

# HIS BABY AGENDA

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Katherine Garbera



*Desire*<sup>TM</sup>

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**His Baby Agenda**

«HarperCollins»

## **Garbera K.**

His Baby Agenda / K. Garbera — «HarperCollins»,

A nanny. A single father. A love stronger than revenge? Only from USA TODAY bestselling author Katherine Garbera! Ten years ago, someone framed him for murder. Kingsley Buchanan lost everything, including Gabriella de la Cruz. Now the billionaire is back to settle old scores. But he must protect his child. Kingsley needs Gabi—as a nanny for his son. But Gabi is no longer a naive girl. She's a businesswoman with needs of her own. The only thing that hasn't changed: her hunger for Kingsley. But Gabi won't risk her heart on a man she can't trust—unless she can convince him that love is more powerful than revenge...

**“Things are never going to be strictly business between us, Gabi.**

The past is always going to be there along with that one question.”

*Don't ask.*

*Don't do it.*

“What question?”

Kingsley leaned in even closer, and she had to fight the urge to bolt away from him. But she wouldn't let him know he was getting to her. She had to stand firm. He was just a man.

No.

He was more than a man. He was her own personal demon. One that she hadn't exorcised because she'd never been able to see him as anything other than a hot fantasy. They'd barely dated before they'd slept together, and then everything had fallen apart.

She couldn't let him continue to dominate every moment they had together.

“If that one night together was a fluke,” he said.

He leaned in closer. So close that she'd barely have to incline her head for their lips to brush.

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**His Baby Agenda** is part of Mills & Boon Desire's No. 1 bestselling series, Billionaires and Babies: Powerful men ... wrapped around their babies' little fingers

His Baby Agenda

Katherine Garbera



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USA TODAY bestselling author **KATHERINE GARBERA** is a two-time MAGGIE® Award winner who has written more than seventy books. A Florida native who grew up to travel the globe, Katherine now makes her home in the Midlands of the UK with her husband, two children and a very spoiled miniature dachshund. Visit Katherine on the web at [www.katherinegarbera.com](http://www.katherinegarbera.com), or catch up with her on Facebook and Twitter.

This book is dedicated to Courtney and Lucas. No mother could be prouder of her children than I am of you.

Thank you to my wonderful editor, Charles, for his insights and knowing the right questions to ask in order to make my manuscripts better. Thank you also to my dear friend Eve Gaddy, who is always available to chat about my plot when I run into problems.

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[One](#)

The intercom buzzed and Gabriella de la Cruz put down her cup of tea to pick up the phone. “Yes, Melissa?”

“There is someone here to see you,” her assistant said. To Gabi’s ears Melissa sounded excited, the way she’d been that time she’d won five hundred dollars on a scratch-off lottery card. She could only guess that another one of the celebrities Melissa was always cyberstalking had dropped by looking for a nanny.

Gabi had started her nanny service seven years ago after a very successful run as a live-in nanny for the Hollywood director Malcolm Jeffers. Mal and his wife had sung Gabi’s praises and suggested she start her own business when their kids were old enough to no longer need a nanny.

“I have an appointment in thirty minutes,” Gabi said. “Can you ask them to come back?”

“I think you’ll want to see him,” Melissa said.

Doubtful. She was busy; it seemed as though everyone wanted something from her at this time of year. Her parents wanted her to make more time for them and come over to their place this weekend. Her clients were anxious about summer and instead of dealing with the nannies who worked in their homes year-round, they were calling her about activities, vacations and travel documents. Her clientele couldn’t just nip down to Disneyland or Legoland for the weekend. They all wanted to go someplace exotic, which was a big headache.

“Who is it?” she asked at last. Melissa wasn’t going to just tell him to go away. And Gabi needed to get back to writing the column she was working on for a national parenting magazine.

“It’s Kingsley Buchanan. The former NFL quarterback, agent to the best athletes in the world.” Kingsley.

Of course when she was having a bad day he’d have to walk back into her life. Heck, even just his name sent a shiver through her. She wanted to pretend it was one of dread, but her pulse had picked up and she’d sat up a little straighter.

“I don’t have the time,” she said, hanging up the phone.

Let’s face it; she didn’t owe him more than that. He’d been her first lover—well, one-night stand might be more accurate given that he’d left her in the morning and been arrested before lunch. She’d only been alone with him one time after that. An ill-fated jailhouse visit when he’d told her she’d been naive to think there was more between them than what she’d gotten.

Idiot.

She wasn’t sure if she meant him or herself.

Why was he here?

Why did she care?

She reached up to push her hair behind her ear and then pulled her laptop closer, staring at the screen and pretending she was reading the email her mother had sent about the first communion of her cousin Guillermo’s daughter in Spain this summer. But she wasn’t.

Why was Kingsley here?

Her door opened without a knock and she glanced up to see broad shoulders filling the doorway. She caught her breath. Of course she'd seen him on television in the past ten years—just occasionally—before she quickly changed the channel. But damn, time had been good to him.

His thick dark brown hair, longer on the top, was artfully styled; it must have had some sort of product in it to keep it in place. His eyes were still blue, but in her mind they seemed icier than they had been in college. His jaw was hard, square and stubbornly set, his beard neatly trimmed.

“Can I help you?”

“That’s why I’m here,” he said, walking into the room as if he owned it, closing the door behind him.

“I believe I asked Melissa to schedule you an appointment for later in the week. I’m booked solid.”

“Surely you can make time for an old friend,” he said.

But there was nothing friendly in his manner as he walked over to her desk and perched his hip on the edge of it. He did casual the way a tiger hunting its prey did it. She tried to convince herself she bore no resemblance to a mouse as she looked up at him.

Take control.

That was what she'd learned after years of dealing with recalcitrant parents and children.

She stood up and held her hand out to him. Time to put this on a business footing. She'd shake his hand and walk him back to the door and then gently tell him goodbye.

Solid plan.

She was a genius.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Kingsley. But I’m afraid I really don’t have time this morning.”

He took her hand in his but didn’t shake it. He held it loosely, stroking his thumb over her knuckles and making goose bumps spread up her arm. His amused look as she pulled her hand free made her want to do something to jar him.

But she wasn’t young and impulsive. He’d been the one to show her that being impetuous was the path to disaster. She stepped away from him.

“Why are you here?” she asked at last. “I think we’ve said all that needed to be said.”

“I’m looking for a nanny,” he said.

“I’m afraid my business only caters to real children, not those stuck in men’s bodies.”

He gave a bark of laughter and shook his head. “I’d forgotten that there was always a little edge to you.”

He had no idea.

“You don’t know me,” she said carefully. “And really, I can see we have nothing further to discuss, so if you wouldn’t mind leaving.”

“But I would mind,” he said. “I’m not one of your naughty clients who you can firmly control with your calm tones.”

She tipped her head to the side to study him. How did he know about her techniques? She'd written those very words last month in her column. Why was he here?

“For the last time, Kingsley, why are you here?”

“I told you, Gabriella, I need you.”

The way he said her name, letting it roll off his tongue as his tone deepened, weakened her resolve to get him out of her office quickly. And he'd said he needed her...the words she'd been waiting ten years to hear.

“Too bad. I don’t want to give the impression of being a clingy woman who doesn’t know when a lover has had enough.”

\* \* \*

Kingsley had known coming back to California would be difficult, but he'd never shied away from obstacles. Experience had taught him that anything that didn't kill him made him stronger. He knew it was a cliché, but a decade ago he'd spent a rough six months being treated as a murderer before being cleared of charges. Rumors had swirled that his father had bought off the grand jury, but in the end there was no evidence and they'd had to let both him and the other suspect—his best friend, Hunter Carruthers—go. But that reputation had followed him into the NFL and he'd always been considered dangerous by his teammates and a publicity liability by his coaches and managers.

Over the years he'd learned to bury his emotions, beneath a layer of ice so that no one could rattle him. But all that seemed to be out the window now that he was in the same room as Gabi de la Cruz once again.

She'd grown into her beauty. Her caramel-colored hair was thick and long, falling past her shoulders in smooth waves. Her eyes were still deep brown, but instead of revealing every emotion she felt, they were cautious. She watched him warily—something he knew he deserved—as if he were about to pounce on her.

He'd be lying if he said she didn't still turn him on.

She'd always been different from other women, which was why he'd been quick to distance himself from her after Stacia Krushnik had been found dead. But that was the past. A past that really didn't concern Gabi, thanks to the heartless way he'd sent her from his life. He was back in California for revenge and he needed someone to keep his son protected from the shit storm that he suspected he and Hunter Carruthers were about to unleash.

"I'm not here for a lover, Gabi. I'm here because I need a nanny for my son."

"Your son?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. He'd followed her through the years via newspaper articles and online social media; it was a hit to his ego that she hadn't done the same. "Conner is three and desperately in need of a nanny."

He'd confused her.

Good. Finally, he felt as though the advantage was swinging back toward him.

She brushed past him; the subtle scent of her flowery perfume surrounded him as she sat down behind her desk. She reached for a piece of monogrammed paper and drew it toward her.

"Conner is three?" she asked. "What kind of nanny are you looking for?"

"You. I have spoken to Mal and he said you were the best. And I've read your parenting articles—I like your theories on child rearing."

"Thank you," she said, bowing her head slightly. "Why don't you have a seat while we discuss this?"

"I'm comfortable here," he said.

She gave him a tight smile. He bit the inside of his mouth to keep from smiling back. He was unnerving her. He liked it.

"Will your wife be part of the interview process for the nanny?" Gabi asked.

"She's dead."

"Oh," she said, looking up at him. "I'm sorry, Kingsley."

"It's okay," he said. "Conner doesn't remember her at all. It happened when he was six months old."

"What have you been doing for child care up to now?" she asked.

He'd been using his assistant, Peri, but she'd gotten married last month and was retiring. "My assistant. How soon can you start?"

"I can't."

"What?"

"I don't nanny anymore. I have a couple of nannies that are coming off assignments in the next week or so. I can set up some interviews for you, and I'd like to meet your son myself. Where is he?"

“With Hunter,” Kingsley said. Hunter and he had been a great duo on the field in college, and after Stacia’s death, Hunter had stopped playing football, being the second son of a privileged family. Hunter hadn’t needed to work, so he had spent the past few years building his reputation as a playboy. Plus the stigma of being charged with the “Frat House Murder” hadn’t helped.

“Um...we need to talk about that. He’s got a wild reputation. I can’t place one of my nannies in your home if he’s going to be there.”

“He won’t be a problem,” Kingsley said. “I don’t want one of your nannies. I want you, Gabi.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not in the field anymore.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” he said. If there was one thing he’d learned from his father, Jeb Buchanan, it was that everyone had a price. Many people believed his father had bought Kingsley’s freedom and the silence of witnesses. But Jeb had a strong sense of justice and no one, not even his wayward younger son, could escape that. His father still wasn’t convinced that Kingsley was innocent in Stacia’s death.

But after Kingsley was done with his revenge, there would be no doubt as to who was responsible for her death.

“I can’t be bought.”

“No? What if I offered to fund the new playground you have been trying to get built?” he asked.

Gabi wouldn’t do it for herself, but he remembered her soft heart and how she’d do anything for a good cause. He wondered if that had changed.

She chewed her lower lip and looked down at the paper in front of her.

It hadn’t.

His gut was still right on the money when it came to this woman.

“We are talking a six-figure sum, Kingsley. Is my being a nanny to Conner worth that much?”

It was. He needed her to watch over his son and he needed her recollections of that party the night Stacia had died. Once he had her living under his roof, he’d be able to get the answers he needed.

There were certain parts of the night that didn’t add up. And everyone he and Hunter had spoken to had a different version of the events. So whether it took six figures or nine, it didn’t matter. He needed to put the ghosts of the past to rest. And Gabi was the only woman who could help him do that.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll need you in my home by this evening. I’ve left my address with your assistant.”

“I’ve agreed to be Conner’s nanny, but that’s it. I’m not living in,” she said.

“For the amount I’m paying, I think you are,” he said.

He stood up and starting walking to the door. He’d accomplished what he’d set out to do. It was time to get back to the rest of his day.

\* \* \*

Arrogant bastard.

Gabi got up from her desk and dashed around in front of Kingsley before he could get to the door. She pressed her back against it and gave him a hard look.

She knew it was important to establish right this moment that he wasn’t in charge. No matter how much it might seem otherwise.

“We’re not finished yet.”

“I can’t imagine what else we have to discuss,” he said.

He didn’t stop as she’d thought he would. Instead he came right up until barely an inch of space separated them and put his hands on the door on either side of her head.

He surrounded her. She could see the flecks of green in his icy-blue eyes and the scar on his left eyebrow that she’d noticed the first time he’d kissed her. Her lips felt dry. Her breath got shallower and she wanted to smack herself in the forehead. Don’t react to him.

This was Kingsley Buchanan—lover and leaver. Not a man she was interested in.  
But her body said otherwise.

Every nerve inside her reacted to him as if she didn't know he was bad news. As if she hadn't just agreed to live in his house... It was a deal with the devil.

Sure, she'd been battling with the county commissioners for the last eighteen months trying to get that park and playground built. And Kingsley's offer was too good to pass up. But he didn't own her. She had to stay in control.

Except his cologne smelled so good.

"We have a lot to discuss," she said. Her voice sounded thready and breathy to her own ears.

Ugh.

"Like what?"

"I'm not living in your house."

"Nonnegotiable."

She frowned at him.

"Everything is."

"Not that. I travel a lot with my job and I work from my home office. I need 24-7 care for Conner."

"I can't work 24-7 for you. I have to run this business," she said.

"I will give you an office in my home and if your office hours are flexible, I'm willing to work with your schedule to give you the time you need. But you must live in my house."

No, she thought. She couldn't do it. But there was something persuasive about him and she felt her resolve weakening. He was a client; she'd keep it all business.

"Okay. We can try it out. But if I feel like it's not working, then we will have to figure out something else."

"I'm sure it will work."

Of course he was.

"Was that all?" he asked.

All?

He leaned in closer and she felt the brush of his breath over her mouth. Her lips parted and she realized that she was never going to be all business with him. There was no way.

"No."

"No?"

"I need some resolution to the past," she said. "You can't be this close to me."

"You're the one blocking the door with your body."

She narrowed her eyes at him. He had a point, but he was still crowding her and he had been since he came into her office. "I mean it. Our arrangement is strictly business."

His left hand shifted on the door and she felt his fingers in her hair. Her scalp tingled and sensation spread slowly downward. "Things are never going to be strictly business between us, Gabi. The past is always going to be there along with that one question."

Don't ask.

Don't do it.

"What question?"

He leaned in even closer and she had to fight the urge to bolt away from him. But she wouldn't let him know he was getting to her. She had to stand firm. He was just a man.

No.

He was more than a man. He was her own personal demon. One that she hadn't exorcised because she'd never been able to see him as anything other than a hot fantasy. They'd barely dated before they'd slept together and then everything had fallen apart.

She couldn't let him continue to dominate every moment they had together.

“If that one night together was a fluke,” he said.

He leaned in closer. So close that she'd barely have to incline her head for their lips to brush. Sure, she remembered their night together, but it had become hazy over the years, tinged with regret and anger. She wanted to take back something that she hadn't realized Kingsley had stolen until this moment, a part of her womanhood that he'd damaged when he'd left her.

She put her hands on his shoulders and went up on tiptoe, so they were eye to eye. He was impossible to read. He'd always been hard, but now there was a new layer of ice in his gaze. A new barrier that she couldn't see past.

For her own sanity, she had to keep this strictly business. She was twenty-eight and finally felt that she was getting her life on track. She wouldn't let a man like Kingsley derail that.

“Oh, I thought you meant if I'd still want you,” she said, trying to turn the tables on him.

“Do you?”

She dashed to the side, ducking out from under his arm. “I've sort of outgrown bad boys.”

“Have you?”

“All girls do when they grow up,” she said. “Melissa will send over a contract. Good day, Kingsley.”

## Two

Kingsley wasn't sure if he'd won or lost the battle with Gabi. She'd always had the unique ability to throw him. Even in college before...everything had gone crazy, she'd rattled him. But the past ten years had changed him. And though he'd enjoyed flirting with her—hell, he was a red-blooded male, of course he enjoyed flirting with her—that wasn't why he was back in California, and he had to stay focused.

He got in his Porsche 911, driving a little over the speed limit as he headed to his new home. The mansion he'd purchased was perched on a cliff above the Pacific with a path to the beach that he intended to use frequently with his son. He'd been working hard—well, running from his past was more like it—since he'd left California. Now he was back and he knew one thing: he couldn't raise his son in a world where he had had to face that kind of stigma.

It was one thing that Stacia's death had left Kingsley mired in scandal. But he wouldn't let it touch Conner.

His phone rang, blasting out “Bad to the Bone.” He hit the answer button on his hands free.

“What's up, Hunter? Is Conner okay?”

“He's fine, the little devil. I'm worn-out. I think he's got the makings of a running back,” Hunter said. “Did she agree?”

Hunter wasn't the playboy the media made him out to be. Kingsley knew they'd still be best friends even if they hadn't been linked together in Stacia's murder. He was closer to Hunter than he was to his own brother.

“Yes, she did. I didn't mention anything about Stacia. I want to get Gabi out to my house so I can be subtle about the questioning,” he said.

“Hey, it's your plan. I'm happy enough to let you set the pace. I just want to get some answers,” Hunter said.

Hunter could barely remember the entire night. And that was a little worrying, since his friend hadn't been a big drinker in college. One theory they had was that someone had put a drug in Stacia's drink—she and Hunter had been dating—and that Hunter had ingested some of it over the course of the night.

“When will you be home? I've got a meeting with Tristan Sabine in forty-five minutes.”

“I'll be there in twenty,” Kingsley said. Tristan was one of the founders of a chain of nightclubs called Seconds. In fact, Gabi's cousin Gui was another owner. Hunter had recently purchased a franchise of the club and opened it in San Francisco, to much success.

“Sounds great,” Hunter said. “I’m glad we’re back here. It’s way past time we got some answers and gave Stacia’s ghost some peace.”

And themselves, Kingsley thought. They’d never been able to live with Stacia’s murder or the fact that it had never really been solved.

He disconnected the call and concentrated on the traffic, but his mind wasn’t really on the past or the drive. Gabi dominated his thoughts the same as she had back in college.

She’d changed.

Really, idiot?

But that was the best he could do. She had changed. It wasn’t just maturing—it was more than that. There was a level of confidence that hadn’t been in her at eighteen. A level of self-assurance that enabled her to stand her ground with him.

He admired that.

He wished...hell, there wasn’t a day that had gone by in the past ten years that he hadn’t regretted what he’d said when she’d come to see him in jail. Regretted it only inasmuch as he knew he’d hurt her. He didn’t regret that he’d gotten her out of the jailhouse before the press had descended. He’d kept her safe from the scandal that had rained down around him and Hunter.

But now...

The woman she was today could handle things that the girl she’d been hadn’t been able to. That didn’t mean he still wouldn’t protect her. He had to get his revenge and keep Conner and Gabi from being hit with the fallout. That was going to take all of the skills he’d learned on and off the football field. Things such as faking out the rushers, keeping the press from seeing past his smile and definitely winning.

He pulled to a stop in the big circle drive in front of his house. The front door opened just as he shut off his car and stepped out of it.

Conner came running down the steps, laughing.

“Daddy!”

Kingsley scooped up his son and kissed the top of his head. Conner had Kingsley’s own blue eyes, but Jade’s reddish-blond hair.

“Get back here, imp,” Hunter said, skidding to a halt in the doorway.

“Um, why was my son running outside?” Kingsley asked.

“Cause he’s spoiled,” Hunter said.

“I am,” Conner said.

Kingsley was pretty sure that Conner had no idea what spoiled meant, but he and Hunter were very close and Conner almost always agreed with his favorite “uncle.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Nothing. He’s quick. I turned my back for a second...”

Kingsley laughed. His son had caught him like that as well. Hunter was right; he’d make a good running back one day. But only if Kingsley cleared up this mess with Stacia’s murder. He didn’t want Conner facing questions about his father in the pressroom someday.

Kingsley walked into the house carrying his son. He put him down when they were in the foyer.

“You heading out?” Kingsley asked.

“Yes. I’m going to stay at my place in Malibu for the next few weeks, but if you get any information I’ll come back.”

“Sounds good. I’ll keep you posted. I’ve got Gabi moving in here and I think I should have something to go on soon.”

“Good. The sooner we get to the bottom of the Stacia situation the better.”

Hunter left and Kingsley watched his friend go until Conner tugged on his hand.

“Who’s Stas?”

“An old friend of Daddy’s. Good news, Con, we’ve got a new nanny coming to live with us.”

“Like Peri?”

Nothing like Peri. For one thing, Kingsley had never gotten excited by the prospect of Peri living in his house. He tried to tell himself that he was only feeling that way because he could finally get to work on figuring out the past, but he knew it was lie.

He wanted more than that one night with Gabi. He wanted to know that what he remembered of their embrace had been real, and he wanted in his own mixed-up way to somehow make things up to her for their one-night stand.

\* \* \*

Gabi paced her office for a few minutes after Kingsley left. She wasn't sure how it had happened but somehow she was back to being a nanny. A live-in nanny to a three-year-old she'd never met in the house of the only man she'd never been able to forget.

Ugh!

“Melissa, please draw up a contract for Mr. Buchanan,” Gabi said as she walked into her assistant's office.

“I bet you're glad I let him in,” Melissa said. “He is even hotter in person than he is on TV.”

Yes, he was. There was no way a television could capture the force of his presence. But then, the meeting today hadn't taught her anything new.

“He did agree to fund the playground I've been lobbying for in town. And he wants me to start tonight.”

“You? You don't work directly for clients anymore,” Melissa said. “What happened in your office?”

This was what came of being too friendly with your staff. Melissa felt comfortable asking her anything she wanted.

“We used to know each other,” Gabi admitted. “He offered to fund the playground if I took charge of his son and worked out of his home. This is going to take a lot of effort between you and me to make this happen. Because for the amount he's paying—he wants me there today.”

Melissa put her elbows on her desk, leaning forward. “Oh, my God. Did he make you an indecent proposal? Are you going to be his mistress?”

“What? No! Where do you get these ideas?”

“I read a lot and watch a lot of soap operas,” Melissa said with a wink. “So no to the bargaining with your body?”

She shook her head. “Definitely no. Just the playground and the stipulation that I live and work from his house. Which means that you are going to have to run things at this office. Think you can handle it?”

“Yes. You know I can.”

Gabi did know. “It'll mean a raise for you, and I'm thinking that you will be my assistant manager. We will probably need to hire another assistant for you.”

“Thank you, Gabi. I won't let you down,” Melissa said.

“I know you won't.”

“I'm going to call the county commissioners and get an exact figure on the budget for the park. I want you to draw up our regular contract for a live-in nanny service and in place of the fees reference the addendum. I'll work on that.”

“You said you have to be there tonight?”

Gabi kept her expression serene only after years of training, but inside she grimaced. Kingsley had doubled her workload for the day. “Yes. If I send you the dimensions of my new office, will you order me some furniture?”

“Yes. Are you sure about this?” Melissa asked. “We still have our fund-raising plan to get the play area built. I think we could do it without you having to jump through hoops.”

Gabi was grateful to have Melissa not just as her assistant but also as her friend. “It would take years to raise that kind of money. This is easier. Besides, I could use some new material for my parenting column. All of my experience is several years old now.”

“Always look on the bright side?”

“It’s worked so far,” Gabi said.

She reentered her office and felt a little better about the encounter with Kingsley. Then she got down to business. She left a message for Rupert Green, the county commissioner who was her contact on the playground. Then she texted Kingsley asking for the dimensions of her office, which he immediately texted back, also assuring her that he would furnish the space. She almost told him that she would do it herself, but she still had to pack her office and her personal belongings so she decided to let him handle it.

She managed to stay busy enough the entire day not to allow herself to think until she was driving out to Kingsley’s house. Butterflies danced in her stomach and she had that stupid tingling in her body that she knew was from excitement. How could she be excited?

Kingsley.

She knew it would be useless to deny it. They had unfinished business between them. Ten years might have passed, but when he’d walked into her office today she’d felt like a college freshman again, starstruck by her first sight of the handsome quarterback.

But she’d learned that the golden boy wasn’t untouchable. So why...

She shook her head. Was it possible that she was still crushing on him? That Kingsley Buchanan still had a hold over her despite the way he’d treated her? Not just ten years ago but today, arrogantly waltzing back into her life and making her feel again.

Awakening desires and passions she’d shoved to the darkest part of her soul in an attempt to never be that vulnerable again.

She had to remember that. How exposed he’d made her feel. She was stronger now. She had to be.

And there was little Conner to think about. She knew next to nothing about the boy, only that he was three and that Kingsley had used some of her methods with the toddler.

Great.

She was doing the very thing she’d warned nannies not to do for years. Going in blind.

She could justify it to Melissa by saying Kingsley was funding a playground that an economically disadvantaged community desperately needed. She could justify it to her mom by saying that getting back in the field would give her a better perspective for running her business.

But justifying it to herself just felt hollow. Like a lie. As she pulled to a stop in front of Kingsley’s Spanish-style mansion, she admitted that she was here for one reason and one reason alone.

Kingsley had asked and she’d been unable to say no.

\* \* \*

Kingsley had tried to get furniture that mirrored the stuff he’d seen in Gabi’s office earlier but it turned out some of her pieces, such as the settee, were one of a kind. So he’d had to settle for some substitutions. All in all he was happy with the stuff he’d managed to get here on such short notice.

He was working under the desk connecting the computer and printer cords while his son lay on the floor nearby coloring.

Seven years younger than his older brother, Kingsley had been an “accident.” His parents had gone back to work and sort of moved into a new phase of their lives when he was born. He’d been left in the care of his nanny most of the time. And he wasn’t complaining about that. But he’d never had much of a chance to just hang out with his father. Kingsley did his best to make sure that he and Conner did have plenty of time together.

“Daddy? How’s this?” Conner brought a piece of copy paper that he’d been drawing on with his crayons over to him. The brightly colored scribbles were Conner’s version of the view from their backyard. Kingsley had three of the images framed and hanging on his own office wall.

When he’d brought Conner into the office he was setting up for Gabi, his son had insisted on making her a picture—or rather, a “pictur,” as he said it.

“Looks good. I bet she’ll love it.”

Someone cleared her throat and Kingsley glanced up to see Gabi standing in the doorway. “The housekeeper let me in and told me where to find you.”

He let his gaze skim over her from the floor up. She’d changed into a pair of white jeans that hugged her slim legs and a pretty turquoise blouse that was made out of some sort of flowing fabric. She had pulled her long caramel-colored hair back into a ponytail and wore a pair of flat sandals on her feet.

She squatted down, smiling at Conner. “Can I see your picture?”

“Yes.”

He walked over to her with that toddler gait of his, sometimes speedy and a little unsteady. He handed her the photo and then went even closer, putting his hand on Gabi’s knee as he pointed to the picture.

Kingsley swallowed as a rush of emotion he didn’t want to define swamped him. Sometimes he got a punch of joy in the heart just watching Conner.

“This is the ocean and the sky. This is Daddy and Unca Hun.”

“Unca Hun?”

“Hunter,” Kingsley said.

“Of course. I’m Gabi,” she said, turning her attention back to Conner. “I’m here to help your daddy take care of you.”

“Like Peri.”

Gabi glanced over at Kingsley and then turned back to the little boy. “Just like Peri. Did you help your daddy set up my office?”

He nodded and Gabi stood up, holding the paper loosely in her left hand. She held her right hand out to Conner.

Conner wasn’t always good with strangers. There had been only a few people close to him since he’d been born. Pretty much Hunter and Peri. Then there were Kingsley’s parents, who doted on Conner, but Jade’s parents lived in Brazil and only saw Conner for a month each summer when they came to visit.

Kingsley took Gabi’s hand and led her over to the desk. She looked at the surface, arching one eyebrow at him as she came to her monogrammed stationery.

“How did you do all this?”

“I have my ways,” he said. He was pleased with himself because he’d surprised her. It was important to ensure that Gabi was happy here, because he needed her to watch over Conner. He’d even sort of justified it to Hunter by saying that he needed her recollections of the night that Stacia had died. But deep inside he knew he’d gone through all of this effort on her office and in her bedroom because he’d wanted to show off a little.

To let Gabi see the life he’d made for himself. To hopefully dispel the image she might have been carrying of him for all these years—the image of him in handcuffs behind a glass wall.

“Time for dinner, Conner,” Kingsley said. “Let’s go find Mrs. Tillman while Gabi gets settled into her office. I’ll be back shortly to give you the tour.”

She nodded. “I have some boxes in my car that I need to bring in.”

“I’ll help once I get Conner settled.”

“Bye,” Conner said as he and Kingsley left the office. They headed down the hallway, Conner running ahead of Kingsley, as he was wont to do.

And when they entered the kitchen, he found Mrs. Tillman putting Conner's plate on the large farmhouse-style table in the corner of the breakfast nook. It had a built-in padded bench, which Conner scrambled up onto.

Kingsley usually made it a point to eat with Conner when he was home, but tonight their schedule was slightly messed up. So Conner would be eating alone. Kingsley planned to dine with Gabi tonight to bring her up to speed on all the details of Conner's schedule. And because he wanted to get to know her again.

"Do you still need me to stay until bedtime?" Mrs. Tillman asked.

"Yes. I want to give Gabi time to settle in. Did you have a chance to introduce yourselves?"

"We did. I put her suitcase in her bedroom and after Conner's bath I will unpack it."

"That's okay, Mrs. Tillman," Gabi said from the doorway, a large brown box in her arms. "I can do it. Kingsley, do you have a hand truck I can use to bring my other office boxes in?"

"No, but I can help you carry them," he said.

"I don't want to disturb you," she said. "I can make a couple of trips."

She turned away and he realized it was too late—she'd already disturbed him and there was no coming back from that.

"Go on, Kingsley. I'll watch the scamp finish his dinner," Mrs. Tillman said.

"Is that okay, Con?"

"Yes."

Kingsley ruffled his son's hair and got to his feet, following after Gabi.

### Three

"Everything Is Awesome" was blasting from the room next to hers. She had an idea that Conner was in there, but she doubted he was alone. She'd done a good job of avoiding being alone with Kingsley. But she had to admit it had been harder than she'd expected.

He'd followed her to her car and if Hunter hadn't called just then perhaps she would have found herself on the patio under the moonlit sky having dinner with this complicated man from her past. But Hunter had saved her from that. She'd escaped into the house and then into a shower and avoided Kingsley for the rest of the night.

But at 6:00 a.m. everything didn't feel awesome. As the nanny, she knew she needed to check on Conner. So she jumped out of bed and walked into his room. He was sitting quietly in his bed with a book open on his lap.

She turned the volume down on his radio before walking over to his toddler bed.

"Morning, kiddo. What are you doing?"

"Reading. Peri likes it if we start the morning quiet," he said softly.

"I'm not Peri," Gabi said, sitting on the edge of his bed and glancing over at the book. It was a picture book—*One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* by Dr. Seuss. She smiled as she noticed that he was rubbing his finger over the pictures and not really reading. But then he was only three, a little young for true reading.

"Do you like this one?" she asked.

"Yes. Daddy took me fishing in summer."

"Did you catch a red or blue fish?"

He laughed at her. "Nope. They were brown."

She ruffled his hair. "They usually are."

His room was neat and she noticed that someone had laid his clothes out for the day on a chair facing the window. She suspected that Conner had opened the curtains because they were only parted nearest the floor.

"What do you want to do today?"

He looked up at her, and it was odd seeing the innocence in a pair of eyes that reminded her very strongly of Kingsley. King had never been that innocent. Never.

“Can we go to the beach? Daddy and I walk in the morning after breffest.”

She smiled and nodded. “Where do we eat breakfast?”

“In the kitchen with Mrs. Tillman. I have to finish my book first,” he said.

“Want to read it to me?” she asked.

He nodded. “Uncle Hun taught me a rap.”

Hunter was seemingly full of surprises. She chastised herself for thinking that. To be honest, she’d never really known Hunter, just his reputation, which prior to Stacia’s death had been one of a charming Romeo, playful, sexy and fun. It was only afterward that she’d started to have doubts about him.

“I’d love to hear it.”

Conner grinned up at her and then pushed the covers down and stood up on his bed. “Gimme a beat.”

She had no idea how to beatbox. She wasn’t too sure she’d have the nerve to ever try doing this if her audience was anyone other than a toddler, but he was waiting for her and she didn’t want to let him down.

She made some beat noises and heard laughter from the door behind her.

“Finally we find the one thing that Gabi can’t do,” Kingsley said from the doorway. His hair was damp, presumably from his shower, and he had on a pair of faded jeans and a faded Buffalo Bills T-shirt. His feet were bare.

“Daddy, can you gimme a beat?”

Kingsley nodded. Gabi pretended not to notice how his shirt clung to his thickly muscled arms or the way he walked over to the bed.

Conner started jumping and rapping Dr. Seuss’s timeless story. She had to admit she fell a little in love with Conner, and that cold lump in the pit of her stomach that had to do with old bitterness and resentment started to loosen.

For the first time since she left the jailhouse ten years ago she felt a spark of something like real emotion. She’d never been able to let a man get close to her after what Kingsley had done. Caution should be her watchword, but instead she wanted to throw it to the wind and find a little of the innocence she’d seen in Conner’s eyes in her own life and in Kingsley’s.

\* \* \*

Every morning since his son was born Kingsley had woken with the desire to put the past to rest. This morning was no exception. As he’d lain in his bed watching the small bit of sun shining in through the crack in his blinds and realizing he was back in California, he’d felt the familiar anger and determination rise inside him.

He needed answers and if he were being totally honest, revenge against whomever had killed Stacia and set Hunter and him up. But rapping with his son and Gabi first thing in the morning brought peace to some long-forgotten part of his soul. A part he thought had died a long time ago.

As Conner finished rapping about the fish and did his “gangsta” pose, Gabi applauded. The little boy looked as if he’d swallowed the sun. He wasn’t immune to Gabi, either.

Kingsley’s entire life had been set on course by the actions of someone else. His silver-spoon existence had been taken away but he’d done his best to claw his way back, and having Conner made it all the more important that he succeed. But when he stood here near Gabi he had a glimpse of a life that might have been. Something he could have had if life hadn’t been so cruel.

Damn. He was feeling sorry for himself and he couldn’t tolerate that.

“I can get Conner ready if you want to get dressed and then we can go have breakfast.”

“Yippee!” Conner said, dancing around.

“Okay, but isn’t this my job?” she asked.

Kingsley nodded. “We need to get your schedule figured out. I have a meeting this afternoon with a potential client and I have to fly out for a few days after that. But we can discuss that over breakfast. I did promise you’d have time to do your work, as well.”

Gabi crossed her arms under her breasts. He was trying to ignore how sexy she looked in a sleeveless navy blue T-shirt and a pair of long, flowing pajama pants. But he wasn’t doing a great job. Frankly, he knew that it was a cliché to hit on his son’s nanny, but in this case he’d known Gabi way before she’d been Conner’s nanny.

Still, he knew that hitting on her wasn’t going to go over well. And he was smoother than that. Really, he was. No matter how kissable she looked. In fact, she looked like the woman he remembered from college. She wasn’t wearing any makeup and the tough, businesslike facade she had worn yesterday was gone, leaving in its place a woman he wanted to cuddle up to.

“Why are you staring at me?” she asked as Conner went over to his closet to find his beach shoes.

“Because I want to kiss you.”

“You aren’t going to act on that, because the contract I sent over prohibits fraternization between the nanny and anyone in the house.”

“That’s why I struck that clause out. Whatever happens between us started a long time ago.”

Conner came back out of his closet.

“We can discuss this later. You aren’t going to get your way every time we negotiate.”

“We’ll see,” he said.

Gabi walked away and Kingsley watched as she firmly closed the door between her room and Conner’s.

“I like her,” Conner said.

“Me, too,” Kingsley admitted to his son. He helped Conner change and then supervised him brushing his teeth and washing his face.

He was always struck by how quickly Conner was growing. It wasn’t that long ago that Kingsley would have had to do both chores for him. But now he was independent enough to do them himself.

“Daddy?”

“Yes?”

“Are you ready for breffest?”

“Yeah, Con, I am. Let’s go.” Kingsley reached out to his son and felt that tiny hand grip his so securely. Whatever went down in the next few months it was paramount to Kingsley that Conner—and by extension, Gabi—was protected. Obviously, some stray sparks had burned her when Stacia died. Finding Stacia’s real killer, clearing his name once and for all and making sure that justice was served...that was a tall order. But one that King and Hunter felt sure they were up to.

Hunter had heard that their old football coach had retired and was living in Carmel not too far from Kingsley’s new home. Hunter planned to visit the old man and see what he remembered. The party where Stacia was killed had been held at his home on campus.

“What time are you leaving today?” Gabi asked as he entered the kitchen. He noticed that she had a bowl of cereal and fresh fruit prepared for Conner.

Conner scampered up onto the bench seat and started eating.

“Not until this afternoon.”

“I need to run back to my office and sign some papers and I’d like to bring my assistant out here so she knows how to get here. It was a little complicated and Melissa isn’t the best with her GPS.”

Kingsley was irritated. He wanted Gabi here. That was what he’d paid for, but he was aware of how well saying something like that would go over. He needed her and he was willing to let her go for now. “Okay, but I want lunch, just you and me. Mrs. Tillman will watch Conner. We need to get a few details settled before I leave.”

“What details?”

“We can discuss it at lunch,” he said. He wanted to be alone with Gabi. He didn’t question it. He’d been operating by his gut for a long time and it hadn’t let him down—except for that one night with Stacia.

He was determined to put the past to rest and to make things up to Gabi. But he knew deep inside that it was her icy exterior that made him want to do it. He wanted to crack through it and find the young woman who’d been so in love with him that she’d come to visit him in jail.

\* \* \*

Gabi had done her best to avoid Kingsley and she felt like a coward. But standing on the threshold of the terrace in the sun with the gorgeous view of the Pacific in the background, she was almost glad she was here. She’d come out here not just to be a nanny to Conner, but also to put the past to rest for once. Her mother was always keen to point out that she kept all men at arm’s length.

She dated.

She was a woman and had needs and got tired of her own company, so of course she’d been out on dates and even hooked up occasionally. But she had yet to be with a man for more than one night, and she had studied enough psychology to recognize that pattern for what it was. Kingsley had left a part of her scarred when he’d rejected her.

So she was here in part to heal. To somehow bring closure to that one-night stand they’d had and hopefully make it possible for her to have a real relationship and give her mom those grandkids she was desperate for.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Why not? I like to eat just as much as the next person.”

“This isn’t just about the meal. You’ve been avoiding being alone with me since you moved into my house,” he said.

He wore a pair of perfectly tailored dress pants and a button-down shirt that had been cut to his size. Kingsley wore his wealth well. And she had to admit that she admired him for it. She was sick of seeing men in baggy jeans on the streets. Kingsley took pride in his appearance and she liked it.

She’d worn a sleeveless sheath dress in turquoise that her mother had told her brought out her eyes. Her mom spent a lot of her time making sure Gabi was presentable to the world.

Kingsley led the way to the table and held a chair out for her. She sort of regretted missing dinner last night. She’d feigned sleepiness and gone to bed early. But she’d needed time to shore up her barriers. To focus on what was important—the kids who’d get the playground that his fee was paying for. Conner, who needed a nanny focused on the job of caring for him and not his superhot dad. And rebuilding her shattered feminine self-worth. That was why she’d stayed away, but today, with the sun shining and Kingsley sitting next to her looking as though he’d stepped out of one of her dreams, it was hard to remember any of that.

“Why are you back in California?” she asked. Get to know him. Wasn’t that the first thing every Cosmo quiz told a woman to do? It was also what she had decided she needed to help herself get over him.

“I wanted Conner to grow up with the sea and the sun. Plus, my parents haven’t forgiven me for...”

“Stacia?” she asked. She wasn’t going to pretend he didn’t have that in his past. It was the incident that defined them as a couple. Three weeks of dating culminating in a one-night stand. And she suspected she needed some closure on that, as well. “What did happen that night?”

“I don’t... Are you sure you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“Yes. I thought... Well, that doesn’t matter. I remember that you took me home and stayed until my roommate came back and then you left. What happened next?”

He rubbed the back of his neck and took a long sip of his sparkling water before he put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “I took a long walk around the campus. I didn’t want to go back to the frat house or the party. I needed to think.”

“What about?”

“You, Gabi. You were a freshman and I was a senior. My life was on track at that point. You know the draft was my next goal, but then you came along and things sort of changed.”

“How?”

“You were different and it made me think about something other than football for a while,” he said.

She wanted to believe him. There was no reason for him to lie to her at this moment, but if that was the truth, why had he been so cruel to her at the jailhouse?

“Yeah, right. Listen, we both know I was just some dewy-eyed coed that you saw as an easy score,” she said. “You don’t have to put a different spin on it. I was more than willing to go with you that night.”

“Believe what you will, but that night was special for me. You were different,” he said.

“Then why were you so mean when I came to visit you?” she asked. There had been no reason for that.

“I was protecting you. I had no clear memories of the night before. I only knew that I’d been found with Stacia and Hunter and that she had been killed. The cops were trying to implicate me in some sort of twisted sex game, and I wanted you as far from that as I could get you,” he said.

She swallowed hard. “Really?”

“Would I lie about that? I certainly didn’t leave you and go back to the party to kill Stacia.”

“What did happen? Do you know?”

“I don’t,” he said. “We’ve never found out anything other than they had no evidence to prosecute Hunter and me. Both of us can’t recall the night that clearly. What about you? Do you remember anything from that night?” he asked.

“Just being into you and around you,” she said. She tipped her head to the side to study him. Stacia’s death was still like a fresh wound to Kingsley. Gabi could tell by the way he was talking about it. Hear it in the anger in his voice.

“If you can remember anything from that night that seemed odd,” he said, “I’d like to know about it.”

“Why?”

“Hunter and I have been piecing together stories and memories of that night. Hunter and Stacia were serious about each other. He blames himself for her death.”

“Did he kill her?”

“No. He didn’t,” Kingsley said. “Enough about that. Tell me about your business. How did you go from college to being a nanny?”

She put her hand on his and squeezed it. That knot of anger that had been deep inside her since the moment she’d woken to hear that her lover had been arrested for killing another woman eased. It had been a long time in coming, but she finally felt as if she was seeing Kingsley as the man he could be.

She didn’t trust herself. Didn’t know if she ever would be able to again, but there was a little bit of hope inside her now.

#### Four

Talking about the night Stacia died always made Kingsley feel anger and resentment. He’d had it all until then. He’d felt untouchable—in part thanks to his family’s money. School had come easily to him and he’d been on the dean’s list every semester. He hadn’t won the Heisman Trophy, but he had been mentioned as a first-round draft pick. His life had been, well, charmed, and he’d taken it for granted.

He’d slept with Gabi, knowing that she came from a good family. He had imagined she’d be the perfect accoutrement for the idyllic life he pictured for himself. One where he outshone his older

brother, where after he'd won the Super Bowl he'd retire and have the perfect family. He figured he'd play hard and when Gabi graduated he'd think about settling down with her.

But after the arrest those plans had disappeared. He'd been shocked that he hadn't been able to talk the cops out of arresting both him and Hunter. It had been inconceivable that anyone would think Hunter would have killed Stacia. Despite his name, Hunter didn't really have a killer instinct. Which is how they'd ended up being labeled the Frat House Killers.

Sitting in the sun with Gabi just reinforced his need for revenge. To find out who had killed Stacia and make them pay for the plans they'd interrupted, for the life they'd taken. And the years they'd lived with the stigma of being murderers.

Gabi pushed her sunglasses up to the top of her head and leaned forward.

"You look scary. Is that your don't-sack-me face?"

He forced a smile because he could tell that was what she wanted, but this lunch simply reinforced all he'd lost. If he hadn't been accused of murder, maybe he would have married better. Maybe Conner's mother would still be alive if he hadn't been so...uninterested in anything except making enough money so he could go after his revenge.

"Yeah. You'd be amazed at what it takes to stop a three-hundred-pound linebacker."

"I shudder to think of facing someone like that. I'm sorry I brought up Stacia. I can tell that it still bothers you," she said.

"Her killer was never brought to justice. Someone thought that Hunter and I would take the fall for them. They were wrong," he said.

"Maybe the cops will find that person," Gabi said.

Doubtful. Especially since most of them believed he and Hunter had gotten off because of their family money. But he didn't want to get into that with Gabi. He needed to know if she remembered anything else about that night. Hunter thought someone might have drugged them before Stacia was killed. Gabi was still on campus after the party, so she might have heard something along those lines. But for right now he wanted to enjoy this lunch.

He'd had some hot dreams about Gabi last night. Maybe it was the fact that they'd only had that one night together or maybe it was because she was under his roof again, but he wanted her. He wanted to see if the kiss, the sex he remembered with her had been real. Or just another illusion that would be shattered by reality.

"You're staring again."

"I'm wondering what it would be like to kiss you," he said.

She flushed under her tan and licked her lips. Her mouth had fascinated him from the first moment he'd met her. Her lips were full and lush. She'd never worn lipstick in college and now she wore something that made her lips shimmer but didn't add color to them.

"Well, stop wondering. I'm in your house to be a nanny, not to assuage your curiosity."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Assuage?"

"Yes, got a problem with it?"

"Not at all. It's just that I figured since you worked with kids—"

"I'd talk like a toddler?" she asked.

He shook his head. She rattled him and made his legendary charm disappear. It was unnerving and at the same time exciting. She was still different from every other woman he'd ever known.

"My curiosity still needs to be assuaged."

She shook her head and lifted the cloche off the plate in front of her. "I have to get to my meeting, so let's eat."

"Don't like talking about kissing me?" he asked.

He took his lid off as well and saw that Mrs. Tillman had prepared fish tacos. His favorite. Gabi took a bite and chewed carefully.

Hell, he needed to kiss her and take her to his bed. Get over this odd infatuation he had with her. What else could he call watching her chew and thinking it was cute?

He took a bite of his taco, glad as hell that Hunter had gone to Malibu for a few weeks. He didn't want his friend to see him mooning over Gabi.

Was that what he was doing?

"So, while you are gone, is it okay to ask your housekeeper to watch Conner if I need to have a conference call?" she asked. "I will do my writing and paperwork either while Conner is having his nap or at night while he's sleeping. But I'm in the middle of placing two nannies with some rather high-profile clients and I don't want to lose their business."

"Yes, that will be fine. She's not interested in being a full-time nanny but will help out as needed."

"Great. Now, when will you be back?"

"In a week. Do you feel like you can handle Conner?"

"Certainly. He seems pretty well adjusted. You've done a good job with raising him," she said.

"I had some excellent advice," he said. "I bought your book."

She shook her head. "Lots of people have bought my book and still have kids that are out of control. You seem to actually listen to him, which is key."

"Well, I like my son," Kingsley said.

"That's a good thing."

"I like you, too," he said.

"Don't. We have a business relationship."

"I know that. But what's to preclude us from having more?"

"Common sense," she said.

\* \* \*

Maybe it was being back in Cali or just being around Gabi, but he felt young again. Free in a way he hadn't been since their one night together. She made him want to be the man who had dreams. Not the man who was focused on vengeance.

But the dreamer was gone. And he was a taker now.

He wanted Gabi.

She kept him at arm's length, which was one thing he wasn't going to allow. She was part of the reason he was here. Not just revenge.

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. But now that she was under his roof, his focus was changing. He still craved revenge on whoever had set Hunter and him up, but he also desperately wanted Gabi.

It was her fault.

She sat across from him in the midday California sun, watching him as though she wanted more, too.

Maybe she'd been waiting, too. Waiting for him to come back into her life.

Yeah, right.

Hell.

What if she was involved with someone? Why wouldn't she be?

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked. "Is that why you are busy espousing common sense?"

She shook her head. "So the only reason a woman wouldn't want to throw away her professionalism with you is because she's involved with someone else?"

"This feels like a trap," he said. "I just wanted to know if there was a man in your life."

"There are a lot of them," she said.

That didn't fit with the woman he thought he knew. But then he had to admit that reading her column and her book didn't give him any special insight into her personal life.

"Fair enough."

She laughed in a very kind way. It was something he hadn't heard in a long time. Women didn't usually laugh around him.

"What?"

"You are so transparent."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"What do you see?" he asked her. He had the feeling she was toying with him and that feeling of being free took him again. It had been a long time since anyone had teased him.

"I see a man who wants to kiss me."

"I told you that," he said.

"But you aren't the kind of man who'd poach so you want to know if I'm taken."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. It makes me like you a little bit more."

That sounded like a good thing, but with Gabi he wasn't sure. "Thanks."

"Don't sound scared. It is a good thing. You came into my office trying to get your own way instead of asking the way most people would. So why are you being so polite about this?" she asked.

Damn.

Of course she'd see what few others did. He rubbed the back of his neck and the feeling of freedom slipped away. The chains of the past were once again wrapped around his neck and ankles. Tying him to that one night, that one event. He didn't want to tell her that it was the fact that Stacia had been raped that night that had also stayed with him. The DNA evidence had been inconclusive and he had no memory of sleeping with anyone other than Gabi, but he wanted to give no woman the chance to say he'd taken her against her will.

"Let's just say consent is a biggie in my book," he said.

"It is in mine, too. But one kiss, Kingsley—I wouldn't begrudge that."

"If I took it you might later," he said.

She put her hand on his. "Do you know why I'm afraid to let go of common sense?"

He had a few thoughts on the matter—she might not want to kiss him, which, given the sexual attraction he felt around her, he hoped wasn't the case. She might have a boyfriend, but he was beginning to think that wasn't the case, either. But the real reason? Only Gabi knew that. She protected her secrets behind her pretty brown eyes like an armed security guard.

"Not really."

"You make me forget all of the caution I carefully built into myself over the last ten years. You make me want to be the freshman girl who took a senior football player back to her dorm room. And that's not smart. And this is the tricky part—I usually think of myself as a smart woman, so kissing you...well, that would be dumb."

He realized she was talking and rationalizing to keep herself safe. Hell, he didn't blame her, but every male instinct he had was saying she was his. He'd claimed her that night all those years ago and he wanted her back again.

But he had a son.

He had a mission in California.

He owed Hunter and himself a chance to clear their names.

Something he knew he couldn't do if he took Gabi to his bed again. She cluttered his mind. She made him want things he had lived a long time without.

But one kiss?

Surely, one kiss wouldn't do that much damage.

One kiss.

"One kiss," he said.

"What?"

“One kiss. That’s all I’m asking for. What could it hurt? We are both wondering if our memories are right and if that fire between us was really as scorching hot as we remember.”

“Are we?” she asked, but she took her sunglasses off her head, set them on the table next to her plate and put her hands on the armrests of her chair as if she were about to stand.

“Yes. You know it and I do, too. Common sense isn’t going to withstand curiosity,” he said.

“You’re right,” she admitted, standing up and walking over to him.

He scooted his chair back and before he could stand, she sat on his lap, wrapping her arms around him and tangling her hands in the hair at the back of his neck. Last time she’d been in his arms she’d been a girl, scared and unsure. This time she was a woman and knew what she wanted.

“One kiss, Kingsley. Better make it count.”

He intended to.

\* \* \*

Gabi knew she’d dared him to kiss her. Okay, so maybe she thought that way she’d be able to say he’d forced her into it later, though she knew that wasn’t true.

There weren’t many things she truly wanted for herself but Kingsley was one of them. There was no denying that despite the coldhearted way he’d dumped her at the police station she still wanted him. Still wanted this embrace.

She wanted to tell herself that he’d been so cruel that night because he’d been trying to protect her, but deep inside she had to admit that even if he hadn’t, he was still hot. Still the one man she looked at and felt the kind of sexual longing that made her forget common sense and reason. He made her want to act like...well, like this.

Sitting on his lap in the midafternoon California sun for the entire world to see. Except there wasn’t anyone else around. It was just the two of them.

She’d never really had Kingsley to herself during their brief courtship. He’d been big man on campus and everywhere they’d gone people knew him, had high-fived him and wanted to talk to him.

This was different.

He was different.

Hell, so was she. She’d been different for a long time now. But suddenly his mouth moved over hers and she forgot all of that.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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