuine surprise. The woman with the hot little body and pretty sky-blue eyes had wit and humor and brains to match. In his quest to extract information from her, he’d found that he’d enjoyed the time he spent with her on the island.

He wanted her hotels and she couldn’t stand the sight of him. She looked at him as if a monstrous blast of fire would spew out his mouth any second. But she was far from a withering damsel in distress. That made what he was about to do very tricky. He’d tried speaking to her rational side without success, so tonight he’d have to speak to her emotions.

When they reached the seaside restaurant, Evan took Laney’s hand and led her inside. They were immediately shown to an intimate corner table he’d reserved for the night.

“I hope this meets with your approval,” Bradley, the maître d’, said.

“This is perfect. Thank you.”

Oysters on the half shell and a bottle of fine red wine awaited them. Outside spotlights shimmered on the shoreline, illuminating crashing waves upon the sand. Stars glimmered above. Warm summer air filtered in through the expanse of open French doors lining the back of the restaurant.

“This is very nice, Evan. But hardly a place to conduct business.”

Evan smiled. “Let me worry about that.”

He poured her a glass of wine and then one for himself. Color drained from Laney’s face the minute she glanced at the oysters.

“What’s wrong? I know you love oysters. We had our share of them—”

“Stop!” She put up a hand and closed her eyes. “I’d appreciate you not reminding me about anything I said or did on Maui. Okay?”

He narrowed his eyes. What was up with her? “What are you afraid of, Laney?”

“Can we just get down to business,” she said, pushing aside her glass of wine and the decorative plate of oysters, without giving them so much as another glance.

“Before we order? Sorry, babe, but I’m hungry. We’ll talk business after the meal.”

When the waiter came by, he appeared genuinely concerned. “Is there something wrong with the wine, Mr. Tyler? Or the oysters? I can assure you they’re the finest quality—”

“No, no, everything’s great. The table is just as I arranged.” Evan sipped from his glass of wine to appease him. “I think we’re ready to order now.”

The waiter put on a smile and began reciting the nightly specials. Evan listened, darting quick glances Laney’s way. Her face paled even more when the waiter began describing the fare in great detail.

“If you’ll allow me to order,” Evan said, looking at Laney with keen interest now, “their grilled swordfish is the best—”

“I’ll just have a salad, Evan.” She cast him a small smile.

“Salad?” Evan scratched his head. The waiter jerked back, appearing slightly insulted.

“If I might suggest the jumbo Cajun prawn salad with lobster dressing,” the waiter offered.

Laney’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “Please, just a green salad with no dressing.”

Evan glanced at the waiter. “Bring us two swordfish dinners. I’ll see if I can’t get the lady to change her mind.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me you’re not on a diet.” Evan said, once the waiter was out of hearing distance.

Laney glanced out the French doors appearing extremely interested in the shoreline. “No, but I’m not very hungry.”

“You’ve lost weight, Laney. Not that you don’t look good, but you’re—”

“Stress, Evan. Okay? I said it. I’m under a good deal of stress lately.”

Evan sipped his drink. “That’s why I’m here. To wipe away all your stress.”

“You only add to it,” she said quietly.

“Have some wine. It’ll relax you.”

Laney glanced at the goblet filled two-thirds full of rich red wine. “I’m not... I’m not...”

Tears built up in her eyes. She tried valiantly to hide them, but Evan noticed and something powerful tugged at his heart. “Laney, listen. No more jabbing at each other. Your hotels are sinking fast. I know more than you think I know about your problems. Get out while you can. While they’re still worth something.”

“It’s not that bad, Evan. You’re making the situation out to be worse than it is.”

“Maybe you don’t know all the facts.”

“I’m aware of the facts.”

“Your father wouldn’t want to see his hotels go under, Laney. I’m sure he’d rather have you sell out than to have their reputation ruined. Your father was desperate to save them. That’s why he called you home. He didn’t know whom he could trust, other than you. He was under a great deal of stress. And now, you’ve admitted that you’re under that same sort of stress. He wouldn’t want your health to suffer, Laney. And he wouldn’t want you to go broke.”

She gasped. “I’m not going broke, Evan. For heaven’s sake.”

The salad arrived along with a basket of assorted bread and Laney stopped speaking long enough to allow the waiter to place it on the table. Evan watched her pick up her fork and shuffle romaine spears around on her plate. Still, she didn’t eat a bite.

“You will if your hotels don’t stop draining your cash reserves.”

Laney snapped her head up. “For all I know, you’re the one behind the mishaps at Royal. You want them that badly.”

Evan swore under his breath. “If you really believed that, you wouldn’t be sitting here having dinner with me. No, I think you really want to hear what I have to say.”

But they were once again interrupted when the waiter arrived. He set two plates of swordfish, garlic potatoes and creamed spinach before them. The mingling of aromas made his mouth water, but the arrival of the food had the opposite effect on Laney. She turned away from the sizzling hot plate.

"Is everything satisfactory?" the waiter asked.

"Yes, thank you," Evan answered. "That's all for now."

Laney picked up a forkful of greens and put them in her mouth. She chewed as if she were accomplishing a great feat. "I'm not sure what I believe about you, Evan. But I need to know what happened that day between you and my father. And I'd appreciate the truth."

Laney didn't believe Evan Tyler. She sat back in the limousine after their dinner, rehashing his denials. Her traitorous stomach refused to calm. Her head swirled. She gazed out the window at the passing moonlit scenery as they drove home, so she wouldn't have to deal with Evan's close scrutiny.

It had been business as usual with Nolan Royal that day. Evan had said nothing out of the ordinary. He'd made his case, presented her father a fair deal and was willing to negotiate. He'd generously offered Nolan Royal a consulting position in the company once the deal was completed.

Laney could only imagine how that had gone over with her father. And even as Evan had spoken those well-rehearsed words to her, Laney knew he'd masked his contempt for her father. She'd done her homework and learned that Evan and his brothers had pursued the chain of Swan's Inns for a long time. They'd wined and dined Mr. Swan personally and spent a good deal of money trying to convince him to sell to Tempest. They wanted to expand, and the Inns would fit perfectly into their plans. But her father had an ace up his sleeve that no one had known about.

His tactics left something to be desired, yes. But Nolan Royal had come up from the ranks the hard way. He knew how to fight dirty if need be to save something he treasured. He had something damaging on the proud, elderly Clayton Swan, something personal and something that might compromise his family life.

What Laney didn't know, was just how much coercion, if any, it had taken. It could have been simply that her father had made him a better deal all around. Laney wanted to think so. And that meant the Tempest Hotels lost out. And if there was one thing Laney had learned about Evan Tyler, it was he didn't like losing.

"I'm not giving up, Laney," Evan said as the driver pulled in to her driveway.

"I'm not selling, Evan." She couldn't betray her father's wishes. She'd made him a solemn promise. She'd work doubly hard to find out the cause of The Royals' problems, if need be. Preston had increased the security in the hotels and he'd persuaded her to hire a private investigator to get to the root of the trouble. Laney was sure that would help turn things around.

"Thank you for dinner. This concludes our business," she said rather stiffly. "Goodbye."

The limo driver opened the door and she feigned a smile at Evan Tyler before getting out.

It was best she didn't see him again until absolutely necessary. She didn't trust him. She wouldn't tell him about the baby. It was too much to deal with right now.

As soon as her feet hit the brick driveway, Laney's head spun in all directions. She straightened up, but that only made things worse. Her legs went weak and she fought dizziness. She tried blinking it away to gain her equilibrium but when she turned toward her front door, she nearly keeled over.

"What the hell?" Evan was beside her instantly, casting her a concerned look. He grabbed her arm and guided her to the front door slowly. "Damn it, Laney. You should've eaten something back at the restaurant."

He took her purse and rummaged for her house keys, then opened her front door. Her mind fuzzy, she couldn't very well argue with him; she struggled just to keep upright. "I...can...manage... from here."

"Right," he said, lifting her up into both his arms and kicking the door open wide.

"I...didn't...invite...you...in." She stared into Evan's dark eyes for half a second, then her world went black.

It didn't take Evan long to find her master bedroom, the cottagelike home had airy open rooms. He carried her in and set her carefully onto a king-size bed. "Laney," he said, tapping her cheek. "Laney, wake up."

Her eyes fluttered opened. She stared at him. "What h-happened?"

"You fainted," he said. "You'll be fine in a second."

"I'm okay," she said, her eyes growing wide as she tried to lift up from the bed. "You don't have to stay."

He grabbed her shoulders and gently set her back down. "Stay put. You're in no shape to get up yet. I'll be right back."

Evan entered her master bath and grabbed a face towel off the towel rack. He rinsed it under the faucet with cold water and squeezed out the excess. As he turned off the faucet and exited the bathroom, something he'd glimpsed struck him as odd. Quickly, he retraced his steps and glanced down into the wastebasket beside the marble sink.

The box lay at the bottom of the trash, its initials angled up toward him, leaving no room for doubt.

e.p.t.

A home pregnancy test.

Evan stared at the box a good long moment.

And then it all made sense.

Laney was pregnant.

The last few times he'd seen her, she'd appeared pale, sort of washed out, so unlike the healthy tanned Laney he'd known in Hawaii. He'd known her body intimately and noticed she'd lost some weight, as well. Hadn't he heard the account of his own mother's pregnancy enough times to recognize it when the symptoms stared him right smack in the face?

How could he have missed those signs?

Laney passed it off as stress. He'd known it was something more. But he wouldn't have guessed it was that much *more*. A child. Evan could hardly believe it. If she hadn't fainted, he might not have found out. Damn it. He had a right to know. When the hell did she plan on telling him?

Anger boiled just below the surface.

Laney's eyes were closed when he entered her bedroom again and sat on the bed. He set the cool moistened towel across her forehead.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "That feels good."

Evan noted the serene look on her face, then he glanced around the room filled with girly things, lace and frills and walls tinted with deep rose-colored shades. On those rose-colored walls, were framed photographs, black and whites, color prints and sepias. She'd surrounded herself with what she loved. Her photographs told her story better than anything else. Her father hadn't recognized her talent. He hadn't known the true Elena Royal.

He stared at the one photo he recognized, a view of the Pacific from atop the Haleakala Crater and memories flooded in, banking his rising fury. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you *what*?"

He sucked in a breath. "About the baby."

Her eyes popped open. Reflexively, her hand braced her abdomen. That gesture spelled it out better than a dozen pregnancy tests.

With a panicked look on her face, she tried getting up again, but he blocked her and shook his head. "You are pregnant, aren't you, Laney?"

Fear, regret and defeat all registered on her face. She laid her head on the pillow, then nodded.

"How...pregnant?" he asked tersely.

Laney had to know what he was asking. Was he the father? After all, she'd been engaged and ready to be married right before he'd met her.

“Seven weeks.”

He did the math. She'd been with him exactly seven weeks ago on that island.

“Are you sure?”

“The doctor confirmed it.”

“When? How long have you known?”

“I saw him yesterday morning.”

Evan's jaw clenched. He ran his hands through his hair and sucked in oxygen, then bolted from the bed and paced back and forth to release excess energy. Adrenaline pumped through his veins like raging wildfire. “You've seen me twice since then and didn't tell me?”

Laney sat upright on the bed and rubbed her head. “I was trying to adjust to the idea.”

“Damn it. It's not an idea. It's a baby.”

She remained seated, probably fearful of rising and fainting again. That was just fine with him. He needed to hash this out with her. Fainting wasn't an option.

“I meant you, Evan. I needed to adjust to you being the father.”

Evan let go a string of curses.

Laney stood. He watched her legs wobble a little, but she held her ground. He was red-hot and ticked off. Yet, at the same time concerned for the baby.

His baby.

“Sit down, Laney. Let's talk about this.”

“I'm not ready to talk about it.”

“Sit.” He pointed to the bed. “I'll do all the talking.”

“Imagine that,” she muttered, but she sat anyway.

“I'm marrying you. As soon as I can make the arrangements, we'll have a small ceremony and —”

“Whoa!” Laney put up a stopping hand. “Are you crazy? I will not marry you.”

Evan scoffed at her refusal. “It's not negotiable.”

“It's not negotiable?” A hot gleam of anger crossed her features. “Okay, I lied. It's *not* your baby. It's Joe the bartender's. Remember him?”

Evan braced his hands on his hips. “Sure do. Good old *married* Joe. His wife, Tessie, waited tables at the Wind Breeze and never let him out of her sight. Nice try.”

Laney rolled her eyes.

“Don't deny it, Laney. The baby is mine.” Evan was sure of it now. If it weren't she wouldn't have had such a panicked look on her face when he discovered the truth. At least, she'd been honest about the time frame. They'd spent a lot of time in and out of bed those days. Evan would bank his last dollar that she hadn't been with another man while on the island. She wouldn't have admitted to him that he was the father otherwise. After all, he knew she thought of him as the enemy, the man responsible for all of her current problems. “And you will marry me.”

Laney frowned, her eyes narrowing. “You'd do anything to get your hands on The Royals, wouldn't you?”

“If you remember, *your* hands were on me—all over me, babe, at least half a dozen times. So don't go pointing fingers. We're both responsible for this.”

“I'm willing to take *full* responsibility.” She cast him a dry look. “You're off the hook.”

“Hell would have to freeze over first. And you know damn well this isn't about the hotels, Laney. You're carrying my child. My flesh and blood. I'm giving that child a name. And making damn sure you take care of yourself while you carry him to term.”

“Don't even suggest I'm not taking care of this child!”

“Prove it. Marry me.”

“My answer is no.” She folded her arms across her middle, shook her head and stared at him.

He stared back. If she wanted a contest of wills, she'd get one. "Let me put it this way. My child will have my name and my protection. If you don't accept this proposal, I can guarantee your hotels will fail and it won't be pretty, Laney. You're out of your depth with this. I've rescued failing enterprises and brought new life into them. That's how Tempest has thrived against worthy competitors. Now, do you or don't you want to save The Royals?"

Six

Two weeks later, Laney stood with one hand holding a bouquet of white fragrant gardenias, while the other hand clasped onto Julia like a sinking swimmer clutching at a lifeguard. "I can't believe I married him."

Julia hugged her close, whispering in her ear as they stood in the vestibule of the Beverly Hills Courthouse, "You're doing it for the baby, honey. You're giving him legitimacy and saving your father's company all at one time."

Though unconvinced, Laney nodded as she peered across the hallway, watching Evan shake hands with his brother Trent. He'd flown in from Texas for the wedding and was leaving later tonight. Evan and Laney had agreed on having one person stand up for each of them during the civil ceremony and Trent had been the brother to win the coin flip. Laney's decision had been much easier. She couldn't imagine this day without Julia by her side.

"But maybe the price is too high."

"Laney, look at him. He's not exactly your average Joe. He's a good-looking devil, intelligent and focused and I have a feeling that this might work out for you."

"*Devil* being the key word here."

Julia shook her head solemnly. "I don't know. He promised to help The Royals out of financial ruin. And he accepted your terms for the prenuptial agreement. You retain full ownership of The Royals. He has nothing else to gain. If you let me play the advocate for a second, I think all he really wants is a place in his child's life. Besides," Julia said almost wistfully, "he's got a gorgeous brother."

Laney looked at Trent and let go a quiet chuckle. "If you like the tall, dark and incredibly rugged type." She'd been introduced to Trent right before the short ceremony.

"What's not to like about a man who can pull off wearing a Stetson in the heart of L.A.?"

But Laney thought Evan the better looking of the two. He wore a stylish three-piece black suit, white shirt and gray silk tie, appearing dashing and handsome and...smug.

Darn him.

She'd resisted his daily proposals and had actually gotten good at saying no to him, though he'd been doggedly persistent, claiming he wouldn't give up. He wouldn't allow her to shove him out of the baby's life.

To add to that, there had been another costly problem at Royal since she found out about the baby. Laney and her team had done everything in their power to figure out a solution, but with having queasy days, Evan showing up on her doorstep every night and mountains of additional paperwork piling up, Laney knew she couldn't do it all alone anymore.

She'd given it a good deal of thought and had finally concluded that raising a child without his father wasn't right. She couldn't quite bring herself to deny her child a family life, even if it were in name only.

Somehow Evan managed to convince her marrying him would solve her problems. She had to honor the vow she'd made to her father. She wanted to save The Royals.

Evan had pulled out all the stops, including showing her his portfolio, his track record with hotel management and his profit-and-loss statements.

Laney knew he was a sound businessman.

But she didn't think she'd wind up married to him.

She swallowed hard. Her stomach was nervous again, but this time it was less a baby disruption and more a my-God-what-have-I-done disruption.

In the back of her mind, she couldn't help but wonder if Evan was behind the problems Royal was having. Was he guilty of sabotaging the company? Had she married the enemy?

Having his baby complicated her life on so many levels. How could she ever trust Evan Tyler, the man she'd spoken vows with today?

As they exited the courthouse, Evan held firmly on to her arm. "Be prepared and smile," he said with a note of caution and before she could sort through his confusing statement they were caught up in a whirlwind of photographers and news reporters. News vans from four different television stations converged on the street. Photos were snapped and reporters rushed up to them. Evan shielded Laney from the brunt of the madness, and soon Trent and Julia came up to stand beside them as the reporters unleashed a flurry of questions.

"What does this marriage mean to Tempest Hotels?"

"Would you classify this marriage as a business merger?"

"How did you and Elena Royal meet?"

"Mrs. Tyler, only a few months ago you were engaged to someone else. Why the rushed marriage?"

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