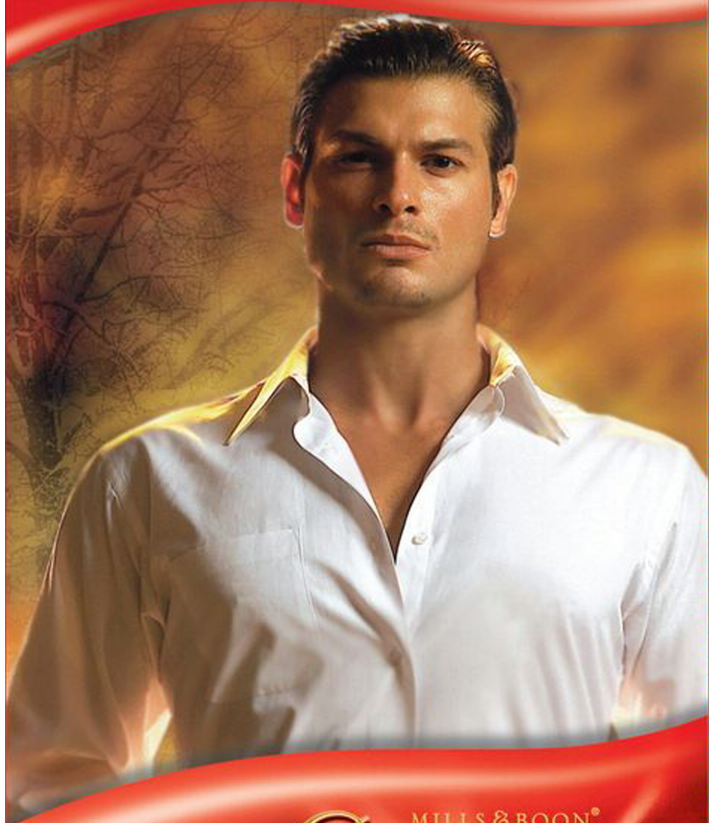


Bound by the Kincaid Baby

Emilie Rose

The Millionaire's Miracle

Cathleen Galitz



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Аннотация

Bound by the Kincaid Baby Emilie Rose The rules of the will were simple: Mitch had to gain custody of his father's bastard son or lose the family fortune. But nothing about Carly Corbin, the baby's aunt, was simple, including Mitch's attraction to her. When she refused to give up her little nephew, Mitch had no choice but to let them both move in. The Millionaire's Miracle Cathleen Galitz She couldn't believe it. Millionaire Bryce McFadden, the ex-husband who had broken her heart, was suddenly back in her life. And he still had the power to make her weak at the knees. Trapped together by an avalanche, could Gillian even consider a new beginning?

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Bound by the Kincaid Baby by Emilie Rose



If Carly was as squeaky clean as the PI reported, then Mitch would have to find another way to get custody of the boy. But how could he win her over?

Seduction? The idea shot across his mind like a comet. He weighed the possibility, and his pulse quickened and his palms tingled the way they did whenever he had a winning plan.

Guilt punched him a time or two, but he ignored it. Mitch had to carry out his father's last wishes or lose his and his siblings' inheritance. If that meant he had to blur the lines of decency, then so be it.

Sharing her bed wouldn't be a hardship. But how far would he have to go?

As far as it takes.

The Millionaire's Miracle by Cathleen Galitz



“This will be the last favour I ever ask of you.”

Gillian reminded herself that the pure animal magnetism she felt for him could not overshadow the fact that Bryce was the most infuriating creature God had ever put on this earth. And

that she could never forgive him for letting her down when she'd needed him the most.

He cut her to pieces with a look of disdain. "I don't suppose you remember the last favour I asked of you."

Gillian shrugged her shoulders. "You'll have to refresh my memory."

Instead of honouring her request, he said, "I've got to hand it to you. You've got gall waltzing into my life after all this time, acting like a little girl lost and playing on my sympathies."

"Sympathy isn't a word anyone associates with you."

Bound by the Kincaid Baby

EMILIE ROSE

The Millionaire's Miracle

CATHLEEN GALITZ



www.millsandboon.co.uk

BOUND BY THE KINCAID BABY

by

Emilie Rose

EMILIE ROSE

lives in North Carolina with her college sweetheart husband and four sons. Writing is Emilie's third (and hopefully last) career. She's managed a medical office and run a home day-care, neither of which offers half as much satisfaction as plotting happy endings. Her hobbies include quilting, gardening and cooking (especially cheesecake). Her favourite TV shows include *ER*, *CSI* and Discovery Channel's medical programmes. Emilie's a country music fan because she can find an entire book in almost any song.

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Dear Reader,

I think most of us have lived the old adage "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." If not, look out. Your turn's coming. And trust me, being forced out of a rut is not a bad thing – once you get over the initial shock.

What I like about romance novels is that after a little squirming, the characters jump off the hook and swim right into the current of change rather than crawl to shore and hide in the shade the way most of us would.

Mitch Kincaid and Carly Corbin's lives are cruising along happily and then wham! Life happens. In trying to fulfil their loved ones' dying wishes, Mitch and Carly are forced to face their greatest fears and weaknesses, but in the process they're able to forge something better together than either one began with.

I'm raising my mug of chocolate coffee and hoping we'll all be as brave and as lucky if change comes a'knocking at our doors.

Happy reading!

Emilie Rose

To friends found when we're not looking.

Sometimes they are the ones who show us
a new and better perspective.

Prologue

“Consider it done,” Mitch Kincaid said Sunday afternoon to the trio gathered around the Kincaid Manor dining-room table for the reading of his father’s will.

“Don’t make it sound easy. Nothing involving a woman ever is,” his older brother, Rand, warned.

“Hey!” their younger sister, Nadia, protested.

Richards, the attorney, looked over his half-glasses at Mitch. “The child is your half brother and stands to inherit one quarter of your father’s estate. When billions of dollars are involved, unforeseen complications often arise.”

“Let me get this straight. I’m supposed to bring my father’s illegitimate son home to Kincaid Manor and keep him here for one year,” Mitch summarized the absurd scenario Richards had read moments ago. It didn’t sound any better now than it had then.

“That is correct. And if you fail to complete your task, you will also fail to inherit your share of Everett’s estate.” Richards paused to scan the three legitimate Kincaid offspring. “You all will. And everything Everett possessed will be sold to Kincaid Cruise Line’s chief rival for one dollar.”

Billions in assets and investments down the toilet. Fifty ships. Five more on order. Eight branded cruise lines under the Kincaid umbrella. Sixty thousand employees. All resting on Mitch’s

shoulders.

He tried to shrug off the crushing weight. Kincaid Cruise Lines wasn't just his job; it was his life, his wife, his mistress, his child. He wasn't like his brother, who, if not for their father's unexpected death three days ago, wouldn't be in Miami now. Rand had walked away from the family and the business five years ago without looking back.

Mitch wouldn't let KCL go without a fight. That meant not only did he have to accomplish his assigned task, but also he had to make damned sure each of his siblings held up their end of the inheritance obligations, too. Or lose everything.

Not gonna happen. Not on my watch.

He made a conscious effort to relax the hands he'd fisted. "What happens to the kid when the year is up?"

"That depends on who you want controlling his fortune until he reaches twenty-one. You or his aunt," Richards replied.

"Not the aunt," Mitch replied without hesitation and turned to his brother and sister. They hadn't been privy to the latest complication of their father's life or the cleanup detail Mitch had screwed up. No doubt that was why their father had assigned him babysitting duty. Punishment.

"The boy's mother is dead and her twin sister is the kid's guardian. I'm betting Carly Corbin is identical to her greedy, conniving twin in more than looks. She's young and single. She'll want to dump the kid. If she doesn't, I'll convince her."

"How?" Rand asked.

“Money. I’ve never met a woman who didn’t have a price.” His comment elicited another indignant squawk from Nadia. “Dad instructed me to pay the boy’s mother a hundred grand to have an abortion—an abortion she obviously never had and managed to conceal from us or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Mitch’s first mistake had been to trust the woman when she’d accepted the money. He should have ensured she’d done what she’d been paid to do whether or not he’d approved of his father’s plan.

Rand’s eyes narrowed. “You’re sure the little bastard is Dad’s?”

Mitch nodded. “A DNA test confirmed it.”

A familiar hard knot returned to Mitch’s chest. Their father had received the test results just days before the child’s mother had been killed in a hit-and-run accident while crossing the street. The driver and car responsible hadn’t been found.

He hoped like hell his father hadn’t had a part in the woman’s death. But Everett Kincaid had never liked playing by any rules other than his own. No one knew that better than Mitch—his father’s right-hand man.

Nadia nervously tapped her nails on the table, anxious no doubt to hear her inheritance requirement. “Ignoring your incredibly sexist remarks and assuming Ms. Corbin hands over—what is our brother’s name?” She glanced at her copy of the will. “Rhett. Oh, I get it. Ever-*Rhett*. After Dad. Cute. What do you know about taking care of a one-year-old?”

Mitch knew more than Nadia thought. But he wasn't going there. Ever again. "I don't need to know anything. I'll hire a nanny. The manor's large enough I'll never have to see the brat."

He aligned his pen beside the thick pile of pages constituting the will. "I'll have him installed in the nursery by the end of the month. Before year's end, I'll have guardianship and the aunt will be history. Bank on it."

One

A pricey pewter-colored SUV blocked Carly's driveway Monday evening.

She maneuvered the stroller around the big bumper and glanced at her house. The setting sun's slanted rays revealed an equally expensive-looking man on her porch swing. If he was the dishwasher repairman she'd called this morning, then she seriously needed to consider changing occupations because appliance repair paid better than physical therapy.

He rose as she turned up the walk, unfolding a tall and broad-shouldered frame beneath a black suit and pale yellow shirt and knotted black patterned tie. Short dark hair swept back from his forehead, and as she drew nearer she noticed the intense green eyes set beneath thick eyebrows in a gorgeous face. The kind of face that could launch a thousand sexual fantasies.

Despite the oppressive June heat and Miami humidity, he looked fresh from the boardroom while she dripped with sweat. And he had the successful and affluent thing going for him which meant he was probably one of Marlene's men.

Sadness slammed Carly like a rogue wave and sucked at her footsteps, tugging her into a riptide of grief. Maybe he didn't know Marlene was...

Carly swallowed the lump rising in her throat.

Gone. Her twin was *gone*. Forever. And all Carly had left of Marlene was her sister's precious baby boy.

She blinked at the sting of tears. When her vision cleared, she registered that this guy was young. Early thirties. Her sister had preferred wealthy men, specifically wealthy *older* men. Like Everett Kincaid. Rhett's daddy.

As if her nephew knew Carly was thinking about the father he'd never met and now never would meet, Rhett let loose a string of one-year-old babble.

God, she loved him. He was so darned adorable she wanted to snatch him up and hug him until he squealed. Hug him like she'd never hugged her own daughter. She tamped down that disturbing thought.

Rhett would get his cuddle, but first she had to deal with her visitor. "Can I help you?"

"Carly Corbin?" His voice was deep, polished, clipped. He descended the porch stairs to join her on the sidewalk and his eyes raked over her, making her conscious of her faded, skimpy running shorts, sweat-dampened T-shirt and stringy ponytail.

She had to tip her head back to look into his face. "Who's asking?"

"I'm Mitch Kincaid."

Anger flashed through Carly. So this was the jerk who'd done everything he could to break up her sister and Everett and who'd later tried to bully Marlene into having an abortion. It was because of his pestering that Marlene had given up her luxury apartment and moved in with Carly.

She'd heard about Everett's older children from Marlene. Fear expanded in her chest, crowding out the anger. God help her if the Kincaids ever found out about Marlene's plot to snare Everett. Carly was terrified they would use it to take Rhett from her.

But they won't find out. You burned Marlene's journal. Nobody but you knows and you're not telling.

She dampened her suddenly dry lips. "And?"

"I'm here to meet...my brother. Is that him?" His narrowed gaze swept Rhett from his shock of baby-fine dark hair to his drool-covered grinning face to his chubby knees and double-knotted sneakers.

"Half brother," she corrected. "And, yes. This is Rhett."

Mitch's surprise-widened eyes found hers. "He looks like a Kincaid."

"Did you think Marlene lied?"

"DNA proved she didn't." His bitter tone indicated displeasure over that circumstance. "May I come in?"

Carly truly believed in close-knit family ties and wanted those for Rhett, but something was off here. Rhett's handsome half brother hadn't squatted down to the child's level or even spoken to him directly. That made her uneasy.

“Maybe another time. I need to feed Rhett, give him his bath and get him ready for bed.”

“It’s about Rhett’s inheritance.”

She bit her lip. Marlene hadn’t had life insurance. At twenty-eight, she hadn’t believed she needed it. Neither of them had. Carly made a decent salary, but the burial costs, child care and car and house payments consumed most of her income. She didn’t know how she’d sock money away for Rhett’s college education. “Everett provided for him?”

Kincaid’s sexy full lips flattened and his eyes hardened. “Conditionally.”

“Up. Up.” Rhett held up his arms and squirmed to get out of the stroller.

Carly unbuckled him and lifted his warm, wiggly little body against hers. She held him tight and savored his sweet baby smell. “What do you mean conditionally?”

“Perhaps we could discuss my father’s will while you feed the boy.”

The boy. Kincaid hadn’t even made eye contact with *the boy*.

Carly wanted Rhett to have everything a growing child needed, and she’d like for him to get to know his half siblings—just in case something ever happened to her. Marlene’s death had been a shocking and sudden reminder that bad and unexpected things did happen. That meant she had to deal with Rhett’s handsome half brother sooner or later. Might as well get it over with.

“Okay. But I’m warning you now that you need to shuck your designer suit jacket.”

“I’m not going to feed him.”

She ought to make him. Just for fun. She fought a smile and lost. “If you’re in the same room, you need to be dressed for feeding time. It gets messy.”

The intense green gaze locked on her face for several seconds, and his eyes met and held hers. Something deep inside Carly tingled. She squashed the fizzy feeling, pivoted quickly and jogged up the stairs. Her hand wasn’t quite steady as she unlocked the front door, then gestured for him to follow her inside.

He’d removed his coat while she wasn’t looking, and even though she’d told him to, now she wished he hadn’t. Those wide shoulders hadn’t been an illusion created by an excellent tailor. She’d bet he had washboard abs under that shirt and long, corded muscles beneath his knife-edged creased trousers. She worked with enough athletes to recognize and admire peak physical conditioning when she saw it.

She led the way through the house, leaving her unwanted guest to shut the door and follow. Or not. In the kitchen she washed Rhett’s hands, strapped him into his high chair and poured a sprinkling of Cheerios on his tray to keep him occupied while she prepared his dinner.

She retrieved a sippy cup of milk and a couple of bottles of water from the fridge. Politeness demanded she offer her “guest” a drink and she did so ungraciously by plunking a bottle down

on the counter in silent offering to the man who took up far too much space in her kitchen. She twisted the cap off her own. After chugging half the icy liquid, she pulled out a cutting board and started Rhett's dinner.

"So talk." She kept a wary eye on Kincaid.

He transferred the unopened water bottle from one long-fingered hand to the other and back again like a metronome. "Rhett will inherit one-quarter share of my—our—father's estate."

The knife slipped from her grip and hit the stainless sink with a loud clank. Everett Kincaid had been a billionaire. Anyone who read the newspaper knew that. Kincaid Cruise Lines was a huge firm that for years had been voted one of the top five places in the country to work.

"You're kidding me."

"No." That bitten out word carried hidden nuances Carly couldn't begin to decipher.

Maybe Everett wasn't the lecherous miser Carly thought him to be if he'd made arrangements for his son. She retrieved the knife, rinsed it and then focused on cutting bite-size pieces of bananas, grapes and cheese without severing a digit. "Go on."

"The condition is that Rhett must reside in Kincaid Manor for one full year to claim his share."

It took a second for that to sink in. And when it did, her heart slammed against her chest and her nerves snarled.

Feeling as if she'd swallowed a bucket of wet sand, she swung

around to face Mitch Kincaid. "You want to take him from me."

"I'll make it worth your while."

She blinked and shook her head. "I don't understand."

"I'll pay you one hundred thousand dollars for your trouble. The same amount my father paid your sister to have an abortion."

No. Carly sucked a quick breath. Marlene had done a few questionable things over the years, but Carly couldn't believe her sister would stoop so low as to accept money for an abortion and then not have one. Besides, Marlene had been thrilled about her pregnancy and overjoyed at Rhett's birth. She would never have considered ending it.

But then Carly remembered Marlene's plan to coerce Everett into marriage and she wasn't as certain Mitch was lying as she'd like to be. That notebook had revealed an unattractive side of her sister that Carly hadn't known existed.

"Marlene didn't have that kind of money."

"I have proof she did. She lived with you for the last fifteen months of her life. You had to have seen evidence of her windfall." The last word dripped sarcasm. "You probably even benefited from it."

Indignant, she snapped erect. "I did not. And I don't know about any money."

Rhett pounded on his tray, jerking Carly back to the present. She numbly carried him his food.

Mitch Kincaid had to be lying. If Marlene had taken the money, then what had she done with it? She certainly hadn't

spent it. Her living expenses after she quit her job as an air hostess for a corporate jet service had been negligible because, as Mitch pointed out, Marlene had moved in with Carly. Afterward the formerly sociable Corbin sister had rarely left the house until after Rhett's birth. She'd claimed it was because she was heartbroken over Everett's betrayal and his refusal to acknowledge his child.

Could Marlene have taken the money and used it for hospital bills? Carly made a mental note to ask the attorney how one went about tracing things like that.

"I don't believe you, and I'm not loaning this child to you."

"I'm not asking to borrow him. I'm offering to take over as his guardian. You'll be free to go about your life unencumbered."

Déjà vu. Her heart clenched in horror and a chill enveloped her. The words sounded eerily similar to those she'd heard twelve years ago. She fought the urge to pull Rhett from his chair and hold him close.

"I love Rhett. I don't consider him an encumbrance. And my sister wanted *me* to raise him."

"As a struggling single parent?"

"If necessary."

"C'mon, Carly, you're young, single and attractive. Why would you want to be saddled with someone else's brat?"

Her brain snagged on *attractive*, but repudiated *brat*. Then she recalled how scraggly she looked after a five-mile run. Clearly Kincaid was willing to say whatever it took to get what he wanted.

"I was there when Rhett was born, when he cut his first tooth, said his first word and took his first step. God willing, I'll be there for every other milestone. I'm not giving him up."

"I can offer the boy more than you can." His supercilious gaze encompassed her outdated kitchen.

"My house may not be up to Kincaid standards, but it's safe and childproofed and full of love. I have a huge fenced backyard." She hated that she sounded defensive. She had nothing to prove to this jerk.

"What does a physical therapist make these days? Sixty, seventy grand a year?"

He knew what she did and how much she made. The knowledge sent a prickle of apprehension over her. How did he know? "None of your busin—"

"That's nothing compared to the roughly one point two-five billion Rhett will inherit if he comes with me."

"*Billion?*" she squeaked.

"Not in cash. Most of the assets aren't liquid," he clarified. "Either he moves in with me or he gets nothing."

Light-headed and growing queasier by the second, Carly sank into a chair. How could she deprive her nephew of the inheritance he so rightly deserved, one that would set him up so that he'd never want for anything?

But how could she let him go?

She couldn't. Carly had promised Marlene that if anything happened to her, she'd raise Rhett and love him—love him the

way she'd never been allowed to love her own daughter.

Mitch Kincaid wasn't offering love. Other than that first searching glance, he'd barely looked at Rhett and had yet to touch him.

She took a deep breath and tried to think logically. Marlene had yearned for Everett to acknowledge his son, and now, better late than never, he had. Maybe there was a way to make this work. "I need to speak to my attorney. And I'll need a copy of the will."

Kincaid's mouth tightened with impatience. "We have a limited amount of time to implement my father's terms, Ms. Corbin. What will it take? Five hundred thousand for your trouble?"

At first she thought he was joking, then realized from the hard glint in his eyes and the harsh angle of his jaw that he was serious. Carly gaped at him. He honestly wanted to buy her nephew. Worse, he thought she'd sell Rhett. The idea infuriated her.

No wonder Marlene had called Everett's son a dirty, conniving rat bastard.

"You're out of your mind. You can't buy and sell people."

"A million?" He ignored her comment and extracted a checkbook and pen from the jacket draped over his arm as if writing a million-dollar check was no big deal.

She rose on shaky legs. "Rhett isn't for sale, Mr. Kincaid. You need to leave."

Rhett chose that moment to cackle with glee and squish

bananas through his fingers. And then the little urchin clutched fistfuls of his hair, moussing the silky strands with the banana mush. “Unless you’d like to help with cleanup.”

Kincaid backed away as if a sewage spill threatened his polished shoes. He reached into his coat pocket again and this time withdrew a business card that he laid on the counter next to his unopened water. “I’ll have a copy of the will couriered over immediately. Talk to your lawyer tomorrow and call me.”

He turned on his heel. Brisk footsteps retreated, then the front door opened and closed.

Carly looked at her adorable nephew and her chest ached. “Oh, Rhett. What are we going to do? I can’t lose you.”

She dampened a washcloth and attacked his messy hands and face. “But you deserve a share of your daddy’s estate. And I’m going to see that you get it.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Marie, Mitch’s personal assistant, said from the boardroom entrance, “but there’s a Carly Corbin downstairs insisting on seeing you. She doesn’t have an appointment.”

About time.

“Show her to my office.” After Marie left, Mitch stood and looked down the table at his brother. “Three days. It took her three days to cave. The question is how much is this little bastard going to cost us? I’ll be back.”

Rand waved him on. “Take your time. I’ll handle the next applicant for Nadia’s position and then grab lunch.”

The damned will had left Mitch with an interminable number of complications. His sister had been banished to Dallas to house-sit as required by her inheritance clause. Her sudden absence only increased his workload. He had to find her temporary replacement, and he had his brother's help whether he wanted it or not, thanks to dear ol' dad making Rand CEO instead of Mitch. That irritated Mitch like a sliver of glass stuck in his foot.

Rand had abandoned the business. Hell, his brother hadn't even spoken to anyone in the family in five years. Five years during which Mitch had busted his ass to prove he was worthy of taking the reins of KCL when his father retired.

But Dad had wanted Rand back and in charge.

Mitch entered his office through the connecting door to the boardroom. Before he could sit down Marie showed in his guest.

Carly barely acknowledged his presence with a brief nod before her wide brown eyes gazed past him to scan the thirty-foot wall of windows and the view of Biscayne Bay behind him.

He stiffened. Women didn't overlook him. It wasn't conceit to admit that his wealth wasn't his only asset. But Carly didn't seem interested in his face or body. Ignoring the jab to his pride, he took advantage of her inattention to assess her.

Her features weren't classically beautiful. But close enough. Her breasts were decent. Neither too big nor too small. Probably real. She wore a bubble gum-pink tracksuit with black stripes down the length of her legs. Killer legs, he recalled from their

last meeting. Too bad she'd covered them today. Getting another look would have been a nice bonus to closing the deal.

Overall, Carly was nice-looking. Not traffic-stopping. But interesting. Until she smiled. That smile of hers could melt bricks. She wasn't smiling today.

Since she was an identical twin, he could see why his father had been attracted to her sister. But damnation, couldn't the man have practiced safe sex after preaching about it for decades? Or had Marlene Corbin had something to do with the birth control failure? Mitch would bet money on it. His father had made a number of mistakes, but he hadn't been stupid.

Carly's gaze finally returned to Mitch. A weird paralysis seized his lungs. He fought it off. "Do we have a deal, Ms. Corbin?"

"Rhett can move into Kincaid Manor," she stated matter-of-factly.

Victory surged through him. He pulled his checkbook from his interior coat pocket. "Excell—"

"But only if I come with him."

His fingers contracted around his pen. "Excuse me?"

"You exude about as much warmth as dry ice, Kincaid. Children need more than that."

His spine went rigid at the insult. "I know how to handle kids."

"Really? Because I didn't see evidence of that the other day. You didn't even try to make a connection with your brother."

"Half brother, as you pointed out. There wasn't time."

“Eye contact and a smile only take a second.”

She had him there. “And your price?”

“I don’t want your money.”

Yeah, like he believed that. What game was she playing?

“What of your home? You’ll leave it vacant?”

“I can rent it for enough to cover the mortgage.”

Her plan shouldn’t have surprised him. In his experience, women were always looking for a free ride. In Carly’s case, Kincaid Manor would be like a spa vacation compared to the in-need-of-renovation structure she inhabited. “Your presence isn’t required.”

“Rhett stays with me, his guardian. And since my attorney says you only had thirty days from the reading of the will to begin fulfilling your part of your father’s demands or forfeit your inheritance, you’re going to have to come to terms with the package deal sooner rather than later.”

Nineteen of those days had passed. Days during which Mitch had employed two teams of lawyers to try to find a loophole in the will. When they’d failed, he’d spent more time hiring a nanny and trying to find out what he could about Carly Corbin. If Carly hadn’t come to him by tomorrow, he would have gone after her.

“I would imagine you have my number since you have everything else.” She backed toward the door.

“Carly, how much do you want?” He signed a blank check and then slid it and his pen across the desk. “You fill in the amount. Whatever you feel is fair.”

Without even glancing at the pen and check, she observed him as if he were three-day-old July roadkill. “You just don’t get it, do you, Kincaid?”

He linked his hands behind his back, hoping to appear casual instead of frustrated and irritated and damn near desperate. “Then perhaps you’ll enlighten me.”

“This isn’t about money. It’s about a little boy and what’s best for him. It’s always about doing what’s best for the child. *Always*. In this case, you’re not it.”

“The boy will lack for nothing.”

“Materially. And his name is Rhett.”

Mitch struggled to rein in his temper, but his entire head grew hot. “*Rhett* will have the best of care.”

Angry color stained Carly’s cheeks and sparked in her eyes, making her look even more attractive. She approached his desk, planted her hands on the polished surface and leaned toward him. “Who will hold him when he’s cranky? Who’ll kiss his boo-boos and rock him when he has a nightmare? Who will tell him about his mother? And who will make sure he knows he was loved and w-wanted?”

The slight crack in her voice nailed him in the gut. She’d just lost her sister, and even if Marlene had been a mercenary, manipulative bitch, apparently Carly had cared for her. Maybe giving up the boy wouldn’t be completely painless. But like ripping off a bandage, the discomfort wouldn’t last long.

Being the middle child meant Mitch had learned the art of

negotiation in the cradle. If he didn't compromise, he'd lose the brat. "I have employed a highly qualified nanny. I'm not trying to cut you out of his life completely. We'll arrange visitation."

"A nanny? You're going to *pay* someone to love him?" Her indignant tone and humorless laugh didn't bode well. Gold fragments glinted in her dark irises. "Is money your answer to everything?"

"There's nothing wrong with nannies. My siblings and I were raised by a series of competent—"

Her snort cut him off. "Now I get it. No wonder you're such a robot."

He flinched at her insult.

Leaving the check untouched on his desk, she marched to the door and paused with her hand on the knob. "That's my offer, Kincaid. Take it or leave it. You get both of us or neither of us. You can pursue this in court with a whole platoon of lawyers if you want, but considering your father allegedly paid my sister an obscene amount of money to abort, and you and your siblings are driven by potential monetary gains, no judge in his right mind will ever award you custody of Rhett even if you are an almighty Kincaid. And that's *if* you can get the case heard before your thirty days are up. Because rest assured, if you sue for custody, I will delay you in every way possible."

Her ponytail swung out parallel to the floor as she pivoted abruptly and slammed the door behind her.

Mitch swore. It didn't help that she was right. His attorneys

had told him the same thing. He'd counted on her being as greedy as her sister and wanting fast cash.

Instead, he had no doubt Carly Corbin was in it to milk him for the long haul. And he had no choice but to accede to her absurd demands.

But he had every intention of winning this battle and he'd do whatever it took to come out on top.

"There's no place like home," Carly muttered under her breath. "There's certainly no place like this one."

She stood in the circular driveway Saturday morning staring up at the expansive ivory-stone facade of Kincaid Manor. The place looked like a castle that had been yanked out of the English countryside and dropped into a Miami gated community.

She'd had to stop and give her name at a guardhouse to get into the neighborhood, and then talk to a disembodied voice at a second set of elaborate iron gates. Those gates had glided shut behind her, locking her inside the Kincaid compound the moment her car had passed through.

Sunlight glinted off a multitude of windows on a steeply roofed two-story structure the length of your average strip mall. Shrubbery pruned to the nth degree surrounded the foundation and fenced the sidewalk as if intended to keep visitors from straying onto the perfectly manicured emerald lawn.

Not exactly ideal for a growing boy whose only speeds were asleep and wide open, but Carly's attorney had instructed her to make nice and play along while they explored their legal options.

For Rhett's sake, she could put up with just about anything.

Hours after she'd left the KCL offices, Mitch had called, "invited" her to stay and given her directions to Kincaid Manor. Carly had immediately sat down and developed a step-by-step plan to bond the Kincaid offspring. She'd work on Mitch first, then she'd tackle his brother, Rand.

"Let's hope the palace is childproofed, buddy."

Rhett squirmed in her arms and babbled a reply. She set him down and herded him toward the porch. He toddled away with a childish giggle.

The imposing lead-glass front door opened, framing Mitch Kincaid. How appropriate. The lord of the manor had deigned to oversee their arrival. But he didn't step out to greet them. He waited, arms folded, while she helped Rhett scramble up the stairs on his hands and knees.

Even though it was the weekend, Mitch wore a suit—this one stark black with a blinding white shirt and a ruby tie. Did the man ever unwind?

Mitch barely glanced at Rhett. "You brought your things?"

Before she could stop him, Rhett bolted across the porch and wrapped his little arms around his half brother's thigh. Her nephew never met a stranger.

Mitch stiffened.

Was that a flash of panic Carly detected in his eyes? Of course not. Who would be scared of an adorable child? She must have mistaken annoyance for fear.

Rhett grasped two chubby fists in the immaculate fabric of Mitch's trousers and bounced, demanding, "Up. Up. Pig me up."

Step one in getting these two to know each other: Mitch might as well learn from the get-go that once Rhett started that song and dance, it wouldn't end until he got what he wanted.

"My minivan's loaded. I wanted to get Rhett settled before I started schlepping our luggage."

"Ingrid," Mitch spoke over his shoulder. "Take the boy to the nursery while I show Ms. Corbin to her suite."

A stacked and stunning blonde in snug hipster jeans and an even tighter, belly-showing T-shirt appeared behind him. The hand she placed on Mitch's lean waist as she ducked around him in the wide doorway was far too familiar for an employee, and her long acrylic nails were likely to put someone's eye out. "Come on, little Brett."

"Rhett," Carly corrected automatically and stepped between the woman and Rhett at the same time Mitch shifted.

Carly and Mitch collided. Her hip ended up aligned with his rock-hard thigh and her shoulder pressed the equally firm wall of his chest. She inhaled sharply, and Mitch's cologne filled her nose. A flood of warmth and awareness swept through her. She stomped on the unwanted response and focused on the problem. *The other problem.* "Who are you?"

The blonde tossed her long hair over her shoulder and smiled intimately at Mitch before replying, "I'm Rhett's nanny."

With a face and body like that, I'll just bet you are.

Carly glared at Mitch, then bent to pry Rhett's stubby fingers from the lord of the manor's pants. Mitch's muscles contracted beneath her touch as she maneuvered. She could feel body heat radiating through the summer-weight fabric, and it almost scorched her. And being at eye level with his crotch was...distracting to say the least.

She finally freed her wiggly nephew and scooped him up. "I told you Rhett didn't need a nanny."

"Who will watch him while you're working? Or do you intend to quit your job and live off my largesse?" The superior way he intoned the words and looked down at her, as if he expected her to freeload off him, set her teeth on edge.

"I'm not quitting my job. I'll watch Rhett when I'm here, and when I'm at work Lucy, his regular day-care provider, will watch him."

"And when you go out in the evening?"

Carly blinked. "You mean on a date?"

He lowered that square chin a fraction of an inch.

"I don't date."

Mitch's eyes narrowed. "You mean you're not seeing anyone at the moment. But that will change."

She hadn't dated since Marlene died and she had no inclination to wade back into the muddy dating waters again anytime soon. But she wasn't admitting that to Mitch and his playmate.

"If I want to go out, I'll hire a babysitter."

"Unnecessary. Ingrid will take over."

“Don’t be ridiculous. Even if I went out every night of the week—which I won’t—that wouldn’t justify a full-time nanny’s salary.” She turned to the bottled, navel-ringed blonde. “Sorry, Ingrid. Nothing personal. But Rhett just lost his mother, and he’s moving into a strange house. That’s enough changes for one little guy to make right now.”

“He’ll adapt,” Mitch snarled quietly.

Carly tipped her head back and held his gaze without blinking. “The way I see it, Kincaid, I hold all the cards. I have nothing to gain by moving in here and you have everything to lose if we don’t.”

Of course, Rhett would lose, too. But his safety was her primary concern. Not even a billion-plus bucks would make her overlook his well-being. She wasn’t going to leave him in the care of Mitch’s horny, dragon-clawed girlfriend.

She felt a bit unfair for judging the woman by her looks, but after interviewing dozens of day-care providers with Marlene, Carly had learned to tell almost instantly which ones had a rapport with children. Ingrid did not. She was almost as cold and detached as her boss—until she looked at Mitch. Then she looked ready to get XXX-rated hot.

Mitch’s nostrils flared and his lips flatlined. He looked angry enough to bend horseshoes with his bare hands or maybe his clenched teeth. “Ingrid, please wait for me in the living room. I’ll join you after Ms. Corbin and I have discussed your qualifications.”

38-24-34. Oh yeah, those were serious qualifications.

But not for child care.

"I'll show you to your room." Mitch turned and stalked across an Italian marble foyer almost as large as the entire first floor of Carly's house.

He hadn't agreed to her terms, but Carly, curious to see more of the mansion and where Mitch intended to put them, followed him anyway. The staircase rose from the center of the polished flagstone floor like a water fountain arching in opposite directions at the top. Carly's gaze stuck to the flexing muscles of his butt like a fly to flypaper as he climbed.

No way. She couldn't find him attractive. Not after all Marlene had told her. She was merely one athlete admiring another's well-toned physique. *Right?*

Shifting her gaze from the glutei maximi ahead of her, she trailed her host. The walk through the gallery, past antique furniture and paintings that looked as if they belonged in a museum, seemed to take forever. "Good grief, how big is this place?"

"Fifteen thousand square feet," he replied, turning down a long hall. A set of double doors marked the end, but he stopped short of them and pushed open a door on the right.

"Your suite."

Carly brushed past him. Her shoulder grazed his chest. She cursed the frisson of goose bumps the small contact caused.

Surprised, she turned a slow circle, taking in the tasteful

lavender, white and mint decor that included a curtained four-poster bed, ornate French furniture and plum-colored rugs. The room looked like a decorating magazine snapshot. Perfect down to the last detail. As much as Kincaid seemed to resent her presence, she'd expected to be stuck in a closet somewhere or maybe the servants' quarters.

"Me down," Rhett demanded and squirmed in her arms.

"Not yet, buddy." Not until she'd moved the expensive-looking breakables out of his reach.

She crossed to the bay window and knelt on its cushioned window seat to look into the backyard. Her mouth dropped open. People actually lived like this?

The formal gardens between her window and the opposite side of the U-shaped house looked elaborate enough for a government monument or a movie set, and whoever had designed them had been fond of rulers. All straight lines. Not one single curve. The roses probably even grew square petals.

An expansive tiled patio stretched across the base of the U, complete with a square water fountain and spouting Poseidon statue. The grassy area immediately off the patio contained, of all things, a koi pond. Beyond the fish, rigid rows of shrubs flanked an Olympic-length pool that reached all the way to a seawall, boat dock, yacht and what looked like two hundred feet of waterfront.

"We're going to have to keep Rhett away from all that water."

"I'll order fencing and safety locks immediately."

Crossing to a door, she pushed it open to reveal a luxurious

bathroom straight out of a hedonist's fantasies. A glass shower. A tub big enough to accommodate four. A marble-topped vanity as long as a bed. Shaking her head at the opulence, she returned to the bedroom and opened a second door to reveal a closet the size of her bedroom back home. But she didn't see a crib or connecting door to a nursery.

She rejoined Mitch. "Where's Rhett's room?"

He nodded toward the window, indicating the opposite wing of the house. "In the east wing."

"I won't be able to hear him from here."

"That's why we have Ingrid."

"We don't have Ingrid. *You* have Ingrid."

His eyes narrowed to green slits. "What are you implying?"

"Your girlfriend is not looking after Rhett."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Oh please. She almost slipped her hand in your pocket for a quick grope downstairs."

His chin jacked up. He closed the distance between them in three long strides and stared down at her with what would have been intimidating ferocity if she didn't work with professional athletes on a regular basis. She'd become immune to the psyche-out glare.

"I don't keep mistresses in my home."

"But you do keep them. Or in this case, her."

Before he could argue, Rhett launched himself at Mitch, startling Carly so much she almost dropped the imp. Kincaid's

only choice was to catch him. Rhett clamped his hands around his half brother's neck and planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek.

The horror in the lord of the manor's eyes made Carly snort with laughter. Okay, so that had been a wet kiss. A little disgust was warranted. She released Rhett's lower half and her nephew shimmied up his brother like a monkey does a tree.

Mitch closed his eyes. The muscles in his jaw knotted—along with every other muscle group she could see. What was going on? He acted as if he couldn't bear to hold the child.

"Take him." He ground out the words.

Confused by his weird behavior, Carly hesitated. Rhett couldn't possibly be more adorable. And he was clean. He didn't even have a dirty diaper.

Mitch thrust Rhett back at her. Frowning, Carly took him. "You want to be his guardian? How are you going to do that when you can't even handle holding him? What is your problem, Kincaid?"

Boy, did she have her work cut out for her in bringing these two together.

Mitch scowled. "I don't have a problem other than a stubborn guest. I'll show you the nursery."

Carly shook her head and stood her ground. "Rhett and I are not sleeping a football field apart. Either you bring his crib in here or I'm staying in the nursery."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Carly held Mitch's gaze. After a moment's standoff, he huffed

an aggravated breath, crossed the room to an intercom system imbedded in the wall and punched a button. "Mrs. Duncan, please have the nursery furniture transferred to the blue suite."

Mitch turned and scowled at Carly. "Satisfied?"

"That depends. Let's see the blue room."

He stalked across the hall and threw open the opposite door. Carly followed more slowly, making sure not to brush against him this time when she entered. Mitch made it easy by staying out of Rhett's reach.

Shades of blue from powder to midnight turned the room into a peaceful sanctuary. Like hers, the suite had a connecting bath and a closet large enough to be Rhett's playroom. "It's beautiful, and if I leave the doors open at night, I'll be able to hear him."

A look she couldn't identify flickered in Mitch's eyes. "Fine. Now if you'll hand the b—Rhett—over to Ingrid, we'll have lunch before moving your things inside."

"No Ingrid."

"She is not my lover."

"She wants to be."

A smug smile slanted his lips, and her stomach sank like a wet sandbag. He could charm the birds from the trees with that smile. She hoped he didn't aim it at her very often.

He tilted his head, his green gaze traveled down the length of Carly's body, then slowly returned. Her skin tingled and her nipples tightened in the wake of his inspection. "It disturbs you that she wants me?"

Carly stiffened at his implication that she might be jealous. “There’s no accounting for tastes. You can sleep with her and each of the Miami Dolphins cheerleaders solely or en masse for all I care, but I’m not having the woman in charge of Rhett’s safety concentrating on getting into your pants when she should be watching him.”

The smile vanished. “Ingrid came highly recommended from a business associate.”

“Then she won’t have trouble finding another job.” He opened his mouth—presumably to argue. She held up her hand to cut him off. “Mitch, this one’s nonnegotiable.”

“Apparently, many things are nonnegotiable with you.”

“I’m not afraid to fight for what I want.” She had been once, and she’d paid the price ever since.

“Like your sister.” His tone made the comment an insult.

Fury, pain and panic hit her like a barrage of arrows. She gritted her teeth and blinked away the sting in her eyes, but she refused to engage in this particular war of words. He couldn’t know about Marlene’s plan. Her sister hadn’t been the type to broadcast her secrets. Not even to her twin. And Carly had no intention of giving Mitch Kincaid ammunition by sharing what she knew.

“Deal or no deal, Kincaid?”

After a few tense moments Mitch nodded once. “No Ingrid.”

Carly exhaled. She’d won the battle, but she had a feeling she’d unintentionally declared war against a man her sister had claimed

didn't fight fair.

Two

Carly's plan to turn Mitch into a family man wasn't going to be as easy as she'd hoped. She hadn't expected to have to start with a man who couldn't bear to touch the child.

Tomorrow she'd have to reassess the stages of Mitch's conversion and possibly break the process down into smaller achievable increments. As if she were training an athlete for a marathon she'd set daily and weekly goals toward attaining the ultimate objective by the end of the year. She wanted Mitch to love Rhett as much as she did. Nothing less would do.

She yanked on her nightie and pulled open the bathroom door. Steam wafted into the bedroom from behind her. Glancing at the big four-poster bed, she anticipated sinking into the thick mattress, but first she needed to check on Rhett one last time. She crossed the hall.

This morning, a team of employees had removed the furniture from the blue room and replaced it with obviously new nursery furniture. After lunch, Mitch had surprised her by dismissing them and helping her unload her car himself during Rhett's nap.

So he wasn't a complete jerk and he wasn't afraid of hard work. But not once had she seen him try to connect with Rhett, and that annoyed her like a festering splinter. A child needed the love and support of his family. All of his family. And he needed to know he was loved and that the one in charge would do the right thing. No matter how difficult.

Rhett had been overwound after a day full of changes, but had finally gone out like a light thirty minutes ago. Carly straightened the lightweight blanket covering him and bent to kiss his forehead. She couldn't possibly love him any more if he were her own.

A sound behind her made her straighten and turn. Mitch stood in the open doorway silhouetted by the light she'd left burning in her bedroom.

"He finally settled?" His low rumbling voice raised the hairs on Carly's arms and reminded her she was naked except for her worn thigh-length nightshirt. She hadn't bothered with a robe because she'd thought Mitch would be off in his own wing of the monstrous ten-bedroom house.

Wrapping her arms around her middle, she crossed the lush carpet and stopped in front of him before whispering, "Yes. He's not usually so cranky. Today was a bit much for him, I think."

Mitch's slow head-to-toe appraisal set her pulse aflutter. Dark evening beard shadowed his jaw and upper lip, and his slightly rumpled hair looked as if he'd run his hands through the thick strands a few times. He'd removed his suit coat and tie and rolled back the sleeves of his shirt to reveal muscular forearms dusted with dark whorls.

In a word, he looked sexy. And he smelled great. The crisp aroma of his cologne had faded and a more masculine, more alluring scent had taken its place. Mitch's scent.

Forget it. He's not your type.

“Well...good night.” She stepped forward and he moved aside.

“Good night.” He turned and walked toward the double doors at the end of the hall. One stood open, revealing the bottom end of a king-size bed covered in a dark green damask spread.

Alarm bells clamored in Carly’s head. “That’s your room?”

“Yes.”

How could she sleep with her door open to listen out for Rhett when she knew Mitch could stroll past at any moment?

Mitch’s gaze turned arctic. “And don’t bother sleepwalking. My door will be locked.”

Anger shrieked through her like steam through a boiling teakettle. Before she could think of an appropriate comeback, Mitch entered his room and shut his door. The lock clicked.

Carly’s short nails bit into her palms and fury chewed her insides. Marlene had been too kind in labeling Mitch Kincaid a rat bastard.

So much for sweet dreams.

Laughter pulled Mitch from the dining room to the kitchen. Surprise halted him in the doorway.

Mrs. Duncan had been a fixture at Kincaid Manor since before Mitch’s birth, but he’d never heard the woman laugh. He wasn’t even sure he’d ever seen her smile.

Making airplane noises, the head housekeeper bent over the brat’s high chair with a spoon in her hand and a twinkle in her eyes. *Mrs. Duncan could twinkle?* She caught sight of Mitch and

abruptly stopped buzzing. Her amusement vanished and her lined face settled back into a familiar expressionless cast. She snapped upright.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t realize you were waiting for your breakfast. I’ll bring it right through.” She set the spoon and bowl she held in front of Carly.

Mitch’s gaze shifted to his unwanted guest. Instead of her usual ponytail, Carly’s hair draped her shoulders in a silky smooth curtain of mink brown. The sunlight streaming through the window behind her glinted on a few golden strands.

“Morning, Mitch.” She flashed him one of her brick-melting smiles and a shot of adrenaline negated his need for coffee. Apparently, *this* Corbin didn’t hold grudges. Or did she merely conceal her vindictiveness better than her sister had?

“Good morning, Carly.” She wore another tracksuit—this one in blinding tangerine with white stripes on the sleeves. He focused on her obnoxiously bright clothing in a failed attempt to wipe the image of last night’s attire from his mind. Her shapeless, oversize T-shirt had been worn almost to the point of transparency. The shadows of her nipples, navel and the dark curls between her legs had been obvious through the faded fabric.

He’d resented the hell out of his instantaneous response. He didn’t like the woman. How could he possibly desire her?

Because you need to get laid.

But not by her.

She had a bowl in front of her and a glass of orange juice.

“Della treated me to her secret recipe apple-cinnamon-raisin oatmeal. You should try it.”

Della? Who was Della?

“Mr. Kincaid prefers bacon and eggs,” Mrs. Duncan said in her usual monotone.

Della was Mrs. Duncan? And Carly was on a first-name basis with her in less than twenty-four hours? As far as he knew, no one in the Kincaid household had ever called the formidable sixty-something woman by her first name.

Carly grimaced. “They’re your arteries. But you’d think after your father’s heart attack you’d be more careful.”

“I am perfectly healthy, thank you.” His cool tone dimmed her smile. “Why aren’t you eating in the dining room?”

“Mr. Messy.” Her nod indicated the slimy child.

“Which is why we should have kept the nanny. You could have eaten in peace.” Yesterday she’d waited until the boy napped to eat lunch.

“Breakfast is one of our favorite times of the day. Isn’t it, munchkin?” She tweaked the child’s nose—the only clean part of his face as far as Mitch could tell. The brat cackled infectiously, stabbing Mitch with a reminder of other children and another time. An old ache invaded his chest.

“Besides, the view from the breakfast nook is gorgeous. But I told Della that you should add a bird feeder or two to the patio. Rhett loves to watch the birds—especially hummingbirds. We’ll pick up some feeders this afternoon after church.”

She attended church?

Probably to confess her fortune-hunting sins. She might try a different brand of ammunition than her twin, but he knew why she'd been prancing around in her nightshirt last night.

Carly's brown eyes took on a challenging glint. "So...are you going to eat in the dining room by yourself or are you brave enough to join us? Rhett's almost finished. You and your Armani should be safe from soggy cereal bombs."

"I'll join you." If for no other reason than to keep an eye on his unwanted houseguest—the same reason he'd put her in the suite beside his. He chose the chair farthest away from the alleged cereal-bomb thrower.

"Not a morning person, eh?" Carly asked as she scraped the last of her oatmeal from a bowl and tucked it between her pink lips.

"I prefer to gather my thoughts for the upcoming day and read the business section. Are you?"

"Absolutely. On really hot days, we take our run before we eat." She leaned over to wipe the boy's face with a cloth and her jacket and the top she wore beneath it gaped, revealing a glimpse of scalloped white lace on the pale curve of her breast. The sight hit Mitch with an unexpected surge of hunger—and not for bacon and eggs.

No. He would *not* be attracted to Carly Corbin. Her sister had taken his father for a ride. This twin wasn't going to get the chance to do the same with Mitch. He made a mental note to

call one of his usual dates—women who knew good sex was all he'd give them.

“Perhaps one day I'll join you on your run.” Again, if only to keep an eye on her. The majority of his neighbors were wealthy and older—prime pickings for attractive gold diggers on the make. Like the Corbin sisters.

“If you can keep up, you'd be welcome. Rhett would love the company.”

Another challenge. She seemed to enjoy issuing them. “I can keep up.”

Mrs. Duncan placed a plate in front of him. Was that a smirk on her lined face?

“What's with the suit?” Carly asked, recapturing his attention. “Going to church?”

“No. To the office.”

“It's Sunday,” she enunciated as if he were lacking fifty IQ points.

“I have work to do.”

Carly shook her head and made a face at Mrs. Duncan. “A workaholic and a diet disaster. Just like his father.”

True, but his spine straightened regardless. “How would you know?”

Sadness shadowed her eyes. “Marlene told me.”

“And yet she didn't tell you about the hundred grand she accepted to have an abortion.”

Carly glared with enough fire to make a lesser man duck for

cover. “If you want to talk trash, then you do it when we’re alone. I will not tolerate you making Rhett feel unwanted. And I think you’re lying about the money.”

“I made the transaction myself. And I have a copy of the check with Marlene’s signature on the back.”

“I want to see it.”

The Corbin women were identical in looks and yet not. Marlene had dressed in designer clothing. Her makeup had been flawless, and he’d never seen one single hair out of place. Beautiful, but hard, he’d concluded within seconds of making her acquaintance. And he hadn’t been attracted to her. Nonetheless he’d tried seduction and later threats, but neither had swayed her toward breaking it off with his father. And when he’d finally convinced his father to end the relationship, she’d turned up pregnant a month later.

A calculating woman with an eye out for number one, he’d concluded. He hadn’t seen that side of Carly. Yet. But he would. She camouflaged her mercenary streak well. But sooner or later the facade would crack.

Carly sipped her juice. Without the red gloss her twin had worn, Carly’s mouth looked softer than Marlene’s. Thus far, the only time Carly had shown her hard side was when butting heads with him over the boy. That was to be expected, since the kid was her ticket to Easy Street. Mitch hadn’t figured out her MO yet, but she and Marlene were genetically identical twins—one egg separated in the womb. Carly’s altruistic pretense had to be

exactly that. A pretense to cover a mercenary heart.

And once she realized he was onto her, her mouth would twist the way her sister's had and her eyes would glint like flint. In the meantime, he'd watch Carly Corbin like a hawk does its prey, waiting for the perfect opportunity to swoop in and steal the child from her.

The boy slammed his hands on the high chair tray, startling Mitch. His eggs fell from his fork.

"Man. Man. Man."

Carly righted the sippy cup. "That's Mitch. Your brother."

"Bub. Bub. Bub."

"That's right. Your bubba."

Mitch's spine fused into a rigid line. He opened his mouth to protest he was no one's *bubba*, but the sparkle in Carly's eyes and something about the angle of her chin, dared him. The witch was trying to provoke him, he realized.

Too bad he refused to be her source of entertainment.

He flicked open his newspaper, concentrated on the financial section and tried to ignore the boy's chorus of "Bubbas" and the smirks on Carly's and Mrs. Duncan's faces.

He wasn't going to let Carly disrupt his life. In a matter of days—a month at the most—she'd realize she was fighting a losing battle. And then she'd turn over guardianship of the kid.

Peace and a nanny would return to the Kincaid household the day Carly Corbin moved out.

Carly's body reacted like a Geiger counter nearing radioactive

material.

The hairs on her arms rose and her pulse stuttered erratically. By the sound of his step and the scent of his cologne she knew who had entered the living room behind her without looking over her shoulder.

Despite its predominantly white decor, the room wasn't cold or uncomfortable due to the plush rugs on the marble floor, overstuffed upholstery and surprising colorful accents scattered about. She preferred this space to the darker, more masculine den.

"Rhett looks like you," she said, keeping her gaze on the Kincaid family portrait hanging above the mantel. "How old were you when this was painted?"

"Eleven," Mitch replied.

"Everyone looks so happy. The all-American family success story." Her family had been happy...until she'd made an unforgettable mistake.

"Appearances can be deceiving."

That brought her around abruptly. Exhaustion dragged Mitch's features, not surprising since he'd left for work before eight this morning, and it was after 10:00 p.m. now. His suit coat was draped on his forearm and his loosened burgundy tie hung askew.

So much for Sunday being a day of rest. "What do you mean?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Did you and Rhett get settled in today?"

“We did. Mrs. Duncan and I have babyproofed most of the rooms. So when you notice some of your priceless collectibles missing, I didn’t hock them. They’ve been put away.”

As a physical therapist, Carly spent a lot of her day encouraging people to go a little farther than they wanted to go. She saw no reason not to continue that practice with Mitch. “Why is the picture deceptive?”

“Let it go, Carly.” If his voice dropped any lower he’d be growling. He turned away.

She reached out and grabbed his bicep to stop him. The muscle bunched beneath her fingers and his heat burned her hand through the thin fabric of his sleeve. “If you expect me to let Rhett live here, then you need to level with me, Mitch. Are there skeletons in the Kincaid closet that I should worry about?”

He stabbed a hand through his hair, effectively dislodging her grasp, and lifted his gaze to the oil painting. “As far as I can remember, my mother wasn’t the contented person you see depicted there. She died in a car accident shortly after that portrait was painted. But I was a kid. So what do I know?”

“I’m sorry. Going through your teens without the steadying influence of your mother must have been difficult.”

A familiar ache welled in her chest. Her daughter would be twelve now and entering what Carly’s mother had always called the testing years. Was her daughter asking the same questions Carly had asked about her birthmother? Did she wonder why she’d been given up and if she was too flawed for even a mother

to love? Carly prayed her daughter's adoptive parents were as supportive and loving as Eileen and Dan Corbin had been.

Carly pushed the questions and regrets aside, the way she always did, and focused on the present. But the ache didn't abate. It never did. The pain rested just behind her breastbone like a hole in her heart.

Mitch grunted a nonanswer and headed toward the wet bar built into the cabinetry flanking the fireplace. But instead of liquor, he splashed bottled water over his ice cubes.

"I'm sure you can see why I want to make certain Rhett doesn't suffer from Marlene's absence."

Studying his reflection in the mirror above the marble countertop, she noted the groove in his brow. For a moment, he looked tired and very much like a man who'd just lost his father and had to take over a multi-billion-dollar corporation despite the grief he must be dealing with. "Rough day?"

He stared into his glass, then met her reflected gaze. "I've spent the past week reacquainting my brother with KCL. He's been working for our west coast competitor for the past five years. And we had to hire my sister's replacement. Rand and I spent the day training her."

Carly had been disappointed when she'd read in the will that Nadia would be out of state. She'd hoped the female Kincaid would have some maternal instincts and side with Carly on Rhett's care. "Training on Sunday?"

"The cruising industry runs 24/7, three hundred and sixty-five

days per year. Good night.” He headed for the foyer.

Tonight for the first time since she’d met him, Mitch looked anything but invincible and nothing like the overconfident rat bastard Marlene had described. For some foolish reason, Carly was reluctant to let this approachable mood pass. “Have you had dinner? Mrs. Duncan left a plate for you in the refrigerator. Want me to heat it up?”

His eyes returned to hers and narrowed suspiciously. “I’m capable of operating a microwave.”

His terse reply raised her hackles, but for Rhett’s sake, she’d be polite. She had to be if she wanted to make a place for the youngest Kincaid in this family. “I’m sure you can, but I’m offering help and company.”

The long stretch of silence spoke volumes. “I could eat.”

Carly headed for the kitchen despite the lack of warm fuzzies his reply elicited. And this time she didn’t get lost. She’d taken more than a few wrong turns today in the enormous house.

She removed the plate from the refrigerator, slid it into the microwave and punched the buttons. “Your home gym is pretty amazing. Would you mind if I used it?”

“Go ahead.”

She leaned back against the counter and observed Mitch. “If you like, I can check your form when you work out to make sure you’re not doing yourself any harm.”

His shoulders squared. “What are you doing?”

“Heating your dinner? Trying to make conversation? Offering

professional advice?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t be polite?”

“Don’t try your wiles on me.”

Carly’s temper ballooned like the plastic wrap covering the plate rotating on the microwave’s turntable. She gestured to her tracksuit, which had taken a beating during Rhett’s dinner and bath. “That’s the second time you’ve accused me of putting the moves on you. Open your freaking eyes, Kincaid. Am I dressed to seduce you?”

She realized her mistake immediately. Her question invited him to inspect her from her ponytail to her running shoes. He did so slowly and thoroughly, lingering over her breasts and legs before returning to her face. It annoyed her immensely that his appraisal left her breathless and agitated.

“It won’t work, Carly. I’m not a sap like my father, nor am I so hard up for a woman that I’ll fall into bed with the first attractive female who offers.”

His rudeness shocked and infuriated her. If this were a cartoon, steam would shoot from her ears. “Hello! I’m not offering anything except leftovers.”

“Precisely.” From his tone she didn’t think he referred to the leftover orange roasted chicken and vegetables.

The timer beeped. Mitch reached past her and retrieved the plate. She could feel both his warmth and, conversely, the chill emanating from him. He crossed the room and plunked his plate

down on the kitchen table. His body language made it clear he didn't want her company.

Carly resisted the urge to stab him with the fork she retrieved from the drawer and settled for slapping the utensil down on the table beside his plate. "If your father was half the conceited jackass you are, then I can't see what Marlene ever saw in him."

"She saw a billionaire sugar daddy and a meal ticket."

Carly glared at him and prepared to blister him with one of the many insults she'd learned from the professional athletes she worked with. But doubt stilled her tongue.

Marlene had confessed in her notebook that she found Everett's fortune quite attractive. But surely her sister had cared about more than the man's finances? And what about the times Marlene had told her she loved Everett? Her sister wouldn't have lied to her, would she?

Yes, she would.

Carly broke eye contact and retrieved the pitcher of iced tea from the fridge. She set it down beside Mitch's plate.

"Go screw yourself, Kincaid. That's the only way a jerk like you will ever have a partner you consider your equal."

With that she pivoted and stomped out of the kitchen, leaving the lord of the manor to his solitary dinner.

She hoped he choked on it.

Three

Kill him with kindness.

As opposed to just killing him—a notion that had entertained

Carly far more than it should have for the past few days. Okay, so she couldn't *really* off Mitch Kincaid. But making him run a marathon on a treadmill with no change in scenery could be fun. Or maybe five hundred sit-ups on a cold tile floor...

But none of those would get her closer to her goal of bonding Mitch and Rhett. She sighed and rolled the ball across the emerald lawn to Rhett Wednesday evening.

It had taken her three days to cool off, three days of not seeing the middle Kincaid, of Rhett not spending a single moment with his half brother, for Carly to realize Mitch had deliberately antagonized her Sunday night.

Why?

She didn't think for one minute he honestly believed she was chasing him, because she hadn't flirted even once. Sure, she'd appreciated his physique a time or two. Who wouldn't? But unless he had eyes in the back of his head, he hadn't caught her looking, so that didn't count.

He had to have been trying to avoid Rhett, and since she and Rhett were practically joined at the hip...annoying her meant avoiding his half brother.

She'd decided she'd have to follow through with her plan—regardless of Mitch's irritating comments—if she wanted the males to get to know each other better. With a thirty-something-year age gap between them, Mitch and Rhett would never have the close bond Carly had shared with Marlene. But the brothers had to start somewhere.

A salt-scented breeze blowing in from the water lifted the skirt of the simple peach sundress she'd donned for dinner. She smoothed the fabric back in place. Dresses. Ick. Give her a tracksuit or running shorts and a tank any day. Carly had been the jock in their family. Marlene had been the girly girl.

A wave of sadness swamped her. Carly lifted her chin and inhaled deeply, trying to alleviate the emptiness. The mouthwatering aromas of grilling swordfish with citrus salsa and marinated vegetables filled her nostrils. Her stomach growled with hunger. Mitch would be home soon and they'd have their first family dinner.

She dug her bare toes into the thick grass. So she'd dressed up. Big deal. The evening sun burned down on them, and her outfit would be cooler than pants. If Mitch wanted to make something out of it, fine. Time would prove him wrong. She wasn't looking for a lover, or a sugar daddy or anything remotely resembling either one. Her broken engagement had left her too raw to think about another romantic entanglement.

She caught the ball and rolled it back to Rhett. Rhett needed her. Sure, having someone depend on her for everything both frightened and overwhelmed her, but she wouldn't let down Rhett or Marlene. Or herself. This time she wouldn't let anyone convince her to take the easy way out. This time she would be the parent she should have been twelve years ago.

The sound of the back door gliding open drew her gaze to the house. Mitch stepped onto the patio. With his eyes narrowed

against the setting sun and his hands parked on his hips, he scanned the backyard like a lord surveying his property. He zeroed in on them and her pulse did something wonky. What was up with that?

She touched Rhett's shoulder. "Look who's here."

Rhett beamed and shouted, "Bubba. Ball."

Mitch grimaced and Carly didn't even bother to smother her grin as her nephew chugged forward. Mitch clearly hated the nickname—which is probably why Carly had practiced it with Rhett since she'd picked him up from day care.

"Evening, Mitch."

Mitch's lips flatlined and his attention returned to her. A breeze off the water lifted his glossy dark hair. "Where is Mrs. Duncan?"

"I gave her the day off."

His scowl deepened. "Carly, that wasn't your decision."

"Ball, bubba," Rhett said before hurling the red sphere.

Mitch caught it and tossed it back—gently, Carly was surprised to see. He fisted his hands by his sides. "I won't tolerate you interfering with the household staff."

"Why shouldn't the woman have time off?"

"She has scheduled days off."

"Sorry, but her younger sister didn't conveniently need emergency gallbladder surgery on Della's scheduled day off. Della wanted to be there and I thought she should. They need to spend time together while they can." Because you never knew

how much time you had left with a loved one.

The stiffness eased from his rigid face and shoulders. “Why didn’t you say her sister was ill?”

“You didn’t ask.” She transferred the fish and vegetables from the top rack of the grill to a platter, then covered it.

“What is that?”

“Our dinner. We’re eating outside. The weather is too gorgeous to be cooped up inside.”

“It’s eighty-five.”

“But the humidity is low for a change and there’s a great breeze blowing in off the water. Shed your jacket and you’ll be comfortable.” She set the platter in the center of the wrought-iron and glass table and pulled the shrimp cocktails from the cooler she’d tucked underneath.

She’d never known there were special bowls or forks to serve the appetizer. This morning when Mrs. Duncan had produced the stemless martini-ish glasses that rested inside crystal globes filled with ice, Carly had had to ask what they were. The special dishes were just one of the many contrasts between the Kincaid’s überreich world and her working-class ways. When she had shrimp cocktail, it came on a black plastic deli tray from the grocery store.

“Have a seat and help yourself.” She flicked a hand toward a chair.

Mitch laid the folded newspaper he carried beside the plate on the opposite side of the rectangular table from Rhett and hung

his suit coat over the back of his chair. "You cooked?"

"Yes. But don't worry. That's parsley on the squash and zucchini, not arsenic. There's wine if you want it."

Mitch lifted a dark eyebrow. "You're not drinking?"

She shook her head. "We're going running later."

He didn't open the bottle, but instead filled his and her water goblets from the insulated pitcher on the table.

She buckled Rhett into his high chair, wiped his hands and then served his diced grilled cheese sandwich. She added a spoonful of green peas and some of the grilled veggies so he could practice his fine motor skills.

Rhett attacked his food as if he hadn't eaten in a week.

Mitch eyed his half brother and then pulled out her chair, showing he did have some manners. "You shouldn't have waited."

She shrugged and sat. "Rhett only looks like he's starving. He had a snack two hours ago. And for him to get a sense of family, we should eat together whenever possible."

Mitch's expression closed like a slamming door.

"No matter how hectic things were when Marlene and I were growing up, my mother insisted on family dinners. It's a great way to unwind and catch up on what everyone else is doing."

Suspicion entered Mitch's eyes. "Carly—"

"Shut up and eat, Mitch, before the ice under your shrimp melts. Contrary to your high opinion of yourself, this is not a date."

Wincing, she reached for her napkin. So much for maintaining

peace. She'd just bonked him over the head with the olive branch she'd hoped to extend. But his distrustful glares really rubbed her the wrong way.

"I'm sorry. There's no excuse for me being rude. But it's just dinner. Della already had most of the meal prepared before her sister called. Cooking it was no big deal."

Mitch stared at her in silence as if weighing the truth of her words, and then he nodded and started on his shrimp. Carly dug into hers, savoring the citrus tang of Mrs. Duncan's marinade. She caught herself watching the absurdly sensual sight of Mitch's straight white teeth biting into the shrimp and his lips surrounding the meat.

Get a grip. Kincaid is not on tonight's or any other night's menu. Remember how he treated Marlene?

She polished off her appetizer and reached for the main course. Mitch followed suit, piling large helpings of fish and vegetables on his plate. He devoured his meal almost as ravenously as Rhett had, but with the perfect form of one who'd had etiquette lessons. She wondered who'd taught him the fine art of eating politely. One of his nannies?

"Did you eat lunch today?" she asked to break the silence.

"There wasn't time. Where are your parents now?"

She gave him points for making conversation. "Arizona. Dad needed the drier climate for his health."

"With all your talk of family, why don't you move out there with them?"

“I’ve thought about it. But my parents’ lives are filled with retirement community activities. I’d have to apply for a new license in a different state, and that could mean months without income. My parents can’t afford to support us, but they’d feel obligated to try. Add in that children aren’t allowed to stay overnight in their complex, and things get even more complicated.”

“Leave Rhett with me.”

She sighed and wiped her mouth. “Give it up, Mitch. That’s not going to happen.”

“It could. Say the word and you’re a free woman.”

She’d been footloose and fancy-free before and she hadn’t liked it. How could anyone expect her to go back to normal knowing she’d given up something precious? Twice.

“You act as if caring for Rhett is a burden. It isn’t.”

“You say that now, but give it time.”

“I’ll say the same thing next week, next year and ten years from now.”

He snorted a sound of disbelief, but she decided not to waste her breath arguing. Talk was cheap. He’d soon see by her actions that she meant what she said.

“You’re only twenty-eight. Aren’t your parents too young to retire?”

“Mom was forty and Dad forty-five when they adopted Marlene and me.” And because Carly had been adopted, she knew exactly what kinds of questions her baby girl would be

asking.

Silence returned, broken only by Rhett's babble and the chink of silverware.

"Does Mrs. Duncan need more than one day?"

Surprised, Carly searched Mitch's face. Good to know the rat bastard had a human side after all. "It would be nice if you'd call and offer it. I have her sister's phone number."

"I'll get someone from the temp agency in to cook our meals and oversee the remaining staff if Mrs. Duncan needs more time."

"Oh please. We're adults. We can feed ourselves. I know my way around the kitchen if you don't. And I think your staff can muddle through pushing a vacuum and making beds for a couple of days." His eyes narrowed to slits, pinning her like a butterfly on a collector's board. "What?"

"You intend to work all day and then come home and cook for me. Why?" Suspicion laced his voice.

"For us. And don't take it personally. I'm not after your heart via your stomach. Rhett and I have to eat, too. And I like to cook. I used to prepare all the meals for Marlene and me."

He looked ready to argue, but instead consumed the last bites of his swordfish. He sat back, still wearing the skeptical, guarded expression. "That was good."

"Thank you. And it's healthier than your usual dinners."

His eyebrows slammed down. So much for the truce. "Don't try to change me, Carly. Don't interfere in my life."

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” she denied and knew she fibbed. By the end of the year she’d have his bachelor lifestyle turned upside down. Priorities changed when a child entered the picture. He’d discover that sooner or later.

He studied her as if she were a puzzle he couldn’t figure out—and one he didn’t trust.

“Down. Ball,” Rhett demanded.

Mitch stood. “I’ll clear the table. You get the boy.”

Carly blinked. A man in Hugo Boss who wasn’t afraid to do dishes? Nice. Too bad she wasn’t looking. “Thanks, but he’d rather play with you.”

“No.” Swift. Harsh. Unequivocal. Mitch stacked their plates and strode into the house.

Carly stared after him. Mitch Kincaid was going to be a tough nut to crack—even harder than her most difficult client.

But just like she did with her more pigheaded patients, she would find a way to motivate him.

Carly Corbin was a sneaky, devious woman.

Mitch opened the tap in the sink to drown out the squeals of laughter penetrating the kitchen windows. Turning his back on the woman and child racing through the gardens, he bent to load the dishwasher.

Carly was determined to drag him somewhere he would never go again with her home-cooked meals and let’s-play-family games. He still had the scars from his last round of playing house. He wouldn’t give his heart to a child only to have it ripped out

when the mother—or in this case, the guardian—had a change of heart. Once he could guarantee Rhett wouldn't be leaving would be soon enough for Mitch to befriend him. Until then, he'd keep his distance.

Carly had clearly given the idea of moving across the country to be closer to her parents careful consideration. Unless she left the boy behind, that put the terms of the will and everything Mitch held dear in jeopardy.

He had to get custody of his father's little bastard.

Soon.

He closed the dishwasher and straightened. The stillness of the backyard grabbed his attention. He scanned the garden and spotted a splash of peach and Carly's bare legs sprawled on the lawn between the fountain and the koi pond.

Alarm flooded his veins with adrenaline. Had the boy fallen in? Dammit, he'd ordered the gardener to fence the shallow pond and pool, but the custom-made materials hadn't arrived yet.

Or had Carly hurt herself dashing across the grass with her hair and her dress streaming behind her.

Mitch slammed through the back door, leaped from the porch and sprinted past Poseidon and across the grass. He rounded the roses and jerked to a halt.

Rhett lay stretched out on his belly beside Carly with his dark head near hers. Her bare arm encircled the boy's waist.

"Orange. That one's orange," Carly said, pointing at the water.

"Orange. Big," the boy warbled.

“Yes, the orange fish is big. The white one is small.”

Mitch's heart jackhammered against his ribs and his lungs burned. Relief over finding them safe segued into awareness of Carly's long legs. Runner's legs. Lean, but muscled. Smooth and tanned. A charge of sexual awareness flooded him and that pissed him off. “What are you doing?”

The duo startled at his harsh tone. Keeping one hand on Rhett's waistband, Carly rolled to her side. “Looking at the fish.”

Barefooted and bare-legged, with apparently no concern for the grass clippings clinging to her dress, calves and feet, Carly attracted him far more than was safe. Despite her denials, he knew damned well she was out to hook him. The way her sister had his father. The way countless other women had tried to work their way into the Kincaid beds and coffers.

Sure, Carly was more subtle and she brought a unique angle to the table. She might deny the attraction, but he'd seen the interest in her eyes when she looked at him. Like now. With her sun-streaked hair pooling like silk on the grass, her chin tilted up to expose the long line of her neck and her gaze slowly climbing his body.

Oh yeah, she wanted him.

But even without her mercenary genetics, he couldn't get involved with her. He'd learned the hard way through both his and his father's affairs that running a business the size of KCL left no room for anything more than temporary liaisons. He'd forget to call, or miss a date, and then there would be hell to pay

from the neglected woman. Too much hassle.

He'd stick with women like him who were too committed to their careers to want more than physical satisfaction now and then. The women he called didn't expect romance. They expected hot, sweaty sex. And nothing more. But even that wasn't safe with Carly Corbin.

She rolled to her feet as graceful as a cat and brushed the grass fragments from her clothing. She missed the blade stuck in her hair. Mitch fisted his hands against the urge to reach for it. For her.

"Up. Up. Pig me up," Rhett demanded. Mitch ignored him.

Carly frowned at Mitch, shook her head and bent to lift the boy. Her top gaped as she did, revealing the curves of her breasts and the dusky hint of her nipples. She wasn't wearing a bra. Need kicked Mitch in the gut.

"Want to help me give Rhett his bath?" Carly asked as she straightened.

He forced his gaze from her chest to her face. "No."

But he wouldn't mind bathing Carly, cupping her flesh with soap-slick hands and sinking into her.

Not gonna happen.

He was not like his old man who'd never learned from his mistakes. Mitch thought with the head on his shoulders and not with the one in his pants.

A woman had made a fool of him once.

It wouldn't happen again.

No matter how much he wanted this one.

“Settle him, Carly,” Mitch muttered and struggled to ignore Rhett’s cries as he paced his room. “C’mon, settle the boy.”

Mitch’s heart hammered against his ribs and his nerves stretched tight. He didn’t want to get involved, but the noise from the blue suite continued to rise.

Where in the hell was Carly?

He yanked open his door and stalked down the hall. Her bedroom door stood open, but the room and bed were empty. Had she gone downstairs? Snuck out of the house for a date?

Bolted like he wanted her to?

At any other time he’d rejoice at the prospect, but not when he was alone in the house with the kid. He forced himself to turn and scan Rhett’s darkened room. The glow of the new night-light illuminated the unhappy, red-faced child.

Short arms extended toward Mitch. “Bubba.”

“It’s okay, kid. Go back to sleep.”

Rhett whimpered in response, ripping Mitch in two.

He strode into Carly’s room to check the status of her clothes. If they were here, she was coming back. Before he reached the closet another sound registered. Running water. The shower. Relief mingled with disappointment. She hadn’t left.

He crossed the plum carpet to the closed bathroom door and lifted his hand to pound on the panel and order her to get her ass out here and take care of the kid. An off-key voice belting out a country ballad stilled his fist and an image of Carly’s wet, bare

golden skin seized his mind and sent a jolt of arousal through him. The slam of his heart reverberated in his groin.

Down, boy. You can be attracted to any woman but her.

He looked over his shoulder and through the open door at the crying child. Which was the lesser of two evils?

Normally Mitch enjoyed naked women, especially wet naked women, but the genetically identical version of the Machiavellian bitch who'd screwed his father over with the oldest trick in the book was off-limits.

His life would be easier if his feelings for Carly were identical to his feelings for her twin. Marlene had left him cold and not just the day she'd calmly accepted cash to get rid of her baby as easily as she would lunch money. She'd never flipped his switch. She was a liar and a con artist who'd set out to nail herself a rich husband and pulled out all stops to achieve her goal. The boy was better off without Marlene Corbin in his life.

"Mama, Mama," Rhett wailed and Mitch winced. The kid already called Carly Mama. Would Rhett also be better off without Carly? Didn't matter. Carly Corbin's days as Rhett's guardian were numbered.

Being in the same room with Carly when she was undressed and living under his roof could open the door to all kinds of lawsuits and legal complications—if she was looking for a free ride, as he suspected. The last thing he wanted to do was give another Corbin grounds to extort more Kincaid money.

He backed away from the door, heading for the lesser of two

evils. The crying child.

Rhett's breath hitched when Mitch entered the room. The boy stood in his crib and held his arms out, opening and closing his tiny hands. "Pig me up."

Mitch fisted his hands by his sides. "Hey, buddy. Carly's in the shower. She'll be here in a few minutes."

The kid's face scrunched up and his bottom lip quivered. Fresh tears oozed from his big brown eyes. Eyes the same shape and color as Carly's. "Up. Up."

Mitch remained a yard from the crib. "You have a bad dream?"

The whimper turned into a cry. The boy grasped the railing and bounced. "Up. Up."

Letting the kid get close even once would be the beginning of nothing good. But he had no choice since Carly wasn't here doing the job she'd committed to do. He shouldn't have let her talk him out of the nanny.

Wishing he could avoid it, but knowing he couldn't, Mitch gritted his teeth and moved closer. Rhett immediately latched his arms around Mitch's neck, crushing Mitch's windpipe. Or maybe it was the memories choking him. He lifted the sturdy little body and automatically patted the diaper, checking for soggy overload. It felt dry.

The kid hiccupped and burrowed his wet face against Mitch's neck. Mitch awkwardly thumped the narrow little back, and when that didn't settle the boy, he crossed to the rocking chair

and sat. Toeing the rocker into motion, Mitch tried to remain detached, tried to shut down the memories. Memories of nights with a colicky child. But he couldn't. His chest tightened with each sway of the rocker.

Soothing nonsense poured from his lips as if it had only been yesterday when he'd performed this same task for another little boy.

A boy he'd planned to adopt and claim as his own.

Rhett felt like Travis, smelled like Travis, cuddled like Travis. Same weight. Same size. Same desperate need for a father's love.

Rhett quieted and grew heavy, telling Mitch he'd drifted back to sleep. But as reluctant as Mitch had been to pick up the boy, now he didn't want to let him go.

He'd missed this. And the only way to ensure he wouldn't have to let Rhett go was to get rid of Carly Corbin.

The sooner the better.

Carly halted outside Rhett's bedroom door and blinked.

As if it weren't shocking enough to find Mitch cradling Rhett and gently stroking his back, a quiet baritone filled the room. Humming? Mitch Kincaid *humming*?

The image didn't fit the arrogant executive she'd seen over the past week and a half.

Eyes closed and with a sad expression on his face, he rested his dark head against the back of the rocker. Rhett sagged on Mitch's bare chest with his head tucked beneath Mitch's jaw, clearly sound asleep.

Something inside Carly twisted at the sight of the big, strong man gently holding the small boy.

Why was Mitch here? Had he come in on other nights without her knowledge? Was his jerk act just that? An act? Which was the real Mitch Kincaid? The picture in front of her certainly didn't mesh with the description Marlene had provided of Everett's henchman or the emotionless robot Carly had seen so far.

Carly entered the room, and Mitch's eyes flew open.

"Is something wrong?" she whispered.

"He woke up crying. You didn't come." The accusatory tone raised her hackles.

He rose quickly and laid Rhett back in the crib. Carly pried her gaze off the bare, broad V of his back to note the care Mitch took not to jostle the child. He handled Rhett with experienced hands and tucked the blanket around him.

Interesting.

"I didn't hear him. I was showering off the stench of our evening run. I forgot to take the baby monitor into the bathroom with me."

When Mitch turned, the sight of his naked chest made her catch her breath. Oh yeah, he had a fine physique above the low waistband of his pants. Wide shoulders. Muscled arms. Washboard abs. Dark swirls of curls circled his flat nipples and painted a silky line down the center of his lean abdomen.

Dampening her suddenly dry lips, she hoped the lust

percolating through her didn't show on her face.

"Don't forget next time." His sandpaper voice sounded harsh in the quiet room. He brushed past her, heading toward the door.

"You've done this before."

Mitch stopped in the hallway and slowly turned. "I told you I knew how to handle kids."

"This is the first evidence I've seen of that. Do you have children of your own who live with their mother?"

"No."

"Then where did you get your experience?"

"Leave it, Carly."

She advanced on him in the dimly lit hall. "You expect me to trust you with Rhett. Tell me why I should."

A nerve in his jaw twitched. "I was engaged to a single parent once."

"What happened?"

"She went back to her famous ex-husband." His blank expression couldn't completely mask the pain in his eyes or the husky edge to his words.

"I'm sorry." Carly reached out and gave his forearm a comforting squeeze. His skin scorched her, but she couldn't seem to pull away.

Mitch's muscles shifted beneath her palm and his chest expanded on a long, slow inhalation. His gaze met hers and desire widened his pupils. The same hunger flooded her veins.

Carly gulped. This could so not happen. Not with *him*.

“What are you doing, Carly?”

Playing with fire, that's what. But she could only shake her head and lower her hand. Too late. Electricity arced between them unbroken.

The dark green gaze dropped from her eyes to her mouth. “Is this what you want?”

Mitch hooked an arm around her waist and yanked her forward. The thin cotton of her sleep shirt and robe weren't nearly enough protection from his searing flesh. Her torso fused to his.

Mitch took her mouth roughly, the initial contact slamming his teeth against hers. She squeaked a protest, but he didn't release her. He merely changed the angle of the kiss.

Every cell in her body screamed with alarm. With arousal.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Mitch Kincaid had hurt and insulted her sister. Carly didn't even like him. How could she when he made no secret of his desire to dump her and keep Rhett locked up like a dog in quarantine?

She had every intention of shoving him away when she dug her fingers into his arm and pressed her free hand against his waist. But the moment his bare, supple skin melded to her palm her body seemed to come up with a different plan. It burned and ached and *needed*, reminding her that she hadn't been with a man in a while. And even then, making love with Sam hadn't felt like this—like a swarm of fireflies taking flight, flickering and sparking nerve endings that had previously lain dormant.

Mitch's lips parted and his tongue traced the outline of

her mouth, caressing, stroking. She gasped, and he swept the inside of her bottom lip, tempting her against her will into settling against him and relaxing her jaw. Their tongues touched, intertwined.

She shouldn't be kissing him back. But his flavor filled her mouth and his musky scent invaded her lungs. Dizziness rocked her. She grappled for steady ground.

One hand mapped an upward path along his bicep to grasp his shoulder. The other spread over his back. Hard muscles flexed beneath his smooth skin.

Mitch's big hands raked her back, her waist. He cupped her buttocks and pressed her against his thickening flesh. Her internal muscles clenched and wept in appreciation of the length pressing her belly. A moan snaked up her throat.

He shoved her robe from her shoulders. It snagged at her waist. His frustrated growl filled her mouth. A quick tug and the belt gave way. Her robe parted. His hot hands found her waist through the thin fabric and raked upward. He traced the underside of her breasts with his thumbs and the air thinned.

She ought to protest, but she couldn't seem to put the words together. She could barely think. All she could do was feel. His heat. His strength. His ravenous mouth. Lust, unlike anything she'd experienced before, rose within her. Her short nails dug into firm tissue and held on.

He palmed her breast and unerringly found her nipple, stroked it, then rolled it between his fingers. A lightning storm of desire

shot straight to her core, melting her, making her heart race and her thighs quiver.

A snuffle from the crib penetrated her sensual high and shocked her back to awareness of where she was and with whom.

She ripped herself out of Mitch's arms. Gasping for air, she backed away, righted her clothing and cinched her robe around her waist like a tourniquet.

How could she be turned on by Mitch Kincaid? She knew too much about him. None of it good.

She swiped the back of her hand across her damp and still tingling lips. "That shouldn't have happened."

Mitch's nostrils flared on a sharply indrawn breath. The passion in his eyes turned to frost and his mouth twisted in derision. "Oh, c'mon, Carly. Don't act like it wasn't your plan to soften me with dinner and a sexy sundress. Screwing me is only the next step on your agenda."

"What agenda?" She had one. But it had nothing to do with sex.

"Did you and your sister have a contest going to see who could land the richest sugar daddy?"

Shock and fury and grief ripped through Carly like an explosion. She dug her nails into her palms to keep from slapping his face. "I was engaged, you moron, to an intern with student loans to rival the national debt. Not a sugar daddy. And don't blame that kiss on me. I've done nothing to attract your attention."

“Haven’t you? What would you call the curve-hugging clothes, the braless sundress and the hypnotic walk?”

She had a hypnotic walk? “I don’t dress suggestively.”

“Give me a break. You have a damned good body and you display it like a trophy. Men probably fall at your feet.”

Flattering, in an insulting kind of way. But wrong. “Are you deluded?”

“Not deluded enough to fall into your trap. Cast your line somewhere else. Because you’re not landing this Kincaid.” He stalked toward the stairs.

“If I landed you, Kincaid, I’d throw you back or use you for shark bait. Go to hell, you conceited jerk.”

“I’ve already been there,” Mitch growled to the empty foyer. “And you’re not taking me back.”

He strode down the hall, heading straight to the book-lined study—formerly his father’s, but now Mitch’s domain. He dragged his father’s old Rolodex out of the drawer and flipped through the cards until he found the one he needed. The cool leather chair against his back did nothing to soothe his overheated skin as he punched out the cell phone number.

“Lewis Investigations,” a man’s voice answered on the second ring despite the late hour.

“Frank, this is Mitch Kincaid.”

“Sorry to hear about your father, Mitch. Everett and I went way back.”

“That’s why I know I can trust you with this job.” He briefly

summarized the situation, and then said, "I need you to dig up dirt on Carly Corbin. I want anything that could discredit her or prove her an unfit guardian. And I need it yesterday."

The P.I. laughed. "You're definitely Everett's son. I'll get right on it. Any chance you can get me a set of fingerprints?"

He remembered the dinner dishes. "I'll get them tonight and have them couriered to you first thing tomorrow. While you're checking into Carly I want you to look into her sister, too."

"Anything in particular I'm looking for?"

"I want to know what Marlene Corbin did with the hundred grand we paid her. And I want you to see what you can find out about the hit-and-run that killed her three months ago. The police have moved the investigation to the back burner."

Mitch's fingers tightened around the receiver. He had to know the truth, and his father had sworn Frank Lewis was the soul of discretion.

"I need to know if my father was involved in her death."

Four

The rat bastard could kiss.

Carly did *not* want to know that.

She increased her speed, trying to outrun her disturbing thoughts and banish the grogginess left over from a restless night. Rhett cackled in his stroller ahead of her, loving the faster pace and the wind in his face. He pounded the squeaky horn on his toy steering wheel, shattering the stillness of the morning.

Rebound romance.

That's the only way she could explain her reaction to Kincaid's kisses. It had been three months since Sam had dumped her. When he'd learned Carly had been appointed as Rhett's guardian, her fiancé had claimed he wasn't ready for an instant family, and he'd added that he didn't want to raise someone else's brat anyway. Sam had given Carly an ultimatum, him or Rhett.

After the brat comment Carly hadn't had a choice. She couldn't love a man who refused to even try to bond with a child simply because he hadn't genetically contributed to its DNA or one who'd ask her to make that kind of sacrifice a second time. Although to his credit, Sam hadn't known about the daughter she'd given up for adoption at sixteen. She hadn't told him for fear he'd find that decision as unforgivable as her college boyfriend had.

She'd chosen her nephew over fiancé and that had been the end of her engagement. And her sex life.

Okay, so chalk up last night's fiasco to neglected hormones. But still...it was one thing to acknowledge Mitch Kincaid was good-looking and sexy. It was another to have locked lips with him and thought even for one second about jumping his bones.

But she had.

And that's why she'd taken the coward's way out this morning and gone for an early run rather than face the rat ba—Mitch—over breakfast. She couldn't look in his eyes and know he'd made her as antsy as a dog in heat. Not until she had her hormones locked back in their kennel.

Maybe she should go out on one of those dates Mitch had mentioned. She weighed the idea and discarded it. Sex with some guy she picked up in a bar or with one of the blind dates her coworker seemed determined to arrange for her just didn't appeal. She preferred a steady, monogamous relationship with her sex. And love. Or at least exceptionally strong and optimistic like.

The distant scruff of footsteps behind her pulled her out of her funk. Safety wasn't an issue here since the gated community had only one entrance, but company on her run would be surprising. She glanced over her shoulder, but a curve in the road and a lush oleander hedge blocked her view. Funny how many of the mansions were surrounded by the toxic plant. She made a point to keep Rhett's curious fingers out of reach.

If there was one thing she could count on in this very exclusive section of Miami, it was the solitude she needed to get her head together. Rich folks, she'd learned since moving into Kincaid Manor, stayed behind their tall fences. They didn't jog or stroll through the meandering, tree-and shrub-lined streets. The pricey peninsula couldn't be more different from her friendly neighborhood of culs-de-sac and block parties. She knew all of her neighbors.

She jogged in place at a hand-carved wooden Stop sign and waited for a banana-yellow Lamborghini to pass. She waved a greeting, but couldn't see through the darkly tinted windows whether or not the occupant waved back.

The nearing footsteps told her the other runner was gaining on her. She glanced back again. *Mitch*. A nearly naked Mitch. Her heart rate shot up.

He wore skimpy running shorts and shoes. Nothing else. And the view of his torso in the bright sunlight was a hundred times better than it had been in Rhett's shadowy room last night. A fitness model would envy that body, those legs, those abs, and oh, mama, those mile-wide shoulders. There wasn't an ounce of surplus fat on him. Corded muscles wrapped in tight, tanned, glistening skin, bunched and flexed with each long stride and pump of his arms as he closed the distance between them and drew up alongside her.

If not for her tight grip on the stroller handle, Carly would have fallen flat on her face—after tripping over her tongue.

“Good morning, Carly.” Like her, he jogged in place. Unlike her, he wasn't winded. Or drooling. His gaze raked over her, lingering on her breasts encased in a sports bra tank before traveling to her shorts and her legs.

So much for avoiding him for a few days. She hoped he'd attribute the heat in her face to exertion and not lust—which had hit her like a hurricane the second she spotted him. His kisses had been that good.

“Morning, Mitch.” Carly snapped her attention back to the road and resumed her run. He kept pace beside her.

“Don't let us keep you.” *Not exactly subtle, Carly.*

“I've decided to join you and the kid when you run.”

Why did she doubt it was for the pleasure of their company?
“His name is Rhett.”

“Bubba, bubba, bubba,” Rhett singsonged.

Mitch shot ahead and turned. Jogging backward, he said,
“Mitch. Not bubba. *Mitch*.”

“Mitt. Mitt. Mitt.”

“Close enough.” Mitch nodded and fell back in line beside her.

They covered a block in silence broken only by the slap of their shoes and the bleats of Rhett’s horn. “Did your sister leave a will?”

Carly’s steps faltered. “Yes. Why?”

“I’d like to see it.”

“I repeat, why?”

“Because anything that concerns Rhett concerns me. I am, after all, his brother. You’re only his aunt.”

Worry twisted her stomach. The attorney had promised the hastily scribbled will was valid. But he was a small-time attorney and not one of the high-profile types the Kincaids probably kept on retainer. “Half brother. Marlene’s will was handwritten, but notarized and completely legal.”

“Then you have no reason not to share it.”

She couldn’t stop him from getting a copy. Cooperating would probably be for the best. “I’ll tell my lawyer you want a copy.”

“I’d prefer to see the original.”

Her nerves snarled tighter. “Why?”

“To make sure the document is valid.”

He was going to challenge her right to Rhett. It was all she could do to keep putting one foot in front of the other. "It is."

"Find a renter for your house yet?" he asked before she could get past her panic.

"No."

"Are you comfortable leaving it vacant?"

If his goal was to ruin her run, he'd succeeded. "My neighbors will keep an eye on it for me."

"You trust them that much?"

"I do."

"You might want to consider a security system."

"I can't afford one."

"You could. Just say the word."

"If I moved back home, I wouldn't need a security system."

Carly usually ran farther, but she couldn't stomach more of Mitch's company this morning. She took a sharp right at the intersection without warning and headed back toward the manor.

Mitch's steps echoed hers, and he tracked her back toward the house. "Running from something, Carly?"

Yes. You. She glanced at him. "I need to go into work early this morning."

A lone dark eyebrow hiked as if he recognized the lie for what it was. But she didn't care. Mitch wasn't interested in his half brother's well-being. All he cared about was the billions of bucks Rhett represented.

Carly needed to call her attorney and find out if Mitch had

any chance at all of stealing her precious nephew. If he did, then renting her house wasn't going to be an issue, because she'd have to sell it and use the equity to pay the legal fees.

Mitch Kincaid seemed determined to screw up hers and Rhett's lives. And Carly was just as determined to stop him.

No matter what the cost.

"Fax coming through," Frank Lewis's voice said through the cell phone line. "You're not going to like it."

Mitch tossed his keys into the porcelain bowl on the credenza. "Why?"

"Because Carlene Corbin is squeaky-clean."

"Nobody's that clean. How far back did you go?"

"Eighteen. Want me to look further? Check for a juvenile record?"

"Yes."

"It'll take some time to crack sealed records."

"I'll wait. What about the other matter?"

"I used my connections to get what the police had on the sister's accident. Nothing of interest so far. No flags on your father."

Mitch exhaled in relief. "Good. Keep looking."

"Everett wasn't Mafia, Mitch."

Mitch entered the study and closed the door. As predicted, the fax machine spewed pages. "No, but we both know you didn't cross him. Marlene Corbin backed Dad into a corner. He would have come out swinging. And he wouldn't plan to lose the fight."

"I hear you. I'm on it. Read the fax. Give me a call if anything rings your chimes."

"Will do. Thanks, Frank." He disconnected, retrieved the report and scanned the pages, noting Carly's University of Florida, Gainesville, education, her steady work history and her broken engagement. Something niggled at him as he settled in his leather desk chair. He reread until he nailed the odd part.

She'd graduated from high school at nineteen when many kids did so at seventeen or eighteen. That wasn't too unusual. Had she missed the age cutoff for entering school? Repeated a grade? He double-checked her birth date. July 9. She hadn't missed the age cutoff. Probably nothing, but he'd get Frank on it.

She'd had a long-term relationship with one man in college, and she'd been engaged until recently to another. What had happened to the college boyfriend and the ex-fiancé?

A knock on the door yanked him away from those intriguing questions. He opened a drawer and shoved the fax inside. "Yes?"

The knob turned and the oak panel opened. Carly filled the gap. She had Rhett on her hip and judging by her purple tracksuit had just returned from work.

"Mitt," the kid screamed and beamed and waved.

A stab of something, probably a hunger pain, jabbed Mitch in the midsection. He jerked a nod. "Hi, kid."

Carly stepped into the study. "Della needed another day. I can have dinner ready in about an hour. Will that work for you?"

"That makes three days off."

“Get over yourself, Kincaid. She’s trying to take care of her sister, not going out of her way to inconvenience you. And I told her to take as long as she needed.”

He gritted his teeth over Carly interfering with household matters. *Keep your eye on the goal. Get the kid. Get rid of the aunt.* “We’ll go out to dinner.”

Refusal tightened Carly’s features and stung Mitch’s pride. Women didn’t turn down his invitations. “I just picked up Rhett from day care. Lucy said he was teething and cranky today. I’m not going to leave him with a sitter.”

“We’ll take him with us.”

Carly’s brown eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You want to eat out with Mr. Messy even knowing he’s likely to be fussy?”

He’d rather have a vasectomy without anesthetic. “We have to eat, Carly. And you’ve worked all day. You shouldn’t have to cook.”

Most women would fall all over themselves to be accommodating. Carly deliberated for nearly sixty seconds, and the lack of enthusiasm on her face wasn’t flattering.

“Give me ten minutes. And don’t make reservations for some swanky place. Make sure it’s family-friendly. Rhett will need a high chair.” She left, closing the door behind her.

Mitch steepled his fingers and tapped his chin. Earlier today his lawyer had informed him Marlene’s will was airtight. Not only had the document been written in her handwriting, the writing of the one-line testament had been witnessed by two bank

employees who knew her well.

I leave everything I hold dear, my possessions, my assets and my beloved son, Rhett, to my sister, Carlene Leah Corbin, because she'll be a better mother to my son than even I could be.

In an overkill move, Marlene had had the thing notarized. Had she taken such drastic moves because she'd feared Everett's rage?

Mitch had never seen his father as livid as he'd been that day in late January when Marlene Corbin had brought her eight-month-old son to the house to meet his daddy. Everett's fury hadn't abated during the month of February while they'd awaited the DNA test results. And then on the first of March Marlene was dead. His father's only comment, "Good riddance," had been heartfelt.

Had his father stooped to murder? Mitch shrugged to ease the knot of tension cramping between his shoulder blades. He'd know soon enough. And then he'd deal with it.

But for now, contesting Marlene's will was out.

He retrieved the fax and resumed reading, but found nothing else of value. True to her word, Carly returned ten minutes later. She'd changed into a short white denim skirt that displayed the length of her legs and a sleeveless wraparound red knit top that clung to her breasts and narrow waist.

She looked good. Good enough to momentarily distract him from his plan. Forcing his head back into the game, Mitch rose and escorted her outside. She headed for her car, he for his.

She stopped in the driveway. "The car seat's in my car."

He eyed the minivan without anticipation and held out his hand for her keys. "I'll drive."

"My car? I don't think so." She turned away and leaned into the backseat to strap the boy in.

Mitch's eyes zeroed in on the curve of her butt, and he almost said to hell with dinner. He didn't like being attracted to his unwanted houseguest. But eating alone wouldn't get him anywhere. After the way she'd kissed him two nights ago, he needed to get her out of the picture. Fast. Or he'd end up no better than his father. Hooked by a Corbin.

Biting back his objections, he pried his gaze from her rear end, rounded the hood and climbed into the front passenger seat. It had been seven days since she'd moved in. He'd expected to see some sign of discontent by now. When would the craving for her single lifestyle kick in? When would she start feeling tied down by her sister's kid?

Waiting for Carly to grow tired of caring for the boy was moving too slowly. He needed faster results.

She settled in the driver's seat, buckled up and turned the key. Mitch checked her ring finger and noted a faint pale indentation he hadn't noticed before. He waited until she'd cleared the guardhouse before asking, "What happened to your engagement?"

Carly braked a little too hard at the stoplight, jolting him forward. He braced a hand on the dash. "It ended. Where are we going?"

“Head toward the bay side of South Beach. Why did your engagement end?”

She shot him a guarded glance. “Sam wasn’t ready for a family.”

And she came with one. Unless she dumped the kid. “That’s a circumstance easily remedied, Carly.”

Her fingers strangled the steering wheel and her glare made it clear she’d rather wrap them around his neck. The light turned green and she punched the gas. “Oh for pity’s sake. Would you get off that horse? I’m not giving up Rhett.”

“You must have loved Sam. You were engaged for two years.”

Her throat worked as she swallowed. She kept her eyes straight ahead. “I’m not going to ask how you know that. But, yes, I did. I stopped the day he asked me to walk away from Rhett.”

Mitch bit back a curse as another avenue closed. But when faced with a roadblock, he’d learned to search for an alternate route.

If Carly was as squeaky-clean as the P.I. reported, then he’d have to find another way to get custody of the boy. But how could he win her over? How could he gain her trust?

Seduction? The idea shot across his mind like a comet.

He weighed the possibility, and his pulse quickened and his palms tingled the way they did whenever he had a winning plan.

Could he deliberately seduce Carly and win her trust, then stab her in the back by taking the kid?

Guilt punched him a time or two, but he ignored it. It would

be nothing more than doing to Carly what her sister had done to his father. Marlene had set up his father, then taken something from him.

Mitch had to carry out his father's last wishes or lose his and his siblings' inheritance. If that meant he had to blur the lines of decency, then so be it. The boy would be well cared for, and no one would be hurt in the long run.

The kiss had proved he and Carly were physically compatible. He studied the curve of her breasts, her narrow waist and the length of her toned legs, and arousal buzzed through his veins.

Sharing her bed wouldn't be a hardship. But how far would he have to go?

As far as it takes.

He'd even marry her if he had to and adopt the child. When the marriage ended, he'd have custody of the kid and Carly would have a healthy bank account.

A win-win situation.

* * *

"He looks just like you, Mitch, except he has Carly's eyes."

Carly opened her mouth to correct the woman Mitch had introduced as a member of his yacht club, but Mitch cut her off.

"Rhett definitely has his mother's eyes."

"Don't tell me Miami's most eligible bachelor is finally going to settle down?" the anorexic, overly tanned, forty-something blonde asked.

Mitch gave her an enigmatic smile and a slight shrug.

Carly wanted to kick him under the table. What was he trying to pull?

To Carly she said, “Kudos, my dear. You have accomplished a miracle.”

Carly stiffened at the implication that she’d landed Mitch. Or that she’d even want to. “I—”

“Thanks for stopping by, Sandra,” Mitch interrupted. “Tell William I said hello.”

“I will. And again, I am sorry about Everett. It’s great seeing you, Mitch, and meeting you and your adorable little one, Carly. Ta ta.” The skinny body slinked away.

Ta ta? Who said *ta ta* these days? But Carly had bigger fish to fry. “What on earth were you thinking? You let her believe Rhett was yours. And mine.”

The idea of having Mitch’s baby made her stomach churn.

Mitch glanced at Rhett, who had almost finished smearing and eating his dinner. “You said the kid had a short attention span. Do you really want to waste time explaining this convoluted mess my father and your sister left behind when we could be finishing our meal before he has the meltdown you predicted?”

“No. But—”

“Forget it, Carly. Sandra isn’t worth the worry.”

“But you lied.”

“Replay every word I said. I never lied. She assumed. I didn’t correct her, nor did I confirm her speculations. Give it a rest. The media frenzy my father’s death created is just beginning to die

down. I'd rather not jump-start it with the kind of scandal his illegitimate child will create. That'll happen soon enough."

Media frenzy. She suppressed a shudder.

She hated that Mitch was right almost as much as she hated that he'd chosen the perfect restaurant and been completely charming and polite throughout the meal. He'd even smiled at Rhett a couple of times.

But he'd been nothing but distrustful and acerbic before tonight, and that made her wary. "Why the chameleon act?"

A dark eyebrow lifted. "I beg your pardon?"

"Why are you being nice?"

"You've stated your case. You're not going to give up the boy—Rhett. That means we will be sharing a roof for the next fifty-plus weeks. No reason why we can't do so amicably."

"I stated my case the day we met. Nothing's changed."

"I thought you'd change your mind. Now I realize you won't. We'll make the best of our alliance." He wiped his mouth and laid his napkin beside his plate. "Would you care for dessert?"

She blinked at the sudden switch in topic. An inkling of suspicion wiggled like an earthworm inside her. Leopards didn't change their spots. Or so the cliché said. And clichés were clichés for a reason. They were usually true.

Mitch had to be up to something. The question was what?

But even more worrisome, Carly had actually enjoyed Mitch's company tonight. She'd better watch herself, because he was still the same rat bastard who'd hurt her sister and had recently

threatened Carly's custody of Rhett.

Letting her guard down around Mitch Kincaid wouldn't be a smart move.

Five

Wooing a woman he didn't like but wanted to sleep with was a unique experience for Mitch.

Carly was too smart to fall for the usual bought-without-a-thought generic bouquet or jewelry trinket. Lucky for him, his personal assistant, Marie, knew where to find the right ammo.

Mitch rounded the house with Carlos, the Kincaid Manor groundskeeper, and two large potted plants on hand trucks. Carly looked up from Rhett on his new riding toy. She said something and the kid looked Mitch's way, then abandoned his wheels to scamper over.

The huge grin on the boy's face hit Mitch in the solar plexus with memories of other grins, other kids who'd been happy to see him back in the days when he used to rush home from KCL in time for dinner instead of working until the cleaning crew ran him out of his office. Kids who'd moved from Miami to Los Angeles and out of reach when their father had been traded to a west coast basketball team.

"What's up, little man?" He released the hand truck and extended a hand for a high five, but Rhett bypassed it and twined himself around Mitch's pant leg and stuck like a thorny vine.

Carly followed at a slower pace. Today's tracksuit matched the blue sky above. She'd shed the jacket, and her white tank

top hugged the curve of her breasts. Her hair had been released from its usual ponytail to drape her bare shoulders, and a breeze lifted the strands away from her face. How had he never noticed that she didn't wear earrings? Her lobes weren't even pierced, and he found the naked, virgin flesh unusually alluring. Did he even know another woman who didn't have at least one hole in each ear?

Carly nodded to Carlos as she joined them. "What are those?"

"Bud-something. To attract hummingbirds." Odd how tight his throat was this afternoon. He patted the head bumping his thigh.

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